‘A souvenir of my deep interest in your future achievements’: The ‘Melba Gift’ and issues of performing pitch in early 20th-century Melbourne

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The international standardisation of performing pitch at a¹=440 Hz was not completed until well into the 20th century. This article examines steps taken by Nellie Melba and some prominent figures in the Melbourne music scene to encourage Australian orchestras to adopt ‘normal pitch’ (a¹=435 Hz), also known as ‘French diapason normal’ or ‘French pitch’, in the 1910s.

On 12 March 1909, Melbourne’s Weekly Times published a photograph of a gathering recently held at the Paris Café on Collins Street (Fig. 1). The photograph was accompanied by the following caption: ‘Madame Melba presenting a set of normal pitch instruments to the Lady Northcote Permanent Orchestra on Saturday, March 6.’ Melba can be seen in the background of the picture; she is standing, dressed in white and wearing a large, feathered hat. (According to The Bulletin, Melba was wearing a lace gown that made ‘feminine eyes bulge’.) Alongside Melba, on her right, a number of brass musical instruments are displayed on a table. Professor Franklin Peterson (1861–1914), then Ormond Professor of Music and Director of the University of Melbourne’s Conservatorium of Music, can also be identified; he is standing immediately in front and to the left of the instruments, his face in profile, sporting a moustache and full head of hair. G.W.L. Marshall-Hall (1862–1915), conductor of the Marshall-Hall Orchestra, which was managed by the Board of the Lady Northcote Permanent Orchestra Trust Fund, is behind and to the left of Melba. On the right-hand side of the café are the local, by and large moustached, musicians for whom these instruments were intended. On the left-hand side are the ladies and gentlemen invited to witness the presentation and, to help mark the occasion, join in afternoon tea.

That Melba gave a set of ‘normal pitch’ instruments to the Marshall-Hall Orchestra is not widely known. Moreover, the history in Australia of performing pitch—so fundamental to musical practice—has never been the subject of scholarly investigation. At times, however, standards of pitch have been a contentious issue amongst Melbourne’s musical profession. Well-known figures, such as Melba, campaigned long and hard for the
standardisation of performing pitch in Melbourne, while debate on the subject has sometimes been aligned with larger ideas of national or imperial identity. Performing pitch has also been a matter of great public concern; concert audiences in late 19th- and early 20th-century Melbourne were accustomed both to hearing problems caused by, and also witnessing efforts to overcome, the use of several different pitch standards in their city.

Fig. 1: Photograph of the presentation of the ‘Melba Gift’ held on 6 March 1909 at the Paris Café on Collins Street, Melbourne. Weekly Times, 12 March 1909, p. 26.

One hundred years after the ‘Melba Gift’ was presented to the Marshall-Hall Orchestra, this article addresses the following questions: What was ‘normal pitch’? Exactly what instruments did Melba give to the Marshall-Hall Orchestra, and why (more intriguingly) did Melba feel the need to make this gift? How were these instruments put to use? What effect did they have on orchestral life in Melbourne, and what can they tell us about the history of performing pitch in the city? What Melba’s personal motivations may have been for making this gift are also considered. In order to reflect on the significance of the Melba Gift to musical life in Melbourne, however, it is essential to place the instruments in the context of both orchestral music in
late 19th- and early 20th-century Melbourne and the wider history of performing pitch.

The present international standard of concert pitch, a¹=440 (where the note A directly above middle C is set at the frequency of 440 hertz, or cycles per second), was not established until the middle of the 20th century; it was first adopted by the International Standards Association in 1939. Prior to this, as Bruce Haynes shows in *A history of performing pitch: The story of ‘A’*, standards of pitch in western art music varied, and it was common for multiple standards to be used at one place at one time.

It has been well documented that standards of performing pitch rose in mid-19th-century Britain and Europe. In the 1850s pitch standards had ‘clearly risen everywhere. Most countries were close to [a¹=] 450, Austria was at [a¹=] 451, and England was at an average of [a¹=] 455.’ As standards of pitch rose, a concern grew amongst the musical profession that the work of the great masters of western music was no longer being performed at the pitch at which it was conceived. With a desire to fix a universal standard of pitch, a commission on the matter, held in France in 1858, recommended the widespread adoption of a standard of a¹=435. This pitch became known variously as ‘French diapason normal’, ‘French pitch’ or ‘normal pitch’. It was made the official standard in France in 1859, while other countries in Europe (sharing, Haynes suggests, a desire to standardise in a globalising world) began to adopt the pitch in the 1860s.\(^{11}\) In Britain and, as we shall see, Australia, however, debate on pitch continued.

There were certainly attempts to lower and standardise pitch in Britain during the 19th century. In 1859, following the adoption of a¹=435 in France, the Society of Arts in London appointed a committee to investigate the matter of pitch.\(^{12}\) The committee found that it was both possible and desirable to establish a uniform musical pitch in Britain; it called, rather perversely, for the introduction of a national standard of a¹=440 (almost a quarter of a semitone higher than the French pitch).\(^{13}\) A decade later, in 1869, conductor Joseph Barnby (1838–1896) tried to introduce ‘French diapason normal’ into London concert life by employing the pitch at a series of oratorio concerts in St James’s Hall.\(^{14}\) Such endeavours, however, failed to bring about any general reform in British pitch standards.

