

1924

NELLIE MELBA'S FIRST FAREWELL

It was a bittersweet night of triumph and nostalgia as Australia's most famous opera star officially bid farewell to her home audience at His Majesty's Theatre, Melbourne, on 13 October 1924.

Still dressed as Mimi in *La Bohème*, the sixty-three-year-old *prima donna* accepted the audience's tribute as she stood before the footlights on a flower-strewn stage with a floral backdrop on which electrically-lit letters, more than a metre high, hailed her as AUSTRALIA'S GREATEST DAUGHTER — OUR MELBA.

It was the first of Nellie Melba's many farewells, and, perhaps for this reason, it was also the most moving.

Only three blocks away, at the Melbourne Town Hall, the same Nellie had made her debut forty years earlier as Helen Armstrong at a benefit concert

for a former conductor, Herr Elsasser. The critic of the *Australasian* wrote enthusiastically:

...Mrs Armstrong, whom her friends have long known as Nellie Mitchell, and who it may here be said is both vocalist a of the first rank, a pianiste of surprising finish, and a painter of more than amateur excellence, but who until last Saturday night had most modestly confined her performances in all of these several capacities to private circles, and who consented to go out of her delightful domestic circle only in the holy cause of charity.

If therefore her success as 'a vocalist had been but moderate, she would have merited the warmest recognition... but when it is said she sings like one out of ten thousand, the obligations due to her are obviously all the greater.

The Elsasser concert, therefore, if it were to be remembered in no other way, will never be forgotten on account of the delightful surprise afforded by Mrs Armstrong's singing, and everybody who heard her will desire to hear her again and everybody who did not hear her is at this moment consumed with regrets at not having been present.

Born Helen Mitchell in Melbourne on 19 May 1861, Nellie received singing, piano, and organ lessons at school, but these were obviously treated merely as a hobby.

When barely twenty-one years old, she married a Queensland sugar mill manager, Charles Nisbett Frederick Armstrong, youngest son of a baronet,

and gave birth to a son about a year later.

But the marriage was unhappy almost from the start, and when her son was only two months old, Nellie left tropical Queensland and returned to her parental home.

Music now assumed a far greater importance in her life, and she studied seriously under Pietro Gecchi, a retired Italian opera singer, although in later years, because of a quarrel over money, she attempted to minimise the influence he had in developing her voice.

The Elsasser benefit, arranged by Gecchi, launched her on a career as a professional singer. She seems to have been popular from the start, with her earnings for the first year amounting to about 750 pounds, a substantial sum at the time.

But for Nellie, conquering Melbourne was merely the beginning — the real challenge and the best training lay in Europe and London.

A transfer to London for her father in 1886 provided the opportunity she so desperately wanted. A letter of introduction brought her an audition with Madame Mathilde Marchesi, a famous Parisian singing teacher.

She listened briefly to Nellie, then rushed out exclaiming to her husband: 'Salvatore, at last I have a star!' Only a year's training was needed, Madame Marchesi told Nellie, to make something 'extraordinary' of her.

And that she did. As Nellie Melba (a name chosen to honour her native Melbourne), she made her debut in European grand opera in *Rigoletto* at

the Theatre de la Monnaie in Brussels. Her success was immediate.

Appearances at London's Covent Garden and opera houses in the United States and Europe followed. Nellie sang before emperors and kings, enchanting them all.

In Milan the notoriously critical La Scala audience greeted her performance in *Lucia de Lammermoor* with deafening applause that went on for ten minutes.

By the time she returned to Australia in 1902 for her first tour, Melba had the world at her feet. Her nine concerts were all packed out, netting her 21,000 pounds with little or no tax to pay.

But her 'eccentricity of genius' also made her many enemies, and when she cancelled a concert in Launceston at the last moment, she was subject to widespread criticism. In Sydney, Ezra Norton's *Truth* screamed:

She had been a constant affliction to maddened managers; a harrowing handful to harassed hotel-keepers; a real strike-a-light startler to staggered stagehands... From the day of her arrival in Australia she has scattered consternation in her wake. She has cancelled contracts, upset arrangements, flouted conventions, kicked up her heels at propriety...

But even these supposed outrages and her many love affairs were soon forgiven by those who heard her sing. More triumphant tours of Australia followed, including one in 1911 by a wholly-imported company of over 200 singers and musicians.

Melba taught at the Melbourne Conservatorium on a few occasions before the first World War, and was created a Dame Commander of the British Empire in 1918 for her fund-raising efforts on behalf of the Red Cross.

Melba's 'farewell' performance in Melbourne in 1924 was followed by a Farewell Concert Tour of Australia in 1927, when she also sang the national anthem at the opening of Parliament House in Canberra, and farewell performances in Sydney and Melbourne the following year.

Her final 'final performance' in Australia was held in November 1928 at Geelong, Victoria.

After almost two years abroad, Nellie Melba again returned to Australia in November 1930. She spent Christmas at Coombe Cottage, the home she had built many years before at Lilydale, near Melbourne.

She died in Sydney on 23 February the following year and was buried on Mount Mary near Coombe Cottage. This time, millions of people all over the world shared in finally bidding farewell to a great artist, whose autobiography *Melodies and Memories* had opened with these words:

'If you wish to understand me at all ... you must understand first and foremost, that I am an Australian'.