

The Dalmatian: first Australian opera by a woman

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Abstract

Australia is currently responding to an international trend that encourages social inclusion and the provision of equal opportunity for all. In a climate that is encouraging and supporting social inclusion, it can be enriching to look back at Australia's history and consider the benefits that have been gained in a previous era when people were given new opportunities in a more socially inclusive environment. This paper will discuss how the composition of Australia's first opera by a woman, Mona McBurney's *The Dalmatian*, exemplifies what can be achieved when social change gives rise to new opportunity. The particular musical significance of *The Dalmatian* is that it is the first opera to be written by an Australian woman, however, this is not its only point of significance. *The Dalmatian* is a product of a unique period in Australia's history when, as a result of various major social changes, women were offered increased musical opportunities. The opera stands as proof of the benefits that can be reaped when society provides equal encouragement, support and opportunity for men and women in their musical endeavours. It is a musical work that speaks to contemporary societies in the pursuit of more socially inclusive environments with equal access to opportunity for all.

Key words: Mona McBurney; woman composer; *The Dalmatians*; Australia's first opera; women

Australian Journal of Music Education 2014:2,106-18

Introduction

Whilst Australia has produced several world-renowned opera stars and many fine singers, conductors and producers, it is not a country with a strong history of operatic composition.¹ Despite this, local productions of well-known Australian operas such as Richard Meale's (1932-2009) *Voss* and Bret Dean's (b.1961) *Bliss* have demonstrated Australians' interest in home-grown operatic composition and in encouraging composers to embrace this form. This interest that began one hundred and sixty-six years ago. In 1847, Isaac Nathan (1790-1864), wrote *Don John of Austria*, Australia's first opera. English born and of Polish

descent, Nathan left London under difficult circumstances² and came to New South Wales in 1841 where he developed a successful musical career. *Don John of Austria* had an initial week of performance but since then only the overture seems to have been played.³ Fifty-eight years later the first opera by an Australian woman

2. Catherine and Charles Mackerras, descendants of Nathan, claim that Nathan had been financially ruined after Lord Melbourne refused to pay him money for his services as a secret agent, sourced in Australian Dictionary of Biography, Isaac Nathan (1790-1864).

3. The full opera, having not been performed for one hundred and sixty years, was performed by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in October 2007. The initial score only had a piano accompaniment, but a descendant of Nathan, internationally acclaimed conductor Charles Mackerras (1925-2010), wrote an orchestral arrangement. The performance was conducted by Mackerras' nephew, also a descendant of Nathan, Alexander Briger. Sourced from The 7.30 Report, Rebecca Baillie: New Generation in Australia's First Family of Music, 2007.

1. ABC Classic FM, 2011, Tears on Toast: Australian Opera: A History, Mon. 14 November. www.abc.net/classic/content/2011/11/14/3364042.htm accessed February 2013.

was written and performed, Mona McBurney's *The Dalmatian*. McBurney had migrated from the Isle of Man⁴ to Australia in 1880 on the ship 'Potosi'⁵. After significant musical training on the Isle of Man, McBurney's musical development was nurtured in Melbourne and in 1905 she completed her opera.

The Dalmatian is a particularly interesting opera not only because it is the first opera to be written by an Australian woman but because it is the product of a very energetic period for Australian women musicians when opportunities were heightened and women's work was given more encouragement and support than in the previous century. The particular social circumstances that existed in this period which encouraged women musicians to pursue their work, was the perfect environment for a modest and shy woman like McBurney to develop her talent. Links to a modern Australian society that endeavours to be more socially inclusive are apparent. The current Australian Federal Government's Social Inclusion Agenda⁶ aims to provide people with the opportunity to learn, work, engage with their community and be able to speak out about issues that affect them and reflects ongoing social changes in Australia. In McBurney's era, major social changes were also taking place, which heightened the opportunities for women musicians. For McBurney, great opportunity occurred because of a congruence of circumstances.

To contextualize the discussion of *The Dalmatian* and the significance of McBurney's achievement, there will be a brief overview of Australian women in music and operatic composition. This will be followed by a brief look

at the era in which McBurney was composing from a musical perspective, with a focus on the social changes that drove the development of more socially inclusive attitudes toward women.

Overview of Australian women in music and operatic composition

Australian women have always been an active part of Australia's musical history. Whilst it is acknowledged that Australia's Indigenous communities had been engaging actively with music prior to white settlement, this paper will limit its discussion to the musical development and activities of women post-white settlement. Many examples of successful female composers, performers and music teachers can be cited to support the notion that a plethora of musical work has been accomplished by Australian women. At the time that McBurney was composing, other women such as Florence Ewart (1864-1949) were also actively working as composers. Ewart was only a moderately successful composer, and as a consequence her work has since been mostly forgotten. Born in London, Ewart wrote six operas, the first *Ekkehard* whilst still in her homeland.⁷ After migrating to Australia Ewart wrote her second opera, *The Courtship of Miles Standish* (1930), which was produced in 1931.⁸ This opera was performed at the New Conservatorium of Music and at Melbourne University Conservatorium. She also wrote the operas *Mateo Falcone* (date unknown), *Nala's Wedding* (date unknown), *A Game of Chess* (date unknown: only exists in fragments) and *Pepita's Miracle* (1945).

Peggy Glanville-Hicks (1912-1990), who lived a good part of her life in America but was Australian-born, gained international recognition as a composer, music critic and promoter. She

4. The Isle of Man is situated in the Irish Sea, between England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales, less than sixty miles west of the Lancashire coastline.

