

Special Feature on THELMA REISS

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Born: 1906, 2nd July (Plymouth)

Died: 1991, 17th September (Suffolk)

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Full credit and acknowledgement is made to Joseph Stevenson as the author of much of the original information on Thelma Reiss.

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Thelma Reiss was born in Plymouth (England), one of the main bases of the Royal Navy, where her father was a sailor.

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She received her first lessons from a member of the Royal Marines Band in Plymouth, making rapid progress – aged 7 she played a Goltermann Cello Concerto in a public debut. She was also studying as a singer, dancer, and pianist. She obtained her first professional steady job at aged 11, as cellist in the trio engaged to play at a Swiss restaurant in Plymouth. She was often troubled with frail health, and contracted tuberculosis, which was eventually cured. She then won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music in London, where she studied with Ivor James.

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After graduation, she returned to ill health, contracting typhus. She played some classical concerts, but mostly she played in theatres, night clubs, and even seaside pier variety acts. However in 1930 she made her Wigmore Hall debut recital, with pianist Joan Black. The audience acclaim and critical approval won its reward with an immediate concert with Sir Henry Wood at a Promenade Concert in Queen's Hall, in which she chose the Elgar cello concerto.

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Her career was then easily well-established. She frequently played with leading British orchestras, and then overseas, and often on the radio. During the Second World War she played at factories and hospitals. She had a very attractive appearance and a warm stage personality endearing her to audiences. Contemporary reports speak of her concert manner as being very stylish and brilliantly executed.

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In addition to her solo and orchestral concertizing, she was very fond of chamber music playing, and appeared with such artists as Myra Hess, Albert Sammons, and Harriet Cohen. She played a major part in the music of Bax - especially the Sonatina (1933), which was written for Pablo Casals, though he never appeared to play it. It was first performed in 1934 by Harriet Cohen and Thelma Reiss under the title 'Sonata in D minor'; but five days later they broadcast it as 'Sonatina', which is the title given on both the manuscript and the printed score. She also premiered George Dyson's 'Fantasy' at the 1936 Three Choirs Festival in Hereford. In 1936 and 1938 she made major tours of Poland and the Baltic states.

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In 1955 health problems appeared again, and she had to retire from performing. She did not go serious into teaching, but retired to Suffolk, where she adopted the hobby of gardening. There is a prize in her name at the Royal College of Music, London. Of her pupils, Minat Lyons should be mentioned - a member of the London Symphony Orchestra.

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PHOTO - Thelma in 1947

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