



Eva Mylott's Home Tour

A Performing Arts & Community History

by Jan Lewis

On 16 September 1875 Eva Mylott was born on a large estate at Tuross Head; one of Australia's most beautiful headlandsⁱ. Her Irish parents, Patrick and Mary Mylott (nee Heffernan) married when Patrick was the managing overseer of the Bodalla Estate. They had nine children. Patrick became a successful farmer, merchant and businessman. He also played a large part in pioneering the district, helping to forge roads between Tuross and Bodalla and establishing the Illawarra & South Coast Steamship Co.

In the days without radio, television and electricity, music and entertainment featured as both a private and public affair. It formed part of the Australian way of life and was a source of social engagement for many communities despite (and perhaps because of) the barriers of isolation and transportⁱⁱ. Church choirs, Eisteddfods, festivals and other music competitions were ubiquitous to the era and this inevitably identified, nurtured and promoted young talentⁱⁱⁱ. It was evident that Eva was a gifted singer and, after she won a singing competition at the age of seven, Patrick moved the family to Sydney to gain the best possible tuition for her music. There, she met and was influenced by many great people.

She studied under Henri Kowalski, 'Prince of the Pianoforte' and renowned English contralto, Madame Ellen Christian, who employed Manuel Garcia's revolutionary singing methods and who was Dame Nellie Melba's first singing teacher^{iv}. Eva met Charles Turner through Madame Christian

and in 1898 she was engaged in three of his touring Exhibition Concerts^v. As well, there was the great flute virtuosi and impresario John Lemmone whom Eva accompanied and who arranged extensive and highly successful concert tours from Melbourne to Brisbane^{vi}.

One of the most endearing, enduring and encouraging influences in Eva's life, however, was her cousin Marie Narelle, a contemporary soprano of Dame Nellie Melba^{vii}. Theirs was a friendship, bonded by the love of music since the time they were young girls growing up on the NSW South Coast. It stayed with them throughout their entire lives^{viii}. They were both taught by Madame Christian in Sydney and toured together many times at home and abroad^{ix}. When they performed together in 1899 for a concert at the YMCA, hundreds of disappointed fans had to be turned away^x. Their performance at Moruya's Centennial Hall in January 1900 was reported as:

An unprecedented success – artistic and otherwise. The deep rich tones of the contralto and the sweet clear voice of the soprano were a treat Moruya has never before experienced and encore after encore was the result^{xi}.

In Sydney, Eva drew record crowds with adoring audiences flocking to her every concert. She eventually became Sydney's leading contralto and was introduced to Dame Nellie Melba through the Sydney Lord Mayor during Melba's 1902 home visit^{xii}. Eva became Melba's protégé and was encouraged to further her studies and experiences abroad. Eva's last Moruya concert was in

September 1902 and was reported as 'an unqualified success' with a quite tangible swell of devotion accorded by the large and enthusiastic audience^{xiii}. In her farewell concert at the Sydney Town Hall, all the windows and doors had to be left open so that the hundreds who could not fit inside could hear her perform^{xiv}.

In December 1902, Eva sailed out of Sydney on the SS Oroya with a letter from Dame Nellie Melba. It read:

This letter will introduce you to Miss Eva Mylott who has a beautiful contralto voice and in whom I have great hopes. I shall esteem it a personal favour if you will hear her sing and do what you can to help^{xv}.

Melba sent Eva to her own tutor in Paris, Madame Mathilde Marchessi, who was also a chief proponent of the Garcia singing technique^{xvi}. There, she worked extraordinarily hard receiving one, sometimes two, lessons per day and studied day and night to learn French, Russian, German and Italian songs^{xvii}.

At Marchessi's grand international pupils' concert, French critics and correspondents from the *New York* and the *London Daily Telegraph* singled Eva out for special mention and Madame Marchessi, referring to her favourite pupil said;

I have no hesitation in prophesying for Miss Mylott a great future in the artistic and musical world from her great power and compass, artistic perception and temperament^{xviii}.

