

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host Allison Tyra and I am joined today by a phenomenal young opera singer named Jess Harper. Jess is going to talk to us today about the Australian opera singer Nellie Melba. I know you have a couple of connections to Nellie, if you want to tell us about that.

JH: Yes, I was really thrilled that you asked me to do this because Dame Nellie has come into my life, she's circled back a few times. And it's it's really cool that I now get to talk about her. I'm no expert at all, but I'm certainly a fan. So in year 12, I had to write a piece for my HSC drama. And I had been bitten by the bug of opera at the age of about 11. And so, you know, I had a long standing love affair and I thought yes, let's write something about an opera singer. And of course Dame Nellie was a very clear idea. So I that's when I started my obsession with her. And then a few, some years later, actually, I was asked to be the cover of a very wonderful Australian opera singer called Emma Matthews, who teaches now in Western Australia. So she was playing Nellie Melba in a musical called Melba, A New Musical. I was called in to be the operatic understudy, just in case Emma needed someone to sing for her. Because eight shows a week is a lot with opera. It's a very specific type of singing and opera is not an art form designed for that and the human voice is not really a voice designed to sing that way that frequently. I did end up jumping in.

AT: It's like a vocal marathon

JH: Exactly, and the repertoire that Nellie sang is not easy, either. She was a pretty phenomenal singer. So I did end up jumping on for two performances. My brief for that was to just learn the operatic arias and I would be singing them backstage while Emma was walking. But she got so sick that she couldn't even come in so I had to turn up the afternoon of the performance I was jumping in and learn the staging in about 90 minutes. And I was sitting there with my iPad kind of scribbling everything because I loved the arias, I'd read the script a few times just to get a sense of the piece, but I never thought I was going on stage. And so I learned the thing in like I said about 90 minutes and then I had to sort of I mean, I had the iPad with me, thank God, but I was just walking around like, "this looks great." This is set in the turn of the century where definitely technology like iPads existed. So that was that was really fun.

AT: Just hide it in some sheet music, you'll be fine.

JH: Exactly, it was. That was a pretty extraordinary moment of my career and my life and I was very honored to do that. So yes, that was the second time she turned up in my life and then the third time Dame Nellie turned up in my life was in 2018. I was incredibly, incredibly fortunate to be a scholar with the Melba Opera Trust. They support young singers and I'll talk about this as we get to talking to the nitty gritty of Dame Nellie, but she left a bequest essentially, she left a large sum of money upon her death. And that has become now a scholarship with the Melba Opera Trust and the Melba Opera Trust have now lots of wonderful donors and things and they support about seven artists, so six singers typically and a pianist a repetiteur, so they support singers in essentially filling the gaps of what a singer, a particular singer needs to launch their career and they have a good business acumen and things. So yes, Nellie left it and her quote was "so that another Melba may arise." So, yes, she was a generous woman and I actually had her specific scholarship. So that was a very cool thing. And something for which I'll always be grateful.

AT: Yeah, and we'll get into it a bit later because I know she did a lot of like singing and mentoring and I feel like she used the phrase "another Melba" perhaps more than was necessary. (laughter)

JH: Yes. She was very proud of her achievements, and she was not at all an archetypal woman. She was born in 1861 and she lived until 1931. So that was, you know, a time when women were still very much under the thumb of the patriarchy. That's not to say that we're not still of course, but back then as well, it was very much

you stay at home with the children and you'd be a housewife, as it were, and you host parties and things but Nellie was not keen on doing any of that at all.

AT: Well, since you mentioned, you know, being under the thumb of a man, should we talk about her marriage and the start of her career?

JH: Totally. Yes. So she was born in Richmond in Melbourne. Her father David Mitchell had emigrated to Australia from Scotland to sort of find a better life. Which he did. He built a lot of now very famous buildings in Melbourne. He was quite a celebrated craftsman for that. So he and his wife Isabella moved to Melbourne and Nellie was born in Richmond. And she was always encouraged in her musical education by her father but he very much was of the opinion that you know, oh no, you don't make, you don't make a career in music. That's ridiculous. You know, you go and do something. Something sensible like you get married, as a woman.

