



Catherine Hayes: Operatic Soprano

Catherine Hayes, (1825-1861), soprano, was born on 29 October, 1825, in Limerick, daughter of Arthur Williamson Hayes, musician. At 14, after an impecunious childhood with her mother and sister, she won the patronage of Edmond Knox, bishop of Limerick, and sang at private concerts before the city's Protestant aristocracy. A subscription enabled her to study singing in Dublin and her first public appearance was at the Rotunda on 3 May, 1839. She saw a performance of *Norma* in September, 1841, and decided on a career in opera rather than concerts. She left for Paris in October, 1842, and studied with Emmanuel Gracia and in Milan with Felice Ronconi. She made her continental debut with the Italian opera on Bellini's *I Puritani*, at Marseilles on 10th May, 1845, and was soon engaged as *prima donna* with La Scala, Milan. On 10th April, 1849, she made her London debut with the Royal Italian Opera at Convent Garden. The *Times* was reasonably enthusiastic, Queen Victoria invited her to Buckingham Palace; the public adored her. In 1851, following the dazzling example of Jenny Lind, she decided to tour America. At New York, on 23 September, Lind's ex-agent, William Avery Bushnell, became her manager. Her progress through the United States and Canada was triumphant: at San Francisco from November 1852 to May 1853 her fees averaged £650 a month, the 'semi-civilised' gold miners bidding up to £1150 to hear her sing.

Under Bushnell's direction Catherine went to Sydney where her arrival in September, 1854, aroused 'an excitement wholly unparalleled in the theatrical annals of this colony'. The *Sydney Morning Herald* exhausted its vocabulary of praise in detailing every nuance of her appearance at the Victoria Theatre on 3 October. Audiences respected her *bravura* passages from opera, but were more affected by her singing of such simple ballads as 'Home Sweet Home' and 'Oh Steer My Back to Erin's Isle'. On 18 October Judge Therry farewelled her before a huge crowd at Circular Quay with assurances that she would be remembered with 'admiration, respect and esteem', and Catherine gave the proceeds of her farewell concert to the Destitute Children's Asylum. Her Melbourne season was almost as spectacular. Her first concert in the redecorated *Queen's Theatre* was, according to the *Age*, 'a great event in our local history'. She visited Geelong, gave a concert in Adelaide and then left for Calcutta, where she arrived unannounced in January, 1855. The audiences were not affluent and she returned to Sydney.

At the Prince of Wales Theatre she



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initiated a daring season of grand opera complete with elaborate sets, supporting soloists and large choruses. The season was launched on 14th August with Bellini's *La Somnambula*. Through the efforts of the *prima donna* the experiment was a huge success, although the sets lacked stage machinery, the supporting artists were uncertain and the choruses were ragged. The season continued with the *Bohemian Girl* and *Norma* until on 17 September she left for Melbourne. The performances suffered some initial setbacks, but, on 22 October, at the new Theatre Royal, *La Somnambula* was presented to 'a house gorged almost to suffocation'. Early in November the public rejected *Lucia di Lammermoor* and she decided to end her engagement, but her farewell appearance in *Norma* convinced the management that audiences were still interested. The season was revived by the *Bohemian Girl*, *Elisir d'Amore*, *La Somnambula* and *Lucrezia Borgia* with performances of *Norma* when attendances lagged. Her last Melbourne appearance was in *Linda di Chamounix* on 21

December. In 1856 she returned to London, where on 8 October, 1857, she married Bushnell. She occasionally appeared in London theatres and toured the country districts but restricted her performances after her husband died in France on 2 July, 1858, aged 35. Her health had suffered from her tours and from a riding accident in America. She died on 11 August, 1861, in London and was buried at Kensal Green cemetery, leaving an estate of £16,000.

Sources

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