



**Nellie  
MELBA**

**The 1904 London  
Recordings**

**PUCCINI**

**GOUNOD**

**BIZET**

**BISHOP**

**BEMBERG**

**TOSTI**

## Nellie Melba (1861-1931)

### The Complete Gramophone Company Recordings, Vol. 2

“ ‘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, out of sheer pity for the poor people who have to listen to me.’ ”

*(Melodies and Memories -Nellie Melba)*

Conjecture still surrounds precisely *when* Melba first recorded her voice and in her colourful and largely unreliable 1925 memoir her own comments on the matter add confusing weight to the assumption that her earliest attempts, even for the Gramophone Company, may have pre-dated by a month or two the proud ‘March 1904’ identification printed on the labels of her first commercial releases. Melba herself somewhat misleadingly claims that her very first attempts were destroyed but adds that the Company’s persistence (“Never have I known such courtesy combined with such persuasion. They simply would not leave me alone...”) soon led to further, more successful efforts. Moreover, whether or not she actually made the cylinders advertised in the small but select catalogue of the dilettante Bettini, by late 1903, having heard and been impressed by the published recordings of, among others, Caruso, Tamagno and her own soprano protégée Elizabeth Parkina, she was no longer averse to the idea in principle, as long as the terms and conditions were acceptable.

By the time she finally “gave in” to the persistence of Fred Gaisberg’s London-based Gramophone Company, Melba was 43 years old. An established international star, she was also a living opera legend whose mystique had been cultivated on lines similar to those which surrounded Jenny Lind and Patti and, in her determination to make it to the top (“In my own path great obstacles were placed, but I do not think anything in the world could have hindered me from

becoming a singer”) she had swiftly risen to prominence through her influential friends in the salons of Paris and London. Born Helen Porter Mitchell in Richmond, near Melbourne, Australia, on 19th May, 1861, Nellie was the eldest child of David Mitchell, a successful Scots immigrant builder (and keen amateur bass) lured to Australia by the 1851 gold rush. Her mother, herself a musical all-rounder, encouraged her youthful inclinations for piano and organ (her favourite instrument) and singing. Nellie was sent to boarding-school and later attended Melbourne Presbyterian Ladies’ College, where she received her first vocal training from Ellen Christian, an English-born contralto and sometime pupil of the baritone-laryngoscopist, the younger Manuel Garcia. Next, after leaving college in 1880, she studied with Pietro Cecchi, a Melbourne-based Italian tenor from California and a former member of the Australian Lyster touring opera company.

The year 1881 brought the death both of her mother and younger sister and by December 1882 Nellie had married Charles Armstong, an impoverished scion of an Irish baronetcy, who ran a sugar-plantation near Brisbane. The following year she bore him a son but from the start their marriage was a failure and she soon resolved to pursue her career instead, first as a pianist at soirées then as the singer who, rather chameleon-like, was soon to be transmogrified into the legendary opera diva ‘Nellie Melba’. Continuing her training with Cecchi, she earned rave notices on the Australian concert and oratorio circuits and in 1886, when her father was appointed commissioner to the Indian and Colonial Exhibition, the ambitious Nellie decided to accompany him to London. Her first appearance in the British capital, then a hub of European culture, made little real impact, but in Paris she was immediately enrolled at

the Ecole Marchesi and never looked back. In Mathilde Marchesi (1821-1913) Nellie found a kindred spirit and a catalyst to make her a success. A German former contralto and another pupil of the younger Garcia, Marchesi ranked among the foremost European voice teachers of her day, and over a period which spanned thirty years her pupils included many famous sopranos (notably Emma Calvé, Ilma di Murska, Emma Eames, Mary Garden and her own daughter, Blanche). While what she actually *taught* her is questionable, she had not only the skill necessary to polish the voice but also the ruthlessness to present her as her latest creation and, under her guidance, in October 1887, Nellie made an auspicious début at the Brussels Monnaie, as Gilda in *Rigoletto*.

