
REVIEWS

Ann Blainey, *I am Melba: A Biography*

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Reviewed by Kerry Murphy

Nellie Melba's life makes an enthralling story, one that has many elements of popular fiction—her astounding successful debut in Brussels, her Royal affair, her stunning jewellery, Worth gowns and costumes; also her London house that she decorated in the style of Versailles and her private Pullman railcar for touring America, which contained a piano and organ and was large enough to house two friends, two maids, porter, chef and waiter. Melba lived in style. She mixed easily with aristocracy all over Europe and was fortunate to have friends such as Alfred Rothschild to help her with her investments.

Yet behind Melba's extravagant façade, was an ambitious, hardworking, forthright woman. A woman who although undoubtedly the most famous Australian of her time, if not of all time, was often lonely and miserable, whose 'Royal affair,' for instance, was a real love affair from which she never really recovered. Ann Blainey's new biography of Melba presents a vivid and compelling picture of Melba's life and career. Melba's love of life, her lack of pretension and her generosity are well portrayed, yet so also are her failings, her imperiousness, her need to control, and her relentless expectations of those working for her. Although clearly closely identifying with her subject, Blainey manages to draw back when needed, for instance, when she admits that Melba might have unwittingly exaggerated her husband Charlie's violence in order to gain custody of her child. Blainey is very fair in her portrayal of Charlie and careful to acknowledge moments when he could be seen in a positive light. In fact Charlie often comes across as an engaging figure, and someone for whom Melba's initial attraction is easy to imagine.

The biography is meticulously researched and documented, but also makes a number of speculative reflections that in most cases seem highly justified and give an imaginative richness to the narrative. The only case where I was not totally convinced was in relation to Melba and

her son George. For many years, Charlie and George were living in North America and Melba had no contact with them; she did not even know where they were.¹ Blainey recreates Melba's anguish during this time (and even later back in Australia) and has her identifying emotionally with a number of young boys of George's age that she meets in her travels. Given that Melba made little attempt to find or contact George during this period, and even changed her will at one point to give George less money, I found these sentimental cameos a little far-fetched.

Melba myths and anecdotes abound, and slowly, as more research is done and more documents come to light, many are being questioned or dispelled. Blainey gives a very full account of Melba's time in Australia before she left and in doing so firmly dispels the myth that began with Melba herself and was continued in Agnes Murphy's biography of Melba, that Melba's potential was not really recognised in Australia. Blainey's evidence shows that although Melba's own family doubted her ability, 'most of the critics, and the public too, hailed her as the foremost concert singer in Australia' (p. 47) and there was a great deal of excitement about her potential career in Europe. To refer to another myth, it has been known for some time (and is well explored in Thérèse Radic's biography of Melba)² that Melba downplayed the influence of her teacher Cecchi in Melbourne and presented herself everywhere as a product of Madame Marchesi's school, although Cecchi's teaching was obviously crucial to her career, and without Cecchi's preparation, Marchesi could not have achieved what she did in such a short period. Without in any way denying the importance of Cecchi, I think the material presented in this biography shows very clearly, that the importance of Marchesi went well beyond her actual teaching. Within her first year with Marchesi, Melba had met all the French composers whose works she would later excel in—Thomas, Delibes and Massenet were frequent visitors to Marchesi's salons and Gounod was patron of her annual concerts. Marchesi's contacts were clearly of crucial importance to Melba's future career. Melba was also taught deportment in Marchesi's school by the famous, although by then aged, French ballet danseur Petita, as Blainey claims (p. 58) 'Marchesi was in effect running a finishing school for Prima donnas.'

There is one last area of conflict in Melba biography/mythology to touch on: Melba's death. Blainey presents evidence to suggest that Melba's death may not have been the result of infection caused by a face-lift. The evidence is not conclusive, but she does open the topic for further speculation.

