

Melba and *La bohème* - Addio, senza rancore

'Farewell, without bitterness' - Mimì's assurance to Rodolfo, uttered on a wintry morning at the Barrière d'Enfer, 'Hell's Gate' customs house on the outskirts of Paris – is inscribed on Nellie Melba's grave in Lilydale Cemetery near Melbourne. It is a fitting epitaph for an incomparable Mimì.

Melba sang the role for the first time at Covent Garden in July 1899, three years after *La bohème's* premiere in Turin. To prepare herself, she spent six weeks in Puccini's home town of Lucca in Tuscany, where the composer visited her nearly every day, coaching her and annotating her score. He even inscribed it: 'To the Mimì of my dreams'.

Melba later claimed that Puccini had written Butterfly for her, though she never sang it. Nor did she sing Tosca, although she yearned to perform the role and came close once or twice. In truth, Melba was not cut out for the histrionic demands of either Butterfly or Tosca. But Mimì was another matter – here she could focus on her strongest asset – her voice.

Mary Garden, the Scottish soprano, who had little reason to like Melba, wrote, 'I never saw such a fat Mimì in my life. Melba didn't impersonate the role at all – she never did that – but, my God, how she sang it.' Mary Garden described the way Melba sang the high C which comes at the end of the first act, as 'the strangest and weirdest thing I have experienced in my life...the note came floating over the auditorium of Covent Garden; it left Melba's throat, it left Melba's body, it left everything, and came over like a star and passed us in our box, and went out into the infinite. I have never heard anything like it in my life, not from any other singer, ever. It just rolled over the hall of Covent Garden. My God, how beautiful it was!...That note of Melba's was just like a ball of light. It wasn't attached to anything at all – it was out of everything.'

Others described her voice as 'silvery', 'clear as crystal (and just as icy)' and like 'Dresden china'. It had the clarity of a boy treble and once, during an evening service in Chartres Cathedral, she commented to a friend, 'I hate these boys. At thirteen they are doing what it took me years and years to do. And I don't know that they're not doing it better.'

The Australian tenor and teacher Charles Bradley recalled that Melba 'simply spoke on a melody' with an unforgettable virginal purity of tone. 'At a rehearsal she was seated on stage, talking to Elena Danieli, the Musetta. Her cue came up and she just turned her head to the front and sang. There was no change but that of pitch, and variation of the length of vowel sounds. It was a most wonderful example of the true art of singing.'

Melba sang Mimì to the Rodolfo of scores of tenors. The first was Fernando de Lucia in 1899 and the last was a fellow Australian, Browning Mummery, in 1928. However, the greatest of all was Enrico Caruso. They first sang together - in *La bohème* - at Monte Carlo in 1902. Although her favourite tenor was Jean de Reszke, the colleague of her early years as a prima donna, Melba liked singing with Caruso. 'The higher he sings' she said, 'the more easy it seems to him. In the third act of *bohème* I always feel as if our two voices had merged into one. ... As a voice – pure and simple – his was the most wonderful tenor I have ever heard. It rolled out like an organ. It had a magnificent ease, a truly golden richness'.

Someone described the combined effect as being like a choirboy singing to an organ accompaniment.

Caruso's sense of humour was notorious and Melba was the butt of more than one of his practical jokes. One incident, recorded in her autobiography *Melodies and Memories*, occurred during a performance of *La bohème* at Monte Carlo with an audience 'thick with Grand Dukes and Princesses and Marchesas'. In the last act, when Mimì is dying in bed, Melba was suddenly startled by a strange squeaking noise which seemed to come from Caruso as he bent over her. She went on singing but could not help wondering if Caruso was ill, for his face was drawn and solemn, and every time he bent down there was this same extraordinary noise of squeaking. Then, with a gulp that almost made her forget her part, she realised that he had a little rubber toy in his hand which, at the most pathetic phrases, he was squeezing in her ear.

