


*A Charming Advent Article from 'Africa',  
the magazine of the Kiltegan Fathers*



*Singing  
Christmas*

**Maeve Edwards**

*My* mother told us that she sang *Panis Angelicus* at the Eucharistic Congress of 1932! But her older sister, my Aunt Maureen, rebuffed this as “stuff and nonsense”!

“Count John McCormack sang *Panis Angelicus* at the Congress,” she said. “Not you!”

“The nuns in school said I was just as good as him!” countered my mother, with an assertion that defied all logic, and was to be a defining feature of her later life.

But I wanted to believe her, for when she stood at our kitchen sink and sang out the glorious lyrics of *Panis Angelicus* for us children, I imagined her as a small girl, her voice soaring over the heads of the dignitaries in Phoenix Park, and all of them awed by its beauty!

For she could sure sing a song, my mother!

She sang her way through life. All her sorrows and joys were expressed in song at that same kitchen sink where my memory has stationed her all these years later, peeling endless pots of potatoes or scrubbing the ubiquitous porridge pot. Always there was a baby beside her in the highchair, banging a spoon in time to the music. We children could tell what mood my father was in by her choice of song! "Oh good, it's Elvis," we'd say knowing immediately things were calm in that part of our world!

She would often answer a question with a song, driving us mad when we grew older, for she used it well to deflect from any awkward questions she did not want to answer.

"Mammy, why is it that we have so many children while Mrs Aylward next door only has two?"

"Que Sera, Sera, whatever will be, will be" she'd sing, making us laugh, thereby neatly avoiding the issue.

Sometimes, she'd frighten us by her silences, and we'd fear there were things going on that we children weren't party to. At these times, she'd sing something sad like *Scarlet Ribbons*, transfixing us children in magic, but always with that edge of worry seeping in at the edge.

The songs she sang have now passed down the line to the next generation. When I visit my grandchildren in Norway, we sing out "There was an Old Woman Who Lived in the Woods Weile, Weile Waile" with the same bloodthirsty gusto that we children did all those years ago. "They pulled the rope and then she was dead!"

My father sang too. On those nights when our aunts and uncles came to visit, he would join my mother in song.

"You start us off, Alice," he'd say, and once the opening bars of *Soft as the Voice of an Angel* came from her mouth, he would join her, his voice sliding in a third below hers. The harmonies they created together were so sweet that the room would become spellbound with wonder! "They could sure give Nina and Frederik, a run for their money," my Uncle Podge would say!

She loved Christmas music too.

Carol singers arriving at our front door in those early days of December, would have her leaping from her place beside the fire. "Listen," she'd say with great excitement. "I think I can hear the carol singers!" She'd swing the baby onto her hip and rush to the front door. There she'd stand, transfixed, singing *Away in a Manger* or *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* along with

“

Carol singers arriving at our front door in those early days of December, would have her leaping from her place beside the fire. "Listen," she'd say with great excitement. "I think I can hear the carol singers!" She'd swing the baby onto her hip and rush to the front door. There she'd stand, transfixed, singing  
*Away in a Manger...*

”

the carol singers who stood in a circle underneath the street lamp. They always left her favourite until last, and once the gentle lyrics of *Silent Night* floated up our garden path, the tears would roll down her cheeks unbidden.

I'd slip in under her arm and stand beside her: "Why do you cry when they sing *Silent Night*, Mammy?"

"It's only happy crying," she'd say, putting my small girl's heart at rest. "It's only happy crying!"

The baby would twist in her arms and put his cheek against hers. Perhaps he understood, in a primal way, that sometimes there is no explanation for why music moves us to tears. It just does.

And now all these years later, with my mother's voice only a distant memory, each Christmas I am reminded of her when my own choir is preparing for our concert. The repertoire of Christmas music is vast but there is one carol that no choir in the country can ever leave out, and that is *Silent Night*.

And when our Musical Director lifts his baton, and our choir begins to sing, a hush comes over the audience, young and old, for that is the power of this beautiful song. And on cue, just like my mother all those years ago, the tears come into my eyes and roll down my cheeks, unbidden.

But it really is only happy crying! ■

Maeve Edwards is a writer and lives in Co Wicklow, Ireland. She features regularly on *Sunday Miscellany*, RTÉ Radio 1. © Maeve Edwards, 2024

(Image by Frauke Riether from Pixabay)