



GREAT SINGERS • MELBA

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Nellie MELBA

The Complete American
Recordings, Vol. 1

PUCCINI

VERDI

MOZART

DONIZETTI

THOMAS

New restorations by Ward Marston

Nellie Melba (1861-1931)

The Complete Victor Talking Machine Recordings, Vol. 1

That Edwardian icon, Nellie Melba, was born Helen Porter Mitchell, in Melbourne, Australia, on 19th May 1861. Her parents were musical and started her musical training early, first with piano then with singing lessons. When she was eighteen, she began to study voice more seriously with Pietro Cecchi, an operatic tenor who had emigrated from his native Italy. Cecchi, with whom she continued her vocal education until her departure from Australia in 1886, undoubtedly gave her the solid basis for a career that would last forty years.

In 1882 Melba embarked on a brief but stormy marriage with Charles Armstrong, by whom she had a son George, born on 16th October 1883. Melba had natural gifts, a driving ambition, a sense of her own worth, and instinctive musicality. Such a woman found life in a tin-roofed shack in Northern Queensland intolerable and was soon back in Cecchi's studio. Keenly aware that Australia lacked the opportunities she sought, she went to Europe. Shortly after her arrival there, she was in Paris, embarking upon a strenuous course of nine months' study with Mathilde Marchesi, one of the great voice teachers of the period. Madame Marchesi recognised Melba's potential: here was a genuine diamond that needed only polishing. In less than a year Melba absorbed ten complete rôles, learned the rudiments of acting and gained proficiency in both French and Italian. She made her operatic début at the Monnaie in Brussels as Gilda in *Rigoletto* on 13th October 1887. She was successful, and sang her first performances of *Traviata* and *Lucia* there that season. Here she had the good fortune to be heard by Lady de Grey, later the Marchioness of Ripon, a power in the musical world of London, who persuaded Augustus Harris, the manager of Covent Garden, to give her a contract.

Melba's début there as *Lucia*, on 24th May 1888, was coolly received, and she made only two other

appearances there that year, a second *Lucia* and one *Gilda*. Offered a secondary rôle, that of Oscar in *Un ballo in maschera*, she returned to Paris and the advice of Marchesi, undeterred by this setback. Next she made a début at the Paris Opéra, singing Ophélie in Thomas's *Hamlet*, a rôle in which she had been coached by the composer. This was followed by successful performances in *Lucia* and *Traviata*. Appearances at the Opéra cut more ice in London than did those at the Monnaie. With Gladys de Grey's rallied support, including that of the Princess of Wales, Melba returned to Covent Garden on 18th May 1889 as Juliette when Gounod's opera *Roméo et Juliette* was presented in London for the first time in French (Jean de Reszke appeared as her Roméo). With that unqualified success began what has become known as 'The Reign of Melba'.

In her farewell speech from the stage of Covent Garden on 8th June 1926 Melba referred to that theatre as 'my artistic home'. She wielded a great deal of power there, and some sopranos with pretensions to 'her' rôles met with short shrift. *Faust*, *La traviata*, *Rigoletto* and, particularly *La Bohème* were the backbone of her London repertoire, but she undertook a few novelties such as Bemberg's *Élaine* and Saint-Saëns's *Hélène*, both of which had been written with her in mind. Melba appeared at Covent Garden for twenty consecutive seasons until 1908. After that year she performed there less frequently, singing in only six of the following eighteen seasons.

Her association with the Metropolitan began in 1893 with her début as Lucia. It was in New York that one of the more improbable incidents of Melba's career occurred: her single performance as Brünnhilde in *Siegfried* in German on 30th December 1896. With the growing vogue for Wagner in the 1890s at both Covent Garden and the Met, and with the examples of Nordica and Eames winning plaudits in Wagnerian

rôles Melba's hard-headed sense of what suited her vocally and temperamentally was briefly overcome by ambition combined with jealousy of those two sopranos. In 1894 she had tested the Wagnerian waters by singing Elsa and Elisabeth in Italian (the latter only in New York), but as Henry Krebbiel wrote about her foolhardy foray with *Siegfried*.. 'The world can ill afford to lose a Melba, even it should gain a Brünnhilde.' A few days later she cancelled the rest of that year's New York engagements and sailed back to England. She remained a prominent member of the Metropolitan company until 1901, coming back for two isolated 'guest' appearances, a Mimi in 1904, and two final appearances in 1910 - Gilda to Renaud's *Rigoletto*, and Violetta to McCormack's début as Alfredo.

