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Dame Nellie Melba GBE (19 May 1861 – 23 February 1931), born Helen "Nellie" Porter Mitchell, was an Australian operatic soprano. She became one of the most famous singers of the late Victorian Era and the early 20th century. She was the first Australian to achieve international recognition as a classical musician.

Melba studied singing in Melbourne and made a modest success in performances there. After a brief and unsuccessful marriage, she moved to Europe in search of a singing career. Failing to find engagements in London in 1886, she studied in Paris and soon made a great success there and in Brussels. Returning to London she quickly established herself as the leading lyric soprano at Covent Garden from 1888. She soon achieved further success in Paris and elsewhere in Europe, and later at the Metropolitan Opera, New York, debuting there in 1893. Her repertoire was small; in her whole career she sang no more than 25 roles and was closely identified with only ten. She was known for her performances in French and Italian opera, but sang little German opera.

During the First World War, Melba raised large sums for war charities. She returned to Australia frequently during the 20th century, singing in opera and concerts, and had a house built for her near Melbourne. She was active in the teaching of singing at the Melbourne Conservatorium. Melba continued to sing until the last months of her life and made a legendary number of "farewell" appearances. Her death, in Australia, was news across the English-speaking world, and her funeral was a major national event.

Melba was born in Richmond, Victoria, the eldest of seven children of David Mitchell and his wife Isabella née Dow.[1][n 1] Mitchell, a Scot, had emigrated to Australia in 1852, becoming a successful builder there. Melba was taught to play the piano and first sang in public at the age of about six.[n 2] She was educated at a local boarding school and then at the Presbyterian Ladies' College.[1] She studied singing with Mary Ellen Christian (a former pupil of Manuel Garc a) and Pietro Cecchi, an Italian tenor, who was a respected teacher in Melbourne.[3] Melba continued to perform, in her teens, in amateur concerts in and around Melbourne, and she also played the organ at church. Her father encouraged her in her musical studies, but he strongly disapproved of her taking up singing as a career.[4] Melba's mother died suddenly in 1880, and she moved to Queensland.[4]

The young singer's talent was so evident that, after less than a year with Marchesi, she was given a ten-year contract with the impresario Maurice Strakosch. After she had signed, she received a better offer from the Théâtre de la Monnaie, Brussels, but Strakosch was not inclined to release her.

She was in despair when the matter was resolved by Strakosch's sudden death.[7] She made her operatic debut as Gilda in *Rigoletto* at La Monnaie on 12 October 1887.[2] The critic Herman Klein described her Gilda as "an instant triumph of the most emphatic kind ... followed ... a few nights later with an equal success as Violetta in *La Traviata*." [2] It was at this time, on Marchesi's advice, that she adopted the stage name of "Melba", a contraction of the name of her native city.[n 4]

Melba made her Covent Garden debut in May 1888, in the title role in *Lucia di Lammermoor*. She received a friendly but not excited reception. The *Musical Times* wrote, "Madame Melba is a fluent vocalist, and a quite respectable representative of light soprano parts; but she lacks the personal charm necessary to a great figure on the lyric stage." [8] She was offended when Augustus Harris, then in charge at Covent Garden, offered her only the small role of the page Oscar in *Un ballo in maschera* for the next season.[9] She left England vowing never to return. The following year, she performed at the Opéra in Paris, in the role of Ophélie in *Hamlet*; The *Times* described this as "a brilliant success", and said, "Madame Melba has a voice of great flexibility ... her acting is expressive and striking." [10]

Melba had a strong supporter in London, Lady de Grey, whose views carried weight at Covent Garden. Melba was persuaded to return, and Harris cast her in *Roméo et Juliette* (June 1889) co-starring with Jean de Reszke. She later recalled, "I date my success in London quite distinctly from the great night of 15 June 1889." [1] After this, she returned to Paris as Ophélie, Lucia in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Gilda in *Rigoletto*, Marguerite in *Faust*, and Juliette.[3] In French operas her pronunciation was poor,[2] but the composer Delibes said that he did not care whether she sang in French, Italian, German, English or Chinese, as long as she sang.[n 5]