AT: Which, except for the get married part, I feel like there is still a bit of that for today's opera singers.

JH: Absolutely, especially opera and still, I'm sad to say very much in Australia. I'm very lucky. I've always had a lot of support from my parents and my family. And now I live in Germany where at large the attitudes, shall we say, to music is completely different. And in Germany, you can get a job in an opera house that has insurance and dental care and childcare and you know, that they consider it as just another job as if you're working in an office, which is sort of extraordinary for an Australian because of course, Australians, you know, don't have that good relationship with classical music, which is a shame because Dame Nellie is on our \$100 note. She really, she says put Australian on the map in at the end of the 19th century. And she did, she was the first Kardashian.

AT: She was better than the Kardashians, she had actual talent.

JH: Exactly, but I was thinking before how different it would be if Dame Nellie had social media because I think she would be the most savage, hysterical person on Twitter. I really do. I don't think she'd be much for Instagram, but she'd be amazing on Twitter. But anyway, I digress.

AT: I would love to see her doing TikTok sea shanties.

JH: Oh, she would blow everyone out of the water. She would just be extraordinary. Yes, she'd do it all properly. And she tell you the origins of all of the sea shanties, you know, and then she'd sing, probably old Scottish songs and things. She was amazing. She always pioneered for excellence and wouldn't accept anything else. So that's something to aspire to. But yes, anyway, her mother died when she was 20 and she had several siblings so Nellie kind of had to be a bit of a mother figure. And one of her younger sisters also passed away, which wasn't uncommon, of course, at the end of the 19th century. But that's not to say that that's not going to change you very much as a person. So she had a very difficult time at that point in her life. So when she met Charles Armstrong, I think it was a bit of an escape route for her, you know, get married, and they apparently had a lot of chemistry. There's a lot of documentation of them having and then we, you know, they're both young and sexy. So of course, you know, why not?

AT: And he was he was the son of a baronet.

JH: Exactly. So it was possibly moving up in the world. They weren't very wealthy, but the fact that she had singing lessons and music lessons and things indicates that there was money in the family and David, her father, was earning enough to support that lifestyle. But she became one of the most wealthy women in the

world, so she certainly had a desire to move up in life. So she married Charles Armstrong in 1882. But their marriage only lasted a year. Apparently, he beat her a fair bit.

AT: I read that he would hold razors to her face, threatened to maim her and even threw a clock at her head. But a lot of the bios, just say like, it was an unhappy marriage and she left and like completely gloss over the fact that like, he was abusive.

JH: He was very abusive, and because she's such a powerful woman I think he probably wanted a wife who would stay at home and be obedient and raise children. And Nellie was none of those things. She started performing in public at age six. She was always one for the limelight. So I think he you know, and some people can't cope with that in a partnership, which is very unfortunate, but of course, Charles Armstrong had history on his side. So, they had a son called George who by all accounts she was absolutely devoted to and there are some schools of thought that believe that Charles Armstrong followed her to Europe and things and when the divorce got a bit tricky, he kidnapped George and took him away to America, which is why she didn't see him again for a very long time.

AT: But they didn't actually divorced until I believe 1900. Like they were technically married for like 10 years.

