

DAME NELLIE MELBA

AN AUSTRALIAN ICON

Presented 13 May 2001, at Melbourne Museum

A lecture by Moya McFadzean
Senior Curator
Australian Society and Technology Program
Museum Victoria

Famous people are handed down to us by a string of story-tellers, historians, gossips, reporters. Great people assume mythic status as they are surrounded by tales both tall and true. We are all myth-makers. Melba, as one of the most “talked about” people in the history of Australia, is one of our greatest creations.

Here are a few facts to start with.

Helen Porter Mitchell was born at ‘Doonside’ in Richmond, Victoria on May 19, 1861. She was the daughter of Isabella (Dow) and David Mitchell, the wealthy builder and businessman. Her early years were often spent at her parent’s country house in Lilydale with her seven younger brothers and sisters. They were a musical family, but it was only Nellie, as she was affectionately known, who had the qualities and temperament which would make her one of the greatest opera singers of all time.

Nellie’s first singing lessons were conducted at the Presbyterian Ladies College but it was the Italian tenor, Pietro Cecchi, who in 1880 first recognised Nellie Mitchell’s singing potential.

After the death of her mother and her sister Vere, David Mitchell took Nellie to Mackay in Queensland. She and her younger sister were quickly accepted into Mackay society and Nellie performed numerous drawing room concerts. In 1881 she married Charles Armstrong and their son, George, was born the following year.

Neither the tropical conditions nor the heated marital arguments were to Nellie's taste. In a letter to Signor Cecchi she expressed her decision to become a professional singer. In 1884 Nellie left Mackay with her son and never returned.

Nellie performed a number of successful concerts and recitals in Melbourne, but her longing was to conquer Europe. The opportunity came in 1886 in a trip to London with her father, two sisters, husband and son. Nellie's letters of introduction from her instructors resulted in interviews with influential composers in London but no success.

David Mitchell, a strict Presbyterian, did not approve of his daughter's desire to "sing in public". However he allowed her one more chance – Paris and an interview with the famous Madame Mathilde Marchesi.

Marchesi was in raptures over the voice of this young girl, from an unknown land. Nellie never looked back. Under Marchesi's tutelage she made her grand debut in Brussels in 1887 and after a few setbacks, established herself as the Covent Garden prima donna until the mid 1920s. It is interesting to note that, before her Brussels debut, Nellie had not been well received at Covent Garden.

Nellie assumed a stage name in honour of her beloved home town and the name "Melba" was soon resounding all over the world.

Nellie Melba returned to Australia several times during her career. Her triumphant homecoming in 1902 saw a national welcome never before and never again witnessed in this country.

Between 1909 and 1911 she purchased and extended Coombe Cottage in Coldstream and enjoyed many retreats with her family and friends to her favourite part of the world.

Melba is famous for her numerous farewells but in 1928 she performed her final and emotional concerts in Australia.

She died on February 23, 1931 of paratyphoid, complicated by an incurable blood infection. She was buried at Lilydale.

Numerous images of Melba have been created over time: the 'wanton woman', the 'brilliant soprano', the 'neglectful mother', the 'patriotic Australian', the 'shrewd businesswoman', the 'drinker', the 'loyal friend'. But voice, her strength, ambition and willpower were the qualities that took her to the pinnacle of the opera world.

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed the era of the great diva. Concert halls were growing in size and required big voices. Prima donnas such as Adelina Patti and Melba would preside over these operatic palaces like royalty.

Divas of Melba's time were placed on social pedestals. They were talented, wealthy, often beautiful – and public property. Their private lives, their movements within the social set filled newspapers and gossip columns. Even more, perhaps than their operatic performances.

Melba seemed to cope with this world as if she was born into it. Nellie was a young woman from the 'colonies' with no Australian predecessor to offer her support. A person less determined would have failed. However, Nellie had the qualities which made her one of the greatest and longest surviving divas of all time. She even jealously guarded her position at Covent Garden to the point of alienating and frustrating new and rival talent. She maintained her voice, her authority, her wealth and her dignity until her final farewell.

Melba's advice to her students was her own lifelong guide: *"(they) cannot hope to become prima donnas unless they are willing to sacrifice everything to their art"*.

