

Dame Nellie Melba (Helen Porter Mitchell)

1861-1931

Every inch a Prima Donna

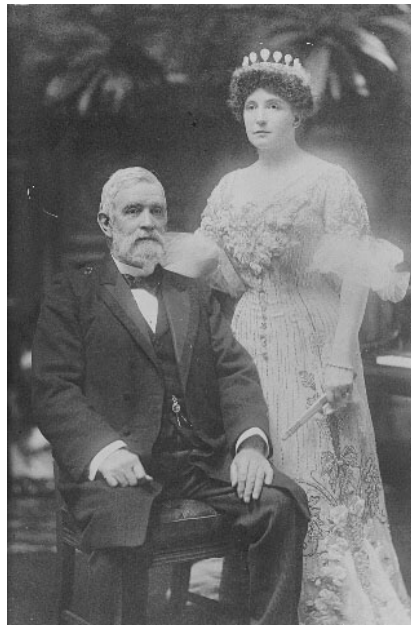


Madam Melba: 1902: Rupert Bunny: National Gallery of Victoria

Dame Nellie Melba (1861-1931), prima donna, was born Helen Porter Mitchell on 19th May 1861 at Richmond, Melbourne, eldest surviving of ten children of David Mitchell, building contractor, and his wife Isabella Ann, née Dow. "Nellie" was a common nickname for those named Helen in the

late 19th century while the adopted surname "Melba," was in recognition of her home city, Melbourne.

Her father's business acumen and strict code of behaviour strongly influenced Melba, who later declared that of all the men she had known he had meant most to her. Her mother shared her husband's taste for music, played a number of instruments and was the young Nellie's first music teacher. Nellie was not, however, an infant prodigy. Although she first sang in public when six years old, forming a lifelong attachment to 'Comin' thro' the Rye', it was her humming that visitors noticed. Unwittingly she had hit upon what she would later describe as an effective vocal exercise. She also whistled, and generally behaved like a tomboy.



Dame Nellie Melba (Helen Porter Mitchell) and her father David Mitchell

Educated first by her aunts, Melba was sent to a boarding school at Richmond before being enrolled as a day-girl at the new Presbyterian Ladies' College. There, in the context of the most advanced education then available to women in Victoria, she pursued her interests in singing and the piano. Nellie showed herself to be adept in elocution, accomplished at painting and in acquiring the social graces. In mathematics and English she was undistinguished.

Nellie's leaving school in 1880 was overshadowed by her mother's death, followed by that of a sister. Deciding on a change of scene, David Mitchell bought a sugar mill near Mackay in Queensland. There the 21-year-old Nellie met Charles Nisbett Frederick Armstrong, tall, blue-eyed and three years her senior, a pleasant man who combined exceptional skills as a rough-rider with the advantage of gentle birth: his father was a baronet. They were married in Brisbane on 22nd December 1882. Sequestered in a tin-roofed house, Melba became bored with the incessant rain and frustrated by a foundering marriage. The birth of a son, George, did little to quell her growing ambition to sing professionally, and on 19th January 1884 she left Mackay and returned to Melbourne.



With her only child, George

Although Melba later repudiated her indebtedness to Pietro Cecchi, her then singing teacher, it was he who recognised, as he said, "a voice which would enthral the world." Melba now adopted her new name and applied herself totally to her studies. On 17th May 1884 she made her début at a Liedertafel concert at the Melbourne Town Hall. 'She sings like one out of ten thousand', wrote the *Australasian's* critic. It was on this occasion that she met John Lemmone, a flautist, later to act as her long-

time accompanist, manager and opera company impresario, and who would be present at her deathbed.



Melbourne Town Hall

After some success as a professional singer (she earned £750 in the first year) Melba accompanied her father, appointed Victoria's commissioner to the Indian and Colonial Exhibition, to London in March 1886. At first encouragement was not forthcoming. Sir Arthur Sullivan told her to keep on with her studies and in a year's time he might offer her a small part in *The Mikado*; her one concert was smothered in fog and polite applause. However Melba had arranged for an audition in Paris with Mathilde Marchesi. Carrying a letter of introduction from Mme (Wiedermann-) Pinschof, wife of the Austro-Hungarian consul in Melbourne, she presented herself to Marchesi, who immediately recognized her potential. Nevertheless, she was told it was necessary to refine her technique

In the seven years he had taught her, Cecchi had placed the voice, coached her in the leading Italian operatic roles. Mme Marchesi's contribution was to send Melba forth to selected salons as much for her social education as for singing experience, and to introduce her to the various composers who visited the Ecole Marchesi. Melba always acknowledged her deep indebtedness to Mme, Marchesi. She addressed her in correspondence as 'Mother', and repeatedly stated that Marchesi had been " her only teacher."