5. *List of unassisted immigration to Victoria, index of inward passenger lists for British, Foreign and New Zealand 1852-1923.*

6. Australian Government, Social Inclusion, <http://www.socialinclusion.gov.au/Pages/default.aspx> accessed February 2013

7. It was written most likely in 1909, though dated 1926.

8. Patton, F. 1989, 'Rediscovering our musical part: the works of Mona McBurney and Florence Donaldson Ewart', *Sounds Australian*, Autumn, no.21, pp.10-21.

wrote six operas in all, and some were produced internationally: *The Transposed Heads* (1952-53), *The Glittering Gate* (1956) and *Nausicca* (1961). Another opera, *Sappho* (1963) although initially rejected by the San Francisco Opera and then largely overlooked, was recently given a new lease of life.⁹ This was via a special musicology project that unearthed forgotten compositions languishing in library collections. *Sappho* was recorded in 2012 in Lisbon, Portugal with Condon conducting.¹⁰ In all, Glanville-Hicks wrote six operas.

Margaret Sutherland (1887-1984), arguably the most internationally recognised and acclaimed Australian female composer, suffered initial rejection by the publishing firm Boosey and Hawkes when she submitted one of her scores.¹¹ She eventually published and was widely acclaimed. Her chamber opera of 1965, *The Young Kabbarli*, was written to a text by Maie Casey. Other reasonably successful operatic compositions by women include Anne Boyd's (b.1946) *The Little Mermaid*, staged by Opera Australia in 1985, and Moya Henderson's (b.1941) opera *Lindy*, staged in 2003. More recently, composer Liza Lim (b.1966) had some success with her opera *The Navigator* (2008).

Australian women have also had considerable success domestically and internationally as performers. Dame Nellie Melba (1861-1931) and Dame Joan Sutherland (1926-2010) were two highly successful operatic singers. Others such as Adelaide Somerset (1882-1964) and Strella Wilson (1894-1989) were well-known singers with active careers, though not in the same category as Sutherland and Melba.

In the field of music education women have also played a very important part. Doreen Bridges (b.1918) is a well-known teacher, lecturer, composer and music historian. Women's participation in Australian and international music covers the full range of musical activities, as demonstrated by conductor Simone Young (b.1961) who was the first female conductor of the Vienna State Opera and the first woman to conduct the Vienna Philharmonic. Many more women could be cited as evidence of the participation and success of women in Australian musical endeavour, and Australian operatic composition, but the limits of this discussion do not allow such extension. Suffice to say, there is a wealth of evidence of women's active presence in all facets of Australian musical history, including operatic composition.

Ironically, women's participation in music has not guaranteed them a place in earlier written accounts of music history. Music and music education histories, journals, bibliographies and reference materials prior to the 1970s, did not include a great deal of material about women. Post 1970s, Australian and international literature responded to the research and intellectual inquiry that created a greater range of literature in this area; more information about women began to appear. Twenty-two years ago it was suggested that 'much has been done: the latest scholarship has been remarkable for both its quantity and its quality. Much remains to be done: the narrative still lacks some continuity, faces, voices and names'.¹² The post 1970 interest in women's work resulted in the re-discovery of many women's compositional works. One of these compositions was McBurney's opera *The Dalmatian*, an opera which demonstrates the power of opportunity.

New opportunities for women

It was during the latter part of the nineteenth century and earlier part of the twentieth

9. Strong, G. 2007, 'Buried symphonies score a chance at resurrection', *The Age*, Sat. July 28, p.13.

10. Jordison, S. 2012, 'Lawrence Durrell and Peggy Glanville-Hicks: a song for Sappho', *The Guardian*, Wed. 22 August.

11. Sutherland's score for *Concerto for Strings* was submitted by a friend to the publishers Boosey and Hawkes. They initially expressed an interest in publishing this work by 'M. Sutherland'. On their learning that the composer was a woman, the work was rejected (Symons, D. 1997, *The music of Margaret Sutherland*, Currency Press, Sydney, p.23)

12. Pendle, K. 1991, *Women and Music A History*, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis.

century in Australia when a number of women responded positively to an environment that nurtured and encouraged their musical talents. Patton described the period 1890 to 1930 as being 'strikingly associated with the creative performance of women'¹³. She argued this period was one in which there was a rich and flourishing music society in Melbourne. There were both professional and amateur music societies, clubs and performing groups and a great deal of interest in performances. Many women formed the mainstay of this music world, and whilst they were not in positions of particular authority within this world,¹⁴ they were very musically active. From an international perspective the period 1880 to 1920 was a time when women were very active in music in many Western societies as a result of the suffrage movement and the increase in their numbers at universities.¹⁵ During 1880 to 1930 there developed a rich culture of musical activity in Australia which allowed more women's involvement than had previously been acceptable: but what was it that drove these new opportunities?

New opportunities and social change

At the turn of the nineteenth century major social changes were taking place in Australia that influenced the lives of women significantly. This was an era which saw the emergence and effect of women's suffrage,¹⁶ Federation and the horror of World War I.¹⁷ A depression took place

in the 1890s¹⁸ and there was the introduction of state education and compulsory schooling for children.¹⁹ Women in Australia achieved the right to vote at various times, depending on the State, South Australia being the first to grant this in 1894.²⁰ In the 1870s and 1880s the Universities of Melbourne and Adelaide opened their doors to women, creating opportunities for both tertiary education and professional pursuits.²¹ In 1902 the Franchise Act granted the right to vote to all white Australian men and women.²² The motorcar became very popular, the first Australian aeroplane flight took place in South Australia in 1910, the Trans-Australian Railway was opened linking Perth²³ to the other mainland states and the first woman parliamentarian Edith Dircksey Cowan (1861-1932) was elected in 1921.²⁴

All facets of the Australian population were affected by these significant changes, but in particular, the position and roles of women in society began to alter. The suffrage movement opened up new possibilities for women in the workforce and gave them a 'voice' because of their newfound right to vote. This movement encouraged women to think differently about their abilities and roles and to speak out about perceived social injustices and prejudices. In combination with access to tertiary education and the right to vote, women must have seen themselves as being more included in society, rather than feeling that they were second class citizens, excluded from some of the opportunities open to men. Roberts commented that when Maybanke Anderson (1845-1956), an early

13. Patton, 1989, op. cit., p.10.

14. A dedicated First Australian Exhibition of Women's Work which took place in Melbourne in 1907 was organised by an all-male secretariat. Similarly, across Australian society, no major teaching positions, conducting positions or numerous committee positions, were occupied by women (Patton)

15. Neuls-Bates, C. 1982, *Women in Music, An Anthology of Source readings from the Middle Ages to the Present*, Harper & Row, New York.