JH: Yes, they were married and they separated a year after they married and Nellie said, right, okay, that's it. So they were up in Mackay in Queensland at that point and she said, bugger this, I'm not putting up with this anymore. She went back down to Melbourne, which is, Queensland to Victoria is already a long trip, but of course back then it was even longer. And she was doing some work in the amateur/pro amateur opera scene in Melbourne. And she just thought, this is not I want, I want more essentially. So she took George, got on a ship, and took herself to London, and she went and sang for people like Arthur Sullivan, and didn't really get anywhere. So she went and did lots of auditions, and she knew she had raw talent and a lot of aptitude and she worked very hard. And she'd been having lots of singing lessons already in Australia. But it wasn't until she saw the writing on the wall and went, Okay, I need to get further lessons. So she went to Paris and she sang for a woman called Matilda Marquese, who is a very, very famous singing teacher, was one of the best at the time. You know, we still use her study books in the modern world for her methods, for what we call bel canto in the opera world, which is the type of singing we all aspire to do because it's the healthiest form of singing and it's the most beautiful as well. Bel canto of course in Italian meaning beautiful singing. So Nellie went and sang for Matilda Marquese and Marquese famously said, Oh, I found a star finally because Marquese could see this incredible, she could hear the voice and she could see whatever it was that made Nellie a charisma machine. And so Nellie studied very, very, very diligently with Marquese for two years and Marquese not just gave her singing lessons but gave her lessons in deportment and told her how to dress and sort of taught her to be that kind of diva personality, which certainly in Paris, which was at that time, where just everyone was making art and music, think Debussy, think Ravel. There was just this explosion of art in the 30 years or so before World War I broke out. So it would have been a really extraordinary time to live in Paris at that time. And so Nellie was getting all of this amazing advice and energy and things. She studied for two years and then she went and auditioned and the Paris Opera offered her a contract of 1000 francs a year, which was a pretty decent salary. And then Brussels offered her a better contract, of 3000 francs a month, which is an enormous salary. But the problem was she had signed the contract with Paris and it was going to last for 10 years. And the director of the opera tried to take legal action with her because she obviously wanted to be released from that contract and take the far better option in Brussels. And so she was about to embark on a very difficult legal battle about it but then the director of Paris Opera died, which mean that she was just automatically released from her contract.

AT: What???

JH: Yeah, he just he just happened to die.

AT: I'm not surprised that he died, but that seems like a horrible way to run a business if the CEO died and now all of our contracts are void.

JH: I know. I know. Yes. Well, I mean, it worked out well for Nellie, so I'm pleased. She had her debut at La Monnaie. And she sang Gilda, Rigoletto, which is by Verdi. And that was the 12th of October 1887. So she was quite young. She was only 26. Well, actually, to be honest, 26 was more like 36, probably in modern day because of course, life was very different 150 years ago.

AT: And just something to keep in mind. I assume that her son was with her this whole time. So she's carting around a like three year old as she's doing all these things.

JH: Yeah, exactly. But I think she saw it as a great way to, I mean, we still do this in Australia. We sort of see Europe as the kind of pinnacle of amazing educational excellence and things but George was learning French as well as English. Nellie could see that it was also a very, very good education for him. And that's exactly right. She did have the responsibility of her son, as well as her own career.

AT: Since you mentioned how Australians view Europeans - Nellie loved Australia. She was very much an Australian and an advocate for Australia.

JH: Exactly.

AT: And she was, as far as I know, the first Australian to achieve that international recognition as a classical musician at a time when most of Europe was just like, Oh, yes, that's the colonies. It's where we send our convicts and I hate the word Aborigines, but that's what they would have said at the time. Like, you know, they view it as this place with no civilization, no culture

AT: Exactly.

AT: And then someone like Nellie comes along and is just like super Aussie in a good way.

JH: Yes, exactly. So she was very famous for, she took her art form and her work extremely seriously. She always strove for excellence. By modern standards, her diction leaves a lot to be desired, but the way she sang was so beautiful. We only have recordings from records, you know, made in 1907. So we will never know unfortunately what it was like to really hear her, but she never took herself too seriously. Australians are known internationally, I think for being very easy in different company, be that, you know, upper class, lower class, middle class, whatever. And I think that that certainly is the thing that comes through her biographies and all the accounts of her is that she managed to get into the upper echelons of society in Paris because they just loved her. She was charismatic. She was really funny. She was incredibly good at what she did as well. She was a fantastic singer. She was a very good actress. And they also loved having some sherry with her after the performances. So that's going to absolutely as you say, change how people will view Australians at large. When she was given her damehood, she was the first performing artist to be given that accolade in the whole world, not just Australian, so that was very, very special for an Australian.

