

# Preface

In 2006 I did a series of talks in Australia entitled ‘Melba vs Alda’. In each talk I played recordings by the two great divas, Nellie Melba and Frances Alda, and at the end I ran a straw poll: ‘From what you have heard, which of them do you prefer?’ Extraordinarily, given Melba’s pre-eminence as The Australian Immortal, Alda won resoundingly in every venue, including at the Athenaeum Theatre in Melba’s hometown, Lilydale, which was filled with Melba faithful (including Melba’s granddaughter, Lady Vestey, in the front row). I’m not sure who was more shocked by the result – me or the audience.

Frances Alda was part of an astonishing musical family. The founding parents of the dynasty were French soprano Fanny Simonsen and her Danish husband, violinist-conductor Martin Simonsen, who together toured the world performing, before settling at St Kilda, Melbourne, in the 1870s.

There they raised ten children, no less than six of them becoming professional singers. And there they formed a pioneering opera company (including several of their young offspring), which toured Australia and New Zealand over the following decades. A speciality of the Simonsens was to entertain gold rush mining communities – in California, in Victoria and New South Wales, and in New Zealand.

One of their daughters, Frances Saville, having established a successful career in Australia, then studied with Mathilde Marchesi

in Paris, going on to be an international prima donna, who crowned her career by becoming a leading member of Gustav Mahler's famous company in Vienna.

Saville's niece Frances Alda, granddaughter of Fanny and Martin Simonsen, followed her aunt as a pupil of Marchesi in Paris, making her European debut with the Opéra-Comique in that city before becoming a diva at the Metropolitan Opera in New York over twenty-one seasons. There she established a celebrated partnership with the finest tenors of the era, including Caruso and Gigli, and with the legendary conductor Arturo Toscanini. Alda became a major star of the gramophone, then of the burgeoning new medium of radio in the USA. In her memoirs she wrote of her childhood home in Melbourne:

Certainly a great deal of the secret of Frances Alda was to be found in the impulsive, fiery-tempered, ardent little girl playing prima donna in the lath and burlap theatre in the garden at St Kilda.

Not all the Simonsens' children were so successful: one, soprano Martina, decided that domesticity was preferable to a life of constant touring, while another, tenor Jules, went off to ply his trade in San Francisco, but, turning to robbery to make ends meet, was sent to Folsom Prison for twelve years, accompanied by much shock-horror reporting.

In total, between Fanny Simonsen, her children and grandchildren, I have been able to identify twelve who became professional singers, some a great deal more successful than others. Of these, ten were women, two men. And another three were professional violinists, including father of the dynasty, Martin Simonsen.

Although there have been other families of singers, none have been so extensive, nor so long-lasting, nor to have travelled the world so comprehensively as the Simonsens of St Kilda, performing as they did across five continents for almost a hundred years.

Roger Neill  
King's Sutton