16. Australian Government, 'Australian Suffragettes', <http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/austn-suffragettes> accessed March 2013.

17. Clark, M. 1981, *A Short History of Australia*, Macmillan Company, Melbourne, pp.182-189.

18. Clark, op. cit., pp.150-154.

19. Clark, op. cit., p.139.

20. Information sourced at the Australian Electoral Commission website http://www.aec.gov.au/Elections/australian_electoral_history/wright.htm accessed March 2013.

21. Grimshaw, P. Lake, M. McGrath, A. & Quartly, M. 1994, *Creating a nation*, Penguin Books, Melbourne, p.171.

22. It excluded indigenous Australians and people of African, Asian and Pacific Island background.

23. Perth is the capital city of Western Australia.

24. Brown, M. 'Edith Dircksey Cowan, (1861-1932)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

Australian feminist, 'started her work there was little or no recognition or awareness of a woman's viewpoint. Women had no access to the vote, tertiary education, sex education, or 'fair' property or divorce laws.'²⁵ By the end of Anderson's career some of the prospects for women had improved, none more so than for female musicians such as Mona McBurney.

Mona McBurney

McBurney was born Margaret Mona McBurney²⁶ at Douglas, Isle of Man²⁷ on 29 July 1862. Her father had opened a school on the Isle and Mona's middle name was 'given in "honour" of the Island.'²⁸ She was the youngest of six children born to Isaiah (b.1813-1896) and Margaret (née Bonnar) McBurney (no dates).²⁹ She had five siblings, Samuel (1847-1909), David (b.1850), Anna (b.1852), John (b.1855) and Euphemia (b.1857), Mona being the youngest of the six children.³⁰ Margaret 'taught drawing and painting'³¹ and

Isaiah was a teacher and classical scholar in Glasgow, a man who was 'profoundly versed in History, Geography and many branches of Natural Science'³² and 'the author of several texts on ancient and medieval history before opening a school on the Isle of Man.'³³ Prior to this, Isaiah was the Senior Classical Master at the Glasgow Academy.³⁴ This avid interest in languages and scholarly learning was carried through to Mona.

The Bonnar family was originally part of the French nobility, 'the name being originally "Bonair" meaning gentle and courteous.'³⁵ The family had a 'love of 'beauty and culture... and ... poetry.'³⁶ Like the McBurneys, the Bonnars were studious. McBurney was educated in Edinburgh, attending the Merchant Maidens School.³⁷ Of her first formal musical training McBurney said 'I studied in Edinburgh under Mr. (now Sir) Alexander Mackenzie [1847-1935]³⁸ the principal of the Royal Academy of Music London.'³⁹ Presumably Mackenzie, being a composer of some note, taught McBurney composition. McBurney's desire to compose 'stirred within her

25 Roberts, J. 1997, *Maybanke Anderson: Sex, suffrage and Social reform*, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, p.9.

26. The researcher has been unable to confirm that Mona was born Margaret Mona McBurney, but the evidence suggested this. The parchment for Mona's graduation from the University of Melbourne stated her name as Margaret Mona McBurney. This parchment is housed in the Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne. In contrast, her death registration stated her name as Mona Margaret McBurney. The ship entry for the McBurney family when they migrated to Australia stated Mona's name as 'Maggie'. It has been assumed by the researcher that McBurney was christened Margaret Mona after her mother, but as an adult preferred to use Mona. The researcher attempted to get a birth certificate or Christening record from the Civil Registry, Deemsters Walk, Bucks Road, Douglas, on the Isle of Man. Unfortunately the registry did not have birth registrations for the relevant period and only holds records of Church of England christenings. The researcher assumed McBurney was christened in the Presbyterian Church, but due to the fact that she lives in Australia, the researcher was unable to visit the various Presbyterian Church parishes on the Isle of Man to search for information.

27. The Isle of Man is situated in the Irish Sea, between England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales, less than sixty miles west of the Lancashire coastline.

28. McBurney, A.M. 1964, Hand-written McBurney family history.

29. Ibid. Isaiah and Margaret were married on 17 June 1845 in Edinburgh.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Morrison, T. 'Testimonial from Thomas Morrison, principal of the Free Normal School, *Testimonials in Favour of Dr Isaiah McBurney*, Edinburgh Commercial Printing Company.

33. Patton F. 1985, 'Mona McBurney, Rediscovered-Life and Works', unpublished lecture notes presented at the ninth conference of the Musicological Society of Australia, Department of Music, Monash University.

34. Patterson, J. *Testimonials in Favour of Dr. Isaiah McBurney*, Edinburgh Commercial Printing Company, Edinburgh.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. The Merchant Maidens School, called the Merchant Maidens Hospital on the Edinburgh Merchant Company website, (<http://www.weedgiethrolls.co.uk/schools.htm>) is now called the Mary Erskine School. It claims to be one of the oldest schools in the world, founded in 1694 to 'establish a foundation for the education of daughters of the burghesses'.