Melba's Covent Garden début, as Lucia, on 24th May, 1888, in a newly refurbished house and during Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee season, while not a triumph in itself, brought with it the special cachet of royal patronage. Indeed, Melba herself traced her success in London more specifically to the "great night" of 15th June, 1889, when she appeared as Juliette to the Romeo of Jean de Reszke, and, perhaps more particularly, to the patronage of Lady Gladys de Grey, who gave her "the first party to which I went after I became a somebody". Enscorced thereafter in London, Covent Garden became the enduring focus of her career, however, and she became a regular attraction at international seasons virtually every year until 1914, and afterwards intermittently until her retirement in 1926. She made her Paris Opéra début in 1889, her La Scala (Milan) début in 1892 and her New York Metropolitan Opera début in 1893. Frequently engaged at Monte Carlo, she also appeared to great acclaim throughout Italy and in Russia, Scandinavia and Austria. She also sang in concert in Europe and the United States, and toured Australia for the first time in 1902. Contracting the great prima donna to record would have been a major coup for any company - and she knew it.

A process of persuasion and negotiation began in early 1904, or possibly even earlier, in which Gaisberg, the Gramophone & Typewriter Company's Sales Manager Sidney Dixon, and Melba's accompanist Landon Ronald (1873-1938; already a noted recitalist, conductor and songwriter, he was also the Company's music adviser) each played a significant rôle. At her own insistence Melba's first attempts for G&T, in March 1904, were made at her home in Great Cumberland Place. She claimed not to like the results and strongly resisted their publication prior to their actual release in July. Her initial contract, however, (she did not actually sign one till May) required her to attend another session within six months at the American Gaisberg's "laboratory" at 21 City Road and that held at that venue on 20th October had the added cachet of the young international Czech violin virtuoso Jan Kubelik (1880-1940), who partnered the soprano in the Bach-Gounod *Ave Maria* (Naxos 8.110737) proudly proclaimed by G&T in January 1905 as "the greatest Talking Machine Record ever conceived."

Whatever Melba's initial reservations, genuine or contrived, the fruits of her 1905-1906 sessions showed considerable improvement and one senses a real effort by the diva herself and the technicians to get things right first time and thereby avoid re-takes. The repertoire chosen is an eclectic mix of things the Company felt would sell, art-songs, traditional ballads and selected operatic items, including, in July 1906, an aria *Elaine*, created for her by her sometime paramour and accompanist, the part-Argentinian, Paris-born Herman Bemberg (1859-1931). She had taken part in the first performance of this now long-defunct opera at Covent Garden in 1892. The sessions of 4th and 5th September, 1905, were exceptionally fruitful, yielding eleven items, all of which were passed for publication. With the exception of the *Jewel Song* from *Faust*, all were either songs or recital encores, the first six being 10 matrices of material aimed at the popular market, issued on discs priced at 12/6d apiece, instead of the

celebrity rate of one guinea normally charged for the 12 "autographed", Lilac-labelled 'Melba' records. In the trios backing Stephen Foster's *Old Folks At Home* and Alfred Scott-Gatty's *Good Night* can be heard the resonant tones of another Australian, the bass Peter Dawson (1881-1961), who had begun his own recording career for G&T the previous year. At this session (4th September), apparently his first face-to-

face encounter with the notoriously outspoken Melba, Dawson, in his autobiography *Fifty Years Of Song*, relates how, on being informed that he hailed from Adelaide, gained an early glimpse of the diva's acid wit with her cutting retort: "What! That town of pubs and prostitutes!".

**Peter Dempsey**

The Naxos historical label aims to make available the greatest recordings in the history of recorded music, in the best and truest sound that contemporary technology can provide. To achieve this aim, Naxos has engaged a number of respected restorers who have the dedication, skill and experience to produce restorations that have set new standards in the field of historical recordings.

## Ward Marston

In 1997 Ward Marston was nominated for the Best Historical Album Grammy Award for his production work on BMG's Fritz Kreisler collection. According to the Chicago Tribune, Marston's name is 'synonymous with tender loving care to collectors of historical CDs'. Opera News calls his work 'revelatory', and Fanfare deems him 'miraculous'. In 1996 Ward Marston received the Gramophone award for Historical Vocal Recording of the Year, honouring his production and engineering work on Romophone's complete recordings of Lucrezia Bori. He also served as re-recording engineer for the Franklin Mint's Arturo Toscanini issue and BMG's Sergey Rachmaninov recordings, both winners of the Best Historical Album Grammy.

