

The Sporting Diva

DAME | JOAN HAMMOND



SARA HARDY DESCRIBES THE
ACTION-PACKED LIFE OF A
GREAT SOPRANO

and raised in Australia.’ While this was true, there were things about her family history that she preferred to keep hidden. Even her inner circle of friends didn’t know the full story.

In recent years, two of Joan’s nieces disclosed a family rumour about Joan’s father, Samuel Hammond, claiming that he had been a bigamist with a fictitious surname. However, the nieces had no documentary evidence to back up the rumour. I was lucky, therefore, to come across a scrap of paper in the Joan Hammond Collection held by the National Library of Australia. It showed a handwritten sketch outlining a branch of a family tree, which gave me the clue I needed to track down Samuel’s true identity. A genealogical search established two things: Samuel’s original surname was Hood, not Hammond, and Joan was born illegitimate.

Samuel Hood was born, raised and married in London. In the early 1900s he left his first wife, Edith, for a young woman named Hilda, who came from the Isle of Wight. Samuel and Hilda settled together in Wimbledon but never married—they simply ‘became’ Mr and Mrs Hammond. They had four children in all, three boys and one girl, Joan.

Hilda was pregnant with Joan when the Hammonds boarded a ship bound for the antipodes in 1912. Their original destination was Sydney but they disembarked prematurely at Christchurch, New Zealand, because the ship had been delayed and the birth was imminent. The family moved to Sydney a few months later, where Joan grew up. Samuel was a successful businessman and his children enjoyed a privileged childhood. There was a large house on the north shore, a big car, a motor launch and a boarding-school education for Joan and her brothers.

ABOVE
National Concert and Artists
Corporation, New York
Joan in Fidelio, c.1950
Papers of Dame Joan
Hammond, 1928–1994
Manuscripts Collection
MS 8648, folio box 1b
Courtesy Julie Wyer for the
Estate of Dame Joan Hammond

WHEN I BEGAN RESEARCHING FOR a biography of the great soprano Dame Joan Hammond (1912–1996), I discovered that her life story included many twists of fortune. It’s an extraordinary tale and as action-packed, bizarre and deeply moving as any of the operatic roles she performed.

Joan’s sumptuous voice and warm personality won the hearts of people all around the world. She was proud to call herself Australian and had a unique way of describing her origins: ‘I was conceived in England, born in New Zealand

When Joan was a child, she had a passion for all kinds of sport and was a terrific swimmer, surfer, sailor, cricketer and golfer. Yet, her passion for classical music was equally intense. She loved singing and had a good voice, but her true ambition was to become a concert violinist—she was an accomplished player by the time she was 12. A bicycle accident, in which she careered into an oncoming car, put an end to her dreams. Her left arm was so badly injured that amputation was considered. The limb was saved but Joan had to undergo four operations over the next 12 months; the damage was such that it gave her much pain for the rest of her life. She succeeded in playing the violin again but had to accept that she'd never achieve concert hall standard.

Joan was a perfectionist, for whom second best was never good enough. Turning her attention to her other great musical talent, she enrolled at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music in 1928 when she was 16, and began to develop her voice. In her 'spare time' she played competitive golf, winning back-to-back championships. For some time, life was full and pleasant for Joan but another twist of fate was soon to occur. The Great Depression in 1929 caused Joan's father to lose all of his money. The Hammonds were forced to move out of their mansion and into a small flat, and Joan was told that she must earn her keep. She became a sports reporter and might have remained in the job had not the J.C. Williamson Imperial Opera Company come to town.

Australian hopefuls were invited to audition for minor parts. This was a rare opportunity for local talent, as Australia did not have a home-grown opera company at the time. Competition was fierce but Joan won a place in the chorus and was the youngest in the company. At the start of rehearsals, she found

it difficult to keep her eye on the conductor as well as act and sing in Italian. With hard work and the help of her colleagues, Joan developed her technique and fell in love with theatre life. The opera company rewarded her with some minor roles and a contract for the Melbourne and New Zealand tours.

In order for her career to proceed, Joan realised that she would need to study in Europe. But, without the necessary funds and influential contacts, her chances of travelling that far were slim. By luck, Joan happened to sing at a concert in honour of Lady Gowrie, the Governor's wife. Lady Gowrie was so impressed with the young soprano that she decided to do all she could to assist her career and was instrumental in setting up the Joan Hammond Fund to raise money for Joan to travel to Vienna to study in 1936.

Joan was an innocent abroad and many adventures followed. She studied hard, hated the food and lived on very little money. Gradually, she found success and sang lead roles in Vienna, as well as debuting in London in 1938 with a solo recital at Aeolian Hall. The reviews were excellent and more engagements followed.