In the later part of her life, Melba devoted a great deal of her time and energy to her Australian tours. In the overseas press, Melba is most often described as representing the British Empire and Blainey's biography gives the impression that Melba saw herself as being part of the British Empire rather than Australian. As Blainey states (p. 305), to be called 'the voice of the Empire' could not have been a higher compliment for Melba. Blainey recounts an amusing story of Melba, one Christmas eve in rural Victoria, treating her visitors to a gramophone recording of Big Ben striking midnight. She attempted to turn her simple farmhouse in Lilydale into 'a gracious English-style house.' Melba's stupendous war effort was certainly on behalf of the British Empire and yet she also invested a lot of energy and indeed money in the advancement of musical culture in Australia and was anxious to see Australian artists succeed, particularly those whose voice style and range was different from her own.

¹ Later, on page 197, Blainey suggests that Melba had perhaps hired a private detective to trace them.

² Thérèse Radic, *Melba: The Voice of Australia* (South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1986).

One instance in the Blainey biography highlights the way in which various sub disciplines in the humanities are often unaware of what is happening outside their own field. Blainey states correctly that the famous flute cadenza for the mad scene from Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* was written for Melba by Marchesi. But she appears to be unaware that authorship of this cadenza has been the cause for considerable discussion in musicological literature for many years. Italian opera scholar Maryanne Smart (following William Ashwood) decided it must have been first sung by Teresa Brambilla in the 1850s,³ but recently, in an article translated in the *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Italian musicologist Romana Pugliese proved from an extensive examination of the manuscript additions to the score in the Paris opera archives, that it was indeed written for Melba by Marchesi.⁴ Pugliese does not appear to have read Melba's Memoirs (where she describes the cadenza),⁵ and her conclusion is arrived at purely by a study of source materials.

I first found myself thinking that it was strange that these musicologists had not consulted the Melba Memoirs, which are easily consultable in libraries around the world, but on reflection, why should they? The particular scholars were first and foremost scholars of Italian opera and their first inclination was to associate the cadenza with Italian singers. So it is quite amusing to read how casually Blainey narrates this much-debated topic. I should add that Blainey of course does not just take Melba's Memoirs at face value—there is too much inaccuracy in the Memoirs to do that, but she has extra documentation from concert programmes and reviews. She appears unaware of the musical source in the Paris archives, however!

There are no footnotes in this book; sources are listed in the back, chapter by chapter and in the order in which they are used. This is often the way biographies are documented, no doubt so as not to interrupt the flow of the narrative. It is a method that I personally find infuriating, and I spent a lot of time trawling through the listed sources trying to work out which source belonged to the quote or reference I was interested in. On one occasion I couldn't actually find the origin of the source, this was the most often quoted statement of Leo Delibes when he declared that Melba 'could sing his opera in French, Italian, German or Chinese for all he cared. The language was irrelevant, just so long as she sang!' (p. 74). I worked out that this information came from Pamela Vestey's biography of Melba,⁶ and Vestey takes it from an undocumented source, Charles Neilson Gattey's, *Queens of Song* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1979). I would really have welcomed some footnote numbers here! But I realise no doubt this would have been beyond Blainey's control and probably the majority of the readers of this book will welcome the uncluttered text.

In conclusion this book is a pleasure to read, a welcome addition to the growing literature on Melba. So many famous Australian singers of the past have disappeared into obscurity. There is no danger of this ever happening to Melba, yet it is good to continue to remind us to celebrate just what a remarkable career she had.

³ Mary Ann Smart, 'The Silencing of Lucia,' *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 4.2 (1995): 130.

⁴ Romana Pugliese, 'The Origins of Lucia di Lammermoor's Cadenza,' *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 16.1 (2004): 23-42. Pugliese still gets the date wrong, however, when she states that the cadenza was written for Melba's premiere in 1889; in fact, Melba sang it earlier in one of Marchesi's student concerts.

⁵ Nellie Melba, *Melodies and Memories: The Autobiography of Nellie Melba* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1925).

⁶ Pamela Vestey, *Melba. A Family Memoir* (Melbourne: Phoebe Publishing, 1996).