38. Sir Alexander Campbell Mackenzie (1847-1935). Mackenzie was an English composer, conductor and teacher. He was born in, and worked as a teacher, in Edinburgh. He was the principal of the Royal Academy of Music from 1888 to 1924 and conductor of the Philharmonic Society. His compositions include 4 operas, an operetta, oratorios, overtures, other orchestral works and violin, pianoforte music and songs. Wier, Albert. E. 1938, *The Macmillan Encyclopedia of Music and Musicians*, vol.1, London, Macmillan & Co., p.1098.

39. *Southern Sphere*, 1911, 'Australian Women Composers: Miss Mona McBurney, Mus. Bac', 1 December p.18.

early in life, for she started writing music when she was quite a child.⁴⁰

Coming to Australia

McBurney was the sister of a well-known music educator and propagator of the tonic sol-fa system in Australia, Samuel McBurney. Samuel emigrated to Australia to 'the colony of Victoria in the southeast of mainland Australia' in 1870,⁴¹ for health reasons. He 'conducted a private ladies' college at Geelong, the provincial capital of Victoria'.⁴² Mona and members of her family followed Samuel to Australia in 1880 on the ship SS Potosi.⁴³

Studying in Victoria

Upon arrival in Australia McBurney continued her school studies at Geelong Ladies' College where her eldest brother Samuel was the director.⁴⁴ She matriculated to the University of Melbourne in 1881. That year the university had begun to offer a Bachelor of Music beginning with an enrolment of five.⁴⁵ Tregear cited McBurney as being 'among the first students to enroll in music'⁴⁶ although records indicate she did not start until 1882. The Professor of Music at this time was Marshall-Hall (1862-1915). In 1896 McBurney capped her university successes by being the first woman in

Australia to graduate from a Bachelor of Music,⁴⁷ and the fourth person in Australia to do so.

The Dalmatian

McBurney's earliest compositional achievement was winning an honourable mention in the Societa Dante in Rome in 1902. Her composition was *Ode to Dante*⁴⁸, a piece for choir and orchestra. Her next major compositional achievement was the opera *The Dalmatian*⁴⁹, of 1905. This was a four act opera with an epilogue; acts one and two had three scenes, and acts three and four, two scenes.⁵⁰ The orchestra included strings, woodwind, brass which included a tenor, alto and bass trombone, harp and cor anglais.⁵¹ The opera went through several name changes from *George the Dalmatian* to *An Idyll of Murano* and finally *The Dalmatian*, with the under-title, *An Idyll of Murano*.⁵² McBurney composed it in response to a Ricordi Prize for an English-born composer to write an opera in English. The competition drew 191 librettos, of which fifty-two were selected as being good enough to set to music and twenty-nine submitted for final judging.⁵³ There was clearly some debate at the time about the judging as McBurney stated 'some trouble among the judges made a long delay, and finally some of the first adjudicatory committee... withdrew. Finally the prize was awarded to

40. Elvins, H.E. 1933, 'The Late Mona McBurney, Tribute by Music Teacher's President', *Australian Musical News*, vol.23, no.11, June, p.9. Elvins was for many years the President of the Association of Music Teachers of Victoria. He knew Mona McBurney through this association as she was also a member.

41. Stevens, R.S. 1986, 'Samuel McBurney: Australian Advocate of Tonic Sol-Fa', *Journal of research in Music Education*, vol.34, no.2, p.80.

42. Stevens, 1986, op. cit., p.81.

43. <http://proarchives.imageering.com.au/index> List of unassisted immigration to Victoria, index of inward passenger lists for British, Foreign and New Zealand 1852-1923. The Potosi departed in December 1880.

44. Patton and Binns both stated that Mona McBurney attended the Geelong Ladies' College before matriculating to the University of Melbourne.

45. Tregear, P. 1997, *The Conservatorium of Music, University of Melbourne: An Historical Essay to Mark its Centenary 1895-1995*, Centre for Studies in Australian Music, p.20.

46. Ibid.

47. The Mona McBurney Collection at the Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne, holds the degree parchment which is dated 21 March 1896. Mona's name is printed as Margaret Mona McBurney.

48. This work is housed in the Mona McBurney Collection, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne.

49. A copy of this opera is housed in the Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne with full orchestral score, vocal score with piano accompaniment and hand-written libretti.

50. *The Dalmatian* Programme, 1926, performed at the Playhouse Theatre, Melbourne. Held in the Mona McBurney collection, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne.

51. Score for *The Dalmatian*.

52. This change of name can be seen in the materials relating to the opera in the Mona McBurney collection at the Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne. McBurney's manuscript workings for the opera show the change.

53. Patton, 1985, op. cit., p.8.

a man's work, mine being ranked second'⁵⁴ A witness in London at the time observed 'rumours of the merits of some of the discarded works, and...when the prize opera was accorded a hearing (1908) all the critics rose and scoffed at it with one accord.'⁵⁵ According to the *Southern Sphere* the winning opera was not heard of since.⁵⁶ *Woman's World* claimed 'Miss McBurney conferred distinction upon Australian music by winning second prize...the first prize being won by Puccini' (1858-1924).⁵⁷ There is no other evidence to suggest this is true, although Riccordi was Puccini's publisher.⁵⁸ Puccini was Italian born so he was not eligible. Also, at this stage Puccini was a well-known composer whose composition would not have been described by McBurney as just a 'man's work'.⁵⁹

The opera was 'laid away in a drawer'⁶⁰ for five years after the Riccordi prize, before excerpts were performed at 'Her Majesty's Theatre'⁶¹...2 o'clock sharp'⁶² on 10 December 1910. The performance was by the students of the Melbourne Conservatorium⁶³ (sometimes called the Albert Street Conservatorium)⁶⁴ in East Melbourne. Marshall-Hall directed the performance and distributed personal invitation cards which read 'the director invites your presence at a Matinee

