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Marconi's Phoney Future
Puccini, 'Addio' (Mimì), *La bohème*, Act III

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Without a doubt, the most high-profile experiment in the early public broadcasting of music in Britain was a short vocal recital organised by the Marconi Company on 15 June 1920. Sponsored by the *Daily Mail*, it featured the internationally famous Australian soprano Dame Nellie Melba, who had recently turned sixty-five. Her celebrity, combined with the inevitable media hype, inspired claims that this was a defining moment not just for radio, but also for culture more broadly: in the words of an early chronicler, it was the 'great initiation ceremony' that launched 'the era of broadcasting for the public amusement' on 'its meteoric career'.[1] The general public appeared to buy into this narrative. One listener, for example, described experiencing 'the sense of importance which comes to those who think they are in at the making of history'.[2] Such reports seem to signal a decisive cultural transformation: they present radio as a catalyst for change, a means of democratising musical culture. But while this celebration of progress – now a commonplace in histories of technological development – is perhaps unsurprising, it obscures the interplay of tradition and innovation that shaped emerging broadcasting practices.[3] Indeed, attending to the role of opera in this early radio recital reveals another side to the story: of a rather inglorious moment in the artform's history, and one that was as redolent of the past as it was of the future.

On the appointed evening, musicians, technicians and a select audience gathered at the Marconi Company's station in the Essex town of Chelmsford. Since public broadcasting was a new phenomenon, the transmission progressed in a rather haphazard fashion, combining long-standing concert conventions with nascent ideas about radio presentation. After 'a succession of "Hello's"' and some technical adjustments, Melba announced her presence with a trill – a musical '"hallo" to all who [were] listening-in' – before embarking upon a short, eclectic programme.[4] The popular 'Home, Sweet Home' was followed by Maurice Bemberg's 'Nymphes et Sylvains' sung in French; finally, an operatic aria, the item of particular interest

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1 H. M. Dowsett, *Wireless Telephony and Broadcasting* (London, 1925), 1: 56. Marconi employees and radio enthusiasts had previously experimented with transmitting gramophone concerts and amateur performances: Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom. Vol. 1: The Birth of Broadcasting* (Oxford, 1995), 35–42; Q.R.S., 'Melba's Wireless Concert', *Derby Daily Telegraph*, (16 June 1920), 2.

2 'Melba and Wireless', *Derby Daily Telegraph* (19 June 1920), 4.

3 David Edgerton challenges the association of technology and innovation in *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History Since 1900* (London, 2006).

4 'Melba's 1,000-Miles Song', *Daily Mail* (15 June 1920), 7.

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here, Mimì's 'Addio' from Act III of Puccini's *La bohème*, was sung in Italian.[5] Although the diversity of genres might appear to give a foretaste of the heterogeneity that would soon characterise British radio, contemporary audiences would most likely have understood it within the nineteenth-century tradition of 'hybrid recitals'.[6] Similarly, journalists' reports suggest that the additional numbers performed after the final 'Addio' were welcomed in the spirit of a concert hall encore, even though they had been sung at Melba's (rather than the audience's) request.[7]

If Melba's programme looked to the past as much as to the future, her performance nevertheless proved a malleable vehicle for those eager to announce a new broadcasting era, especially when she sang as Mimì. This role was strongly associated with the singer, who was widely credited with having introduced *La bohème* to London audiences.[8] Beyond capitalising on her celebrity status, Mimì enabled Melba to exhibit vocal traits that were particularly lauded by critics. With its declamatory, recitative-like opening and simple melodies, the Lento molto 'Addio' provided ample opportunity to demonstrate her 'crystal clarity of enunciation': 'the tone that is pure sound and no noise!'[9] At its highest point, the top B flat reached on the second syllable of 'ricordo d'amor', the melody seemed to magnify the oft-remarked 'silvery' quality of her voice.[10] In foregrounding such vocal characteristics, reporters did more than simply rehearse music critics' usual rhetoric, they also set the stage for emphasising the purity of Melba's voice as evidence of technological advancement. A typical letter to the *Daily Mail* attested 'So perfectly was ["Addio"] rendered … that persons standing in the wireless room heard it distinctly, although they stood some distance from the instruments.'[11]

Of course, after a century of scientific progress it is difficult – if not impossible – for us to recapture early experiences of sound reproduction technology: the strangeness, or the marvel, of early radio transmissions is all but lost to history. Even allowing for this, it seems probable that such claims were hyperbolic. *The Musical Times* alone was bold enough to criticise the quality of sound reproduction, admitting that 'musically the demonstration was not as satisfactory as it was scientifically marvellous'.[12] As the commentator went on to explain, 'the golden notes of the great singer were often broken by metallic whirrs and weird sounds caused, it was said, by thunder in the atmosphere'.