In the early 1890s, Melba embarked on an affair with Prince Philippe, Duke of Orléans. They were seen frequently together in London, which excited some gossip, but far more suspicion arose when Melba travelled across Europe to St Petersburg to sing for Tsar Nicholas II: the Duke followed closely behind her, and they were spotted together in Paris, Brussels, Vienna and St Petersburg. Armstrong filed divorce proceedings on the grounds of Melba's adultery, naming the Duke as co-respondent; he was eventually persuaded to drop the case, but the Duke decided that a two-year African safari (without Melba) would be appropriate. He and Melba did not resume their relationship.[1][12] In the first years of the decade, Melba appeared in the leading European opera houses, including Milan, Berlin and Vienna.[3]

Melba sang the role of Nedda in *Pagliacci* at Covent Garden in 1893, soon after its Italian premiere. The composer was present, and said that the role had never been so well played before.[13] In December of that year, Melba sang at the Metropolitan Opera in New York for the first time. As at her Covent Garden debut, she appeared as Lucia di Lammermoor, and as at Covent Garden, it was less than a triumph. The *New York Times* praised her performance "one of the loveliest voices that ever issued from a human throat ... simply delicious in its fullness, richness and purity" "but the work was out of fashion, and the performances were poorly attended." [14] Her performance in *Roméo et Juliette*, later in the season, was a triumph and established her as the leading prima donna of the time in succession to Adelina Patti.[3] She had at first been nonplussed by the impenetrable snobbery at the Metropolitan; the author Peter Conrad has written, "In London she hobnobbed with royalty; in New York she was a singing menial." Assured of critical success, she set herself to achieve social recognition, and succeeded.[15]

Some writers expressed surprise at Melba's playing the last of these roles, since it was merely a supporting part in the opera. She played it on many occasions, saying in her memoirs, "Why on earth a prima donna should not sing secondary rôles I could not see then and am no nearer seeing to-day. I hate the artistic snobbery of it." [9] She sang the role opposite the Carmens of Emma Calvé,[2] Zélie de Lussan[29] and Maria Gay.[30] Marguerite de Valois, too, is not the leading female role in *Les Huguenots*, but Melba was willing to undertake it as seconda donna to Emma Albani.[2] She was generous in support of singers who did not rival her in her favoured roles, but was, as her biographer J. B. Steane put it, "pathologically critical" of other lyric sopranos.[3]

Melba was not known as a Wagner singer, although she occasionally sang Elsa in *Lohengrin* and

Elisabeth in Tannhäuser. She received a certain amount of praise in these roles, although Klein found her unsuited to them,[2] and Bernard Shaw thought she sang with great skill but played artificially and without sensibility.[31] In 1896 at the Metropolitan, she attempted the role of Brünnhilde in Siegfried, in which she was not a success.[3] Her most frequent role in that house was Marguerite in Gounod's Faust, which she had studied under the supervision of the composer.[3] She never essayed any of Mozart's operas, for which some thought her voice ideally suited.[11] Her repertoire across her entire career amounted to no more than 25 roles, of which, The Times obituarist wrote, "only some 10 parts are those which will be remembered as her own." [11]

By now established as a leading star in Britain and America, Melba made her first return visit to Australia in 1902–03 for a concert tour, also touring in New Zealand.[1][n 6] The profits were unprecedented; she returned for four more tours during her career.[35] In Britain, Melba campaigned on behalf of Puccini's *La bohème*. She had first sung the part of Mimi in 1899, having studied it with the composer. She argued strongly for further productions of the work in the face of the distaste expressed by the Covent Garden management at this "new and plebeian opera".[3] She was vindicated by the public enthusiasm for the piece, which was bolstered in 1902 when Enrico Caruso joined her in the first of many Covent Garden performances together.[2] She sang Mimi for Oscar Hammerstein I at his opera house in New York, in 1907, giving the enterprise a needed boost.[3] After her initial successes in Brussels and Paris in the 1880s, Melba sang infrequently on the European continent; only the English-speaking countries welcomed her wholeheartedly.[36]

In 1909, Melba bought property at Coldstream, a small town near Melbourne, and around 1912 she had Coombe Cottage built. She also set up a music school in Richmond, which she later merged into the Melbourne Conservatorium. She was in Australia when the First World War broke out, and she threw herself into fund-raising for war charities, raising £100,000.[3][n 8] In recognition of this, she was created a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire (DBE) in March 1918, "for services in organising patriotic work".[n 9]

After the war, Melba made a triumphant return to the Royal Opera House, in a performance of *La bohème* conducted by Beecham, which re-opened the house after four years of closure. The Times wrote, "Probably no season at Covent Garden has ever started with quite the thrill of enthusiasm which passed through the house." [43] In her many concerts, however, her repertoire was regarded as trite and predictable. After one of them The Musical Times wrote:

