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# Nellie MELBA

## The Paris and London Recordings 1908-1913

PUCCINI

GOUNOD

VERDI

WAGNER

THOMAS

MOZART

> "There is one quality which it had and which may be comprehended even by those who did not hear her; it had splendor. The tones glowed with a star-like brilliance. They flamed with a white flame. And they possessed a remarkable force which the singer always used with continence. She gave the impression of singing well within her limits."
>
> W. J Henderson on Melba, in *The Art of Singing*

Thus wrote one of the hardest-to-please of the old-time Metropolitan Opera critics - and her recorded vestiges surely attest in equal measure both to her virtues and her limits. It is to some extent now generally accepted that Melba's singing, though surely impressive, was more outstandingly individual than typical of her generation, but even to diehard collectors who refuse to admit Melba into their hearts, those old lilac-labelled 'Melba' plates often as not hold a special, more tangible appeal. First, they have the look of quality about them, a certain patina and the kudos of a legendary name prominently displayed; second, they are a reminder of days long gone when singers like Dame Nellie behaved and were treated like royalty.

In 1904, the Gramophone Company, which could already boast Caruso, Battistini and Tamagno, felt another, even wider, Rubicon had been crossed when Melba, the supreme target among the sopranos, finally gave in to their demands. Yet few singers' records, then as now, have elicited more contrasting reactions, but even these, in the final analysis, boil down to matters of taste. While her detractors may lament whitish tones, consistent emotional detachment and that at times rather wilful coloratura, Melba's worshippers still thrill at the silver purity of timbre and the firmness and evenness of her scale-passages. Technically speaking, by 1910, the almost fifty-year-old diva had been recording her voice for a decade (if we count the pre-1900 Bettini cylinders she is known to have made) and, like the gramophone itself, was steadily becoming more versed in the art.

Nellie was born Helen Porter Mitchell in Richmond, near Melbourne, on 19th May, 1861, the eldest child of an immigrant, David Mitchell, a self-employed builder and amateur bass singer who had come from Scotland during the 1851 gold rush. Her mother encouraged her to study piano, organ and singing and during her teens, at Melbourne Presbyterian Ladies' College, Nellie received her first serious vocal training from Ellen Christian, an English-born contralto and former pupil of the baritone and teacher, the younger Manuel García, inventor of the laryngoscope. After leaving college in 1880, Nellie continued her studies in Melbourne with Pietro Cecchi, an Italian tenor from California who had toured Australia in Lyster's company.

In 1882, Nellie married Charles Armstrong, a sugar-plantation owner from Brisbane. She bore him a son, but the marriage was not a happy one and she soon decided to pursue her career instead, first as a pianist at society functions then as a soprano. Continuing her training with Cecchi, in Australia she earned rave notices in oratorio and recital and in 1886, on her father's appointment as commissioner to the Indian and Colonial Exhibition in London, she resolved to try her luck in Europe and went with him. In London, at that time a major cultural centre, she made little initial impact but in Paris she had the good fortune to meet the catalyst to her future success in Mathilde Marchesi (1821 - 1913), a noted ex-contralto pupil of the younger García and a celebrated teacher from whose Parisian studio had emerged a long line of sopranos schooled in the 'Marchesi Method'. Under Marchesi's guidance Nellie made a successful début, as Gilda in *Rigoletto*, at the Brussels Monnaie, in October 1887.

Melba's high-profile début at Covent Garden (as Lucia, in May 1888, in a house newly refurbished for Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee season) while not artistically so unqualified a triumph, brought her both royal patronage and an entrée to high society through Lady De Grey. From 1889 onwards Covent Garden would remain the focal point of her career and ever afterwards she viewed it as her artistic home, appearing in almost every annual international season until 1914 (and after World War I more intermittently until her retirement in 1926). Melba's other prestigious débuts included the Paris Opéra in 1889, La Scala, Milan, in 1892 and the Metropolitan, New York, in 1893. She also made frequent appearances at Monte Carlo, was a favourite at various opera venues in Italy, Russia, Scandinavia and Austria and made extensive concert tours throughout Europe, the United States and Australia.