Melba as Marguerite, the heroine of Gounod's opera *Faust*

Melba made her début as an opera singer at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels, on 13th October 1887. She was an immediate hit as Gilda in *Rigoletto*, a daunting role for a 26-year-old. Subsequently she appeared in *La Traviata* and in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, then, on 24th May 1888, sang Lucia at Covent Garden. It was not a conspicuous success; and although she later sang her favourite role of Gilda, she seemed to make little headway, On being offered a secondary part by the management in another opera, Melba packed her bags and fled to Brussels.

However she had found an ally at Covent Garden in the influential Lady de Grey, who wrote begging her to return. Melba consented, but meanwhile made her Paris début as Ophélie in *Hamlet* on 8 May 1889. Acclaimed by press and public alike, she moved on to Covent Garden, where she appeared with Jean and Edouard de Reszke in *Roméo et Juliette*. 'I date my success in London', she later recalled, 'quite distinctly from the great night of 15th June 1889'.



Melba as Ophelia

Melba was fortunate in that the greater part of her career coincided with Covent Garden's golden age, even though its architect, the impresario (Sir) Augustus Harris, had initially engaged her reluctantly. Harris mounted spectacular productions involving hundreds, broadened the repertoire and widened the audience while still drawing the aristocracy. Melba found the Royal Opera's extraordinary social status exhilarating. Even though some of her greatest triumphs occurred elsewhere, most notably at La Scala in 1893 and repeatedly in New York, it was to Covent Garden that Melba returned season after season, maintaining a permanent dressing room to which she alone held the key. There she reigned supreme.

A powerful figure behind the scenes, Melba effectively blocked a number of rivals. In 1913 Covent Garden commemorated the 25th anniversary of her first appearance there with a gala performance: Melba appeared as Mimi in *La Bohème*, a role she had studied with the composer and made famous.



Royal Opera House - Covent Garden

Assisted materially by her friend Lady de Grey, Melba moved freely in high society. It was remarked that she carried herself as if to the manner born. On first-name terms with the great, she would sing at their houses only when it pleased her: a not unreasonable attitude when, in addition to her tours to Continental opera houses, she had been invited to sing in St Petersburg before Tsar Alexander III, had sung in Stockholm before King Oscar II, in Vienna before Emperor Franz Joseph and in Berlin before Kaiser Wilhelm II. She had also been commanded by Queen Victoria to Windsor. "Years of almost monotonous brilliance" was the summation on her Covent Garden farewell programme. When she appeared in distant places, she was mobbed, much as pop-singers are today.

Meanwhile friendly advice from Alfred de Rothschild strengthened her financial position. Shortly after the turn of the century she bought a house in Great Cumberland Place, London, to be her home for more than twenty years. She employed French workmen to remodel it in the style of Versailles.

It is amusing to note that one of the clearest pointers to the adulation heaped on Melba at this time involves not music, but food. Peach Melba is a classic dessert invented in 1892 - 1893 by the French chef Auguste Escoffier at the Savoy Hotel, London to honour the Australian soprano. It combines two of her favourite summer fruits, peaches and raspberry sauce plus vanilla ice cream.

Although Charles Armstrong had accompanied Melba to Europe, he joined the army to keep himself occupied and only occasionally visited his wife and baby in Paris. While he was reluctant to shed the marriage; a spectacular row on the occasion of Melba's *début* in Brussels effectively ended it. In 1890 Melba had met Philippe, Duke of Orleans, the dashing heir of the Bourbon pretender to the French throne, then living in England. The pair were glimpsed together in London, Paris, Brussels, St Petersburg and Vienna, where they indiscreetly shared a box at the Opera. The newspapers got hold of the story, and almost immediately Charles Armstrong filed a petition for divorce on the grounds of adultery. The case was eventually quietly dropped – it is suspected that diplomatic pressure may have been brought to bear. The scandal was enough to send the Duke off on a two-year safari in Africa, and to impress upon a bereft Melba both the importance of discretion and an increased sense of loneliness. Armstrong, having spirited their son away to America, divorced her in Texas in 1900.



Dame Nellie Melba outside Brisbane's Gresham Hotel, circa 1909. John Oxley Library.

Melba's circle increasingly included Australians and she maintained regular contact with her family there. In 1902 her long-awaited return home took place, a concert tour to all States and New Zealand. From the concerts in Sydney and Melbourne alone she netted £21,000, the takings of one Sydney concert setting a new world record. Melba's train journey was a

royal progress southwards to Melbourne, where thousands turned out to greet her. A contingent from P.L.C. shrilled a 'coo-ee' as she alighted, while Stock Exchange brokers waved their hats in the air as her carriage passed. For newly federated Australia, Melba represented glamour, success, and international acceptance: Melbourne in particular felt that she had made the place famous.

