Dame NELLIE MELBA – An Opera Recital

Helen Porter Mitchell was born near Melbourne in 1861. Her father, David Mitchell had come from Scotland in 1852 virtually penniless, but, hardworking and resourceful, he became a wealthy building contractor, owning land and quarries. From him she inherited drive, desire to succeed and keen business sense, indeed, she was always her own manager. Her mother, Isabella né Dow, though born in Scotland, may have been partly Spanish, perhaps accounting for her daughter's fiery temperament.

Her father had a good bass voice and played the violin. Sisters of her mother had good voices and her mother taught her piano from the age of five. At eight years of age she gave her first public appearance, singing "Comin' thro' the Rye"

to her own accompaniment. At school her histrionic abilities were noted and she had her first voice lessons, whilst continuing keyboard studies. In due course she became a pupil of Pietro Cecchi, a retired Italian tenor living in Melbourne.

In 1882 she met and married Charles Armstrong, son of a baronet, adventurer, manager of a sugar plantation and an excellent horseman. However, by the end of 1883, there was a son, her husband was making no money, life with him was becoming a burden and the urge to become a professional singer had reasserted itself. She returned to Melbourne with her son and singing studies recommenced. The marriage was later dissolved.

Helen Armstrong was a realist, she knew her potential and that through hard work it could be realised. Cecchi arranged her début, unpaid at a benefit concert, in 1884. She was accompanied by John Lemmone, a flautist. They became colleagues for almost fifty years. The relationship was one of mutual respect, it was entirely professional, and Lemmone was perhaps the only person who could influence her.

In 1886 her father travelled to London to represent Victoria at the Indian and Colonial Exhibition. Helen travelled with him, enabling her to hear, amongst others, Albani, Patti, Santley, de Sarasate and de Pachmann.

In London her attempts to gain herself some experience of performing and to make herself known in a great musical centre failed. Fortunately she had a letter of introduction to Mathilde Marchesi in Paris. Marchesi, then at the height of her fame as a teacher, is said to have greeted the prospective student's audition by calling out to her husband, "Salvatore, enfin j'ai trouvé une étoile!"

About this time she broke with Pietro Cecchi. Over what is unknown. Her own later account, that she had learnt nothing from Cecchi, that Marchesi had taught her everything, is clearly untrue. She studied with Cecchi for over six years, with Marchesi for just over one year. Marchesi, great teacher though she was, must have been building on well laid foundations; as Shaw inferred as early as 1893 [*The World* 18th January].

In 1887 Helen Armstrong-Mitchell made her European début as Gilda in *Rigoletto* at the Théâtre Royale de la Monnaie, Brussels, on Marchesi's advice as Nellie Melba. Melba was successful in Brussels, but in London the following year she was assailing territory held by Emma Albani, Sigrid Arnoldson, Minnie Hawk, Zélie de Lussan, Margaret Macintyre, Lillian Nordica, Sofia Scalchi, Zélia Trebelli, the de Reszke brothers and Jean Lassalle; neither public nor critics were much impressed.

After successful appearances in Brussels and Paris she returned in 1889. From then until her farewell in 1926 she ruled Covent Garden. She first sang with Caruso in 1902. She did not appreciate his schoolboy pranks, and in any case she regarded de Reszke as his superior.

In her were combined beauty of voice, technique of a very high order, dominating personality and discerning business sense; though of her musicianship opinions varied, and the astonishing accuracy with which she could hit any note at any level drew attention away from her sometimes sketchy fioritura [vide Shaw, *The World*, 4th July 1894]. She became a precursor of today's pop-star; a variety of toast and a dessert were named after her. She was imperious and disliked by some. Several believed, based on fact, rumour or imagination, that she had them barred from Covent Garden; she did not need to, they were insignificant beside her.

Tetrazzini was different. She had established a great reputation in Mexico and South America, in Russia and Spain, but she was unknown in London. Thus, for her first appearance at Covent Garden in 1907, whilst Melba was in New York, the house was half empty. Next evening, and ever after, it was full. When Melba returned in 1908, whatever the truth in other cases, she must have realised that Tetrazzini was there to stay. There was no conflict, neither was there any love.