The real musical interest of the afternoon, however, was supposed to centre in the "Jewel Song" from Faust, Puccini's "Addio", Lieurance's "By the waters of Minnetonka", and Tosti's "Good-bye", and in the encores, thoughtfully announced beforehand – "Home, sweet Home" and "Annie Laurie." Look again at the last batch of head-lines. "The Diva to go home." By all means. Why not? As the Diva has melodiously declared (only too often), there's no place like it. "And teach 100 girls herself." If the Dame can give those hundred girls her own beautiful voice, well and good, but for heaven's sake let a musician be called in to attend to their repertoire. We cannot lightly face the prospect of a hundred debutantes let loose on us a year hence full to the epiglottis with "Minnetonkas", "Jewel Songs", and "Home, sweet Homes." [44]

In 1929 she returned for the last time to Europe and then visited Egypt, where she contracted a fever that she never entirely shook off.[1] Her last performance was in London at a charity concert on 10 June 1930.[46] She returned to Australia but died in St Vincent's Hospital, Sydney in 1931, aged 69, of septicaemia which had developed after facial surgery in Europe some time before.[1] She was given an elaborate funeral from Scots' Church, Melbourne, which her father had built and where as a teenager she had sung in the choir.[1][47] The funeral motorcade was over a kilometre long, and her death made front-page headlines in Australia, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Europe. Billboards in many countries said simply "Melba is dead". Part of the event was filmed for posterity. Melba was buried in the cemetery at Lilydale, near Coldstream. Her headstone bears Mim's farewell words: "Addio, senza rancor" (Farewell, without bitterness).[48]

It is easy to sing well, and very difficult to sing badly! How many students are really prepared to accept that statement? Few, if any. They smile, and say: "It may be easy for you, but not for me."

And they seem to think that there the matter ends. But if they only knew it, on their understanding and acceptance of that axiom depends half their success. Let me say the same in other words: In order to sing well, it is necessary to sing easily.[49]

Others also benefited from Melba's praise and interest. She passed her own cadenzas on to a young Gertrude Johnson, a valuable professional asset. In 1924, Melba brought the new star Toti Dal Monte, fresh from triumphs in Milan and Paris but still unheard in England or the United States, to Australia as a principal of the Melba-Williamson Grand Opera Company. After sharing the Covent Garden stage in a 1923 night of operatic extracts with another Australian soprano, Florence Austral (who, as a dramatic soprano, posed no threat to Melba, a lyric soprano), Melba was effusive with her praise, describing the younger woman as "one of the wonder-voices of the world".[50] She similarly described the American contralto Louise Homer as possessing "the world's most beautiful voice". She gave financial assistance to the Australian painter Hugh Ramsay, living in poverty in Paris[51] and also helped him to forge connections in the artistic world.[48] The Australian baritone John Brownlee and tenor Browning Mummery were both protégés: both sang with her in her 1926 Covent Garden farewell (recorded by HMV), and Brownlee sang with her on two of her last commercial recordings later that year (a session arranged by her in part to promote Brownlee).

Melba's first recordings were made around 1895, recorded on cylinders at the Bettini Phonograph Lab in New York. A reporter from Phonoscope magazine was impressed: "The next cylinder was labelled 'Melba' and was truly wonderful, the phonograph reproducing her wonderful voice in a marvellous manner, especially the high notes which soared away above the staff and were rich and clear." Melba was less impressed: "'Never again,' I said to myself as I listened to the scratching, screeching result. 'Don't tell me I sing like that, or I shall go away and live on a desert island.'" The recordings never reached the general public – destroyed on Melba's orders, it is suspected – and Melba would not venture into a recording studio for another eight years.[52] Melba can be heard singing on several Mapleson Cylinders, early attempts at live recording, made by the Metropolitan Opera House librarian Lionel Mapleson in the auditorium there during performances. These cylinders are often poor in quality, but they preserve something of the quality of the young Melba's voice and performance that is sometimes lacking from her commercial recordings.[n 10]