Many singers complained that in order to perform at the higher pitch standards being used in Britain they were straining their voices. In 1869 a vocal teacher named Charles J. Bishenden stated publicly that the high English pitch was ‘ruinous to the voice’ and that it was the very reason why many European singers did not perform in Britain.\(^{15}\) Indeed, soprano Blanche Marchesi (1863–1940) thought it was ‘a real torture for a Continental larynx to sing at different pitches’.\(^{16}\) Some vocalists even refused to perform at a ‘high’
pitch: tenor Sims Reeves (1818–1900), for example, declared in 1868 that he would not sing with the Sacred Harmonic Society again until it adopted ‘French pitch’. Soprano Adelina Patti (1843–1919) likewise refused to perform at Covent Garden in 1879 unless its orchestra used the lower standard. Patti, as it happens, helped fund the purchase of new woodwind and brass instruments so the Covent Garden orchestra could play at ‘French diapason normal’. In spite of the concerted efforts of conductors and singers, however, British firms continued to produce and sell instruments tuned to higher standards of pitch. By 1874 ‘Philharmonic pitch’, used widely in Britain, had risen to $a^1=455$.

It was only in the final years of the 19th century that pitch was lowered in Britain. In 1895 the promenade concerts at Queen’s Hall were performed at $a^1=439$, using new woodwind and brass instruments acquired with the financial support of music-loving laryngologist, George Clark Cathcart (1860–1951). The following year the Royal Philharmonic Society also adopted this British version of ‘French pitch’ (called thereafter ‘new Philharmonic pitch’). By the end of the 19th century, ‘French diapason normal’ (or its British counterpart ‘new Philharmonic pitch’) was in use throughout much of the western musical world. The ‘normal pitch’ was also the standard preferred by many solo singers, some of whom campaigned for its universal adoption.

Much of the literature on musical life in late 19th- and early 20th-century Melbourne addresses the city’s orchestral music and the work of G.W.L. Marshall-Hall. Marshall-Hall was the first to hold the Ormond Chair of Music at the University of Melbourne (from 1891 to 1900), and when the University Conservatorium was established in 1895, he was its first Director until 1900. Marshall-Hall then founded the Melbourne Conservatorium in Albert Street, East Melbourne, where he was Director until 1913. His own orchestra, established in 1892, gave an annual concert series in the Melbourne Town Hall until 1912. While his was not the only orchestra active in Melbourne at this time—the amateur Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, for example, was founded in 1906 by Alberto Zelman Jnr (1874–1927)—there was no permanent professional orchestra in the city. Conductors struggled to organise musicians, many of whom worked primarily in local theatre orchestras. It was especially difficult to find capable wind players; reviews of Marshall-Hall’s orchestral concerts often criticised its woodwind and brass sections for their poor intonation.

There was also no uniform standard of performing pitch in Melbourne. Local orchestral players appear to have tuned to the old ‘Philharmonic pitch’ (as mentioned above, about $a^1=455$)—‘the bad, mad old pitch,’ Charles Baeyertz (1866–1943) later described, ‘with its conversion of tenors and sopranos into mere screeches … [and] positively hellish influence on the
higher brass instruments …’ The pitch of the grand organ in the Melbourne Town Hall—the city’s principal concert venue—was slightly lower than this, between $a^4 = 445$ and $a^4 = 450$. The pitch of the organ in the Royal Exhibition Building, which had been raised under Sir Frederic Cowen’s instruction in 1888, climbed so high in warmer weather—according to one report, a quarter of a tone above ‘Philharmonic pitch’ (approximately $a^4 = 468.3$)—that the organ could not be used in conjunction with orchestras. Church organs in Melbourne were generally tuned to $a^4 = 445$, called ‘church’ or ‘medium pitch’, though the organ in St Paul’s Cathedral was built by T.C. Lewis in 1890 to about $a^4 = 450$ at 60°F, a pitch Lewis himself preferred. Pianos were obtainable at each of the most common standards—‘Philharmonic’, ‘medium’, ‘French diapason normal’. As the city’s *Argus* reported in September 1907, ‘at a leading music warehouse in Melbourne it is found necessary to keep three pianos, each tuned to a different pitch’. ‘One customer, player or singer,’ the newspaper explained, ‘may want to try a piece at the low French or normal pitch, another at the medium English pitch, and yet another at the high “concert” or old Philharmonic pitch.’ Potential customers could not only listen to a piece of music played in store prior to purchase, but also hear it at the pitch at which they intended to perform.

Meanwhile, special arrangements had to be made for visiting musicians who wished to perform at ‘normal pitch’. When George Musgrove’s Grand English Opera Company came to Australia in 1900, for instance, it brought its own set of ‘normal pitch’ instruments in order that its orchestra (consisting of both imported and local players) could perform at the lower pitch. Reviewing the opera company’s first performance of *Il Trovatore* at the Princess Theatre in Melbourne on 13 October 1900, thecritic for Melbourne’s *Age* remarked:

> Concerning matters of musical pitch the average man knows little and cares less, and the lowering by a semitone of that hitherto in use here will not excite much controversy save in the most select circles. … [but at the lower pitch] we can now listen to Trovatore without serious fears as to the ability of the singers to produce these exalted notes—fortissimo and without bursting.