Melba travelled with a veritable entourage as her successes extended to Brussels, Paris, New York, St. Petersburg and Monte Carlo.

In 1902 she returned home to tour Australia, as the various colonies had become since she left. A pop-star today could not be accorded higher status.

Her interest in her homeland was evinced in several ways. Besides tours, she encouraged numerous Australian singers, and in 1909 she started her own class for singers in Melbourne. However, she was better at recognising vocal ability than the characteristics of personality which are also needed, so that various of her protégés fell by the wayside. She also bought a considerable property, where she frequently rested and entertained, and to which she eventually retired.

As leading tenor in an opera party to tour Australia in 1911 she chose John McCormack. As each was forthright, mutual regard for each others' talents was matched by mutual hostility.

Melba could use troopers' language when, for example, things were not going well in a recording studio, but she also knew how to move in 'Society' as an equal; it was the patronage of Lady de Grey, whose husband contributed liberally to Covent Garden's finances, which assisted and accelerated Melba's ascent.

She watched money carefully, but she could be generous when moved, and when she gave, she gave privately. She sang happily for friends and for charity, but objected to being expected to sing in society drawing-rooms. During the Great War she raised large sums by organising and performing in concerts for charities; work which was recognised in 1918 when she was created a D.B.E.

As time moves on many singers move from the opera stage to the recital platform; stresses are fewer, acting and costumes are not required, memory can be re-enforced with texts, programmes and keys chosen to avoid what is no longer easy, and purses may be larger. By the time he was forty John McCormack had given up opera altogether. Melba never entirely deserted opera, but she appeared increasingly in recital. Her concert repertoire was wide. There were operatic arias, the number with fireworks gradually decreasing; there were popular and sentimental songs such as would not be taken seriously today, "John Anderson, my Jo", say, and (compulsory) "Home, sweet home"; and there were songs by her friends, Landon Ronald and Hermann Bemberg; but there was also a surprising proportion of 'serious' material, Chausson, Debussy, Duparc, Fauré, Grieg, Hahn and Rachmaninov, for example. Her thoughts even turned towards Lieder, but she heeded Lemmone's advice and kept away.

On June 15th 1920 Melba became the first professional artist to broadcast. She was not interested in 'experimentation' with her voice, but was eventually persuaded by Lord Northcliffe (and his cheque for £1000) to make the journey to Marconi's Chelmsford works, where the transmitter, call sign MZX, power 15kW, wavelength 2,750m, was situated. At 7.10 she was heard running up and down a scale to enable last adjustments to be made to the transmitter. Then she sang

"Home sweet home", Bemberg's "Nymphes et sylvains" and Mimi's "Farewell". There were four encores: "Chant venitien" (Bemberg), unknown, repeat of "Nymphes et sylvains" and a verse of "God save the King". Melba was heard as far away as Persia; for the Marconi Company it was a huge success.

In 1926, amid scenes of enormous emotion, for audience and artist, Melba sang and spoke her farewell to Covent Garden, her home since 1889. She returned to Australia for a farewell tour. Houses were full, but not all of the comments were favourable.

She was in Europe once more in 1929 to see old friends and to revisit old haunts. In Egypt, to escape the cold Paris winter that year, she became ill. She returned to Australia. Her health gradually deteriorated and she died in 1931.

A Note on the Records

Melba's name is mentioned in catalogues of Bettini records, but, along with most other significant names found there, an exception being Marcella Sembrich, no actual records are known. Thus the first surviving records of Melba are the astonishing fragments from live performances recorded by Lionel Mapleson at the Metropolitan Opera in 1901. These were, of course, made as private souvenirs, with no thought of publication. (vide Symposium Records Compact Disc 1284).

As the gramophone metamorphosed from a noisy toy to a vehicle of culture so the various companies competed to capture the famous names of the musical firmament. High amongst these was Melba, but Melba played hard to get, very hard. Eventually, early in 1904, she was willing to be recorded for her father to hear in Australia. Perhaps she desired to shew her father, a strict Presbyterian who had disapproved of his daughter's career, that, in her own way, she had emulated his success. The records were to be made at the Langham Hotel, Cumberland Place, where she resided, and were definitely not for publication.

