

## WATTS, HELEN JOSEPHINE (1927 - 2009), singer

**Name:** Helen Josephine Watts  
**Date of birth:** 1927  
**Date of death:** 2009  
**Spouse:** Michael Mitchell  
**Parent:** Winifred Watts (née Morgan)  
**Parent:** Thomas Watts  
**Gender:** Female  
**Occupation:** singer  
**Area of activity:** Music; Performing Arts  
**Author:** Rhidian Griffiths

Helen Watts was born in Milford Haven on 7 December 1927, the daughter of Thomas Watts, a pharmacist, and his wife Winifred (née Morgan). She grew up in Haverfordwest and attended St Mary and St Anne School, Abbot's Bromley, Staffordshire. There was music in the family: she started to play the piano at the age of seven, and her brother was a chorister at Llandaff Cathedral and later a choral scholar at St John's College, Cambridge. Her own initial ambition, however, was to become a physiotherapist. Being too young to start the appropriate course, she was encouraged to go for voice training at the Royal Academy of Music, where she studied with Caroline Hatchard, and embarked on a musical career.

During the 1950s her success in radio broadcasts brought her to the attention of the Welsh conductor Geraint Jones, who engaged her for BBC programmes of Bach's music. She sang Bach arias at the Proms in 1955 and became closely identified with the music of Bach and Handel, making a large number of recordings, including four complete versions of Handel's *Messiah* and three of Bach's *Magnificat*. Her recordings were widely praised and earned her the respect of the critics, and she won a Grand Prix du Disque in 1959. In 1964 she sang the title role in the English Opera Group's staging of Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia* on tour in the USSR, and in 1970 performed Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* to widespread acclaim at Carnegie Hall in New York. She performed regularly on the concert platform with choral societies, and worked with many celebrated conductors, including Georg Solti, Benjamin Britten, Bernard Haitink and Herbert von Karajan. She also appeared regularly in opera at Covent Garden and Salzburg and with Welsh National Opera and was widely respected as one of the finest and most dependable singers of her generation. Particularly well regarded are her recordings of the Angel in Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius* under Sir Adrian Boult in 1976 and her part in the first complete recording of Vaughan Williams's *Riders to the Sea* under Meredith Davies in 1972.

Though not fluent in Welsh, she retained great affection for Wales, particularly her native Pembrokeshire; she sang regularly in Wales, and recorded some Welsh songs, notably 'Berwyn' by [D. Vaughan Thomas](#), 'Y bardd' by [Mansel Thomas](#), and 'Gweddi Pechadur' by [Morfydd Owen](#), all on the Qualiton label. At the Swansea Festival in 1969 she gave the first performance of [Grace Williams](#)'s song cycle 'Billows of the sea', which the composer dedicated to her.

Having lived for many years in Cuckfield, Sussex, she retired from her singing career in 1985, and returned to her native Pembrokeshire where she was able to continue her passion for gardening.

She was appointed an honorary FRAM in 1961 and CBE in 1978, and in 1980 she married the viola player Michael Mitchell (1929-2007).

Helen Watts died on 7 October 2009. A memorial service was held at St Paul's, Covent Garden on 9 December, at which a number of her recordings were played and tributes were paid by, among others, the tenor Ian Partridge and the baritone Thomas Allen.

### Author

Rhidian Griffiths

### Sources

Donald Brook, *Singers of Today* (1958)

'[Helen Watts](#)', *The Daily Telegraph*, 1 November 2009

'[Helen Watts obituary](#)', *The Guardian*, 15 October 2009

'[Helen Watts, contralto](#)', *Gramophone*, 23 October 2009

*The Times*, 10 December 2009

## Further reading

[Helen Watts \(Mezzo-soprano, Contralto\)](#), Bach Cantatas website, viewed 17 April 2019

[Helen Watts](#), Discogs website, viewed 17 April 2019

Wikipedia Article: [Helen Watts](#)

## Sound and Film

[Helen Watts sings "Y Bardd"](#) (1959)

[Helen Watts sings "Gweddi'r Pechadur"](#) (1959)

## Additional Links

VIAF: [103446081](#)

Wikidata: <https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/Q468060>

Published date: 2019-04-16

Article Copyright: <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/> 

The Dictionary of Welsh Biography is provided by The National Library of Wales and the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies. It is free to use and does not receive grant support. A donation would help us maintain and improve the site so that we can continue to acknowledge Welsh men and women who have made notable contributions to life in Wales and beyond.

Find out more on our [sponsorship page](#).