AT: My understanding is that her title was Dame Commander of the British Empire. And that was a result of during World War I, she obviously couldn't tour Europe, but she did, essentially fundraising tours around North America to raise money to support the war efforts. And I believe she raised like, potentially as much as

100,000 pounds. And Nellie did that with her own initiative and her own effort, and all of the exhaustion that comes with doing tours. Like you said, you can't just sing eight shows a week operatically - it would kill you.

JH: Yeah, it's a lot. You would assume that Nellie was given her damehood for you know, being an exceptional musician, which she was but it is actually because of her philanthropy.

AT: And I love "Dame Commander."

JH: Oh, exactly - she would have she would have loved that too, I think. "It's 'Dame Commander' to you."

AT: You mentioned recordings earlier, and I read that she made almost 200 recordings between like 1904 and 1926. So like one of the earliest recording artists in the world.

JH: Yes, another feather to her cap. She was very happy to explore new technology, which we're all very grateful for because recordings of her singing exist at all. And she was always that, we say "muck-in," she had that muck-in kind of ideology, I think and was very happy to record things but I remember reading in, I think it was her ghost biography. Her ghost writer wrote this, so I don't know how true it is. But she did say oh, you know, it was so irritating. We did a take of Caro Nome, which I really enjoyed. But then someone knocked over a chair and we couldn't use it, and I was furious. We haven't come that far, you and I spent 40 minutes trying to get this interview off the ground to talk about -

AT: We're not supposed to talk about that, shh! (laughter) And in 1920 I have down that she was also the first artist of international standing to participate in direct radio broadcasts.

JH: Exactly. Yes. So once again, something I really admire about Nellie is that she was always keen to get art to the people. The tours she did in North America are one thing but she also did an enormous set of tours in what she called the Outback of Australia. She went to tiny little towns, and sang for people in little town halls regardless of how many people turned up. She felt so passionately about bringing classical music, or you know what, perhaps what we call easy listening now, I don't think she necessarily did a full operatic concert all the time, because of course, you want to be accessible to an audience and so singing Cole Porter or something is also going to go down very well, but she was so passionate about bringing music to all Australians.

AT: And I think that's the 1909 Sentimental Tour when she covered more than 16,000 kilometers just in these remote towns. And then in 1922, she returned to Australia because I assume she was in Europe. As she was wont to do, and performed concerts for the people in Melbourne and Sydney and deliberately ensured that the ticket prices were low. And she brought 70,000 people to those concerts.

JH: Yeah, she was very, very famous by that point. I think everyone sort of wanted a slice of Nellie if they could get it but she could also see that the people need art, people always need art. I mean, what have we all been doing in lockdown, we've been seeking comfort in art in whatever form that comes and she knew that Australians were you know, they're all just trying to have a go and make a life and Australia was not a wealthy country at all at that time. And she really knew her audience. She could charge, you know, there are stories of her being seen at parties and things in you know, in Europe in Paris or Brussels or London or what have you, with the highest of society and someone coming up saying, "Nellie, you couldn't just give us a little song, could you?" And she would say "oh, you couldn't just write me a little check, could you?" which is just one of my favorite stories about her. Just because she knew her worth and she would never be undersold. So in that society, she knew that she could charge what she was worth but she's not then going to make the Australian public pay the same sort of money, which I think is a really a sensible business thing, of course, but just a kindness to the Australian people who were so proud of their Dame Nellie.

AT: I saw a quote from her. "If you wish to understand me at all, you must understand first and foremost that I am an Australian." And I think that comes through, like clearly her love of country and her country people but also bringing that with her when she went around the world.