In March 1904 she finally agreed to records of her voice being published. They were to have a special lilac label with a facsimile of her signature and to cost 1/- more than those of any other artist. Further records were made, again at the Langham Hotel. Unusually for a major artist at that time an orchestra, albeit a small one, provided some of the accompaniments, and the flautist Phillipe Gaubert travelled from Paris to provide obligati.

The records were not in one of the regular matrix series, but in a special series commencing Melba 1, perhaps invented when the records were non-commercial, being only for her father. Thus the early numbers may well relate to those records. It is probable that there were as many as four sessions:

Melba 1 to 9	Private Records for Melba's father, with piano accompaniment, circa 5th March; of these 5 were eventually published.
Melba 12 to 16	Piano accompanied session involving Phillipe Gaubert. Gaubert was to be available 27th March.
Melba 20 to 23	With orchestra, accounts refer to 45 players, but only a very few can be heard.
Melba 25 to 28	As these numbers include operatic material, but are with piano, they are presumably from a further session, at latest circa 3rd April. The gaps are unaccounted for.

Certainly Melba 6 could not be used commercially on account of its running far too near the centre, which would have led to severe distortion and wear, especially of loud notes near the centre, on machines of the time. As there were no tape recorders and editing desks in 1904, the second portion of the music, "Sempre libera", was remade on a separate disc, and the factory deleted the offending section mechanically. This was done in two stages. First the portion to be removed was indicated by heavy scratches on the metal master, second this part was machined away, and a new centre fitted. This was a pity as Melba gives a full-scale, full-blooded performance compared with which the replacement is somewhat tame.

This is known as a metal with the scratches did survive, and over the years transfers from it have been made, but always necessitating some compromise between reducing the clicks and deadening the music.

Remarkably a test pressing still exists made before the scratches were added, and this, although somewhat noisy, has been used in this album. The performance, and it is a performance, is electrifying; any notion of coldness in Melba is completely dispelled.

Mad scenes as vehicles for virtuosic display for coloratura sopranos are, for better or for worse, a thing of the past. This mad scene from *Hamlet* is, perhaps the finest example on record. Melba was allowed to spread herself, most unusually for the time, over two long sides (with quiet endings, little wear problem) allowing the artist full scope in one of her most successful roles. For many this is one of Melba's greatest records, if not the greatest. However, those who feel that Melba's efforts might have been expended on better music will find support in Shaw's comments [*The World*, 30th July 1890].

The mad scene from *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Del ciel clementi) on the other hand, limited to one shortish side, is rather from St. Lubin's cadenza than Donizetti's opera. It is at once an example of virtuosic sure-fire accuracy and a demonstration of what would not be acceptable today.

Thus the first records include brief extracts, some rather oddly chosen, arias and songs of standard length for a 78rpm side, and one piece of continuous music extending to 9½ minutes. Subsequent recordings were better tailored to the parameters imposed by the format.

Before moving on from 1904: the story of Melba agreeing initially to record only for her father makes wonderful copy and is compatible with the date of the formal contract, 11th May 1904. However, earlier correspondence casts doubt on it, for on 20th February 1904 the Company wrote from London to Melba in Monte Carlo outlining the main clauses of a contract, enclosing an advance on royalties and requesting a receipt, and on 21st February Melba in Monte Carlo, the post must have been better than it is today, replied acknowledging the cheque and agreeing to make records.

Melba was not primarily a Mozart singer, though she often included arias from his operas in concerts. This piece was recorded in London in May 1913, and again in October in Camden, N. J. Why is not obvious, the two versions are very similar. Melba generally used the cadenza by Saint-Saëns. Jan Kubelik (1880-1940) was then the company's most prestigious violinist, his label category exceeding those of Elman, Kreisler and Szigeti.

89074 Il Re Pastore–L'amerò sarò costante
(Aminta's Air, "I Will Love Her" from "The Shepherd King") Mozart
Nellie Melba, Soprano–Jan Kubelik, Violinist

Il Re Pastore is a dramatic cantata in two acts; text by Metastasio; music by Mozart. First production at Salzburg, April 23, 1775.