In 1907 Melba was persuaded by Oscar Hammerstein to join his Manhattan Opera Company, making her début on 2nd January 1907 as Violetta. Engaged for ten performances, she enjoyed herself so much appearing at this rival to the stuffer Met that she sang fifteen times. It was during this stay in the United States that she made her first round of Victor recordings. She returned to Hammerstein's fold briefly during the 1908-9 season, adding Desdemona to her previous rôles.

In 1898, when there was no resident company at the Metropolitan, she had toured the hinterland of the United States with what was called the Melba Grand Opera Company. The experience of being in charge heartened her when she embarked on her lengthy tours of Australia in 1911 and 1924 as head of the Melba-Williamson troupe. In 1928 there was another Australian tour, and, although Melba's name was associated with it, she went on stage but once. At 67, for a final farewell, she repeated part of the programme of her Covent Garden adieu, the last two acts of *Bohème* and the opening of Act 4 of *Otello*.

Accounts of Melba's proficiency as an actress vary from the laudatory (the minority) to the dismissive, yet she held her own in a stage career notable for its duration. I suspect she succeeded primarily as a

'presence'. It seems she generally avoided unnecessary stage movement, content to sketch a general sense of the action. She knew very well indeed that what the audience paid for, clamoured for, was Melba's voice in Marguerite's or Mimi's music rather than a striking characterisation. With the years her figure became cumbersome, but at the same time she radiated dignity. She had learned early on how to be taken on her own terms.

Listening to the records, one may at first find her charmless and not much that is insinuating in her approach. It takes time to listen to them and appreciate the clean attacks, the admirable steadiness of tone and the way in which the voice blooms as it rises in a climactic phrase. The more one hears Melba, the more one comes to appreciate the opalescent play of colour as she sings (for example, the word '*misterioso*' in Violetta's *Ah! fors'è lui*).

There are details that stick in the memory. The sadness she projects in the phrase, '*nell'ora del dolore*' in Tosca's *Vissi d'arte* which lacks some portamenti where we customarily encounter them. Her *Caro nome* in *Rigoletto* omits the introductory recitative but gives her the coda which concludes with one of her trills famous for its regularity, but here she sustains it through an exquisitely calibrated *diminuendo*. In the manner of the divas of her time, she ends her Mad Scene from *Lucia di Lammermoor* in the lower octave, but in the preceding *cadenza* with flute Melba's no-nonsense *staccati* seem almost impertinent in their assurance.

Critics have taken Melba to task for the general mediocrity of the song literature she favoured. Again, it takes some effort to conceive of a time when the public was far less exposed to music, except what they could produce at home, than is the case nowadays. If there seems something saccharine about a song like Tosti's *Good-bye*, it is worth while not to judge it, but rather to listen to the utter conviction with which Melba performs it, rising to a higher emotional temperature than was her wont. Or listen to Tosti's *Mattinata*, in which she plays her own accompaniment. In the early

records with orchestra a singer would be moved forward or back from the horn to avoid 'blasting' with too loud a tone too close to the recording horn, but, when the singer is seated at the piano and playing it, there is little room for any movement. In *Mattinata* there is a special sense of intimacy that derives as much from her controlled dynamic range as from her playing of the broken chords in the accompaniment.

Today singers are inclined to conform, so it is

refreshing to hear the rhythmic liberties a singer like Melba will indulge in. She controls these variations of tempo with a keen musical instinct. Tosti's *Serenata* contains some delicious examples, as well as some figurations that are like filigree. The result of listening intently to a number of Melba's recordings is to surprise oneself with details that had earlier been overlooked.