Performance of Opera to be given by the students in her Majesty's Theatre on Saturday 10th December, 1910, at 2 p.m.'⁶⁵ It was a concert in costume and 'two scenes only were produced'⁶⁶. The scenes were performed as part of an opera concert which included selections from works such as Thomas's *Mignon*, Flotow's *Martha* and Wagner's *Lohengrin*. The conservatorium students and some staff would have worked assiduously to put on such a performance and it seems that McBurney rehearsed the orchestra, at least in part.⁶⁷ As part of the preparations costumes were planned and sketched. Two sketches were kept as mementos in the conservatorium diary.⁶⁸ One is of a Greek slave and the other, a lady in fine garments. A note accompanying the sketch stated 'any colour may be worn – No white muslin dresses.'⁶⁹ The lady's hair 'can be worn either loose or braided-if the latter, beads or pearls can be plaited.'⁷⁰ The list of instructions about this character's costume was quite extensive, suggesting it was a sketch of the main character Marietta. McBurney most likely wrote the list and drew the sketches.

The first scene performed was a love duet between Arisa and Aristarchi,⁷¹ which took place at night. McBurney used a baton⁷² with

54. *Southern Sphere*, op. cit., p.18.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.

57. *Woman's World*, 1926, 'Women of the Five States', 1 June, p.373 on the microfiche held in the State Library of Victoria.

58. Kennedy, M. 1985, 'Puccini, Giacomo', *The Oxford Dictionary of Music*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p.567.

59. *Southern Sphere*, op. cit., p.18.

60. Ibid.

61. This theatre was built in 1886 in Melbourne as the Alexandra Theatre and then renamed the Her Majesty's Theatre in 1900. It was located on the corner of Exhibition and Little Bourke Streets in the Melbourne Central Business District.

62. *Argus*, 1910, *The Dalmatian* Concert announcement, 10 December, p.24.

63. It later became the Albert Street Conservatorium, then the Dame Nellie Melba Conservatorium and then the Melba Memorial Conservatorium.

64. *Argus*, 1910, 'Students in Opera, A Successful Performance', 12 December, p.8.

65. Invitation Card for *The Dalmatian* performance, 1910 *Diary*, held in Melba Conservatorium archives.

66. Ibid.

67. The Melbourne Conservatorium Diary for October 1910 had a hand written note stating that Miss McBurney borrowed the conductor's stand.

68. It is assumed that McBurney drew these sketches and wrote the accompanying notes, but this cannot be substantiated as no signature or indication of the artist is given.

69. Sketch for *The Dalmatian*, 1910 *Diary*, held in Melba Conservatorium archives.

70. Notes to accompany sketch of lady in *The Dalmatian*, held in Melba Conservatorium archives.

71. Program for *The Dalmatian* performance, 1910, p.2. held in the Melba Conservatorium archives.

72. The Mona McBurney collection at the Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne, holds two batons. One is a silver metronome in a black box. It has an inscription 'Miss Mona McBurney from Muriel'. It is a pinfolds patent metronome. The other baton is a brown wooden one, with plenty of chips in it as if it has been banged on the stand many times throughout its use. Presumably the silver one was for performances, and may have been used in this opera presentation.

an electric light on the tip, 'which may be useful for players and singers, but is very distracting to the audience.'⁷³ The critic made no comment on the actual music in this scene. The acting in the second scene, a chorus of sewing maidens embroidering Marietta's wedding gown⁷⁴ was described by the same critic as 'stagey and lacking in passion' and 'it was impossible to hear the words.'⁷⁵ The criticisms continued: 'the work suffered badly from the weakness of the principals...the voices were weak...it was impossible to hear the words... and the band fumbled about as if they had never seen the music before.'⁷⁶ However, the sewing girls' chorus was 'excellently done.'⁷⁷ Conversely, the *Age* critic was not so disappointed in the performance and said 'if the rest of the work be on the same level... should prove a success musically.'⁷⁸ The music was described as charming and melodious and the critic felt the singers 'did well in the effective duet of the earlier scene, and the Song of the Rose [aria sung by Marietta in second scene after she enters to see her wedding gown but then turns away to sing]...proved a captivating number'. Marietta, played by Madge Boys,⁷⁹ was betrothed to Count Contarini but in love with a Dalmatian. The *Age* critic said 'the agreeable chorus work was done justice to by all concerned.'⁸⁰ Despite the contrasting comments, the *Argus* critic did concede that it would be absurd to judge a new and serious work on such a poor performance.⁸¹ The 'audience was pleased, and loudly demanded the authoress whose modesty, however, would not permit her to come forward.'⁸² In 1910

McBurney was a woman in her late forties so she was well beyond the period of youthful shyness, hence 'her own disinclination for the limelight contributed to her obscurity and her considerable talents were to some degree wasted as a result.'⁸³ Over the next three decades 'Several recital performances of arias, choruses and piano arrangements from the opera' were performed 'and the opera was singularly well-known.'⁸⁴ The diary of the Melbourne Conservatorium stated in May 1911, 'Miss McBurney took *The Dalmatian* score and parts this morning'. This may have been in preparation for an October 1911 performance at the Athenaeum Theatre.⁸⁵ McBurney accompanied the performance on the piano, and the stage was 'tenanted by some 60 or 70 young people, principals and chorus.'⁸⁶ It was the first time the opera had been performed in its entirety. McBurney was a popular figure and the audience showed 'enthusiasm in their faces... [having] come to give generously of their best endeavours to the rendition of a friend's work.'⁸⁷ Another performance of excerpts took place at an annual concert of the Musical Society of Victoria of compositions of Australian composers, 'Mona McBurney...her opera still a pleasant memory – was represented by four beautiful songs entitled *At Thy Fair Hands*, *The Hour of Truce*, *Farewell to Hermione*⁸⁸ and *A Gypsy Benediction*'.⁸⁹

73. *Argus*, 1910, op. cit., 12 December, p.8.