Caruso's most celebrated prank was also played during a performance of *La bohème* at Monte Carlo. Singing *Che gelida manina* (Your tiny hand is frozen) he pressed into Melba's hand a hot sausage which he had had his dresser heat over a spirit lamp in the wings. Yelping with shock, Melba flipped the sausage into the air and it bounced across the stage. She uttered a few angry words under her breath but Caruso's superb voice continued with the love-song. Then during a pause for breath he whispered, 'English lady, you like sausage?'

Despite her airs, Melba was not averse to indulging in practical jokes herself. She recounted how, during a close relationship with the young French composer Herman Bemberg, she coated the inside of his hat with greasepaint, cut his umbrella so it would fall to pieces when opened, and hid eggs in his overcoat pockets.

She was sympathetic towards struggling young artists of talent (male, at any rate) who were prepared to devote their lives to art. The Australian painter Hugh Ramsay was - like Marcello - sharing a studio in Paris when Melba first saw his work. She invited him to visit her in London, introduced him to influential people and commissioned him to paint her portrait. Incessant work and a poor diet damaged his health and he fell ill with tuberculosis. His doctors recommended that he move back to the warmer climate of Australia. However, he had no money, so Melba at once wrote out a cheque to pay his fare and provide for living expenses. In 1902 she found him in Melbourne and organized a three-day exhibition of his works in her own home. Most of his pictures sold, allowing him to live for a few months without worrying about bills. Tragically, he succumbed to tuberculosis at the age of twenty-eight. His legacy included several portraits of Melba - and a reputation as one of Australia's finest painters.

Ramsay was not the only artist in whom Melba took an interest. She collected works by Arthur Streeton, Lionel and Norman Lindsay, Elioth Gruner and, especially, Hans Heyesen who she especially admired. 'This is the coming man' she told friends.

To have 'more farewells than Melba' or to 'do a Nellie Melba' are now established figures of speech. She gave a number of 'farewells' in Australia after her final Covent Garden appearance on 8 June 1826, but Covent Garden was the place that counted most in those days of empire, and it was there that she had reigned supreme. She had literally forced *La bohème* on the Royal Opera House in 1899 after its lukewarm British premiere in Manchester in 1897, and had proved herself the greatest Mimì of all. 'Melba nights' were spectacular events attracting the cream of London society, elegantly dressed and bejewelled.

For her final performance, in the presence of King George and Queen Mary, she chose the second act from *Roméo et Juliette*, then the 'Willow Song' and 'Ave Maria' from *Otello's* third act, and finally the last two acts of *La bohème*. The latter selection was, above all, what the audience had come to hear, and what Melba had come to sing. She was sixty-five, thirty years older than her Rodolfo (Australian, Browning Mummery) and forty years older than her Marcello (Australian, John Brownlee). The whole performance, including her farewell speech, was captured by His Master's Voice.

In 1928, another Australian soprano, the nineteen-year old Marjorie Lawrence, tried to arrange an audition with Melba, but she was never acknowledged. Even in retirement, Melba could not bear the thought that other female singers – especially Australians – might win some of the limelight she had enjoyed for so long.

However, Marjorie Lawrence did record the recollections of a stage attendant present at that memorable Covent Garden farewell in 1926: 'We could see that Melba was weeping as she took her bows – dozens of them' he said. 'She seemed distressed as she walked back into the wings and, fearing she might collapse, I signalled my colleague to hold the curtains together and not reopen them. I was standing with him when Melba, in a flash, made a complete recovery although there were tears on her cheeks, and hissed at us, 'Pull back those bloody curtains.' We did, and she was out before the audience bowing and sobbing again.'

Peter Bassett

References:

John Hetherington. *Melba*. Cheshire, 1967.

Charles Neilson Gattey. *Queens of Song*. Barrie & Jenkins, 1979.

Nellie Melba. *Memories and Melodies*. Hamish Hamilton, 1980. (First published 1926).