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Producer's Note

This is the first of a series of three CDs containing every known recording made by Nellie Melba for the Victor Talking Machine Company, here containing the recordings made in 1907. Melba's Victor recordings date from 1907-16, a period when the Victor Company was experimenting with various recording techniques. The earliest vocal records of the Victor Talking Machine Company (made between 1900-3) boast a stunning clarity of sound, exemplified by the records of Rosalia Chalia as well as the first recordings of Emilio De Gogorza and Pol Plançon. This immediacy was achieved by positioning the singer extremely close to the recording horn. By 1904, however, Victor discovered that many of these records did not stand up to multiple playings owing to the wide amplitude of the recorded sound. Over the next six years Victor experimented with positioning the singers further away from the horn in order to produce records which would wear out less quickly. Although many records from this period sound more distant than those made earlier, the quality and timbre of the recordings is both natural and even. From 1910 up until the end of the acoustic recording era in 1925, the Victor Company aimed to produce more brilliant and powerful recordings. The engineers experimented once again with positioning the artists close to the recording horn, and the sound of the recordings is louder and brighter than before. Although there is no documentation of the recording techniques and equipment used at each session, I believe that different types of recording horns and diaphragms were also used. One negative result of these changes is the appearance of an edgy strident quality to the records which is unbecoming to the voices of many singers. To take the records of Enrico Caruso, for example, those made after 1909, though powerful and brilliant, lack the evenness of tone and naturalness of sound compared with those made between 1907-9. Often Caruso's later discs sound as if something in the recording mechanism itself is resonating, resulting in a rather jarring sound in the tenor's loudest notes.

Melba's first Victor records display the characteristics of other recordings made in 1907: the voice is somewhat distant, and the background surface noise is rather prominent. On mint condition pressings, however, one can hear a very clean and natural reproduction of Melba's voice. One technical problem on these discs is a strong resonance on the notes E and F² (an octave and a half above middle C), which results in some blasting, even on mint copies of the records (e.g. the final high F in the 1907 recording of Tosti's *Good-bye*).

Over the years I have heard many people remark that they could not derive genuine pleasure from Melba's records despite her immense reputation. While we are perhaps unaccustomed to hearing a voice such as hers today, the real problem surely lies in the difficulty of playing the original records. The acoustic recording process was not as flattering to Melba's voice as it was to that of Galli-Curci, Ponselle or Rethberg. Great care must be taken to preserve the delicacy of Melba's vocal timbre by retaining the high frequencies that are present on her records. By using pristine copies of the original records, I have been able to reduce surface noise to a minimum without resorting to excessive filtering. I sincerely hope that this reissue will allow the listener to make a more accurate assessment of Nellie Melba, and thereby come to a greater appreciation of her immeasurable contribution to the art of singing.

Ward Marston

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|--|------|--|------|
| VERDI: Rigoletto: | | PUCCINI: La bohème: | |
| 1 Caro nome | 3:51 | 3 O soave fanciulla | 3:25 |
| 5th March 1907; C 4283-2 (Victor 88078) | | with Enrico Caruso, tenor | |
| | | 24th March 1907; C 4326-1 (Victor 95200) | |
| PUCCINI: La bohème: | | PUCCINI: Tosca: | |
| 2 Sì, mi chiamano Mimi | 4:21 | 4 Vissi d'arte | 3:30 |
| 24th March 1907; C 4281-2 (Victor 88074) | | 24th March 1907; C 4282-2 (Victor 88075) | |

- GOUNOD : Faust:**
5 Ah! Je ris de mer voir si belle 3:09
 [Air des bijoux]
 27th March 1907; C 4338-2 (Victor 88066)
- VERDI: La traviata:**
6 Ah! fors' è lui... Sempre libera 4:20
 27th March 1907; C 4339-1 (Victor 88064)
- PUCCINI: La bohème:**
7 Donde lieta uscì al tuo grido d'amore 3:09
 27th March 1907; C 4341-1 (Victor 88072)
- TOSTI:**
8 Good-bye 4:17
 27th March 1907; C 4340-1 (Victor 88065)
- TOSTI:**
9 La Serenata 3:47
 with Ada Sassoli, harp
 27th March 1907; C 4342-2 (Victor 88079)
- BLANGINI:**
10 Per valli, per boschi 2:15
 with Charles Gilibert, baritone
 28th March 1907; C 4347-1 (Victor 89011)
- BEMBERG:**
11 Un ange est venu 3:04
 with Charles Gilibert, baritone
 28th March 1907; C 4348-1 (Victor 89012)
- HAHN:**
12 Si mes vers avaient des ailes 2:20
 with Ada Sassoli, harp
 29th March 1907; C 4352-1 (Victor 88080)
- MOZART: Le nozze di Figaro**
13 Voi che sapete 3:15
 29th March 1907; C 4353-1 (Victor 88067)
- THOMAS: Hamlet**
14 A vos jeux, mes amis, permettez-moi de grâce 3:58
 [Mad Scene part 1]
 29th March 1907; C 4354-1 (Victor 88069)
- THOMAS: Hamlet**
15 Pâle et blonde, dort sous l'eau profonde 3:55
 [Mad Scene part 2]
 29th March 1907; C 4355-1 (Victor 88070)
- ARDITI:**
16 Se saran rose 3:08
 29th March 1907; C 4356-1 (Victor 88076)
- DONIZETTI: Lucia di Lammermoor:**
17 Alfin son tua 4:07
 [Mad Scene]
 Charles K. North, Flute
 30th March 1907; C 4349-2 (Victor 88071)
- BISHOP:**
18 Lo! Here the Gentle Lark 3:05
 Charles K. North, flute
 30th March 1907; C 4350-2 (Victor 88073)
- HANDEL: Il penseroso**
19 Sweet Bird 4:23
 Charles K. North, flute
 30th March 1907; C 4358-1 (Victor 88068)
- TOSTI:**
20 Mattinata 2:20
 30th March 1907; C 4360-1 (Victor 88077)
- Tracks 1-8, 10, 11 & 13-19
 with orchestra conducted by Walter B. Rogers
- Track 20
 Nellie Melba, piano