When Clara Butt performed in the Melbourne Town Hall in September 1907, she organised for two pianos to be placed on stage: one tuned to the ‘French diapason normal’ (her standard of choice), the other tuned to the pitch of the Town Hall organ. The latter was used when items on Butt’s program—Samuel Liddle’s setting of ‘Abide with me’, Edward Elgar’s ‘Land of hope and glory’—called for organ as well as piano accompaniment.
The use of multiple pianos at different pitches was not uncommon at concerts in Melbourne, however; as one 1908 report explained, ‘a label … [would be] pasted on each piano, so that the pianists knew precisely to what pitch the instrument was adjusted’.\(^{37}\) A description of the state of affairs in Melbourne in 1907 as a ‘sort of musical chaos’ points nonetheless to a growing need or desire to standardise pitch in the city.\(^{38}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pitch Standard</th>
<th>Frequency (Hz)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>’Old Philharmonic pitch’</td>
<td>(a_1 \approx 452.5–455)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>’Medium’ or ‘Church pitch’</td>
<td>(a_1 \approx 445)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>’International standard pitch’</td>
<td>(a_1 = 440)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>’New Philharmonic pitch’</td>
<td>(a_1 = 439)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>’French diapason normal’</td>
<td>(a_1 = 435)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand organ, (Royal) Melbourne Exhibition Building, 1888</td>
<td>(a_1 \approx 468.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand organ, Melbourne Town Hall, 1921</td>
<td>(a_1 \approx 445–450)</td>
</tr>
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Fig. 2: Summary of common pitch standards, showing pitch of grand organs in (Royal) Melbourne Exhibition Building in 1888 and Melbourne Town Hall in 1921.

A campaign to establish the ‘French diapason normal’ as the standard pitch in Melbourne, led by Professor Franklin Peterson, began in the opening years of the 20th century. Peterson, who believed the University could initiate the adoption of ‘normal pitch’ throughout Victoria, began his campaign by raising money in late 1907 to purchase a complete set of new ‘normal pitch’ woodwind and brass instruments for the University Conservatorium.\(^{39}\) He received donations from Melba (50 pounds) and Clara Butt and her husband Kennerley Rumford (26 pounds and five shillings),\(^{40}\) while Alberto Zelman Jnr’s Melbourne Symphony Orchestra contributed the proceeds from one of its concerts.\(^{41}\) The new instruments were ordered from Boosey (at a discount rate) in October 1907, though Peterson would have to wait until May 1908 for them to finally arrive.\(^{42}\) In the meantime, eager to start using ‘French diapason normal’, Peterson borrowed the ‘normal pitch’ instruments belonging to George Musgrove’s Grand English Opera Company, which had returned to Melbourne in 1907; thus the University Conservatorium was using ‘French pitch’ by the end of 1907.\(^{43}\)

In the same year Peterson convinced the Victorian Government to adopt ‘normal pitch’ as the official standard for all institutions under the control of its Education Department.\(^{44}\) He issued a circular to schools across Victoria seeking their support for the reform and, in early 1908, published a long list of institutions that had so far agreed to adopt ‘normal pitch’.\(^{45}\) Peterson also tried to regulate pitch through the Music Examinations Board of the Universities of
Melbourne and Adelaide; ‘normal pitch’ was expected at all examinations conducted by the Board from 1909.\textsuperscript{46} For all his efforts, however, both the organ in the Melbourne Town Hall and the city’s leading orchestra, the Marshall-Hall Orchestra, remained at a higher pitch.

Melba, it is clear, preferred to sing at ‘French diapason normal’. She probably grew accustomed to the standard when training in Paris in the 1880s; later, she was quite outspoken on the issue of pitch, especially in regard to the situation in Australia. When negotiating with J.C. Williamson in 1901 the terms of a contract for her first homecoming tour of Australia, Melba demanded: ‘£400 a night; 10 per cent. of the gross receipts; passages for herself and maid to and from Australia by way of America; Mr. Williamson to pay all duty on her wardrobe; that she must appear in opera; that Mr. Salignac, the French tenor, should be engaged; and that the orchestra must be [at] French pitch.’\textsuperscript{47} On her 1902 Australian tour (managed, in the end, by George Musgrove, not Williamson), Melba had pianos tuned to ‘normal pitch’ wherever she sang (it appears she kept a tuning fork herself, which was sent ahead to concert venues so that pianos could be tuned accordingly).\textsuperscript{48} Then in 1907, as mentioned above, Melba contributed 50 pounds towards the cost of purchasing ‘normal pitch’ instruments for the University Conservatorium. ‘It is quite impossible to sing certain works unless the normal pitch is used,’ she wrote to Peterson, ‘so to help your scheme I enclose £50, with the hope that very soon there will be nothing but normal pitch all over Australia.’\textsuperscript{49} Agnes Murphy remarked in her 1909 biography of Melba that ‘among the local matters with which Melba early identified herself was a move to secure the Australian adoption of the normal musical pitch’.\textsuperscript{50}

Melba’s decision to provide the Marshall-Hall Orchestra with a complete set of ‘normal pitch’ woodwind and brass instruments was made in communication with the orchestra’s board of management, the Lady Northcote Permanent Orchestra Trust Fund, and Marshall-Hall himself. In July 1908, writing to the Chairman of the Trust Fund, Sir James Barrett (1862–1945), Melba expressed her wish to support, in some ‘direct’ manner yet to be decided, the establishment of a permanent orchestra in Melbourne.\textsuperscript{51} In the following weeks, Marshall-Hall wrote directly to Melba, and it was then that she decided to purchase the instruments:\textsuperscript{52} Melba made the official offer of a full set of ‘normal pitch’ woodwind and brass instruments in a letter from her secretary to Marshall-Hall on 31 July 1908.\textsuperscript{53} While correspondence on the matter between Marshall-Hall and Melba does not seem to have survived, the desire to establish a permanent orchestra and to adopt ‘normal pitch’ appear to have been closely related.