74. Program for *The Dalmatian* performance, op. cit.

75. *Argus*, 1910, op. cit., 12 December, p.8.

76. *Ibid.*

77. *Ibid.*

78. *Age*, 1910, 'Students in Opera', 12 December, p.11.

79. *Handbook*, 1911, Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, List of works performed in the 10 December performance.

80. *Age*, 1910, op. cit., 12 December, p.11.

81. *Argus*, 1910, op. cit., 12 December, p.8.

82. *Ibid.*

83. Farley, K. 1985, *Degrees of liberation: a short history of women in the University of Melbourne*, University of Melbourne, p.41.

84. Patton, 1985, op. cit., p.7.

85. The theatre is in Collins Street in the central business district of Melbourne.

86. *Southern Sphere*, op. cit., p.18.

87. *Ibid.*

88. The song *Farewell to Hermione* is held in the Mona McBurney Collection, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne. It has a hand-written note on the front 'from a projected tragic opera-never completed'. It was not actually an aria from *The Dalmatian* as this article suggested.

89. Un-dated and un-named article held in the Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne. The article was a review of the Concert of the Musical Society of Victoria's concert of compositions by Australian Performers. Given the critic's statement that her opera was 'still a pleasant memory', the researcher suggests the article was soon after the 1910 performance.

In 1926 a critic wrote 'Miss McBurney is an example of an artist who has to a great extent been blushing unseen in the musically desert air of Australia'.⁹⁰ Marshall-Hall was a great admirer of McBurney and encouraged and supported the performance of her works. The critic suggested that if there were 'more Marshall-Halls here Miss McBurney would not have been allowed to hide her light under the bushel she insists on carrying about with her'.⁹¹ McBurney's opera was viewed well as a composition with 'some beautiful melodies, being, in that respect, lost to all decencies as high-class music'.⁹² Despite the compliments, McBurney seemed incapable of promoting her work, it had lain in a drawer for years after the Ricordi Prize and the critic was 'sorry that the desire in some quarters that Miss McBurney should wield the baton and conduct her own opera was frustrated by her absurd diffidence'.⁹³ This diffidence contributed to a less than satisfactory performance in July of that year.

The opera was performed again in July 1926 at the Playhouse Theatre. T. Leslie Middleton⁹⁴ directed the performance⁹⁵ and his wife Clarice Malyon (Middleton) was the stage manager.⁹⁶ McBurney had 'generously offered its first production to the committee of the Queen Victoria Hospital; and though there were difficulties attending so ambitious an undertaking, the members full realized the value of the offer and refused to be daunted'.⁹⁷ Sufficient funds had to be raised to support the

cost of the performance, which would have been made more costly because two performances were planned⁹⁸ for the 25 and 26 June.⁹⁹ The performance had the support of Bernard Heinze (1894-1982), Fritz Hart (1874-1949) and Alberto Zelman Junior (1874-1927),¹⁰⁰ and the principal part was performed by Elizabeth Pinschof (b.1886).¹⁰¹ Sadly 'an unfortunate contretemps despoiled "The Dalmatian" of the interest of an orchestra, and therefore we knew nothing of its orchestration'.¹⁰² At the last minute, the orchestra was cancelled by Zelman and a piano accompaniment substituted.¹⁰³ *Table Talk* stated that 'the only harmony about the whole of the preparations for the opera was in the score. Lack of adequate rehearsal of the orchestra was at the root of the whole trouble, and I understand that but for this Mr. Zelman's breakdown would not have been so severe'.¹⁰⁴ Zelman was reportedly ill on the night of the performance¹⁰⁵ but there is an undercurrent of insurmountable difficulties with the orchestra. *Table Talk* said:

*the whole difficulty could have been overcome by Miss McBurney taking the baton herself, but since her nervousness in public is such that she could not even be prevailed on to "take a curtain", it proved impossible to persuade her to do the obvious thing to rescue her opera from failure.*¹⁰⁶

90. *Table Talk*, 1926, 'Cabbage and Kings, Miss McBurney's Opera', 24 June, p.8.

91. *Ibid.*

92. *Ibid.*

93. *Ibid.*

94. T. Leslie Middleton, was born in South Australia and studied singing and opera in Europe. Sourced in Davies, G. R. circa 1945, *op. cit.*, p.29.

95. Program for *The Dalmatian* performance 25 and 26 June, 1926, held in Melba Conservatorium archives.

96. Un-named and un-dated article in the 1926 Diary held in the Melba Conservatorium archives.

97. *Woman's World*, 1926, 1 June, *op. cit.*, p.373 on the microfiche in the State Library of Victoria.

98. *Ibid.*

99. Concert Program for *The Dalmatian* performance at The Playhouse Theatre, 1926, held in the Mona McBurney Collection, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne.

100. Alberto Zelman Junior was Melbourne's leading solo violin soloist and principal violin teacher. He was for some years the principal violin teacher at the University of Melbourne Conservatorium. Davies, G. R. circa 1945, *Music Makers of the Sunny South, a General Survey of Music and Musicians in Victoria*, Davies, G.R., Melbourne, p.26.

101. Un-named and un-dated article in the 1926 *Diary* held in the Melba Conservatorium archives.

102. *The Australian Musical News*, 1926, Australian Grand Opera, 'Mona McBurney's "The Dalmatian"', 2 August, pp.21 & 23.