Playing
Time
69:39

Nellie Melba

The Complete American Recordings, Vol. 1

1907

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MADE IN
CANADA

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- 1 VERDI: *Rigoletto*: Caro nome
 - 2 PUCCINI: *La bohème*: Sì, mi chiamano Mimì
 - 3 PUCCINI: *La bohème*: O soave fanciulla *
 - 4 PUCCINI: *Tosca*: Vissi d'arte
 - 5 GOUNOD: *Faust*: Ah! Je ris de me voir si belle
[Air des bijoux]
 - 6 VERDI: *La traviata*: Ah! fors'è lui... Sempre libera
 - 7 PUCCINI: *La bohème*: Donde lieta uscì al tuo grido
d'amore
 - 8 TOSTI: Good-bye
 - 9 TOSTI: La Serenata †
 - 10 BLANGINI: Per valli, per boschi ‡
 - 11 BEMBERG: Un ange est venu ‡
 - 12 HAHN: Si mes vres avaiet des ailes †
 - 13 MOZART: *Le nozze di Figaro*: Voi che sapete
 - 14 THOMAS: *Hamlet*: A vos jeux, mes amis,
permettez-moi de grâce [Mad Scene part 1]
 - 15 THOMAS: *Hamlet*: Pâle et blonde, dort sous l'eau
profonde [Mad Scene part 2]
 - 16 ARDITI: Se saran rose
 - 17 DONIZETTI: *Lucia di Lammermoor*: Alfin son tua
[Mad Scene] °
 - 18 BISHOP: Lo! Here the gentle lark °
 - 19 HANDEL: *Il penseroso*: Sweet Bird °
 - 20 TOSTI: Mattinata
- * with Enrico Caruso, Tenor
† with Ada Sassoli, Harp
‡ with Charles Gilibert, Baritone
° with Charles K. North, Flute

Helen Porter Mitchell adopted the professional name, Melba, to acknowledge her Australian birthplace, Melbourne. In 1887 she made her operatic début in Brussels as Gilda, eventually winning acclaim at Covent Garden, the Metropolitan Opera and most of the leading opera houses of the world. This volume is the first of a series of three Naxos discs containing all the known recordings Melba made for the Victor Talking Machine in Camden, New Jersey, and New York. The 1907 recordings document some of Melba's greatest hits with audiences of the period. Although the voice is recorded somewhat distantly, there is a naturalness of sound which allows Melba's clean attacks, steadiness of tone and the bloom in her voice as it rises in a climactic phrase, to be heard without the edgy, strident quality that characterises some of the more powerful and brilliant recordings made after 1909.

Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer: Ward Marston
Special thanks to Neil Forster, Harry Glaze, Lawrence Holdridge,
Peter Lack and Jim Peters · Previously released on Romophone

www.naxos.com

A complete track list can be found in the booklet
Cover image: Nellie Melba's début at the Théâtre de la Monnaie,
Brussels, 1887, as Gilda. (Lebrecht Music & Arts)