The Trust Fund, in consultation with local musicians, drew up a wish list of instruments.\textsuperscript{54} On 9 September 1908, Barrett sent the list to Melba, adding
in his letter to her that this generous gift would ‘settle for all time the troubles with the varied pitches in Australia, because once the Marshall-Hall orchestral pitch is lowered, the theatres and in fact everyone else will follow’.\textsuperscript{55} Interestingly, Barrett thought the quality of instruments Melba was to purchase (‘if the expense of providing first class instruments proves heavier than you anticipated,’ he wrote to her, ‘you could leave out the third bassoon, double bassoon, and the trombones …’) would persuade local musicians to play at ‘French diapason normal’. ‘On two previous occasions,’ he noted, ‘low pitched instruments have been brought to Australia [presumably those brought out by George Musgrove, and those purchased by the University], but the musicians have complained so much of their qualities, that they have not come into general use.’\textsuperscript{56}

Barrett’s faith in the ability of the new instruments to standardise pitch in Melbourne was echoed in the local press. One report of Melba’s gift stated that ‘the chief value of the gift lay in the fact that it practically ensured the adoption of the normal pitch in Victoria’.\textsuperscript{57} Melba’s gift also fuelled Professor Peterson in his campaign to standardise pitch in Victoria; with these new instruments on the way (as well as those already in possession of the University), he argued that the time had come for the City Council to have the pitch of the Melbourne Town Hall organ lowered to $a^1=435$.\textsuperscript{58}

Not everyone, however, was keen to employ ‘normal pitch’ in Victoria. George Peake (1853–1933), conductor of Melbourne’s Philharmonic Society from 1889 to 1911, engaged in a public debate with Barrett and Peterson over the issue of pitch.\textsuperscript{59} Peake believed that the high ‘Philharmonic pitch’ was still in use in England and, consequently, that it (rather than ‘French pitch’) should be used in Melbourne. ‘As the Commonwealth community of Australia are more English than French, in their taste and culture,’ he argued, ‘we should … retain the higher pitch.’\textsuperscript{60} Peake was also concerned that wind players would face great expense if forced to purchase new ‘normal pitch’ instruments; Melba’s gift may have been a generous one, but there were many more musicians in Melbourne than one set of instruments could equip. As for different players using the same instrument, Peake thought the idea was ‘utterly repugnant’. ‘As one of them said,’ wrote Peake, “‘he would as soon use the other fellow’s tooth-brush as blow his instrument’.’\textsuperscript{61}

Both Peterson and Barrett hotly disputed Peake’s argument.\textsuperscript{62} According to Peterson, ‘every important orchestra from end to end of Great Britain’ had in fact abandoned the old ‘Philharmonic pitch’, and he argued that Victoria should follow the ‘rest of the musical world’ and use ‘normal pitch’. Peterson conceded the fact that the ‘French diapason normal’ had not gained any official status in Britain; on this point, however, he was ‘very proud that her daughter Victoria is showing the mother the lead’.\textsuperscript{63} Barrett responded to
Peake by drawing attention to the problems caused by the number of different standards being used in Melbourne, noting four pitches presently in use: ‘normal pitch’, the pitch of the organ in the Melbourne Town Hall, the pitch of the organ in the Royal Exhibition Building and the old, high ‘Philharmonic pitch’. Barrett even went on to suggest that ‘there are, probably, several more, judging by the weird effects sometimes produced’, and he thought it regrettable that such difference of opinion existed in connection with Melba’s gift.\(^{64}\)

Melba purchased the full set of instruments through London manufacturer Rudall, Carte & Co. on 17 December 1908.\(^{65}\) The Melba Gift, as the set of instruments became known, included the following instruments made (with a few exceptions noted here) by Rudall, Carte & Co.: four clarinets (two A and two B-flat, by Albert), one bass clarinet (Albert), three flutes (two cocus wood Radcliff model; one cocus wood Carte & Boehm 1867 patent model), one piccolo, four French horns, three trombones (two tenor, one bass), three trumpets, two oboes, two bassoons (Heckel), one cor anglais and one tuba.\(^{66}\)

The instruments were brought to Melbourne onboard the S.S. *Miltiades*, along with their custom leather cases, embossed with the words ‘Melba Gift’.\(^{67}\) They were first unpacked in Glen’s music house in Collins Street on Friday 12 February, before being dispersed among the musicians playing in the Marshall-Hall Orchestra (the instruments would be first heard in public in concert with Melba herself).\(^{68}\)

Reporting on the arrival of the instruments, Melbourne’s *Leader* offered further explanation for Melba’s gift. ‘The motive which actuated Madame Melba in making the gift,’ the newspaper claimed, ‘is to assist in the formation of a permanent orchestra to definitely settle the question of pitch, so as to bring it into line with other parts of the world.’\(^{69}\) The establishment of a permanent orchestra and the standardisation of pitch were seen once more to go hand in hand.\(^{70}\)

Melba arrived in Melbourne on Tuesday 2 March 1909 and, as already mentioned, the presentation of instruments took place on the following Saturday, 6 March 1909.\(^{71}\) During the ceremony, Barrett read out a prepared speech on Melba’s behalf (suggesting, perhaps, that she was saving her voice for her upcoming concerts). It is unclear who wrote the speech—if not Melba, then probably Barrett—but it presented nevertheless familiar arguments for the use of ‘normal pitch’ (the work of the great masters was no longer being performed at the pitch at which it was conceived; the desirability of establishing a universal standard of pitch). The speech was as follows:

> I ask you to accept these instruments, not only as a souvenir of my deep interest in your future achievements, but as evidence of my gratitude for the splendid service you have already given to musical
art in my native city. The works of the great masters, which you have so successfully presented to the Victorian public, were practically all composed for performance at the low pitch, and I am glad to think that in making these masterpieces still more familiar to the people, who must necessarily be exalted by their ideal interpretation, you will be able to perform them under the conditions intended.

