

Ludwig (Ledwidge), William

by Noel Young

Ludwig (Ledwidge), William (1847–1923), singer, was born 15 July 1847 in Arran Quay, Dublin, eldest son of William Ledwidge, chorister, of Dublin, and Teresa Ledwidge (née Burke). He attended the O'Connell Schools and came under the influence of Br Swan, and later entered a solicitor's office. He sang for a time in the choir of St Paul's church, Arran Quay, and in University Church, where Alban Croft was the organist and where he met Alessandro Cellini, who gave him lessons. In 1874 he joined the Carl Rosa Opera Company in London, where his contemporary (Sir) Charles Santley, the English baritone, so greatly admired his Irish colleague that he left his valuable wardrobe to him as a parting gift. He changed his name to Ludwig, possibly because of frequent misspelling but more likely because an opera singer with a Germanic name was more employable.

In 1877 he became chief baritone of the Carl Rosa company. He was famous as a Wagnerian singer and continued for most of his career to sing in Wagner's operas. Not only was his big voice suited to parts such as Wotan, the Dutchman, and Hans Sachs, but his declamation and acting were splendidly dramatic. In May 1883 he was in the Carl Rosa production of Verdi's 'Il trovatore' at the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin, then connected to the exhibition building in Earlsfort Terrace, by a first-generation telephone. Visitors to the exhibition were able to hear the opera live from the Gaiety. In 1884 he took the title role in 'Mephistophile' at the same theatre. He sang Claude Frollo in Goring Thomas's 'Esmeralda' at Drury Lane (1883) and took part in the first performance of Mackenzie's 'Colomba'. He was also justly famous for his oratorio and concert singing. He was perhaps the greatest Vanderdecken of his day. Wagner is said to have given him a score of 'The Flying Dutchman', inscribed: 'To the incomparable Vanderdecken'.

He made at least three trips to America in the 1880s, where he was engaged by the National Opera Company. He later toured there with his own company in the 1890s, mixing operatic and Irish songs, and was engaged by the Boston Opera Company in 1901. His commitment to 'nationalist' music is perhaps best illustrated by his concerts in 1898 to mark the centenary of the Irish rebellion. Sir Henry Wood described him as 'the greatest Elijah'. James Joyce (qv) mentions him by name in both *Ulysses* (Penguin ed., 736) and *Finnegans wake* (Penguin ed., 538). In 1903 he organised a touring concert party to Athlone and introduced Lily Foley to her future husband, John McCormack (qv), who called Ludwig 'one of the most distinguished baritones Ireland has produced'. Unfortunately, just as he was planning to retire from the stage and begin full-time teaching he suffered from a throat infection that necessitated an operation that destroyed his voice. His last public performance was with Carl Rosa in the Theatre Royal, Dublin, at Christmas 1910. His friends bought him an annuity and this, as well as some work in the fledgling cinema industry,

helped him survive in modest circumstances. His charity work is reckoned to have cost him much of his fortune. He died 25 December 1923 in London.

Ludwig married first (15 January 1872) Mary Catherine Price (d. 1874); they had one son. He married secondly (16 February 1876) Evelyn Miles from Chelsea, London; they had two sons and nine daughters. He set up his home in London at 191 Junction Rd and later at 13 Queen's Avenue. He is commemorated by the RIAM's Ludwig Cup.

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O'Connell School registers 1855–8; O'Connell School 50th anniversary programme; *The Dramatic and Musical Directory, 1891*; J. D. Brown and S. S. Stratton, *British musical biography* (1897); *Wilkes-Barre Record*, Pa., May 1901; Gaiety Theatre 25th Anniversary Souvenir; Pierre Key, 'John McCormack', *Evening Telegraph*, 31 Dec. 1923; *Ir. Times*, *Freeman's Journal*, *Ir. Independent*, 31 Dec. 1923; Arthur E. Hull (ed.), *A dictionary of modern music and musicians* (1924); Albert E. Wier (ed.), *The Macmillan encyclopaedia of music and musicians* (1938); Dublin Grand Opera Society programme, winter 1984; Richard Pine and Charles Acton, *To talent alone: the Royal Irish Academy of Music, 1848–1998* (1998), 224–5, 556