JH: Exactly.

AT: It wasn't like she tried to hide it or anything because she was worried about how people would see her. It's like, "No, this is who I am."

JH: Exactly. And as we've discussed, that's why people loved her, because she was authentic. She was never trying to be, I mean yes, she learnt how to walk properly and speak with perhaps better elocution than she had with Marquese. But she never lost her larrikin spirit, and she says she had a Scottish work ethic and an Australian spirit, so those two made for a very entertaining party guest if nothing else, and an amazing extraordinary energy that she would have brought to her performances as well, which is why people just went so nuts over her as a person, as a performer.

AT: Speaking of her performances, we haven't really touched on what made her a phenomenal singer because I mean, we can sit here and say she was fantastic, but like, for example, can you explain what a three octave voice means?

JH: I will sing an octave for you because that seems to be the only way I can I can demonstrate it (sings). And so the two notes at the beginning and the end of that are essentially the same note but an octave apart. So it sounds harmonically the same in your ear. So she had a three octave range, which is a large range. Incidentally, actually, I have a three octave range, too.

AT: Now you're just bragging (laughter).

JH: Yes, I am. You can edit that out if you wish.

AT: Oh no, I love it. Brag about yourself. Do what Nellie would do.

JH: Yes. Do a Nellie Melba, exactly. Know your worth. In opera, you need a minimum, I would say, of two and a half octaves, especially as a soprano, you need to have sort of flashy high notes, because that is what thrills people most of the time. And because she had a three octave range, that meant she could traverse a lot of different repertoires. So at that time, a lot of singers would only sing a few different things at once, but she was typically at the Met for example, sometimes an average fortnight for her would be singing Mimi in La Boheme, then followed by Marguerite in Faust, then perhaps Juliet in Romeo and Juliet and then maybe La Traviata, and Lucia. And that's that's five, six roles in one week, just because the opera doesn't want to put on the same opera every night so people keep coming back. So she worked very, very hard, in the sense in that she was always jumping from different roles, which is not really how the opera world works anymore. But because she had this three octave range, it meant she could sing, so Lucia I suppose is a really good indication of an enormous range. And actually, sorry, this is going to get quite musically technical. So I hope I don't ruin anyone's life by talking like this. But there is a cadenza at the end of the very famous Mad Scene in Lucia di Lammermoor and Dame Nellie actually wrote that. It's a very famous one with we flute and voice, so she added that in. Donizetti did not write that - she thought actually, I think I'm gonna make this my own.

AT: That is the most famous like, that's probably I would argue the best soprano scene in opera.

JH: Yeah, it is the most famous.

AT: So, just to give some clarity for the folks who don't know opera, the Lucia mad scene is basically this young woman has been separated from the man she loves and forced to marry this other guy who I don't think is actually that bad. It's just she doesn't want to be married to him. And so on the wedding night they go up to the bedroom, and you hear, for example, a piercing scream or something because all the party guests are still downstairs. And so then Lucia comes out in a bloody night gown holding a knife having clearly just stabbed her new husband, which, poor guy, I don't think he deserved that. It wasn't his fault. It was her brother, but that's not the point. So she's like in this trance, daze sort of situation where she's singing to her love who she thinks is dead because her brother's a dick. It's opera, go with me, because I love this scene.

JH: It's amazing.

AT: So she's just like sort of floating through this horrified crowd in her bloody nightgown with her bloody knife. You know what she just did with it. And she's just sort of gently singing to the man she loves about how they'll be together. And it is, theatrically, I would argue the best scene in opera.

JH: It is incredibly compelling. Extraordinary writing from Donizetti as well. But Melba I guess thought, nah, I want to show off more. I can sing this more beautifully than anyone else. So I'm gonna write myself a few extra bits. And Joan Sutherland, who's one of our other incredibly famous Australian operatic exports, who passed away in the 1990s, may she rest in peace. That was her famous role, Lucia was her famous role. And she added a little bit to Nellie's cadenza and made it her own, the Joan Sutherland cadenza, but Nellie was the one who started doing that.