Born blind in 1952, Ward Marston has amassed tens of thousands of opera classical records over the past four decades. Following a stint in radio while a student at Williams College, he became well-known as a reissue producer in 1979, when he restored the earliest known stereo recording made by the Bell Telephone Laboratories in 1932.

In the past, Ward Marston has produced records for a number of major and specialist record companies. Now he is bringing his distinctive sonic vision to bear on works released on the Naxos Historical label. Ultimately his goal is to make the music he remasters sound as natural as possible and true to life by 'lifting the voices' off his old 78 rpm recordings. His aim is to promote the importance of preserving old recordings and make available the works of great musicians who need to be heard.

Ward said he'll send his notes by Fri am.

Tracks 1, 2, 4, 8-10, 12-16, and 18-20 with piano accompaniment by Landon Ronald  
Tracks 3, 11, and 17 with piano accompaniment by Herman Bemberg  
Tracks 5-7 with H. M. Coldstream Guards Band conducted by Lieut. Mackenzie Rogan  
Track 12 with flute accompaniment by Albert Fransella  
Track 16 with cello accompaniment by W. H. Squire

Tracks 1, 4, and 19 sung in Italian  
Tracks 2, 3, 11, 13, 17, 18, and 20 sung in French  
Tracks 5-10, 12, 14, and 15 sung in English  
Track 16 sung in Latin

Tracks 1-4 Recorded at 21 City Road, London

- TOSTI (Cesareo)**  
1 *La Serenata* 3:35  
Recorded 20 October 1904  
Mat. 402c (Cat. 03034)
- GOUNOD: Roméo et Juliette**  
2 *Je veux vivre dans ce rêve* (Juliette's Waltz) 2:59  
Recorded 20 October 1904  
Mat. 404c (Cat. 03035)
- BEMBERG (Ocampo)**  
3 *Chant Hindou* 4:04  
Recorded 20 October 1904  
Mat. 405c (Cat. 03036)
- PUCCINI: La Bohème**  
4 *Donde lieta uscì al tuo grido d'amore* (Addio) 2:59  
Recorded 20 October 1904  
Mat. 406c (Cat. 03037)
- TRADITIONAL**  
5 *God Save the King* 2:29  
Recorded 4 September 1905  
Mat. 7200b (Cat. 3625)
- OLD SCOTTISH AIR (Burns)**  
6 *Auld Lang Syne* 3:14  
Recorded 4 September 1905  
Mat. 7201 1/2b (Cat. 3615)
- CLARIBEL (Mrs Charles Barnard)**  
7 *Come Back to Erin* 3:20  
Recorded 4 September 1905  
Mat. 7202 1/2b (Cat. 3616)
- FOSTER**  
8 *Old Folks at Home* 2:47  
with Gwladys Roberts, Ernest Pike  
and Peter Dawson  
Recorded 4 September 1905  
7203b (Cat. 3617)
- SCOTT-GATTY**  
9 *Good Night* 2:11  
with Gwladys Roberts, Ernest Pike  
and Peter Dawson  
Recorded 4 September 1905  
7204b (Cat. 3618)
- RONALD: Four Songs of the Hill**  
10 *Away on the Hill There Runs a Stream* 1:59
- Recorded 4 September 1905  
7205b (Cat. 3619)
- BEMBERG**  
11 *Sur le lac* 3:29  
Recorded 5 September 1905  
Mat. 520c (Cat. 03046)
- BISHOP (Shakespeare)**  
12 *Lo, Here the Gentle Lark!* 3:10  
Recorded 4 September 1905  
Mat. 521c (Cat. 03047)
- GOUNOD: Faust**  
13 *Ah! Je ris de me voir (Air des bijoux)* 3:10  
Recorded 5 September 1905  
Mat. 522c (Cat. 03048)
- BISHOP: Clari, the maid of Milan (Paine)**  
14 *Home Sweet Home* 3:56  
Recorded 5 September 1905  
Mat. 523c (Cat. 03049)
- TOSTI (Whyte-Melville)**  
15 *Goodbye* 3:51  
Recorded 5 September 1905  
Mat. 524c (Cat. 03050)
- BACH/GOUNOD**  
16 *Ave Maria* 2:40  
(Meditation on Bach's Prelude, WTC 1)  
Recorded 7 July 1906  
Mat. 689c (Cat. 03069)
- BEMBERG: Elaine (Ferrier)**  
17 *L'amour est pur comme la flamme* 2:45  
Recorded 7 July 1906 with Ladies' Chorus  
Mat. 690c (Cat. IRCC-17)
- BIZET (Régnard)**  
18 *Pastorale* 3:06  
Recorded 7 July 1906  
Mat. 691c (Cat. 03070)
- PUCCINI: La Bohème**  
19 *Mi chiamano Mimi* 2:54  
Recorded 7 July 1906  
Mat. 692c (Cat. 03071)
- LALO: Le roi d'Ys**  
20 *Puisqu'on ne peut fléchir ces jalouses* 3:20  
*gardiennes... Vainement, ma bien aimée*  
Recorded 7 July 1906  
Mat. 693c (Cat. 03072)

