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Nellie Melba

Lead: Australia has a rich history of cultural icons: Phar-Lap the indefatigable race horse; Ned Kelly, the iron clad bank robber; yet none surpass the impact of opera singer and early 20th century material girl, Nellie Melba.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Born in 1861 of musically inclined Scottish immigrant parents in the Melbourne suburb of Richmond, Nellie Melba performed in her first singing concert at the age of six, and began professional training in

1880. Though she was developing into a powerful coloratura soprano, Australia was far from the center of the operatic universe. If she was to succeed in that world, she would have to go to Europe. In 1886 she auditioned for and was received as a student of the mezzo-soprano Parisian vocal master, Madame Mathilda Marchesi. Marchesi recognized a unique talent, trained her for six months, and then, using her connections, opened the doors. Possessed of her father's confidence, Melba strode onto the stage at Theatre de la Monnaie in Brussels in October 1887 and never looked back. Her intense soprano with its icily brilliant, trill vibrato grabbed the imagination of the opera world and

soon she was playing to packed houses in London, Paris, St. Petersburg, New York and, eventually even Italians embraced Nellie.

Perhaps before most opera performers she understood the important commercial connection between superior performance and an interesting, even scandalous private life. Essayist Michael Fitzgerald says that on the way to vast riches, Nellie Melba by her love affairs and manipulation of the media paved the way for other talented and clever divas such as Dame Joan Sutherland and even Madonna. Her grasp on the world's imagination is revealed to us only imperfectly in the tinny tones of

a primitive technology, but on the other hand we still enjoy Peach Melba and Melba Sauce, and, of course, Melba Toast.

Research assistance by Carol Hassett, at the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

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