So Nellie Armstrong had changed her name to Melba and became one of the greatest opera singers of all time. In essence, however, she probably remained much the same.

The Melba myth that we have created and nurtured makes getting to know the woman extremely difficult. For every story there is another to contradict it. But there can be no doubt that Nellie was a woman with enormous willpower, that she had an unshakeable confidence in her own ability and that she was, at least until her later years, completely single-minded. She had to be in order to achieve success and maintain her position.

Career women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were not common. Nellie had to make the choice that has faced many women – family or career.

She chose a career which demanded her constant attention and all of her energy. It demanded continuous travel and a move into a world totally foreign to her family. Her marriage quickly collapsed and her son was taken by his father to America. She never remarried. Over the years, Nellie was involved with at least one other man, notably the Duc d'Orleans, pretender to the French throne. She was a married woman of 'common' background. The French and English courts frowned upon the relationship thus threatening her position at Covent Garden.

When diplomatic pressure was brought to bear Nellie would no more sacrifice her career for him than he would for her. Sadly they parted.

Nellie was at the top of her field. She remained always the professional and demanded perfection from herself and others. The consummate businesswoman, Nellie was financially independent and, indeed, made a great deal of money. In a world dominated by men in positions of power, Melba could hold her own with composers, fellow singers, kings and politicians.

Many stories circulate about the positive and negative aspects of Melba's personality. A woman in a competitive field, constantly in the public eye, with an aggressive personality, is not likely to win everyone's approval. Reports of stinginess are balanced by stories of generosity. Images of self-importance and pretension are softened by moments of sensibility and of down-to-earth humour.

There can be no doubt, however, that Nellie loved her country. She wrote *"If you wish to understand me at all, you must understand first and foremost that I am an Australian."* Her autobiography, her letters, her public speeches, all pronounce an affection for Australia that she never denied or disguised.

At no time was the strength of feeling for her 'beloved country' more evident than during the First World War. Melba worked tirelessly for the war effort. Her numerous benefit concerts raised huge sums for local and overseas causes. She promoted Australia's involvement and resented any underestimation of her nation's war efforts. Of America she once wrote with cynicism: *"Of course America is going to win the war!!!! Need I say more? It makes one mad."*

For her services towards the war effort King George V made Melba Dame Commander of the British Empire. It is interesting to note that it was for her wartime fund raising efforts, rather than for her artistic achievement, that she received this honour.

After cementing her position in the European opera houses, Melba returned to Australia and, as she grew older, her visits became more frequent. Family, the landscape, the people and later her home drew her back to Melbourne.

During a time when national recognition of local art was hard won, Melba not only associated with and supported Australian artists but purchased their work. Melba was one of the earliest people to appreciate the talents of Hans Heysen. The work of this now famous painter features frequently in her impressive private collection which consists principally of Australian (landscape) art.

Before World War 1, Australia was an uncertain nation. With little faith in its own political, industrial and, particularly cultural abilities, Australians looked to England for a role model. The overwhelming success and recognition Nellie Melba received overseas aroused back home a new pride and new confidence in Australian potential. Australia was placed, musically, on the world map. A nation which even today creates heroes and surrounds them with a mythical aura, took Melba to its heart.

Opera has been performed in Australia since the early nineteenth century. Its popularity has fluctuated according to changing fashions, economy and to the entertainment trend of the period. Italian compositions dominated the stages after 1840 and lighter works such as French comic opera and English operetta enjoyed periodic popularity. Local composers were writing operas but few were professionally performed.

Entrepreneurs such as George Coppin (from the 1850s) William Saurin Lyster (from the 1860s) and J.C. Williamson and George Musgrove (from the 1880s) introduced a wide range of operatic works to Australian audiences. These highly publicised performances, culminating in the J.C. Williamson-Dame Nellie Melba Grand Opera Seasons, exposed a broader public to the delights of a varied repertoire and internationally acclaimed singers.

The astounding recognition that Melba received overseas was bound to have an effect upon the public profile of opera in Australia.

The general public began to read about Melba, her operatic roles, her successes, the famous concert halls at which she sang. As Melba became noteworthy, so did opera. Her Australian tours were always a phenomenal success and this new broad interest in opera can only have had a positive effect upon emerging Australian talent.