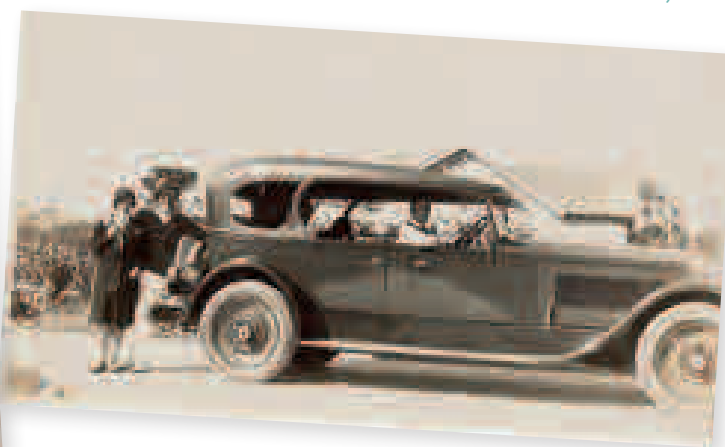
Although the future looked bright for the ambitious and single-minded Joan, she could not ignore the disturbing changes in Vienna, her home base. Adolf Hitler's influence was everywhere, especially following the *Anschluss* (Annexation). There were German soldiers,



ABOVE
Joan featured on the cover of *The Australian Golf & Tennis Magazine*, 1 June 1933
Papers of Dame Joan Hammond, 1928–1994
Manuscripts Collection
MS 8648, unnumbered folio box
Courtesy Julie Wyer for the Estate of Dame Joan Hammond

BELOW, FROM LEFT
Unknown photographer
Joan Hammond at two years of age
reproduced from *Dame Joan Hammond: Love & Music* by Sara Hardy (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2008)
Courtesy the Arts Centre, Performing Arts Collection, Melbourne

Unknown photographer
A rare photograph of Samuel Hammond, here with Joan, Tony and Len, c.1926
Papers of Dame Joan Hammond, 1928–1994
Manuscripts Collection
MS Ac97/111, box 16
Courtesy Julie Wyer for the Estate of Dame Joan Hammond





Nazi flags and the chill of fear in the streets. Joan continued to travel between Austria and Britain to fulfil engagements and was in London in mid-August 1939 when rumours of war were at their height. She was due to perform in Vienna on 1 September but made the good decision to remain in London. Germany attacked Poland on 1 September and World War II was declared two days

Joan took Pippo with her whenever she could, even on her bicycle, which had a front basket especially adapted to carry him.

During the war, Joan made several gramophone recordings and radio broadcasts that brought her more fame. People listened to her voice all over the world—in living rooms, mess halls, outposts and prison camps. One recording in particular made her a household name. It was of an obscure aria that not even her record producer, the great Walter Legge (1906–1979), had heard of. Legge wanted her to sing something commercial for her next record but Joan was adamant that it had to be ‘*O Mio Babbino Caro*’ (‘Oh My Beloved Father’) from Puccini’s opera, *Gianni Schicchi*. It was recorded in 1941 and sung in English because there was a wartime ban on recordings made in Italian or German. This ‘B side’ became her biggest hit, eventually selling over a million copies.

After the war, Joan continued to achieve all the success she had dreamed of. In London, she sang at Covent Garden and at Sadler’s Wells. She toured all over the world, including Australia.

Fate struck again in the early 1960s when a heart attack signalled a premature end to her singing career. When better health returned, Joan put her energy into developing opera in Australia. She became the head of vocal studies at the Victorian College of the Arts and trained some of the country’s greatest voices, including Cheryl Barker, Peter Coleman-Wright, Nicole Yule and Steve Davislim. She chose Australia for retirement and lived in Victoria with her companion Lolita Marriott (d.1993). Joan Hammond died in 1996.

ABOVE
National Concerts and Artists Corporation, New York
Joan with her ‘best mate’, Pippo, late 1940s
Papers of Dame Joan Hammond, 1928–1994
Manuscripts Collection
MS 8648, folio box 1b
Courtesy Julie Wyrer for the Estate of Dame Joan Hammond

BELOW
Unknown photographer
Joan as Marguerite in *Gonoud’s Faust*, one of her first professional roles, early 1940s
Papers of Dame Joan Hammond, 1928–1994
Manuscripts Collection
MS 8648, folio box 1b
Courtesy Julie Wyrer for the Estate of Dame Joan Hammond

later. Joan had escaped the likelihood of being caught and interned as an enemy alien in Austria.

Joan had many adventures in war-torn Britain. She sang all over the country, from grand theatres to lowly village halls. She also performed for troops, hospital patients and factory workers as part of her work for the Entertainments National Service Association. When Germany was on the verge of invading Britain, Joan volunteered to be an ambulance driver. She was placed with a unit in the East End of London, the area hit hardest by the Blitz and where there was the extreme danger of becoming a casualty. One of her greatest comforts was Pippo, her standard poodle.



SARA HARDY is a biographer and playwright who enjoys writing about extraordinary women. Her biography of the Australian landscape designer Edna Walling, *The Unusual Life of Edna Walling* (2005), was awarded the inaugural Peter Blazey Fellowship in 2004. *Dame Joan Hammond: Love & Music* (2008) is her second biography.