I hope that very soon some enthusiastic Victorian will come forward to provide the money necessary for the lowering of the Town-hall organ pitch, and that this example will be followed throughout the Commonwealth, so that Australia, which has already made such a wonderful showing in the service of the various arts, may hold a proud place in the world’s musical advancement, an advancement very dear to your heart and mine.\(^{72}\)

Marshall-Hall also spoke at the ceremony. His address, as reported in the *Argus* the following day, confirmed that he had little interest in ‘normal pitch’ itself. ‘The chief value of Madame Melba’s gift,’ he reportedly said, ‘was that it provided the orchestra with instruments of uniform make and pitch, so that wood wind chords in perfect tune would now be possible.’ ‘He did not care much what the pitch was,’ the *Argus* continued, ‘so long as it was uniform.’\(^{73}\) Years later, in 1915, Marshall-Hall would say that the ‘normal pitch’ was impracticable in Australia.\(^{74}\) Why he showed such indifference, however, is unclear. Perhaps Marshall-Hall thought, after the disbanding of his own orchestra in 1913, that a reform in pitch practice could not be successfully carried out in a country void of a permanent orchestra.

The presentation ceremony at the Paris Café received a great deal of publicity in Melbourne. *The Age*’s report offered another explanation for Melba’s grand act of altruism: she had resolved to help standardise pitch when, visiting Melbourne in 1907, she had been ‘struck by the fact that a variety of pitches were adopted in the musical circles in Melbourne, her native city’.\(^{75}\) *The Bulletin*, on the other hand, anticipated the benefits that a set of uniformly pitched instruments would bring to musical life in Melbourne, giving some idea of the conditions under which Marshall-Hall had been conducting his orchestra:

Melbourne orchestras up to date have had to struggle with occasional fantastic sounds, produced from instruments made in Germany, Austria, London, or Timbuctoo, and of any old and varied pitch. This wonderful new set will lengthen the life and
temper of the conductor who has to be referee during the heated arguments among the un-uniform tooting machines.\textsuperscript{76}

Melba’s instruments were heard in public for the first time on Tuesday 11 March 1909.\textsuperscript{77} That evening, Melba gave a concert in the Melbourne Town Hall with the Marshall-Hall Orchestra, which, using the new instruments, played at ‘normal pitch’. The program included the \textit{Andante} from Tchaikovsky’s Fifth symphony, which, with solos for each of the woodwind instruments, provided a wonderful opportunity to try out the new instruments. The concert was cause for great excitement in Melbourne; \textit{The Age} critic thought that it called for ‘paeans of joy from all true believers [in the standardisation of pitch]’.\textsuperscript{78} Obviously an advocate for ‘normal pitch’, the critic described the concert as no less than ‘an epoch making event in our musical history—almost a new era from which musical dates should be reckoned—in that in this matter of pitch it brings in order where heretofore chaos has reigned supreme’.\textsuperscript{79}

The new instruments do appear, as Marshall-Hall predicted, to have enabled a greater uniformity in pitch in his orchestra. According to the \textit{Argus} critic at least, throughout the orchestra’s performance of Tchaikovsky’s \textit{Andante}, ‘the tone of the individual instruments was rich and round; and the combined chords were most perfectly and satisfyingly in tune’.\textsuperscript{80} The woodwind and brass players, however, struggled with the new and unfamiliar instruments. The instruments (the ‘clarionets and bassoons in especial, and now and then a trombone’), it was suggested, ‘need a little more “breaking in”’.\textsuperscript{81} The orchestra appears to have improved when the concert with Melba was repeated a few days later, and the musicians had been afforded more time to practise playing the new instruments.\textsuperscript{82} ‘Teething’ problems aside, critics declared the change of pitch ‘a decided success’.\textsuperscript{83}

It is therefore curious that the Marshall-Hall Orchestra would put Melba’s instruments aside after just two concerts,\textsuperscript{84} even though Melba performed twice more with the orchestra in the Town Hall on 20 and 27 March, before she left to tour New Zealand and outback Australia.\textsuperscript{85} The orchestra proceeded with its annual concert series in the Melbourne Town Hall for 1909, playing without the new instruments, and without adopting ‘normal pitch’.\textsuperscript{86} One explanation for this turn of events was given years later, in 1920, when Melbourne’s \textit{Herald} blamed local theatre musicians for Melba’s instruments not being used ‘as often as they should be’. According to the \textit{Herald}, ‘the difficulty is that most of the woodwind players are engaged in the theatres where the high-pitch is still used … [and] players will not agree to use the normal pitch instruments for orchestral concerts’.\textsuperscript{87} Marshall-Hall’s orchestra was never a permanent professional one, and George Peake’s
concerns about hygiene may have had some merit—how were the instruments to be transferred between players?

When Melba returned to Melbourne in October 1909, she insisted that the Melba Gift instruments be resurrected for use in her two farewell concerts at the Royal Exhibition Building. When the first of these concerts took place on Saturday 16 October, but the musicians were still uneasy playing the ‘normal pitch’ instruments; the woodwind and brass sections were criticised for ‘doing things they ought not to do, and not doing things they ought to do’. The Age critic made similar comments regarding the Marshall-Hall Orchestra’s ‘shaky’ performance at the second and final concert with Melba a week later. It was also reported that during the concert Marshall-Hall had difficulty in tuning the orchestra to the piano (the exact pitch of which is unknown); the critic in the Argus recorded ‘a short delay whilst the conductor tried to get his wind instruments down to the abnormally low pitch of the pianoforte’. The standardisation of pitch in Melbourne was, evidently, far from complete. Professor Peterson criticised, through the columns of the Argus, the resistance and lack of concern shown in Melbourne to the adoption of ‘normal pitch’. This, Peterson wrote, was a ‘desirable, a necessary reform,’ and he could only hope that Melba made ‘the consistent use of her instruments a condition of her generous help to the permanent orchestra scheme’.