Unfortunately, a week after she sailed for Europe in March 1903, John Ezra Norton penned an open letter in the *Truth* newspaper which accused her of wilfulness, miserliness, parasitism and drunkenness. Norton made it plain that he would welcome a legal challenge and kept up the attack, but Melba, safely ensconced once more in London society, chose to ignore him. Unfounded stories of her fondness for the bottle continued to circulate for years afterwards.

Although she was entering her forties, Melba was at the peak of her career. She was commanded to sing for the president of France at Buckingham Palace; in 1904 she created the title role in Saint-Saëns' opera *Helene* at Monte Carlo and in 1906-07, since she was displeased with the Metropolitan, she deserted it for the Manhattan Opera House, which she revived financially with a triumphant season.

It was probably her finest hour. Shortly after that American tour she contracted pneumonia and, although she fulfilled her engagement at Covent Garden, found it necessary to go to Australia for a holiday. While she was away Luisa Tetrazzini, ten years younger, gave a season at Covent Garden and quickly became a sensation. However, once Melba returned she held her ground, even though on occasion she irksomely had to alternate roles. Tetrazzini's success was even greater in America, where she settled although she no longer challenged, Melba.

In 1909 Melba embarked on a "sentimental tour" of Australia, covering 10,000 miles (16,093 km) and appearing in many remote towns. The further she toured, the greater the adulation: there were banquets, speeches, even small crowds at wayside stations as Melba progressed with an entourage consisting of her manager, a maid and a valet, together

with two baby grand pianos. She would arrive a full twenty-four hours before a performance, and to sustain the excitement give her concert without an interval. On these visits she also began to promote what she regarded as the correct way of singing, essentially the Marchesi method as modified by herself. She bought a property at Coldstream near Lilydale, Victoria, and called in the architect and engineer John Grainger, father of Percy, to build Coombe Cottage. Increasingly it became the centre of her operations; nearly half of her remaining years would be spent in Australia.

When World War I broke out, Melba was at Coombe Cottage. To go back to Europe was difficult, but she did make three wartime concert tours of North America where she excited pro-allied sentiment, and also applied herself to raising funds for war charities at home, most notably by her spirited auction of flags at the conclusion of her concerts. She probably raised as much as £100,000 for the war effort, and on one memorable occasion stated that she would be prepared, if necessary, to work on the wharves.

Melba, associated herself closely with the Melbourne Conservatorium, which had recently broken away from control by the University of Melbourne. She taught there from 1915 until her death in 1931. A link with her continued after her death through her provision of a generous bequest and it is her association with the Conservatorium which was responsible for the change of name of the institution, in 1956, to the Melba Memorial Conservatorium of Music.



The Melba Memorial Conservatorium of Music, Melbourne

Her interpretation classes became famous, and drew students from all over the country. A martinet, she would pace up and down in her high leather boots, identifying students' mistakes. To be taken up by Melba held terrors of its own. She published her "singing tutorial", *The Melba "Method"*, in 1926.

The war over, Melba went to London to reopen Covent Garden; the city's weariness and shabbiness depressed her deeply. The brown tweed coats she noted disapprovingly in the stalls, in place of the formal attire and tiaras of pre-war 'Melba nights', were an indication of changed social conditions and the declining status of Covent Garden. She did not appear there again until 1923. Back in Australia she sang, offering cheap tickets, at the immensely successful *Concerts for the People* in Melbourne and Sydney in 1922, which drew some 70,000 people. Beverley Nichols, who travelled with her while ghost-writing her *"Melodies and Memories"* (1925), observed the "unutterable weariness of the perpetual struggle to keep her supremacy when her voice and her body were growing old". Melba returned to England and on 8th June 1926 gave her farewell performance at Covent Garden. Three Australians sang with her in three of her best-known roles: one of them (at her insistence) was John Brownlee, making his Covent Garden debut.

Melba now began a series of farewell appearances. "Doing a Melba", was to enrich the language as well as bolster her self-esteem. Her last operatic performances came in Sydney on 7th August and in Melbourne on 27th September 1928. Two months later in Geelong she gave her last Australian concert. Feeling that she had been away too long, Melba left for Europe for two years, and sang in Brighton before moving on to Paris and Egypt, where she developed a fever. She never quite shook it off; however she managed to sing one last time at a charity entertainment at the Hyde Park Hotel, London.