AT: I read something about nature had given her an almost perfect larynx and vocal cords and I don't even know what that means. Is that just someone waxing poetic?

JH: I mean, that is very, very poetic. And I don't think that's true. I mean, it's like when people say, oh, you know, opera singers are so talented. And I think no, we're not talented. We just work incredibly hard. You know, you don't say a gymnast is talented. They're out there stretching and learning how to jump and land without breaking their ankles for hours and hours every day and opera singers in particular, are doing exactly the same thing. So like I said, Scottish work ethic. Nellie just worked incredibly hard. She did have an aptitude. And of course, you can't work on an operatic voice without having an aptitude for it. It's very hard to find someone who would perhaps call themselves tone deaf and then train them to be an operatic star. I think that's probably a pipe dream. We're talking about her enormous range. And then we got went on a wonderful little tangent about Lucia di Lammermoor. So that was where she showed her extensive range and big high notes and things. But she could also sing what we call heavier repertoire, like Wagner. She sang Elsa in Lohengrin, and she sang Elizabeth in Tannhauser. She did try Brunhilde which is one of the hardest roles in the whole repertoire for soprano but she only sang one or two performances of that and she said no. It's an amazing story, actually - the director came backstage and she knew she had done a bad job. So this is one of the great things, is often singers think, oh no, it was fine, it doesn't matter but Nellie always knew when she had done a poor job and when she'd done an amazing job. Mostly she did an amazing job. But she did a poor job of Brunhilde and she said, "just tell the critics immediately I'm never going to sing it again. I know I'm not going to do it again." She really knew what she was good at. Which is pretty amazing because a lot of people get caught up in fame and fortune and stardom things but Nellie, for her it was always about the music, always about the work and always about representing herself properly. And she did have an amazing voice. She was known for having a very silvery, beautiful tone. And Puccini, who's a very famous opera composer who wrote one of the most beloved operas in the world now, which is La Boheme, Nellie Melba had in her collection of scores a signed copy by Puccini of La Boheme because he loved the way that she sang Mimi, for example, he always said "oh, you sing Puccini. You don't sing Melba Puccini. And he loved that Nellie actually saying what he wrote.

AT: *I think I read that she was known for that, not just with Puccini, but she was known for sticking to what the - except in the case of Lucia, apparently.*

JH: *Yes, but that that's a different kettle of fish because in the bel canto tradition, with Donizetti and Rossini that was encouraged and allowed and often musicians, singers would make up a cadenza on the night if they felt something different and it was almost the what jazz is now.*

AT: *It was improv?!*

JH: *Yes, it was improv. It's an extraordinary to think of now because we think of classical music is this very...*

AT: *Stiff. Rigid.*

JH: *Yeah, stiff and strict and rigid, yes, which it's not. It's really not it's anything but that, it's just it's the most extraordinary, alive electric thing.*

AT: *But she was very much about presenting the music as the composer intended and so as you were saying, you know, some of the composers you could freestyle a bit but she was very much about, I guess, being the conduit. So that the composer's intentions were what the audience experienced.*

JH: *Exactly.*

AT: *And you mentioned La Boheme. And not only did she do, I'm sure, a fabulous Mimi but she was also an advocate for La Boheme because the Covent Garden management, were like sneering at this new and plebeian opera.*

JH: *Exactly, so opera had typically been stories, up into this point, had been stories about kings and queens and royalty and enormous wars, and you know, and Shakespearean plays made into opera and things.*