The next documented occasion on which the instruments were used was Melba’s 1911 opera tour. Planning the tour with her Melba-Williamson Opera Company, Melba wrote to Barrett and Marshall-Hall, asking for the loan of the Melba Gift instruments, a request supported by Sir George Tallis, of J.C. Williamson management, in his own letter to Barrett. If the Melba Gift instruments could not be borrowed, then another set of instruments would have to be brought from overseas so Melba could perform at ‘normal pitch’. The instruments were later placed at the University. In May 1912, the Lady Northcote Permanent Orchestra Trust Fund officially loaned Melba’s instruments to the University Conservatorium. Under the care of the Music Library, the instruments were borrowed by professional musicians for three or four years at a time. From the 1930s, they were loaned primarily to University students, and were still being played up until the mid-1980s.

Melba continued to use her ‘normal pitch’ instruments whenever she performed in Melbourne. In 1916, Melba made sure an orchestra supporting her production of Otello, conducted by Fritz Hart (1874–1949), used the instruments. When Melba sang with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra in 1921, it was organised for the Melba Gift instruments to be used. Similarly, when the Melba-Williamson Opera Company launched its opera season in 1924, and again in 1928, J.C. Williamson visited the University to borrow as many of Melba’s instruments as he could.
century, the Melba Gift instruments certainly played an important part in Melbourne’s musical life.

There is no doubt that the instruments relate to the movement to establish a permanent orchestra in Melbourne in the early 20th century; Melba herself expressed a desire to support this cause. The Melba Gift, however, could not save the Marshall-Hall Orchestra, which had always struggled to engage players, and which would disband in 1913 due to tensions with the Musicians’ Union over working conditions.

The instruments, to a greater extent, are evidence of the movement to standardise performing pitch in Melbourne. Melba’s donation was made when performing pitch was a contentious issue in Melbourne; into a ‘sort of musical chaos’, the Melba Gift supported Professor Peterson’s campaign to standardise ‘normal pitch’ in Victoria. The gift, however, also had its critics. In a culture ‘more English than French’, not everyone was keen to perform at ‘French pitch’. Indeed, the Melba Gift did not bring about the standardisation of ‘normal pitch’. Peterson was able to secure the pitch as the official standard of the Victorian Government, and Barrett may have believed that ‘once the Marshall Hall orchestral pitch is lowered, the theatres and in fact everyone else will follow’, but the pitch of the Melbourne Town Hall organ remained unchanged until 1921, and current research shows that ‘French diapason normal’ was never uniformly adopted in Melbourne; it was a\(^1\)=440 that eventually became the international standard.

The great immediate value of the Melba Gift, then, was as a set of uniformly pitched woodwind and brass instruments. Marshall-Hall may have cared little for ‘normal pitch’, but he was certainly delighted to acquire a set of instruments all at the same pitch. In this respect, the Melba Gift offers a colourful insight into orchestral life in Melbourne prior to standardised pitch, when conductors acted ‘as referee during the heated arguments among the un-uniform tooting machines’.

Why Melba gave the instruments is still open to debate. There is evidence to suggest Melba made the gift for her own benefit, as she borrowed the instruments for her subsequent opera tours and concerts in Australia. Melba may simply have been following (or matching) the example set by Adelina Patti, who had purchased new ‘low’ pitch instruments for the Covent Garden orchestra some years earlier, in 1879. There is no evidence to support the assertion, however, that Melba made the gift of ‘normal pitch’ instruments because her own upper register was failing.

This gift, moreover, was not the only contribution Melba made to the standardisation of pitch in her hometown. As already stated, Melba donated money to the University in 1907 for a new set of ‘normal pitch’ instruments. Later, in 1921, she led a deputation to the Lord Mayor of Melbourne to have
the pitch of the Town Hall organ lowered. Melba also led by example, singing at ‘French pitch’ whenever she performed in Australia.\textsuperscript{102} Melba obviously considered the standardisation of pitch to be a matter of great importance. Speaking in an interview for Melbourne’s \textit{Herald} in 1921, Melba said that she resented the state of performing pitch in her home-town ‘very deeply’. She also said: ‘I will do all in my power to alter this woeful state of affairs.’\textsuperscript{103} The Melba Gift may not have proved ‘an epoch making event’ in Melbourne’s musical history, but Melba’s ongoing efforts to standardise performing pitch in Australia ought to be recognised.

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\textbf{NOTES}

\textsuperscript{3} Dr Jennifer Hill must be thanked for identifying many of the musicians of the Marshall-Hall Orchestra using photographs from the Marshall-Hall Collection, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne. Flautist John Amadio (1883–1964) can be seen standing, short and clean-shaven, in the centre-right of the photograph.
\textsuperscript{4} According to \textit{The Bulletin}, Sir James Barrett (1862–1945), Chairman of the Board of the Lady Northcote Permanent Orchestra Trust Fund, and his wife, Marian, née Rennick (1861–1939), invited a ‘creamy few’ of Melbourne’s musical and social elite to witness the presentation. Among those in attendance were Carl Pinschof (1855–1926) and his wife, the singer and music teacher Elise Wiedermann (1851–1922). Pinschof, businessman and Victorian consul for Austria-Hungary, was a foundation member of the Lady Northcote Permanent Orchestra Trust Fund. He was also a director of Herald & Weekly Times Ltd, which published the \textit{Weekly Times} where the photograph of the presentation appeared. ‘Johanna’, ‘Melbourne chatter’.
\textsuperscript{6} The standard was decided upon at a conference, held in London in May 1938, of the Acoustics Committee of the ISA. Llewelyn S. Lloyd, ‘International standard musical pitch’, \textit{Journal of the Royal Society of Arts}, vol. 98, 16 December 1949, p. 74. See also

7 Haynes, *A history of performing pitch*.


9 In fact Haynes argues that the ‘prevailing pitch actually used [in Britain and Europe] from the 1830s and 40s to the present (as opposed to the official pitch standards, which are not the same thing) has fluctuated, but its centre appears to have remained constant at about 444/445’. Haynes, *A history of performing pitch*, pp. 344–345.