Melba made numerous gramophone (phonograph) records of her voice in England and America between 1904 (when she was already in her 40s) and 1926 for the Gramophone & Typewriter Company[54] and the Victor Recording Company. Most of these recordings, consisting of operatic arias, duets and ensemble pieces and songs, have been re-released on CD.[55] The poor audio fidelity of the Melba recordings reflects the limitations of the early days of commercial sound recording. Melba's acoustical recordings (especially those made after her initial 1904 session) fail to capture vital overtones to the voice, leaving it without the body and warmth it possessed – albeit to a limited degree – in life. Despite this, they still reveal Melba to have had an almost seamlessly pure lyric soprano voice with effortless coloratura, a smooth legato and accurate intonation.[55] Melba had perfect pitch; the critic Michael Aspinall says of her complete London recordings issued on LP, that there are only two lapses from pitch in the entire set.[56] Like Patti, and unlike the more vibrant-voiced Tetrzzini, Melba's exceptional purity of tone was probably one of the principal reasons why British audiences, with their strong choral and sacred music traditions, idolised her.[57]

Melba's farewell to Covent Garden on 8 June 1926 was recorded by HMV, as well as broadcast. The programme included Act 2 of *Roméo et Juliette* (not recorded because the tenor Charles Hackett was not under contract to HMV), followed by the opening of Act 4 of *Otello* (Desdemona's "Willow Song" and "Ave Maria") and Acts 3 and 4 of *La bohème* (with Aurora Rettore, Browning Mummery, John Brownlee and others). The conductor was Vincenzo Bellezza. At the conclusion Lord Stanley of Alderley made a formal address and Melba gave an emotional farewell speech. In a pioneering venture, eleven sides (78rpm) were recorded via a landline to Gloucester House (London), though in the event only three of these were published. The full series (including both speeches) was included in a 1976 HMV reissue.[56]

As was the case in many of her performances, most of Melba's recordings were made at "French Pitch" (A=435 Hz), rather than the British early 20th century standard of A=452 Hz, or the modern

standard of A=440 Hz. This, and the technical inadequacies of the early recording process (discs were frequently recorded faster or slower than the supposed standard of 78rpm, whilst the conditions of the cramped recording studios " kept very warm to keep the wax at the necessary softness when cutting " would wreak havoc with instrumental tuning during recording sessions), means that playing her recordings back in the speed and pitch she made them at is not always a simple matter.

On 15 June 1920, Melba was heard in a pioneering radio broadcast from Guglielmo Marconi's New Street Works factory in Chelmsford, singing two arias and her famous trill. She was the first artist of international renown to participate in direct radio broadcasts. Radio enthusiasts across the country heard her, and the broadcast was reportedly heard from as far away as New York. People listening on the radio barely heard a few scratches of the trill and two arias she sang. Further radio broadcasts would include her Covent Garden farewell performance, and a 1927 "Empire Broadcast" (broadcast throughout the British Empire, by radio stations AWA and 2FC, Sydney, on Monday 5 September 1927; it was relayed by the BBC London on Sunday 4 September).[58][59]

Melba was appointed Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1918, along with May Whitty the first stage performer to receive this order, for her charity work during World War I, and was elevated to Dame Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire in 1927.[1] She was the first Australian to appear on the cover of Time magazine, in April 1927.[60] A stained glass window commemorating Melba was erected in 1962 in the Musicians' Memorial Chapel of the Church of St. Sepulchre, London, known as "the musicians' church".[61] She is one of only two singers with a marble bust on the grand staircase of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. The other is Adelina Patti.[62] A blue plaque commemorates Melba at Coombe House, Devey Close in Coombe, Kingston upon Thames, where she lived in 1906.[63]

Melba was closely associated with the Melbourne Conservatorium, and this institution was renamed the Melba Memorial Conservatorium of Music in her honour in 1956. The music hall at the University of Melbourne is known as Melba Hall. The Canberra suburb of Melba is named after her. The current Australian 100 dollar note features the image of her face,[64] and her likeness has also appeared on an Australian stamp.[4] Sydney Town Hall has a marble relief bearing the inscription "Remember Melba", unveiled during a World War II charity concert in memory of Melba and her First World War charity work and patriotic concerts.[65] A tunnel on Melbourne's EastLink freeway is named in her honour.[66]

A novel Evensong by Nichols (1932) was based on aspects of Melba's life, drawing an unflattering portrait.[3] The 1934 motion picture adaptation of Evensong, starring Evelyn Laye as the character based on Melba, was for a time banned in Australia.[68] Melba makes an appearance in the 1946 novel Lucinda Brayford by Martin Boyd. She is depicted as attending a garden party thrown by Julie and Fred Vane, mother of the eponymous heroine: "Melba sang two or three songs, "Down in the Forest", Musetta's song from La bohème, and finally "Home, Sweet Home." She is described as having the "loveliest voice in the world".[69]

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