Perhaps more revealing than such a uniquely frank assessment, however, is this account's foregrounding of the 'great singer', a practice that betrayed an enduring

[5] The aria is properly known as 'Donde lieta uscì'.

[6] For more on how technological advances intersected with established performance practices, see Laura Tunbridge, 'Frieda Hempel and the Historical Imagination', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66 (2013), 439.

[7] '[S]cores of scattered audiences must have wondered how they could beg for an encore. As though their thoughts had travelled through the air, a response was forthcoming.' 'Melba Concert by Wireless', *Gloucestershire Echo* (16 June 1920), 3.

[8] Melba had not in fact been involved in the opera's unsuccessful 1897 London premiere; however, she took the credit for initiating the 1899 revival that established the opera in the repertory; see John Hetherington, *Melba: A Biography* (London, 1973), 98–9.

[9] B., 'Melba – Queen of Song', *Daily Mail* (15 June 1920), 6.

[10] 'Melba – Queen of Song'.

[11] 'Melba Sings by Wireless', *Daily Mail* (16 June 1920), 7.

[12] 'Music in the Provinces', *The Musical Times* 61 (July 1920), 491.

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preoccupation with the operatic performer over and above the musical work. As her voice was disseminated via the newest medium, the diva, true to tradition, stole the show. Meanwhile, even the more musically minded critics seemed to show little interest in the opera.[13] 'Addio' was chosen because it was one of Melba's best-known songs, not because of its status as a work of art (which, in any case, was far from certain).[14] It appears that no attempt was made to recount the narrative context: even the most detailed newspaper articles made no reference to any such explanatory announcements. What is more, since Melba sang in Italian, most listeners were 'denied the pleasure' of understanding the words.[15] The combined effect was such that one writer even appears to have confused Puccini's 'Addio' with Bemberg's 'Nymphes': his account of the former praises Melba's 'swift execution' of the trills and runs – pyrotechnics that are notably absent from this lyric aria.[16] Indeed, the specifics of the aria itself were apparently of so little significance that, the day before the much-hyped broadcast, the *Daily Mail* casually announced that she would sing 'something from "La Bohème" in Italian'.[17] A day later, the *Western Times* showed a similar lack of interest in the programme's more highbrow numbers, reporting that 'Dame Melba commenced by singing "Home, Sweet Home" in English, and then followed with songs in French and Italian.'[18]

As the *Daily Mail* celebrated an unprecedented and experimental meeting of 'art, romance, science', then, it tacitly obscured the fact that Melba's programme and its reception were also steeped in tradition.[19] For the world at large, meanwhile, opera's presence at the birth of British public broadcasting was insignificant, less a harbinger of a democratic future than an inconsequential glance to the cultural past. Melba could have sung anything: what mattered was simply that her disembodied voice had been transmitted across the globe. As it was still more emphatically celebrating the broadcast's success a week later, the *Daily Mail* proudly gave details of the furthest listeners, who had been 1,033 miles away – on board the *S.S. Victorian*, a mail liner that was homeward bound from Quebec.[20]

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[13] It would be a few more years until operas were first broadcast in their entirety, and before critics began to predict that radio might be the saving grace for this supposedly dying art form. For example, 'Do We Care About Opera?', *The Listener* (24 April 1929).

[14] Put simply, the problem with Puccini's music was its popularity; see, for example, D. C. Parker, 'A View of Giacomo Puccini', *The Musical Quarterly* 3 (October 1917), 509–16; and Alexandra Wilson, *The Puccini Problem: Opera, Nationalism and Modernity* (Cambridge, 2007).

[15] 'Melba and Wireless'.

[16] 'Melba and Wireless'.

[17] 'Melba's Song to the World', *Daily Mail* (14 June 1920), 5.

[18] 'Dame Melba Singing in Chelmsford Heard at Exeter', *Western Times* (16 June 1920), 2.

[19] 'Melba's 1,000-Miles Song'.

[20] 'Melba at 1,033 Miles', *Daily Mail* (21 June 1920), 7.

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