16 *Musical pitch: Letters, articles and comments in the press on the proposal to adopt the low pitch throughout the pianoforte trade: Reprinted for the information of all interested in the question, etc.*, London: Waterlow & Sons, 1899, p. 54.


‘New Philharmonic pitch’ ($a' = 439$) was higher than ‘French diapason normal’ ($a' = 435$) on account that an allowance should be made for the difference between the average concert room temperature in Britain and the Continent. As Llewelyn S. Lloyd discusses, the two different pitch frequencies were generally understood to be the same standard of tuning. Llewelyn S. Lloyd, ‘International standard musical pitch’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, vol. 98, 16 December 1949, p. 84; Haynes, *A history of performing pitch*, p. 358.


O’Byrne, ‘Zelman’s children’.


‘Anglo-Australian’, ‘The Exhibition organ: To the Editor of the *Argus*, *Argus*, 3 October 1921. Emeritus Professor Tony Klein, School of Physics, University of Melbourne, must be thanked for his assistance in calculating this pitch frequency.
In 1909, Herbert Palmer, of Melbourne organbuilders George Fincham & Son, stated that the firm was building instruments at the following ‘usual pitches’: ‘Diapason Normal C=517.3 \([a^1=435]\); Church Pitch C=530 \([a^1=450]\); … Philharmonic Pitch C540 \([a^1=455]\).’ Herbert Palmer, Letter to Mrs F. Wimpole, George Hotel, St Kilda, 31 July 1909, George Fincham & Sons records, MS 13534, series 1, item 23 (letter book 22), p. 352, La Trobe Collection, State Library of Victoria.


Argus, 20 September 1907, p. 4. Whether the store stocked pianos built to each of these pitches or tuned pianos of the same model to varying pitches is not clear, though Broadwood is known to have built pianos to these three pitches. See Alexander J. Ellis, ‘On the history of musical pitch’; Haynes, A history of performing pitch, p. 356.


Alison Gyger, Opera for the antipodes: Opera in Australia, 1881–1939, Sydney: Currency Press and Pellinor, 1990, p. 94; ‘The Princess’s Theatre: Mr G. Musgrove’s programme: Interesting attractions promised (From our correspondent)’, Argus, 31 August 1900, p. 6.

‘Amusements’, The Age, 15 October 1900. Cited in Gyger, Opera for the antipodes, p. 94.


James W. Barrett, ‘Classic or normal pitch in music’, Argus, 11 January 1908, p. 4.

Argus, 20 September 1907, p. 4.


Director’s report, University Conservatorium of Music prospectus 1908, University Conservatorium prospectus 1899–1913, Rare Book Collection, Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library, University of Melbourne.

Franklin Peterson, ‘Adoption of normal pitch: To the Editor of the Argus’, Argus, 17 October 1907, p. 8. A set of ‘normal pitch’ tuning forks was also placed at the University. These are held today in the School of Physics Museum, University of Melbourne.

At a reception held at the University Conservatorium on 28 May 1908 to honour visiting violinist Jan Kubelik, the new instruments were named the ‘Kubelik instruments’. ‘Conservatorium reception’, Argus, 29 May 1908, p. 5.

Director’s report, University Conservatorium of Music prospectus 1908; Tregear, The Conservatorium of Music, p. 42.


Arranging Melba’s Adelaide concerts, George Musgrove asked Melba for ‘the tuning fork, as I want it to send to Adelaide for the purpose of having the piano put in order’. George Musgrove, Letter to Nellie Melba, 7 November 1902, George Musgrove Records 1896–1905, MS 12450, box F 3300, letters dating from 2 May 1902 to 23 February 1903, Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria.


Nellie Melba, Letter to James Barrett, 4 July 1908, Marshall-Hall Collection, M-H 12/1, box 45, Scrapbook of letters, programmes and some newspaper clippings. Melba added the following handwritten note to her letter: ‘I think the orchestra ought to be called The Melbourne Symphony Orchestra – NM.’

Direct correspondence between G.W.L. Marshall-Hall and Nellie Melba noted in James Barrett, Letter to Nellie Melba, 9 September 1908, Marshall-Hall Collection, M-H 12/1, box 45, Scrapbook of letters, programmes and some newspaper clippings.

Letter noted in Barrett, Letter to Melba, 9 September 1908.

Dr James Rudall, who had been playing oboe and cor anglais in the Marshall-Hall Orchestra, requested that the oboe purchased be ‘No. 89 in Rudall, Carte & Co’s catalogue.’ James E. Rudall, Letter to James Barrett, 15 October 1908, Marshall-Hall Collection, M-H 12/1, box 45, Scrapbook of letters, programmes and some newspaper clippings.

Barrett, Letter to Melba, 9 September 1908.

Barrett, Letter to Melba, 9 September 1908.


Peterson had advised the council previously, in 1901, to wait until local orchestral players had acquired such ‘normal pitch’ instruments before altering the pitch of the

59 See letters to the editor in the *Argus* on 28, 30 November 1908; 1, 4, 5 December 1908.

60 George Peake, ‘Normal pitch: To the Editor of the *Argus*’, *Argus*, 28 November 1908, p. 20.

61 Peake, ‘Normal pitch: To the Editor of the *Argus*’.

62 The *Argus* claimed to receive more letters responding to Peake than it had room to publish. *Argus*, 30 November 1908, p. 9.