AT: *It was epic.*

JH: *Yeah, exactly, which it is anyway, but then Puccini just wrote this story about some sort of young, sexy artists living in an attic just trying to make their way in the world. He just wrote what his life was essentially. And everyone thought this is so boring. I mean, what you know, we know people are dying of consumption. We don't want reminders of that. But of course, Nellie could see that this was a really special piece of music, and she did exactly as you say, she really, really hammered it in and said, "if you want me to sing, it's Boheme." And of course Covent Garden was like, "keep the prima donna happy, keep her happy and the people will come" and they came to hear her and she really launched that opera and it's now it's, I mean, Opera Australia, puts it on every year.*

AT: *Like every year.*

JH: *Every year because people come and it's a beautiful work. It's an extraordinary piece of music. It's perfect.*

AT: *It also makes sense, because we were talking earlier about you know, she wanted it to be music for the people and Boheme is very much the people. It's you know, the folks living in the garret, it's the everyday people if your everyday people are artists, which his were. But I just find it hilarious that you know, they're like, (snooty) "Oh, not this" and now it's it's the most done opera. It's got to be in at least the top 10, if not the top five most performed operas in the world.*

JH: That takes me to a point about which I'm very passionate, which is not necessarily Melba, but about opera and it's, it's timeless. People consider it this inaccessible thing, but it's not, it's just stories of people living their lives and trying to live their lives the best they can and dealing with the pressures of life and how that changes them, how love changes them and death changes them. Nellie knew that and that's why she wanted to take it to the Australian people in you know, Broken Hill, which for anyone not in Australia is you know, probably called Broken Hill because you'd be broken by the time you've traveled to get there.

AT: Aw. Like, you're not wrong, but aw.

JH: No, we love you, Broken Hill. We love you. But what made her a great singer, I think is not just what she brought to the art form as a vocalist and with her instrument, but also her business acumen. She really changed, what I touched on earlier about her saying, Well, you can write me check if you want me to sing at this party.

AT: But also the 200 recordings that she did, the broadcasts.

JH: She was very prolific.

AT: Like she was very savvy and she also, from what I understand, she very tightly managed all of the aspects of what we would today call her brand. Like she said, the first rule in opera is the first rule of life: See to everything yourself, which as a control enthusiast, appeals to me.

JH: Yes. She was phenomenal in that every detail, every single detail there's as part of being a scholar with the Melba Opera Trust we, in the first sort of block, they call it, so you know, you go to Melbourne and do rehearsals for a week and things, we did something called a Melba pilgrimage, where we got to go and visit her house and her her gravesite actually. I cried, it was that cool for me, I just thought it was so amazing. And we actually got to see some of her clothes and some of her luggage and things. And everything, you know, she had luggage from Louie Vuitton and all of her clothes were designed by French designers. And that's what she wore on stage as well. I mean, she didn't wear her clothes on stage, but her costumes were designed by French designers, silk lining, real fur, properly made beautiful works of art essentially. And that was her seeing to things herself as well. She demanded this level. That's how she was branding herself as well, as the diva, the couture and that wealth.

AT: There was another quote where she said "if I had been a housemaid, I'd have been the best in Australia. I couldn't help it. It's got to be perfection for me."

JH: Exactly. Yes. That sounds like her to a tee because she was very particular. Early on in her career, she actually just packed up some of the dresses that had been made for her singing Marguerite, I believe, in Faust and she said "no, no, these are mine now, they were made for me." She could tell a beautifully made garment when she came across one.

AT: And she knew that she could get away with taking it.

JH: Exactly, because she was La Melba. Her house is full of beautiful trinkets and artwork and you could see that she was fastidious for style and aesthetic and things, you know none of that stuff escaped her notice. And similarly in her singing, she was scathing of other sopranos who sang the same repertoire as her because in her mind, no one could sing it as well as she could. I mean, if you sang different repertoire, she would support you. She'd love you, you know, she'd help you out. But if you were the same sort, mm-mm. I remember reading

one of her biographies, she wrote about another soprano who was singing, I think it was Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* and she said, "Oh, you know, and then she missed that note in this cadenza, but the conductor hid it really well by flicking the upbeat slightly earlier than he would have." And you sort of think "okay, Nellie, and you never had an off night, did you? You're always perfect."

