

Jessica Duchen: 'La Stupenda', a voice as singular as Maria Callas

Covent Garden became Sutherland's artistic home and she was a key player in some of its biggest moments

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Initially she had expected to become a mezzo like her mother, who was her first teacher. Instead, she evolved into a dramatic soprano whose malleable virtuosity allowed her to excel in the most demanding bel canto operas. It was Donizetti's most dramatic heroine, Lucia di Lammermoor, that came to be her signature role, catapulting her to fame in 1959 when she performed it at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, and subsequently in Paris. Few who heard her sing its famous "Mad Scene" would ever forget it.

She had worked her way up steadily via small solos in Mozart and rather bigger ones in Handel: her performance of the aria "Let the Bright Seraphim" from Samson caused a 10-minute ovation at Covent Garden in 1958, presaging the glory days of Sutherland as "La Stupenda" – the nickname awarded her in 1960 in response to her success in the same composer's Alcina.

It was an extraordinary journey for a woman who had given up a secretarial job in her native Australia in 1949 apparently hoping to sing the one thing she never became especially known for: Wagner. Her husband, the conductor Richard Bonyngue, with whom she enjoyed a career-long artistic partnership, perceptively advised her to concentrate

instead on the bel canto repertoire, which he was eager to reinvigorate. The couple, over the years, did exactly that.

Covent Garden became Sutherland's artistic home and she was a key player in some of its biggest moments: for instance, it was alongside her in *La Fille du Régiment* that Luciano Pavarotti made his name, singing Tonio with his nine top Cs. That opera's heroine, Marie, ideally suited Sutherland's down-to-earth personality and sense of humour. An imposing figure with bucketloads of charisma, she once joked: "It's not that I am so tall – it is that tenors are so small."

She made her last public appearance in 1990. The previous year she had been awarded the DBE; the following year came the Order of Merit. Her death marks the end of an operatic era.