

Agnes Duncan MBE (1899 - 1996)

Agnes Duncan was born on November 10th 1899 in Alexandria, West Dunbartonshire.

Perhaps the first evidence of her determined spirit lies in her account of gaining a place in the, then prestigious Vale of Leven children's choir at the age of 10, by claiming to be 12 years old.

With her rich contralto voice and excellent musicianship, Agnes was a highly sought-after soloist, and is credited with having sung with all the major choirs in Scotland during a period spanning several years.

However, in 1943 she abandoned singing to become a choral conductor, then an almost exclusively male profession. She formed the Scottish Junior Singers which, under her direction, became one of the best junior choirs in Britain earning her praise from Kathleen Ferrier, Isobel Baillie and others. The choir won prizes at many Festivals, including the Llangollen Eisteddfod, and once received a standing ovation at the Royal Festival Hall. It also provided children's choruses for the Scottish National Orchestra and Scottish Opera, bringing Agnes into contact with Colin Davis and Adrian Boult whom she credited with honing her conducting skills. Perhaps the choir's greatest achievement was winning both the youth and children's classes in the International radio singing competition "Let the People sing" in 1959 and 1961.



Agnes's musicianship and love of singing led to her being in demand as an adjudicator at Music Festivals and Mods, an activity she continued long after retiring. She notably attended every Glasgow Music Festival from its inception in 1911 until the 1990's, fulfilling roles ranging from performer to Honorary President.

In recognition of her contribution to the Festivals movement, Agnes was selected to make a presentation to Her Majesty the Queen, on behalf of the British Music Festivals Association in 1992.

In 1967, she was awarded an M.B.E. for her services to music.

Agnes was a long-standing member of SI Glasgow Central and, although her music commitments precluded her from holding any Officer posts, she supported the Club's activities enthusiastically.

On her 90th birthday, SI Glasgow Central acknowledged her life-long involvement in the Glasgow Music Festival by presenting the Agnes Duncan Trophy to the Festival. SI Glasgow City now gifts the Trophy, and a cheque for £100, annually, to the winner of an under 18s vocal soloist competition held on the last night of the Festival. Her name therefore continues to be associated with excellence in singing.

Agnes was strong-minded and unafraid of offering criticism where she felt it was merited. She was also a great raconteur with a fund of entertaining stories and had a good sense of humour. Her marriage to Matthew Nisbet produced one child, Cathleen, who was a singer with Scottish Opera.

Agnes Duncan died aged 97. As a soloist, choral conductor and adjudicator she made a substantial mark on music in the U.K. She imparted the joy of music to countless young people several of whom became professional singers and musicians. Her legacy lives on in them and the musicians they have in turn inspired.