63 Franklin Peterson, ‘The normal pitch: To the Editor of the *Argus*’, *Argus*, 30 November 1908, p. 9.

64 James Barrett, ‘The normal pitch: To the Editor of the *Argus*’, *Argus*, 30 November 1908, p. 9.


66 According to this list, Melba gave 25 instruments, but not all sources agree upon the exact number, type and make of instruments belonging to the Melba Gift. The set may have also included one contrabassoon. Extant Rudall, Carte & Co. records are incomplete, and there are some discrepancies between the manufacturer’s original stock books and later accounts of the ‘Melba Gift’ instruments. See ‘List of instruments, agreement: The University of Melbourne with the Lady Northcote Permanent Orchestra Trust, 5 June 1929’; and Inventory of instruments held at the University of Melbourne, 1978, Minutes book of the Lady Northcote Permanent Orchestra Trust Fund, 1969—, both in the Lady Northcote Permanent Orchestra Trust Fund Collection, 88/158, University of Melbourne Archives; ‘Lady’s letter from London: Madame Melba’s gift: London, December 18’, *The Australasian*, 23 January 1909, p. 228.


68 ‘Musical notes: Set of musical instruments presented by Madame Melba’.


70 It is interesting to note that among those reported as present for the unpacking of the instruments—Barrett; flautist and accompanist to Melba, John Lemmone (1861–1949); and members of the Marshall-Hall Orchestra—Marshall-Hall’s own name is missing. ‘Music: The permanent orchestra’; ‘Normal pitch: The Melba instruments’, *Argus*, 13 February 1909, p. 6.


‘The Melba instruments: Formal presentation’.

Minutes of meeting, 2 February 1915, Minutes of the Conservatorium Committee, 1903–1927, University of Melbourne, Conservatorium of Music Collection, 97/64, University of Melbourne Archives.


‘Johanna’, ‘Melbourne chatter’.


‘Madame Melba: First concert: Great attendance’.

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‘Madame Melba: First concert: Great attendance’.

The musicians playing Melba’s instruments in these two concerts may not have been the same players as those originally handed the instruments by the Trust in early February 1909—they, by this time, would have been in possession of the instruments for over a month.

‘Madame Melba: First concert: Great attendance’.


Peterson, ‘Normal pitch’. According to Peterson, the Marshall-Hall Orchestra, having placed the ‘Melba Gift’ instruments aside after these first two concerts, returned to playing at the old high ‘Philharmonic pitch’. Indeed, without using Melba’s ‘normal pitch’ instruments, it is unlikely they could have continued to perform at a\(^1\)=435.

Peterson, ‘Normal pitch’.


It is not clear to what use the instruments were put during the year.


Peterson, ‘Normal pitch’, *Argus*.


This suggests there were few ‘normal pitch’ instruments in Australia in 1911. While it appears Melba was granted loan of the ‘Melba Gift’ instruments (or at least of some of them), on 13 April 1911 she and J.C. Williamson purchased the following new ‘low’ pitch instruments for her opera tour: two trumpets, two French horns, three
trombones, four clarinets (two B-flat and two A), one piccolo and one oboe. Rudall, Carte & Co. stock books 0, 2 and 3, Boosey & Hawkes Archive, ARC227/146, ARC227/148 and ARC227/149.

95 It therefore appears that the Marshall-Hall Orchestra—which proceeded to give an annual concert series in 1912—was no longer using the ‘Melba Gift’ instruments, and consequently no longer performing at ‘normal pitch’. See minutes of meeting 1 May 1912, Minutes book 1908–1929, Lady Northcote Permanent Orchestra Trust Fund Collection, 88/158. The loan was renewed in May 1914. See minutes of meeting 28 May 1914, Conservatorium Committee minute books 1903–1927, University of Melbourne, Conservatorium of Music Collection, 97/64, University of Melbourne Archives. An official loan agreement between the Trust and the University was signed on 5 June 1929. The instruments, still the property of the Trust, would remain in the custody of the University as long as their condition was properly maintained. While the University had principal use of the instruments, other musicians could still borrow them. See Agreement 5 June 1929, The University of Melbourne with the Lady Northcote Permanent Orchestra Trust, Lady Northcote Permanent Orchestra Trust Fund Collection, 88/158. A number of the instruments now form part of the Musical Instruments Collection at the Faculty of VCA and Music, University of Melbourne.

96 Margaret Greene, Personal interview with author, 27 July 2006. See also Ledger books, Three: 1918–1986, Rare Collections, Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library, University of Melbourne.

97 Ledger books, Three: 1918–1986. Current research shows that, during the 1930s, orchestras in Melbourne were playing at ‘New Philharmonic pitch’ (a¹=439), not Melba’s preferred ‘French pitch’ (a¹=435). This may explain why the instruments were no longer being used by professional musicians. A few of the instruments survive at the University of Melbourne; some have recently been placed on display in the Grainger Museum.


100 Loan records show that Alberto Zelman Jnr, conductor of the MSO, borrowed some of the instruments directly from the University. See Volume 1, Ledger books, Three: 1918–1986.


102 Melba’s preference for the French standard became so well known in Australia that, according to James Griffen Foley, it was ‘sometimes spoken of as the “Melba Pitch”’. James Griffen Foley, ‘C. 540 or C. 517? Australia’s unenviable position—Necessity for universal pitch’, Australian Musical News, vol. 12, April 1923, pp. 403–405. Alison Rabinovici must be thanked for locating this article.

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