8.110738

**Nellie Melba****ADD**

Complete Gramophone Company Recordings, Vol. 2

**The 1904 London Recordings****Playing  
Time  
61:58**

- 1 **TOSTI: La Serenata**
- 2 **GOUNOD: Roméo et Juliette:**  
Je veux vivre dans ce rêve (Juliette's Waltz)
- 3 **BEMBERG: Chant Hindou**
- 4 **PUCCINI: La Bohème:**  
Donde lieta uscì al tuo grido d'amore (Addio)
- 5 **TRADITIONAL: God Save the King**
- 6 **TRADITIONAL: Auld Lang Syne**
- 7 **"CLARIBEL": Come Back to Erin**
- 8 **FOSTER: Old Folks at Home**
- 9 **SCOTT-GATTY: Good Night**
- 10 **RONALD: Away on the Hill There Runs a Stream**
- 11 **BEMBERG: Sur le lac**
- 12 **BISHOP: Lo, Here the Gentle Lark!**
- 13 **GOUNOD: Faust: Ah! Je ris de me voir (Jewel song)**
- 14 **BISHOP: Clari, the maid of Milan:**  
Home Sweet Home
- 15 **TOSTI: Goodbye**
- 16 **BACH/GOUNOD: Ave Maria**
- 17 **BEMBERG: Elaine:**  
L'amour est pur comme la flamme
- 18 **BIZET: Pastorale**
- 19 **PUCCINI: La Bohème: Mi chiamano Mimi**
- 20 **LALO: Le Roi d'Ys: Puisqu'on ne peut fléchir ces**  
jalouses gardiennes...Vainement, ma bien aimée

Helen Porter Mitchell adopted the professional name Melba to acknowledge her birthplace, Melbourne. She began to study singing seriously in 1882 and made her operatic début in Brussels in 1887. Melba won acclaim at Covent Garden and the Metropolitan Opera and subsequently in most of the leading opera houses of the world until her retirement, becoming the epitome of glamour and fame. Melba's voice was remarkable for its even quality over a range of nearly three octaves, and for its pure silvery timbre. Her first recordings were made in 1904 for The Gramophone and Typewriter Company, the precursor of HMV. The repertoire is drawn from Melba's operatic rôles in *La Bohème* and *Faust*, as well as from the popular and traditional ballads and songs of the period, such as those by Tosti, and Bemberg, who can be heard accompanying Melba in works composed by himself.

Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer: Ward Marston  
Special thanks to Lawrence F. Holdridge and Jeffrey J. Miller.

[www.naxos.com](http://www.naxos.com)

A complete track list can be found in the booklet  
Cover image: Nellie Melba as Mimi from *La Bohème*  
(Lebrecht Collection)

MADE IN  
E.C. 05537