Eva returned to London in 1903 to further tuition from Melba herself and Signor Tosti in preparation for London's autumn

season. She then toured with Melba, Trebelli and Madame Albani and was honoured with the special patronage of the Prince and Princess of Wales^{xxix}. Over the next three years Eva was constantly engaged in St. James, Albert and Queen's Hall concerts, Covent Garden, as well as many Festivals, and numerous Choral Societies throughout the British Isles^{xx}. During this time she also furthered her education studying under Madame Minna Fischer for German lieder, Madame Gay D'Hardelot for ballads and Randegger and Sir Henry Wood for oratorio^{xxi}. Her repertoire included at least sixteen oratorios, innumerable ballads and more than a dozen operas.

The following year she travelled and performed to critical acclaim in Europe and later in Canada and America where she spent five very successful years. The Americans and Canadians loved her^{xxii}. On the back of a postcard she sent home, she claimed to be the busiest singer in the United States^{xxiii}. The breadth of her travels and extent of her successes are too many for this essay but an excerpt from one review is typical:

Rich in tone, glorious in volume, artistic in interpretation, wonderful in diction, remarkable in control and faultless in method – Miss Eva is undoubtedly one of the greatest lyric artists of the day^{xxiv}.

Nearly nine years had passed since Eva left the shores of her beloved homeland by which time she had performed in the finest concert halls and to the most sophisticated and critical audiences in the world; but it was time to return home.

It was a grand occasion when the R.M.S. Makura steamed into Sydney Harbour on 6 July 1912. Under the command of Captain Gibb, the Makura was dressed up in flags from stem to

stern in Eva's honour. The *Evening News* reported that hundreds were there waving banners and handkerchiefs and she was besieged by people when they were allowed on board. Sydney streets were festive with flags singing their welcome. Amongst a profusion of bouquets, the esteemed singer was met by Government and local dignitaries^{xxv}. Two days later, she was given a civic reception by the Lord Mayor; no other performer except Dame Nellie Melba had received such recognition.

When asked in an interview upon her arrival what the key to her success was, she replied:

There is no royal road to success. Not only is the way itself toilsome, but as soon as the goal is reached constantly fresh endeavour is needed to keep at the front. The best of health, unbounded energy, the will to study new music when a novel by the fire would be infinitely preferred, tact with friends, and business sense to make the best of opportunities as they offer, are all needed by an artist who wishes to keep an already secured position.^{xxvi}

Exemplifying those comments in another interview, she recounted her most recent commitments:

With reference to life in America, I have found it decidedly strenuous, both socially and professionally. I have been especially rushed with engagements the last year, having appeared in every State of the Union, and in all the provinces of Canada, appearing as the soloist with the famous Theodore Thomas Orchestra of Chicago, and on the extensive tour with famous violinist Jan Kubelik; also on a long tour as soloist with the Russian Symphony Orchestra. Besides, I have sung with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, the Apollo Club of Chicago and many

other leading organizations in oratorio and in concert^{xxvii}.

Her tour with the seventy-member Russian Symphony Orchestra alone travelled 12,000 miles in six weeks between Easter and June and gave ten concerts per week in which Eva sang Handel's *Messiah* 60 times^{xxviii}. The logistical headaches of planning such tours is highlighted when, on one occasion, whilst en route to Texas, the supply of food was delayed due to flood and the company performed 'for two days without food'^{xxix}.