The music was written by Mozart for the entertainment of Archduke Maximilian on his visit to Salzburg in 1775. The action takes place in Sidon, and tells of the capture of that ancient city by *Alessandro*, who puts to death the tyrant and usurper *Stratone*, and places on the throne the rightful king, *Aminta*, who has been living as a shepherd. *Alessandro* plans to marry *Aminta* to *Tamiri*, daughter of the deposed *Stratone*, but the young ruler is in love with a shepherdess, *Elisa*, and rather than give up his love, he returns the crown to *Alessandro*, who is so pleased with the young shepherd's fidelity that he gives consent to his marriage with the shepherdess, and establishes them upon the throne. *Tamiri* is free to marry her lover *Agenor*, and *Alessandro* generously promises them the next kingdom he may conquer.

This aria of *Aminta*, one of the best numbers in Mozart's work, was a favorite with Jenny Lind. The air, with its simple melody, has all the charm which one associates with Mozart's writings, and Mme. Melba's voice is heard here with wonderful clearness and beautv of tone; while in the violin obbligato the individual tone of Kubelik is at once recognized.

The American Victor Company quite often provided the text of the music being performed or biographical details of the artist printed neatly in silver on the back of its recordings.

Melba must have been desperate to sing Brünnhilde. Her one appearance as Brünnhilde in *Siegfried* in 1896, she freely admitted it herself, was disastrous; she had to rest her voice for weeks after. Who talked her into trying it, or whose advice she failed to heed is uncertain. Mimi was her saviour. It was a role in which she could remain supreme as age took its toll on her powers of coloratura and fioritura. As Elsa, however, she was admired and could thus, in an age when translations were acceptable, satisfy her hankering after Wagner.

The Quartet from *Rigoletto* with John McCormack as the Duke was made the year before the Australian tour mentioned above.

The aria from *Le Roi d'Ys* is sung by Melba with great charm, though in the opera it is sung by the tenor.

The issued version of the "Sevillana" from *Le Cid* has a somewhat acid sound. The version heard here was probably too heavily recorded for use at the time, but with modern technology the brilliance and vivacity of the singer are brought out.

"Si, mi chiamano Mimi", heard here as "On m'appelle Mimi", is Melba's sole recording in Paris, though why it is sung in French is not clear.

Floria Tosca is not generally included amongst Melba's roles, but as Levik [*The Levik Memoirs* - Symposium Records, 1995], a most careful and methodical writer, says of Melba, "a marvellous Tosca", one must presume that she did sing the part at any rate in Russia.

Bemberg's *Elaine*, dedicated to Melba, was performed at Covent Garden at her behest in 1892 with no less than Jean and Édouard de Reszke, Pol Plançon Blanche Deschamps-Jehin and, of course, Melba in the cast.

When Melba first sang at Covent Garden Edison was shouting "Mary had a little lamb" onto a piece of tinfoil. By the time of her farewell a microphone was able to capture her voice floating out into the auditorium. Even in her mid-60s it must have been one of the most sublime sounds ever heard in the house. Scenes from three operas were given, the last from *La Bohème*, which had been her salvation after the Brünnhilde failure of 1896.

The solo and duet, Melba's only records of music from *La Traviata*, span the second half of her career. The astonishing bravura of the solo from 1904 has already been mentioned. Now, in 1926, even after her farewell, with Père Germont well under half Violetta's age, we are deeply moved by the sadness and submission conveyed by Melba's voice in Verdi's music.

Shaw was at first unimpressed by Melba, but in *The World* 3rd August 1892 he wrote, "Melba, who is ... a new artist this year ... transfigured, awakened ... her heart ... now acting on her singing ... [she was] merely a brilliant singer ... [now she is] a dramatic soprano".

Acknowledgements: Symposium Records thanks the late Sir Paul Getty, K.B.E., Raymond Glaspole, and Dave Mason, Thanks are due also to Paul Lewis and Adrian Tuddenham for assistance with the production.

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