"I am very pleased with my latest records. Your wonderful gramophone improves year by year." (Melba, in the accompanying advert to her records of July 1906).

Melba's Paris session of May 1908, her sixth for G & T, produced only one master: *Mimì's Narrative*, sung in French. From 1906 to 1908 she was under contract to Hammerstein's Manhattan Opera and between engagements, at G & T's affiliate Victor studios in New York and Camden, New Jersey, recorded an estimated twenty-four sides, of which at least four were originally unpublished. Her engagements in the United States during late 1908-early 1909 provided the opportunity of another New York session (1st January) but the greater part of her time and energy was used up in 1909 by a concert tour of Australia. Her return to the London studios in May 1910 was marked by three over-adventurous sessions, which produced a cross-section of operatic repertoire, showpiece encores and ballads, including several re-takes (most of which remained un-issued until HMV's Archive series of the late 1940s), a tantalisingly lost duet from *Traviata* with McCormack (assigned matrix 4187f) and the intriguing 'distance tests', effectively, a pioneering technical exercise aimed specifically at reducing the number of wasted masters.

On 4th May, G & T had contacted Melba with a view to "making new and remaking old records", reassuring her that "the public who have bought your records in thousands in the past, will willingly and gladly buy over again, if they feel they can get even a trifle nearer to the real voice of the woman whose name is a household word throughout the world". Melba clearly tried, possibly a little too hard, to rise to the occasion. At all of the three sessions the operatic items would be accompanied by the newly-formed New Symphony Orchestra, under Landon Ronald. At the first session (11th May) *Jean* (a sentimental love-ballad of 1895, by the Pennsylvania-born Negro spiritual-singer Henry Thacker Burleigh, 1866-1949) was followed by Tosca's *Prayer* and the first of three unpublished attempts at the *Sevillana* from Massenet's *Don César de Bazan* (chronologically his second opera, first given in Paris, in 1872), with *Elsa's Dream* from *Lohengrin* (here we have a taste of one of her few entrées into Wagner territory). At the next session (12th May) Melba was joined for operatic ensembles by Sammarco, McCormack and Edna Thornton (according to legend Melba berated McCormack for arriving late and a heated verbal sparring-match ensued between the bluntly-spoken Aussie diva and the volatile Irish tenor). Other items recorded include a song by Ronald and *Bid Me Discourse* (featured by Patti and other Victorian divas, this setting by Sir Henry Rowley Bishop (1786-1855) of an extract from Shakespeare's poem *Venus and Adonis* was composed in 1820 for a London production of *Twelfth Night*). Fresh items of the session of 19th May include *Soir païen* (by the French opera and song composer Georges-Adolphe Hüe, 1858-1948), *O for the wings of a dove* (the famous air from Mendelssohn's 1844 hymn for soprano, chorus and organ *Hear My Prayer*), *Spring* (by the German-born, London-based conductor, composer and bass recitalist Sir George Henschel, 1850-1934) and the *aria antica*

showpiece *Pur dicesti, o bocca bella*, by the Venetian Antonio Lotti (1667-1740).

After a three-year absence, Melba next visited the Gramophone Company's London studios on 6th May, 1913. Four new masters were produced. Her earlier (October 1904) take of the Bach-Gounod *Ave, Maria* had proved a steady seller for almost a decade and the selection was re-recorded (with violinist Jan Kubelik, 1880-1940) as well as an aria from Mozart's 1775 opera *Il re pastore* and songs by Duparc and Chausson.