After her reception Eva gave a concert at the Sydney Town Hall^{xxx}. In the ensuing three months, she undertook a more leisurely tour of Wollongong, Milton, Bodalla, Cobargo, Bega, Wagga, Henty, Temora, the Northern Rivers, and of course, her home town, *Moruya* -

The concert was billed as 'high-class' with tickets selling for 4 shillings (for reserve chairs) and 3 and 2 shillings^{xxxi}. It had been raining continuously for a week and muddy, boggy and slippery conditions threatened to cancel the event. The roads between Milton and Batemans Bay were almost impassable but after a treacherous trip, Eva finally arrived late the night before the concert^{xxxii}. The downpour continued the next day until a sudden break at about 6pm when the concert could begin. Hundreds packed the Centennial Hall to hear her divine voice^{xxxiii}. At the sight of the stately, golden-haired Australian in a magnificent gown of blue satin chartreuse with opal trimmings, an overwhelming applause erupted and continued for some considerable time^{xxxiv}. Throughout the evening, Eva was continually encored and showered with bouquets by an audience absolutely proud beyond measure.

Following the concert a reception and presentation was held at the Mechanics Institute and a welcoming committee had

gone to great lengths to decorate the hall^{xxxv}. It was a splendid and intimate affair; the sort that Eva loved. Although she had travelled the globe, performed in some of the greatest houses and concert halls of the world, in front of Royalty, the aristocracy and society's privileged elite, when she was presented on that day with an exquisite illuminated address in the form of an album created by the nuns of St Mary's Convent, she replied, 'This is the proudest moment of my Life'^{xxxvi}. For Eva, to be surrounded by family and friends – to be appreciated by her home – meant more than the applause of strangers^{xxxvii}.

At the close of the reception, her beloved public and adoring friends sang 'Auld Lang Syne', and then 'For She's a Jolly Good Fellow' followed by cheers, clapping and not a dry eye. Fond memories of the occasion carried the home crowd with an exuberance that sustained them for many years.

Eva returned to the United States to teach and continue her singing career. Throughout her life, she had worked for many charities but during WWI she devoted her work to benefit concerts in aid of the Allied Soldiers. In 1917 she married Hutton Gibson, a partner in a Chicago brass foundry. The following year she bore their first child, John Hutton and gave birth to their second son, Alexander in February 1920. Tragically within a month of his birth, she died of throat cancer^{xxxviii}. Eva is Mel Gibson's grandmother.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Hutton Gibson's Scrapbook, private collection, undated newspaper clipping HG14JL1.

For a view of Tuross see <http://www.turossbeachholidaypark.com.au> When Eva returned to Tuross in 1912 after many years absence and saw 'the familiar view of Tuross River, the ocean, with the sun upon the widespread scene' she remarked that 'it was the most beautiful in all her world-wanderings'.

ⁱⁱ Barbara Mackenzie Findlay Mackenzie, *Singers of Australia from Melba to Sutherland*, Lansdowne Press, Melbourne, 1967, pp 1 – 2

ⁱⁱⁱ Julie Ager, 'Gumsuckers March – Percy Grainger tours Gippsland with Ada Crossley's concert party, 1908', *Gippsland Heritage Journal*, Vol. 2, 1987 p.3.

^{iv} Barbara Mackenzie, *op cit.*, pp37, 87, 261.

H.J. Gibney, *Eurobodalla: History of the Moruya District*, Library of Australian History, Sydney, 1980, pp 138 – 140.

Nellie Melba, *Melodies and Memories, The Autobiography of Nellie Melba*, Thomas Nelson Australia, 1980, p 7.

Phone interview with Sister Genevieve, Sisters of Charity Archives, and Ms Denise Mohr, Director of Development, St. Vincents College, Sydney, 20 October 2003.

Despite having studied Grand Opera herself, Madame Christian's own career preferred choral and oratorio work. This is noteworthy because Eva's career would mirror similar preferences in terms of her love for choral and oratorio work.

Manuel Garcia's study into the human voice and invention of the laryngoscope added a new branch to medicine.

Madame Christian later founded the Garcia School of Music at St. Vincents College, Potts Point. It continues to this day under the name 'The Garcia Centre of Performing Arts'.

^v *Moruya Examiner*, 28 October 1898.

Charles Turner was a tenor and his wife Annis Montague, a soprano. They performed in Europe and America before making their debut in one of Madame Christian's concerts after which they established the Turner Concert and Operatic Company.