103. Patton, 1989, *op. cit.*, p.11.

104. *Table Talk*, 1926, 1 July, *op. cit.*, p.8.

105. *Ibid.*

106. *Ibid.*

It is difficult to know exactly what happened but clearly McBurney's shyness meant that she was incapable of retrieving the situation after Zelman withdrew and much was owed to 'Mrs. Alexander Raff...she deserves praise without stint for her big night's work in supporting the whole opera illuminatingly as pianist.'¹⁰⁷

Despite the lack of an orchestra, which is 'always an extremely important matter in an opera',¹⁰⁸ the performance had quite a positive review, one critic saying it was 'thoroughly melodic at all points, several of its numbers being couched in a remarkably singable style for these days of mixed modes and baffling intervals.'¹⁰⁹ McBurney composed using classical idioms and did not embrace the more modern and less harmonious style that gained popularity during this period. It was suggested that Gounod was her inspiration and that 'there were some Faust-like qualities in "The Dalmatian".'¹¹⁰ The critic further said 'it needs rehashing in several places, in order to ensure clarity...Miss McBurney splits a second act that plays for less than half an hour into three scenes.'¹¹¹ Clearly, the critic was not overly impressed, and there seemed to be an attempt to suggest that McBurney's work was partially stolen from another composer 'at least one obvious derivation, from Wagner's Fire Music should be mentioned with a view to excision.'¹¹²

Another critic, however, was much more enthusiastic about the performance 'the music has charm, it is well designed for dramatic effect, it has abundant variety together with an underlying unity, and withal it is eminently singable.'¹¹³ Impressively, 'Miss McBurney, who sat in the dress circle, received a wonderful ovation

at the close of the performance, the actors on the stage and the entire audience stood and faced the balcony, cheering and applauding the composer, who refused to take her call. The stage was banked with flowers, and the scene was one to be long remembered.'¹¹⁴ Like the contrasting opinions of the original 1910 performance, the opinions about this 1926 performance varied greatly too.

The Dalmatian seems to have then been forgotten and it was not until Patton unearthed it in the Grainger Museum in the 1980s that it was given some renewed attention and its history committed to paper.

Encouragement, support and opportunity: The significance of *The Dalmatian*

As a landmark composition, the significance of *The Dalmatian* is two-fold. Its most apparent significance is as the first opera to be written by an Australian woman. This in itself is important as it marks the beginning of female operatic composition in what was at that time a developing country. However, it also represents an important shift in Australian society, a shift that resulted in wider opportunities being available to women, particularly women musicians. These new opportunities underpinned McBurney's success. Whilst it is not suggested that McBurney was not responsible for her own success, being a talented and capable woman, it is suggested that her success was 'also determined to a large extent, by the forces of the period-the compound effect of contemporary efforts.'¹¹⁵ These changes, coupled with support she had from her female family members,¹¹⁶ and the encouragement of a major Melbourne music

107. *Australian Musical News*, 1926, op. cit., p.23.

108. *Ibid.*

109. *Ibid.*

110. *Table Talk*, 1926, 'Australian Opera', 1 July, p.7.

111. *Ibid.*

112. *Australian Musical News*, 1926, 2 August, p.23.

113. Un-named and un-dated article from the 1926 Melbourne Conservatorium Diary held in Melba Conservatorium archives.

114. Un-named and un-dated article from the 1926 Melbourne Conservatorium Diary held in the Melba Conservatorium archives.

115. Patton, 1985:15

116. Jenkins, L. 2007, 'Australian women composers, performers and music teachers from 1890 to 1950', unpublished PhD, Monash University.

figure at the time, drove her compositional work and heightened her success. The reasons for her success were multi-factorial.

In December 1880 when the SS Potossi arrived, McBurney would have been about eighteen years old. By this stage the University of Melbourne was allowing women to enroll. In addition, the university had just started to offer the Bachelor of Music and McBurney was one of the first students to take up this opportunity. McBurney took good advantage of this opportunity to study at tertiary level and was a very good university student being awarded general exhibitions for the first and second years of her course.¹¹⁷ Indeed, a fellow student reminisced that one day in Interpretation Class, Professor Marshall-Hall asked McBurney to play the Schumann Concerto and that 'It was an experience I have never forgotten. I felt that it was the most beautiful playing I had ever heard.'¹¹⁸

As in many situations a congruence of circumstances can lead to particular outcomes than may otherwise not have occurred. For McBurney, the opportunity to study at a tertiary level was accompanied by the opportunity to work with a man who was ahead of his time in his attitudes towards women composers. G.W.L. Marshall-Hall, the Professor of Music at the university, was a great supporter of female music students in the Bachelor of Music degree¹¹⁹ The support of such an important figure no doubt gave the women extra confidence to pursue their composition work as well as their other musical activities. This must have been particularly significant for McBurney who was a shy and modest woman, even having difficulty accepting applause for her work at public performances.¹²⁰ Given that McBurney was studying music and developing her compositional skills in an era that still expected women to marry and have

children, this support must have been crucial in the nurturing of her musical confidence. She was going against the more accepted mode of behavior by remaining single and childless.

Marshall-Hall was 'the dominant figure over Melbourne's musical life from 1890 to 1915'¹²¹ He was a significant figure indeed because he encouraged performers and composers and helped to establish two conservatoriums and the Australian music examination board. In 1892 he established the Marshall-Hall orchestra, which performed many of his own works and gave opportunities for musicians to perform. He also coordinated a series of concerts and performances which developed amongst audiences a musical culture and taste for performance never seen previously in Melbourne. These performances provided a forum for women's works, albeit only the smaller works such as chamber music, songs and piano pieces. Without some form of patronage women were unable to have orchestral works performed, limiting their exposure; the Marshall-hall concerts provided a venue for some works to be heard.¹²²The importance of Marshall-Hall for McBurney cannot be underestimated as following her university study he continued to be a support for her. When her opera *The Dalmatian* was written it was Marshall-hall who provided the opportunity for it to be performed as discussed previously.