AT: She would have been Twitter feuding is what you're saying.

JH: Oh, yeah. Yeah, she would have. Yeah, absolutely. Yes, like I said she would have been savage. Savage.

AT: But like you said, as long as you weren't, I believe, a lyric soprano, who just have a different color to their voice, so they wouldn't be lyric sopranos they would be a different kind of soprano. And so as long as you weren't a lyric soprano, Nellie was pretty supportive of a lot of singers.

JH: She was extremely supportive. She brought up a lot, especially of emerging Australian talent when she was alive, and in her death. You know, I'm a direct recipient of her bequest actually so thank you, Dame Nellie.

AT: Well now that she's dead, the lyric sopranos can be supported as well.

JH: As a lyric soprano myself, it's "whew, born in the right century. Thank goodness for that." But she was incredibly supportive. So in the tours that she was doing in Australia and the concert tours she was doing, she always brought up not just other singers, but she worked with a violinist for a long time and a flautist as well, and she just really encouraged Australian musicians and sort of helped to push them over to Europe so they could get their European education.

AT: So she started this great migration that we're seeing now where young Australian - because it's not just you, I know a lot of young Australian opera singers who go to particularly Germany but also elsewhere in Europe, to sort of get their careers going.

JH: Exactly. Germany is the place to be at the moment and of course in Nellie's time, Paris was where you went because that was like the buzzing core of everything. And you know, she was right. You can get a very good education in Australia but you must go overseas to learn languages. You know, I have dear friends here who, growing up as a German, for example, but they can go to Italy for a summer for three months, very easily, very cheaply and just learn to speak Italian at the age of 14 because it's just across the Alps. You know, but you can't really do that in Australia unless you're extremely wealthy. And extremely lucky. And so yes, we still as Australians need to make that pilgrimage. And of course, in Nellie's time, you sat on a ship for six weeks or something. Whereas, you know, the 24 hour flight time it's very hard, of course, but it's nothing like that, but yeah, you really did. You're away for a long time, but you have to. And because it's an art form that was born in Italy, it was born in Europe. And that's just part of the education still, but she definitely started a trend. And that's what then meant so many more Australian, really, really top tier musicians could emerge because they were able to access that education from that path that she, you know, carved herself essentially.

AT: I think that's everything I wanted to cover unless there was anything else you wanted to tell us about the Dame Commander.

JH: The Dame Commander, an amazing woman. So one of my favorite things about her, the larrikin spirit. So on her gravestone. She has a quote from *Boheme*, which is "Addio, senza rancor" which is what Mimi sings in her second aria which comes in act three when she and Rodolfo are kind of breaking up because they've realized she's dying and he's too poor to kind of look after her. But "Addio, senza rancor" means goodbye without any bitterness. I always just thought that was her last word being like "it's okay guys, like no hard

feelings to those of you who thought I'd never make it. And I did. So whatever. Haha haha." So I always feel she's one of the original, deeply sassy women because that's essentially just a beautiful little Twitter moment, isn't it? Addio, senza rancor. So I do think she's left an incredible legacy, but I love that she never took herself too seriously. I think that's really really special, which is why she was so loved because people felt they could actually get to know her. And my other favorite quote that she said, is "in my own path, great obstacles were placed but I do not think anything in this world could have hindered me from becoming a singer," which is something I take through my own life. And yes, I admire very much from her, you know, she escaped an abusive marriage and took her son overseas and just made her life work and became a superstar. Its kind of Cinderella story, but make no mistake nearly did that by herself. She did that, she did the work. So yes. Dame Commander indeed.

AT: I hope everyone who's listening will join me next time for the Infinite Women podcast. Thanks so much.