The J.C. Williamson seasons of 1911, 1924 and 1928 were instrumental in directing this cultural climate. The 1924 season in conjunction with Melba offered 18 operas, including *La Boheme* with Melba as Mimi and Dino Borgioli as Rodolfo.

La Boheme was Melba's favourite opera and many believed Mimi to be her finest role. Puccini's love story set in the Latin quarter of Paris around 1830 remained in Melba's repertoire until her retirement. Mimi, a consumptive dressmaker, falls in love with Rodolfo, a poor student and eventually dies in his arms. Many of Melba's concerts included an aria from *La Boheme*. The famous quotation from the opera, Mimi's dying words "farewell without bitterness" is inscribed upon Melba's headstone.

Her other great roles were as Marguerite in Gounod's *Faust* and as Violetta in Verdi's *La Traviata*. It is said that, despite the advice of her teacher and peers, she attempted to perform Wagner but that the different range required for the role nearly destroyed her voice – she learned her lesson, recognised where her strengths, and her limitations lay, and never attempted Wagner again.

There were some complaints that the importing of overseas singers for the main roles in the J.C. Williamson opera seasons robbed local talent of work. However the display of international achievement provided motivation and models for local singers and a broadening of mind and experience for audiences.

Australian singers were used for minor parts and in the chorus. Melba herself engaged many artists to perform in Australia. She was able to use her influence to bring opera to her country and take local opera talent to the continent.

Melba's relationship with Australia was sometimes an ambivalent one on both sides. Australians traditionally love a hero, but conversely are wary of the successful. Melba's first triumphant homecoming in 1902 received a national welcome which has never been equalled. Yet the general public rode with satisfaction the wave of rumour circulated by the

Truth newspaper that Melba drank (in all likelihood, she was seasick after a Bass Strait crossing and unable to perform).

Melba herself was not always benevolent in her attitude towards Australia. Frustrated by parochialism and lack of support for local culture, Melba sometimes gave vent to her anger: “*They’re hopeless ...hopeless*”, she is reported to have said in exasperation to a friend. Nevertheless, much is hearsay, and her letters demonstrate how sincere and strong was her affection for her homeland.

This affection was nowhere more apparent than in her fondness for the Lilydale district. The people of Lilydale returned the favour by claiming Dame Nellie Melba as their local personality. Lilydale had been part of Melba since her birth. Her father owned Steel’s Creek Cattle Station by the Yarra River where Nellie has spent much of her childhood. In the 1870s, David Mitchell became a Lilydale Councillor and established the Cave Hill Limestone Quarry. He would later purchase the St Hubert’s Vineyard at Coldstream.

Melba took a keen interest in the affairs at Cave Hill, wrote letters to the editor of the Lilydale Express and attended a number of functions and fundraising activities. She attended local Arbour Days, launched the Lilydale golfing season in 1918 with a straight drive down the fairway and opened the Belgian Fund Jumble Fair at Coldstream in 1915.

When Nellie established her own residence at Coldstream she forever immortalised Lilydale as the home of Melba.

In 1909, after visiting her father, Nellie Melba noticed a ‘For Sale’ sign at Dooley’s farm, about five kilometres from Lilydale. She purchased the 75-acre property on the spot. By 1911, the house had been enlarged through designs by John Grainger, Percy Grainger’s father – a sprawling, single- storeyed, flat-roofed house, with a roof garden covered in trellis. Beyond were stables and a garage with a small tower on which was inscribed ‘East West, Hame’s Best’.

The garden was designed by William Guilfoyle (retired Director of Melbourne’s Royal Botanic Gardens). The family made alterations and the result was an open plan garden divided into sections – the swimming pool and Italian garden, the rose garden, the kitchen

garden as well as two tennis courts. The rose garden was Melba's greatest love. The house and garden is surrounded by a huge cypress hedge, which acts as a vital windbreak. It was renamed Coombe Cottage, after a house Melba had rented in Surrey, England.

Coombe became Melba's home – she rented houses and apartments all over the world but Coombe was her refuge and she filled it with special people and possessions. And it was in the heart of the country that she loved.