In nineteenth century Australia women were seen as domestic beings who 'devoted all their creative energies to the family, the home and the garden, most of the objects they made were hidden-seen only by their family or friends or visitors.'¹²³ During McBurney's lifetime marriage was no longer absolutely crucial to a woman's welfare, but it gave many women financial security, social acceptance and a roof over their

117. Patton, op. cit., p.1.

118. Elvins, op. cit.

119. Campbell, M. 1934, *Centenary Gift Book*, 'Victorian Women in Music', p.89.

120. Jenkins, 2007, op. cit.

121. Patton, 1985, p.15.

122. Patton, 1985, op. cit.

123. Isaacs, J. 1987, *The Gentle Arts, 200 Years of Australian Women's Domestic & Decorative Arts*, Lansdowne, Sydney, preface.

heads. Without a husband McBurney was without the usual financial support that a working person required. However, she had great family support, particularly from her sisters. Effie, Mona's sister, was Mona's greatest support. Lizzie McBurney, Mona's sister-in-law, said 'if Effie thinks Mona will come in very done out from school, [in 1884 Mona was at university] she will go and make a cup of tea and have it all ready by the time she arrives'.¹²⁴ Effie was described by Lizzie as 'the cook' which no doubt relieved Mona from the daily chores of meal planning, food purchase and preparation. This would have enabled her to devote herself more readily to her work. Effie made the ultimate sacrifice when Mona was writing *The Dalmatian*, 'Effie...devoted herself to the care of her father ...and later to her sister Mona. This unselfishness caused her death at age fifty'.¹²⁵ Effie had cancer, and hid this fact so that she could support Mona's composition work. Annie Marian explained 'Aunt Mona was writing an opera for a competition in Italy, and, in order that nothing should distract her mind from her work, Aunt Effie hid the fact that she was ill until the opera was completed. By that time it was too late for the cancer operation she underwent to save her life'.¹²⁶ Mona's other sister Annie was also a huge support at home and she dedicated her whole life to looking after the family and Mona in particular (Jenkins, 2007). McBurney took advantage of the opportunity to attend university, she was encouraged and supported by a significant Melbourne music figure, Marshall-Hall, she had huge support from her female family members and she was talented and motivated. In addition, she lived during a time when women musicians were more musically active due to great social change and change in attitudes towards women composing. A more socially inclusive society created opportunities

for McBurney, twenty years earlier these opportunities had not been available.

Conclusion

As it was in McBurney's time in Melbourne, Australia is once again undergoing major social change. In response to an international push for social inclusion, the current federal government has a Social Inclusion Agenda, which incorporates an approach to diversity which encourages people of all backgrounds, abilities and experiences to participate in the educational and training process, the workforce and the community. This agenda follows on from a century of social development which ensued after the suffrage and federation era, change which has seen a second wave of feminism, the abandoning of the 'White Australia' policy, multicultural policies, an apology to the Indigenous people of Australia for the 'Stolen Generation'¹²⁷ and very recently the initial development of a National Disability Insurance Scheme.¹²⁸

Interlinked with the current social inclusion agenda is the concept of active citizenship, which incorporates 'people's capacity to take an active role in public affairs, through formal democratic structures, the press, public debate, associations, political parties, trade unions, local clubs and societies or simply through informal networks'.¹²⁹ When equal opportunities are available to all people regardless of their social position, race, religion, disability or gender, a broader based participation in society ensues. If this opportunity is accompanied by encouragement and support, in various forms, society usually benefits as

127. Sydney Morning Herald, 2008, Kevin Rudd's Sorry Speech, February 13.

128. National Disability Insurance Scheme <http://www.ndis.gov.au/>.

129. Chanan, G. 2001, 'Active Citizenship and Community Involvement: Getting to the Roots', *European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions*, viewed March 2013, < <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/pubdocs/1997/57/en/1/ef9757en.pdf>>.

124. Ibid.

125. McBurney, A.M. 1964, Hand-written McBurney family history.

126. McBurney, L. 1884, 17 February, op. cit.

people feel more included and are more willing to be active members of the community.¹³⁰

McBurney's opera *The Dalmatian* stands as proof of the benefits that can be reaped when society provides equal encouragement, support and opportunity for men and women in their musical endeavours. McBurney was offered the opportunity to attend university, she had the encouragement and support of a highly influential figure in the music world of Melbourne and the society in which she lived was becoming more free-thinking in its expectations about women. In addition, she had excellent family support both financially and with household tasks and she was given the opportunity to have her works performed. These performances allowed for her compositions to be publicly recognised and lauded. As a result of these circumstances, McBurney was able to pursue

her compositional work and to write a major work that under different circumstances she may have had neither the confidence nor support to do. She also became a more active citizen, culminating in the public performance of her works.¹³¹

A congruence of circumstances, which included opportunity, encouragement and support for women musicians of McBurney's era resulted in Australia's first opera written by a woman. The musical landmark *The Dalmatian* is a work that speaks to contemporary societies in the pursuit of more socially inclusive environments with equal access to opportunity for all. It demonstrates the connection between social landmarks and opportunity, and the link between socially inclusive attitudes and individual achievement.

130. Jenkins, L. 2011, 'Socially inclusive school environments, identity development and active citizenship', *Migration, citizenship and intercultural relations: looking through the lens of social inclusion*, Ashgate, London.

131. Chanan, G. op. cit.

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