**Peter Dempsey**

## Producer's Note

This third volume of Nellie Melba's complete Gramophone Company recordings contains all of her extant discs from the 1908-1913 sessions. Of the twenty-three recordings presented here, only twelve were originally published, although take two of the *Faust Trio* was eventually released during the 1930s. Test pressings of originally unpublished items exist among collectors and these have been my source for all the unreleased material. In remastering the published sides, I have compared multiple copies of each recording and chosen the one which yielded the clearest reproduction of Melba's voice. In this regard, I often found that early pressings, although somewhat noisier, produced the truest sound whereas later pressings often sounded muffled and unfocused. This defect in later pressings is likely attributable to worn stampers. Track numbers 1 and 10, particularly, were remastered from early pressings since all later 78rpm issues are pressed from acoustically re-recorded masters. I should mention that track 21 is especially noisy and seems to have been recorded at a lower than usual level. This was duly noticed by the Gramophone Company and the record was almost immediately deleted from the catalogue and replaced by an American Victor recording made on 2 October of the same year.

## Ward Marston

In 1997 Ward Marston was nominated for the Best Historical Album Grammy Award for his production work on BMG's Fritz Kreisler collection. According to the Chicago Tribune, Marston's name is 'synonymous with tender loving care to collectors of historical CDs'. Opera News calls his work 'revelatory', and Fanfare deems him 'miraculous'. In 1996 Ward Marston received the Gramophone award for Historical Vocal Recording of the Year, honouring his production and engineering work on Romophone's complete recordings of Lucrezia Bori. He also served as re-recording engineer for the Franklin Mint's Arturo Toscanini issue and BMG's Sergey Rachmaninov recordings, both winners of the Best Historical Album Grammy.

Born blind in 1952, Ward Marston has amassed tens of thousands of opera classical records over the past four decades. Following a stint in radio while a student at Williams College, he became well-known as a reissue producer in 1979, when he restored the earliest known stereo recording made by the Bell Telephone Laboratories in 1932.

In the past, Ward Marston has produced records for a number of major and specialist record companies. Now he is bringing his distinctive sonic vision to bear on works released on the Naxos Historical label. Ultimately his goal is to make the music he remasters sound as natural as possible and true to life by 'lifting the voices' off his old 78 rpm recordings. His aim is to promote the importance of preserving old recordings and make available the works of great musicians who need to be heard.

Tracks 1, 4, 12-16, 20 and 23 sung in French
Tracks 2, 10, 11, 17 and 18 sung in English
Tracks 3, 5-9, 19 and 21 sung in Italian
Track 22 sung in Latin

Track 1 with orchestra
Tracks 2, 10-12, 16-19 with piano accompaniment by Landon Ronald
Tracks 3-9, 13-15, with New Symphony Orchestra conducted by Landon Ronald
Tracks 20, 21 and 23 with piano accompaniment by Gabriel Lapierre
Track 22 with piano and organ accompaniment by Gabriel Lapierre and Stanley Roper

Special thanks: J. Neil Forster, Stanley Henig, Lawrence Holdridge, and Jeffrey Miller

Paris, 9 May 1908:

**PUCCINI: La Bohème:**

1 On m'appelle Mimì 4:24
Mat. 602j ; Cat. 033062

London, 11 May 1910:

**STANTON-BURLEIGH:**

2 Jean 2:55
Mat. 11689e; first issued on HMA 44

**PUCCINI: Tosca:**

3 Vissi d'arte 3:19
Mat. 4183f; Cat. 2-053020

**MASSENET: Don César de Bazan:**

4 Sevillana 2:59
Mat. 4184f; first issued on HMB 100

**WAGNER: Lohengrin:**

5 Elsa's Dream 3:59
Mat. 4185f ; Cat. 2-053019

London, 12 May 1910:

**PUCCINI: Tosca:**

6 Vissi d'arte 3:21
Mat. 4186f; first issued on HMB 147

**GOUNOD: Faust:**

7 Final trio 2:48
with John McCormack and G. Mario Sammarco
Mat. 4188f; unpublished

**VERDI: Rigoletto:**

8 Quartet 3:48
with Edna Thornton, John McCormack
and G. Mario Sammarco
Mat. 4189f; Cat. 2-054025

**GOUNOD: Faust:**

9 Final trio 2:50
with John McCormack and G. Mario Sammarco
Mat. 4190f; first issued on IRCC 7

**BISHOP:**

10 Bid me discourse 3:22
Mat. 4193f; Cat. 03188

**RONALD:**

11 Sounds of Earth 2:37
Mat. 4194f; first issued on HMB 147

**THOMAS: Hamlet:**

12 Distance Tests: phrases from Mad Scene 1:45
Mat. 4195f; first issued on HMB 36

London, 19 May 1910:

**MASSENET: Don César de Bazan:**

13 Sevillana 2:57
Mat. 4206f; unpublished

**MASSENET: Don César de Bazan:**

14 Sevillana 2:59
Mat. 4207f; unpublished

**MASSENET: Le Cid:**

15 Pleurez mes yeux 3:45
Mat. 4208f; Cat. 2-033020

**HÜE:**

16 Soir païen 3:58
Mat. 4209f; unpublished

**MENDELSSOHN:**

17 O For the wings of a dove 2:43
Mat. 4212f; Cat. 03199

**HENSCHEL:**

18 Spring 3:14
Mat. 4213f; Cat. 03328

**LOTTI:**

19 Pur dicesti 3:57
Mat. 4214f (first issued on HMB 100)

London, 6 May 1913:

**DUPARC:**

20 Chanson Triste 2:30
Mat. Y16572e; Cat. 7-33004

**MOZART: Il re pastore:**

21 L'amerò, sarò costante 4:60
With Jan Kubelik, violin;
Mat. Z7322f; Cat. 2-053083

**BACH-GOUNOD:**

22 Ave Maria 3:55
With Jan Kubelik, violin;
Mat. Z7323f; Cat. 03333

**CHAUSSON: Poème de l'amour et de la mer:**

23 Le temps des lilas 4:05
Mat. 7325f; Cat. 2-033037

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# Nellie Melba

## Complete Gramophone Company Recordings, Vol. 3

### The Paris and London Recordings (1908-1913)

Playing Time 76:16

1. PUCCINI: La Bohème: On m'appelle Mimì
2. STANTON/BURLEIGH: Jean
3. PUCCINI: Tosca: Vissi d'arte
4. MASSENET: Don César de Bazan: Sevillana
5. WAGNER: Lohengrin: Elsa's Dream
6. PUCCINI: Tosca: Vissi d'arte
7. GOUNOD: Faust: Final trio
8. VERDI: Rigoletto: Quartet
9. GOUNOD: Faust: Final trio
10. BISHOP: Bid me discourse
11. RONALD: Sounds of Earth
12. THOMAS: Hamlet: Recording Tests: excerpts from the Mad Scene
13. MASSENET: Don César de Bazan: Sevillana
14. MASSENET: Don César de Bazan: Sevillana
15. MASSENET: Le Cid: Pleurez mes yeux
16. HÜE: Soir païen
17. MENDELSSOHN: O for the wings of a dove
18. HENSCHEL: Spring
19. LOTTI: Pur dicesti
20. DUPARC: Chanson triste
21. MOZART: Il re pastore: L'amerò, sarò costante
22. BACH/GOUNOD: Ave Maria
23. CHAUSSON: Poème de l'amour et de la mer: Le Temps des Lilas

Helen Porter Mitchell adopted the professional name Melba to acknowledge her birthplace, Melbourne. She began to study singing seriously in 1882 and made her operatic début in Brussels in 1887. Melba won acclaim at Covent Garden and the Metropolitan Opera and subsequently in most of the leading opera houses of the world, becoming the epitome of glamour and fame. Melba's voice was remarkable for its even quality over a range of nearly three octaves, and for its pure silvery timbre. Her first published recordings were made in 1904 for The Gramophone and Typewriter Company, the precursor of HMV. The wide-ranging repertoire on this disc features Melba's famed operatic rôles in *La Bohème* and *Faust*, others with which she is less associated, such as *Lohengrin* and *Tosca* as well as coloratura classics including *Sevillana* and Ophelia's *Mad Scene*.

Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer: Ward Marston
Special thanks to J. Neil Forster, Stanley Henig, Lawrence F. Holdridge and Jeffrey J. Miller.

www.naxos.com

A complete track list can be found in the booklet
Cover image: Nellie Melba as Marguerite in Faust (Lebrecht Collection)

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