There was a constant flow of guests at Coombe when Melba was in residence. Musicians, singers, actors, artists, social celebrities, politicians, as well as Melba's family, all graced the rooms and gardens of Coombe Cottage. I quote from her autobiography *Melodies and Memories*:

"...I have built my Australian home, Coombe Cottage, almost within sight and sound of the same trees and vineyards in which I played as a child, under the same brilliant sunshine, facing the same sudden storms that sweep in like giants from the hills".

Due to her hectic schedule, Melba's time at Coombe Cottage was neither regular nor prolonged. However, she was in Australia when the First World War commenced and Coombe was her base between appearances at charity functions and benefit concerts.

Her only son George was to rekindle an interest in the country of his birth. He had lived most of his life with his father on ranches in America. In 1913, he married Evelyn Doyle in London and they made their home at Coombe which had been deeded to them by Melba. Extra acreage was purchased, named Coombe Farm and stocked with dairy cattle and a few sheep. Melba's only grandchild Pamela was born in 1918 and became the delight of her grandmother's later years. Her birth drew Melba home from abroad.

The following is from a letter to Pamela from Melba after she left Australia in 1922:

Darling Pamela

I am thinking of you so much and missing you dreadfully. I wish I had stolen you. We have had a lovely crossing. There is such a dear little baby on board, her name is Mary. I know you would like her. I hope Bully and Jack are quite well and that Jacky Towt comes and plays with you. I am so lonely and miss you more and more each day.

Bless you darling I love you.

Granny

In 1909, a concert in Lilydale commenced the famous tour which would take Melba through regional and outback Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, as well as Tasmania and New Zealand. It became known as her 'sentimental tour'.

By this time, Melba was commanding larger audiences and concert fees in Europe, England and America than any of her fellow artists. Yet it was during this, the peak period of her career, that she decided to organise a tour of the country and outback towns of eastern Australia and New Zealand.

It was an impressive undertaking. Melba was almost fifty and the conditions would be primitive. In demand at every principal opera house on the Continent, she forfeited enormous fees and a precious season of opera to her competitors, to sing in halls in remote parts of Australia.

Some were quick to suspect her motives. Had her European fame been overestimated? Was her voice fading, and her fame dwindling? These rumours were rejected as ridiculous. Melba had an affection for her homeland which increased during her absence and resulted, after 1902, in frequent return visits. She greatly desired the recognition and acceptance of her own people and, by taking her voice to all Australians, she hoped to win their respect and offer them a cultural experience usually denied to them by distance.

She succeeded. Between April and October, Melba travelled ten thousand miles (mostly by train) to around fifty towns throughout eastern Australia, Tasmania and New Zealand. She weaved her way through Forbes, Dubbo and Glenn Innes in New South Wales to Charters Towers and Murwillumbah in Queensland, to Sale and Bairnsdale in Victoria and Launceston in Tasmania. Her accommodation was usually provided at the local hotel or at the home of a local dignitary. She stayed one, sometimes two nights in each town and her visits were also preceded and followed by much discussion and reports in local papers.

The concerts were extraordinarily popular. As the concert venue was always filled to capacity, the determined public crowded outside the halls in silence, clambered on top of the hall roofs and even crawled under the buildings to lay beneath the stage in order to hear something of the great voice.

Melba has many amusing memories of her 1909 tour, which she retells in her autobiography with warmth and humour. Once the piano fell through one of the country stages; once a landlady purchased new furniture for Melba's room only to add it to Melba's Company's bill; another time, a group of society people sat on the hall roof to enjoy a free Melba concert and were left stranded for the night when the gardener unwittingly removed the ladder. In one town, Melba could hear alarming noises emanating from beneath the stage on which she stood. After whispering an inquiry to her flautist, John Lemmone, he discovered that people, desperate to hear Melba's performance, were lying beneath the stage and repeatedly bumping their heads in the cramped space. Melba appeared to take it all in her stride.

The repertoire of Melba and her accompanists were not that of high opera. They sang popular songs such as Tosti's "Goodbye" and Handel's "Sweet Bird" with an occasional Melba operatic classic such as the Mad Scene from "Lucia de Lammermour". Of all the popular folk songs of the day that Melba performed, it was 'Home Sweet Home' that became immortalised as her own.