^{vi} John Lemmon became Melba's life-long associate and general manager.

^{vii} Marie Narelle was born Molly Ryan of Temora, NSW in 1870. Barbara and Findlay Mackenzie list her amongst Melba's contemporaries in *Singers of*

Australia from Melba to Sutherland, 1967. She was known as the 'Queen of Irish Song' and is purportedly the first soprano ever recorded by Thomas Edison on his cylinders. Inspired by stores as a young girl of a woman named 'Queen Narelle' from the Moruya aboriginal tribe, Marie changed her name to Narelle as a talisman before she went abroad. Queen Narelle was married to King Merriman who was the last royal blood aborigine of his tribe.

^{viii} Eva introduced Marie to Harry Currie who became Marie's second husband in 1911. Marie hosted Eva and Hutton's wedding party.

^{ix} *Musical America* 28 March 1914.

^x Hutton Gibson, *op cit.* HG5JL23.

^{xi} *Moruya Examiner*, 12 January 1900.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, 28 October 1902.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, 19 September 1902.

^{xiv} Hutton Gibson *op cit.* HG4JL24.

The day before Eva made her farewell concert at the Sydney Town Hall, Marie Narelle made her debut in London's Royal Albert Hall.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, HG5JL25.

^{xvi} Barbara Mackenzie and Findlay Mackenzie, *op cit.*, p 262.

^{xvii} *Moruya Examiner*, 29 May 1903.

^{xviii} Hutton Gibson *op cit.* HG13JL1.

^{xix} *Regina Leader*, November 1912.

^{xx} Hutton Gibson *op cit.*, HG7JL1.

^{xxi} Hutton Gibson *op cit.*, 6 January 1906.

^{xxii} *The Examiner* 2 March 1967.

Within three days of arriving in New York Eva sang, without rehearsal, to an enthusiastic audience of 6,000 at the Hippodrome for the suddenly indisposed contralto Miss Taylor. She was an instant success and continued to build a successful career performing on the concert circuit, singing in fashionable homes and tutoring.

^{xxiii} Gibney, *op cit.*, photo p. 139.

^{xxiv} *Quebec Chronicle*, 7 October 1909.

^{xxv} Hutton Gibson *op cit.*, HG1JL1.

^{xxvi} Hutton Gibson *op cit.*, HG7JL2.

^{xxvii} Hutton Gibson *op cit.*, HG6JL25.

^{xxviii} Noel Warry, *16 Women of early Eurobodalla*, Moruya and District Historical Society Incorporated, Moruya, NSW. 1990, pp 50-53.

'Chats in the Home Circle – With Women', *The Catholic Press*, p 14, Hutton Gibson *op cit.* HG2JL3.

^{xxix} Hutton Gibson *op cit.*, HG2JL5.

^{xxx} Eva suffered some voice strain due to so little rest and non-stop greetings with friends and relatives whom she had not seen for many years; she performed admirably nevertheless.

^{xxxi} *Moruya Examiner*, 20 July 1912.

The concert made a profit of 318 pounds.

^{xxxii} Hutton Gibson *op cit.*, HG9aJL1.

^{xxxiii} *Musical America* 14 June 1913.

Like Marie Narelle, Eva enjoyed a strong indigenous following with aboriginals paying top dollar and dressing up in their finest to attend her concert. Eva claimed that their favourite song was 'O, That We Two Were Maying' which she said 'possessed a universal art spirit which reached the heart of human nature'.

^{xxxiv} Hutton Gibson *op cit.*, HG9bJL1.

^{xxxv} The Mechanics Institute, recently heritage listed, is being returned to its original condition with a view to using it as a centre for the performing arts.

^{xxxvi} *Moruya Examiner* 3 August 1912.

^{xxxvii} Hutton Gibson *op cit.*, HG15JL1.

^{xxxviii} On the day of her death, Eva received a letter from the Lismore Hospital Committee thanking her for her donation of medical instruments and making her a Life Member; however, she was too ill to note its contents.