

Antoinette Sterling and Other Celebrities  
Chapter 5 – Her Songs and Singing  
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“More Heart and Less Art”, is what Antoinette would advise those who sought her counsel about their musical careers. She felt it was wonderful to free the soul; accompanied by voice, and truly sing from the heart. She said “singing is nothing but using the breath properly. Let them learn to breath and to think. Let them educate their minds and their hearts, instead of incessantly tantalizing their vocal chords. The singing will come easily enough then.”

Antoinette liked to sing without accompaniment, and improvise, freely. This is when she truly felt inspired. She also believed, for the training of one’s voice, they should have three to four years, or longer, of professional training. The singer would advise to only “go to the best, and none but the best. To pay more at the time is the cheapest in the long run.” After this training, it would be time to cultivate the heart. It took many years of training for Antoinette to arrive at the ease, and naturalness of her renditions. Many thought because she sang so “naturally”, that she’d never had a lesson. How apropos, the tenet “Summa ARS est celare Artem” – “The Highest Art is to conceal the Art.”

When it came to ballad singing, Antoinette relied on dramatic inspirations. The song would be sung differently each time she sang it, due to her interpretation at that moment. Sometimes, an accompanist would have trouble following her singing. They would practice one way during rehearsal, but she would quite often change her interpretation, and sing it differently, often leaving the accompanist at almost a complete loss. One such occasion, was when a young accompanist, who had been trained at an institution, where he was taught to play in tempo to the metronome, was to accompany Mme. Antoinette. Needless to say, he felt quite sure of himself, which he really should not have been quite so arrogant, as his arrogance got the better part of him. At first he had thought there was no need for a rehearsal with the singer, because he could play any music put in front of him. However, after much prodding by his superior, he agreed to meet with the singer.

Upon arrival at Antoinette’s home, the young man sat down at her piano, with the sheet music for “We’re a’ noddin’”, and played through the music, with no problem. When he started playing the song, again, and Antoinette began singing, slowing in sections that were written for a speedier tempo, and singing faster in areas which were written in a slower tempo, the accompanist became quite frustrated. He stopped playing, stood up, throwing the sheet music down, and asked, scathingly, “Do you wish me to play this song the way it is written, or the way you sing it?” My Great Grand Aunt, the fiery little Scot she was, answered, “Do you know who taught me to sing? GOD! Play it as I sing it.”

Antoinette always felt interpretation of words was much more important than the music, though if the music wasn’t pleasing to her, she would not sing the song. She had always insisted on a composer reading his words to her, before hearing the music. If the worlds “spoke” to her, she would consider singing the song. If not, she graciously declined. Because of this, there were several songs she chose not to add to her song list, which later became enormous financial successes by the other singers. But, Antoinette was one to be true to her feelings, and beliefs, and she appeared to never falter.

The following is the description Antoinette gave, concerning “The Three Fishers,” her interpretation, and the verdict of the words, by Charles Kingsley: “Although I had never been at sea in a storm, and had never even seen fishermen, I somehow understood that song of ‘The Three Fishers’ by instinct. On reading the poem over for the first time, no one could know from the opening that the men would necessarily be drowned. Therefore it was a story. But there is a natural tendency to anticipate an unhappy ending, in spite of the lesson given so long ago to ‘think no evil.’ Hence it was customary to begin the song so mournfully that everybody realized from the very start what the end was going to be. Madame Sainton Dolby, for instance, used to sing it sorrowfully from the first note to the last. I had never seen or known of any one who was drowned, but that mysterious instinct was so strong that I could not foreshadow the finish. When, therefore, I started, I always made the first verse quite bright. I must believe it was the true way, since both the poet and the composer most warmly endorsed my reading of it.

“Charles Kingsley invited me down to Eversley once, to my great delight, and asked me to sing ‘The Three Fishers’ for him, I was young then, and had ‘boy-nature’ enough to sit down and do it at once. At the close he said, ‘I have seen many wrecks among the fishermen. That is true to the very life. The excitement and tragedy come at the time they are being drowned, not afterwards. Then follows the calm and resignation.’ He asked for something else, and when I had sung ‘Caller Herrin’ he walked out of the room, affected. I had several sweet mementoes of Eversley given to me: two photographs of Mr. and Mrs. Kingsley standing at the door, which opened out on to the lawn, a book of his life, and an old copy of Shakespeare’s sonnets with the Kingsley coat of arms stamped upon it.

“I often went to visit Mrs. Kingsley. The last time I saw her, she was lying on the sofa ill and weak. She asked me several times what her husband had said on that occasion, and was so interested that she promised to keep quite quiet if I would sing ‘The Three Fishers.’ And so as she lay there in her drawing-room, her hands folded across her breast, I repeated it, and afterwards, out of my little book, sang her twenty more songs.”

Malcolm, and his mother share the following, also relating to Mr. Kingsley: When on tour in Australia, the contralto met one of the nurses who had been a member of his household. She said that he had told her how once “on going to a concert to hear Madame Sterling sing ‘The Three Fishers,’” he was so stirred by its tragical truth that he could only sob.. “How marvellous, “ my mother wrote in her diary, “is that instinct which leads to the truth unknown to the personality. Mr. Kingsley had wished to hear what it was in that song which took such a hold of the people. Sitting there alone in a remote corner, he found so many things made manifest in the words accentuated by the human voice, in the poetry beautified by the halo of the music, that he wept to find how much more there was in the lines than he himself had ever seen.”

The following is her description of the writing and first performance of “The Lost Chord”: “One day my husband read the verses, and took a very great fancy to them, seeing the possibilities of a wonderful effect if only he could get them set by the right man. After much thought, he came to the conclusion that the one of all others from whom they were most likely to receive the proper setting was Mr. Arthur Sullivan. He accordingly went to the composer, and on broaching the subject was met with the astonishing reply, ‘I have set them.’ In his Scotch way, my husband said no more, but returned and told me. I had never heard of any such song, and was sure it had not been brought out. He therefore set off once more to make further inquiries, and found that it had been set – all but the last verse. I always think that Sullivan was not permitted to finish it till we met.

“I well remember going to rehearse it with him for the first time. On handing me the manuscript, his first words were, ‘It won’t be a success, I’m afraid.’ I shall never forget the anxiety felt by all of us as to how it would be received – least of all, perhaps, by myself. The first performance took place at one of the Ballad Concerts. The composer himself was at the piano, and Sydney Naylor at the organ. What excitement, when it was over! What applause burst out on all sides! It was the greatest success that had ever been made by a new song, and the wonderful sale of over half a million copies during the following twenty-five years speaks to the lasting nature of this. The song was indeed an inspiration, and he wrote to me in a letter, shortly before his death, these words: ‘I have composed much music since then, but have never written a second “Lost Chord.”’

In Antoinette’s later years, she delighted in singing “Crossing the Bar.” The song impressed her the first time she heard the words “I hope to see my Pilot face to face, When I have crossed the Bar.” The most inspiring rendition of the song came about in the following description, and took place at one of the concerts given, in winter at Penzance. This is how Malcolm said his mother recalled the event: “The elements seemed conspiring together to make a fit accompaniment to those glorious words. The wind was blowing as though all the Furies had been let loose. A storm was at its height, the lightning lit up the sky, and was followed a moment later by peal on peal of thunder. Inside the Concert Hall, like a deep “ground bass,” was heard the heavy rise and fall of the sea, as the waves came roaring in to dash over the Bar. The elements, thus joining in with the voice and the organ, combined to produce one of the most powerful effects which it would be possible to imagine.”

Stay tuned for Chapter 6 – Love For Scotland