Dreading another northern winter, Melba decided to return to Melbourne, but her health grew worse on board ship. Partly in the hope of getting better medical care, she went to Sydney where, in St Vincent's Hospital, Darlinghurst, she died on 23 February 1931 of septicaemia, which had

developed from facial surgery she had undergone in Europe some weeks previously.

Though tempered with some astonishment that so great a personage should have been a singer, the obituaries read as though it was the passing of a monarch. "Is it too much to say", asked the *Argus*, "that she was the greatest Australian?" In Canberra parliamentarians stood with heads bowed to honour her memory. As a visiting English musician had earlier written, it was difficult for anyone outside the country to realize the extraordinarily powerful position Melba occupied in Australia. She may indeed have told Dame Clara Butt to "Sing 'em muck!"; certainly Melba felt obliged to pronounce on everything from the state of the Empire to the condition of the road to Portsea. In England she would trade on her Australianness to be brash and forthright, but in Australia, Beverley Nichols recalled, travelling with Melba "was like travelling through France with Marie-Antoinette". She would bestow graded, lavish tiepins as if they were decorations, certificates of approval to shopkeepers, and designed a uniform for her students at Albert Street complete with a blue letter 'M'. There were also many acts of public charity and private generosity. Convinced of her own importance, she believed that the accidents which occurred during an American tour during World War I were German-inspired attempts to eliminate her. Her autobiography shows that Melba's social successes were quite as important to her as her singing ones. Yet, as she once remarked to an inquiring aristocrat, 'there are lots of duchesses but only one Melba'.

A splendid constitution and tenacity of purpose, allied with exceptional powers of concentration and attention to detail, were elements of a charismatic personality which enabled Melba to remain for so long in the forefront of the musical world. Occasionally her sense of theatre led her to interact with the audience. On one occasion her direct intervention from the stage prevented a panic when fire broke out, and during a performance of *The Barber of Seville* in San Francisco in 1898, the year of the Spanish-American war, she won the hearts of a restless audience by singing 'The Star-Spangled Banner' in the music-lesson

scene. Ruthless to rivals, she was quite capable of singing the same part from the wings in order to undermine a singer she did not like. A practical woman, she knew how to drive a hard bargain, while her feeling for show-biz gave her a sureness of touch in dealing with the press.

Melba believed that her voice and personality were of a kind that came together only once a century. Certainly she drew the admiration of other singers, and even had the capacity to make them sing better. However not everyone rated her so highly. The eminent and notoriously irascible conductor Sir Thomas Beecham believed she was 'wanting in genuine spiritual refinement', while others spoke of her coldness. George Bernard Shaw, then a music critic, initially found Melba 'hard, shallow, self-sufficient and altogether unsympathetic', but by 1892—after the break with the duke of Orleans—he acknowledged her as not merely a brilliant singer but a dramatic soprano.

She was at her best either in those parts which required a light voice, such as Gilda, Lucia, or Marguerite, or which did not require too great an exploration of psychological complexity, such as the pathetic Mimi. She only twice created roles, both in undistinguished works and only after World War I did she put her aptitude for languages to use by singing chansons (French lyric songs). The fact remains, however, that she sang with seeming effortlessness, producing a voice which Sarah Bernhardt described as being 'pure crystal', and which the soprano Mary Garden admired for the way it "left the stage and seemed to hover in the auditorium like a beam of light". For Percy Grainger, "Her voice always made me mind-see Australia's landscapes".

Melba sometimes chose to describe herself as "The Voice". "Good singing", she stated, "is easy singing". Nature had given her an almost perfect larynx and vocal cords. Her range was fully three octaves, while her registers were so well blended that even an eminent throat specialist thought they were one. A scientific measurement of her trill produced twenty feet of undulations between perfectly parallel lines.

From 1904 Melba began recording and issued over one hundred records, in the process helping to establish the gramophone. In 1920 she also became the first artist of international standing to participate in direct radio broadcasts.

Melba was appointed Dame Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire (G.B.E.) in 1927. On her death in 1931, she was survived by her son, and left an estate valued at £67,510: in 1914 she had been worth much more. Of the portraits painted, those by Rupert Bunny and John Longstaff are the best known; both are in the National Gallery of Victoria. However, neither depicts the young Melba, with the electricity of her auburn hair and lively eyes, her majestic profile and frank mouth; nor do they show the Melba of later years, the one familiar to millions of Australians reading their newspapers, a cultural icon swaddled in furs and splendid isolation.



The microphone used by Dame Nellie Melba to make the first live radio broadcast in 1920. Originally held by the Marconi Corporation, ownership has now been transferred to the History of Science museum in Oxford, and the Bodleian Library

References

Author: Jim Davidson, 'Melba, Dame Nellie (1861 - 1931)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 10.

<http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A100464b.htm>