The audiences loved the variety — and Melba enjoyed the adulation, but also the people themselves. John Lemmone, Melba's flautist and manager, skilfully orchestrated the entire tour, which gave Melba healthy, although not exorbitant, profits. She had desired to produce a tour for the enjoyment of all Australian people and this she certainly achieved.

Melba's hectic schedule also accommodated, when possible, her "dear" students at the Albert Street Conservatorium in Melbourne. No doubt Melba was searching for some kind of immortality by passing on her knowledge and techniques to a new generation of singers. And no subject was too trivial for her scrutiny; in a letter to one of her proteges, Stella Power, Melba recommends a good corset and a good Melbourne supplier.

Stella Power was dubbed "Little Melba" and the great diva promoted Power as the woman who could fill her place. But while Melba taught, advised, financed overseas trips and used her influence to secure roles on international stages, neither Power nor any other student had the energy and determination essential for the making of a prima donna.

Melba never accepted payment for her services. Her limited time in Australia made irregular her presence at the Conservatorium.

Nevertheless, her numerous letters to the director of Albert Street, Fritz Hart, reveal an unceasing interest and commitment to her students. She spread the word to the English and American press of the quality of Australian Voices.

When in Melbourne, her influence saw that Albert Street singers received minor roles and positions in the chorus of all local productions, including the J.C. Williamson opera seasons. Coombe Cottage in Colstream became the venue for student gatherings and “chop” picnics.

In 1926, Melba produced her own singing theory. The Melba Method was ghost written by Fritz Hart and Mary Campbell and contained vocal exercises and text on relaxation methods. It was quite successful. In a letter to Fritz she wrote: *“I am sure you are glad to learn that The Method is well on its way...and we are receiving 500 pounds advance royalties. You ought to receive 250 pounds almost as soon as this letter. I hope so, and I am so glad for your sake and for Mary’s sake too – and I think we shall make a lot of money out of it... Hurrah! I have called it – The Melba Method...”*

Melba left 8,000 pounds for the establishment of a scholarship. Before the Second World War, it was the country’s most valuable singing award. Today this two-year scholarship is still awarded by the Melba Memorial Conservatorium of Music in her memory.

Her memory is also kept alive by the existence of voice recordings. Around the turn of the century, the technology was under experimentation and Melba was one of the few operatic stars who allowed her voice to be recorded for posterity. The reluctance of other performers becomes understandable when listening to the sound quality which cannot do justice to the voice. Nevertheless, it is marvellous to have something that takes us some way to comprehending the immensity of her operatic abilities.

The phrase “More farewells than Nellie Melba” has been part of Australian vernacular for many years. However, saying goodbye to the cities and countries in which one had performed was a traditional gesture, and Melba performed many ‘farewell concerts’ around the country during the 1920s.

Her final farewell on February 23, 1931 seemed to strike at the hearts of all Australians. Obituaries and funeral reports covered the newspapers and dominated conversation. It was a national event of a comparative scale with Sir Donald Bradman’s recent passing.

Politicians, royal representatives, religious leaders and other high-ranking members of society attended the service. The streets of Melbourne were lined with people all the way from Scots Church to Lilydale to watch the passing of the funeral procession.

Australia mourned its famous daughter – many had never even heard her sing. Melba, like Ned Kelly, Phar Lap and Donald Bradman, had become a legend in her own lifetime. After her death, the myth-making process continued, the name “Melba” now represents a potpourri of images – we pick and choose those which interest or appeal.

At one of her farewell concerts on 13 October 1924 at His Majesty’s Theatre, Melbourne, she pronounced: *“I have done my best... I have tried to keep faith with my art. For all that Australia has done for me, for all the beauty that she has shown me, for all the love she has offered, I wish to say, thank you from the bottom of my heart... I never was prouder than I am tonight to be an Australian woman”*.

Selected References

- Hetherington, John *Melba: A Biography*, Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 1967
Melba, Dame Nellie *Melodies and Memories* (Introduction and notes, John Cargher, Nelson, Melbourne, 1979)
Radic, Therese *Melba: The Voice of Australia* MacMillan Co of Australia Pty Ltd, 1986
Vestey, Pamela *Melba. A Family Memoir*, Phoebe Publishing, Melbourne, 1996