

ISAAC NATHAN OF CANTERBURY: 'THE FATHER OF AUSTRALIAN MUSIC' (1790-1864)

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Fig.1 Nathan in his mid 20s

Born into the Jewish community of Canterbury in 1790, Isaac Nathan died in Sydney in 1864. Collaborator with Lord Byron, friend of Lady Caroline Lamb, music librarian to George IV and singing teacher to his daughter Princess Charlotte, in 1840 he began with his family a new life on the other side of the world. In the preceding years he appears to have served the Crown as a confidential agent, thus following in the footsteps of Christopher Marlowe.

Nathan's father was Menehem Mona, a refugee from Poland who worked as a language teacher and was probably Cantor of the city's synagogue, which then stood in St. Dunstan's Street. He claimed to be a natural son of Stanislaus

Poniatowski, the last King of Poland. (How the family name became Nathan is not known.) Genealogical research has led to a suggestion that the boy's mother was a lady who, as Mariana Mary Lewis, became a mistress of the Prince Regent; but it should be noted that she was born in 1779¹. Sent in his early teens to a Jewish school in Cambridge, Isaac was allowed, because of an obvious talent, to move to London to study music. He soon began to compose, to teach, and also to publish scores. At the age of 24 he wrote to Lord Byron, begging him to provide words for an ancient Hebrew melody which he had arranged. Rebuffed, he persevered through an intermediary with such great success that in 1815-16 he was able to publish a whole volume of poetry and music entitled 'A Selection of Hebrew Melodies'. Byron's poems, most of them unrelated to Judaism, included such well-known lyrics as 'She walks in beauty like the night'. The Jewish melodies were not remarkable, and Nathan's arrangements, with Italianate trimmings, were hardly suitable, but public interest was strong. (Some of the songs can be heard on a San Jose State University website at www.sjsu.edu/faculty/douglass/music/album-hebrew.html) Nathan was visited by Sir Walter Scott, and his collaboration with Byron developed into a brief friendship. In 1816 the poet had to leave the country; but his former lover Lady Caroline Lamb had also begun to supply our composer with poems, and she agreed to serve as godmother to his eldest daughter. (It seems all his 12 children – he was twice married - were baptised.) It may have been Lady Caroline who encouraged him to approach Byron, as he had already written a duet for her brother's wedding. Meanwhile he was teaching Princess Charlotte to sing; but in 1817 she died.

Nathan's royal connections ensured that he continued to enjoy some success. In 1835 he published his 'History of Music', which was also a manual of singing technique and was well received. It seems, however, that he had another career, for a letter survives from 1837 in which he addresses William IV with an offer to undertake a mission (seemingly not his first). In due course, Nathan travelled to the Continent, and returned with some letters which he gave to the Duke of Sussex, brother of the King. His biographer suggests they concerned the claims of Augustus d'Este, the Duke's son, who had been declared illegitimate under the Royal Marriages Act.

At about the same time the King died. Queen Victoria's Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne, had been married to Lady Caroline, and after her death Nathan had commented upon her marriage in print. Melbourne now allowed him only a minimal payment for his services. Chronically short of funds, it was at this point that his thoughts turned to emigration.

Arriving in Sydney, where Sir George Gipps, who is buried in Canterbury Cathedral, was Governor, Nathan at once opened a singing academy. He also set about assuming the role of a kind of composer laureate, writing music to mark important events in the life of New South Wales. Bishop Broughton commissioned a Lord's Prayer, which was well received. While Nathan's main income was from teaching, he served for several years as Choirmaster of St. Mary's Roman Catholic Cathedral, where he conducted concerts; also as music adviser to the Synagogue and to St. James' Anglican Church. In 1847 there was a landmark event: his 'Don John of Austria' became the first Australian opera to enjoy a professional production.

Nathan has been much praised for his conscientious and unprecedented research into Aboriginal music. In 1849 he produced 'The Southern Euphrosyne', a kind of Australian counterpart of the 'Hebrew Melodies'. Again the traditional tunes were romanticised, but at least they were brought before the public.

Isaac Nathan's death, though tragic, was somewhat in keeping with his propensity for making history: he was the first Australian victim of a fatal tramway accident. Largely forgotten in Canterbury, in his adoptive country he is often called 'the father of Australian music'. The much-respected composer Peter Sculthorpe, who was deeply interested in Balinese and Aboriginal musical traditions, wrote an orchestral work entitled 'At the Grave of Isaac Nathan'. In 2012 Les Murray, Australia's best-known poet, paid tribute in 'The death of Isaac Nathan, 1864', calling him 'the Anglican who used to pray wrapped in a white shawl'. Nathan also lives on in the music of Max Bruch, of violin concerto fame,

¹ if the birth dates quoted for Mariana and Isaac are correct, she apparently became a mother at the unlikely early age of 11 years?

who incidentally was not Jewish. In the 1880s Bruch arranged three of his Hebrew melodies for chorus and orchestra, and also used one of them as a main theme in his 'Kol Nidrei' for cello and orchestra, a work still heard in concerts today.



Fig. 2 Nathan in his early 60s



Fig. 3 Nathan in old age

There is a biography, 'The Hebrew Melodist: the Life of Isaac Nathan', by his descendant Catherine Mackerras, mother of the eminent conductor Sir Charles Mackerras. In 2011 ABC Classics released a full-length recording of 'Don John of Austria', with a top-class Australian cast, in a version prepared by Sir Charles, who was the composer's great-great-great grandson.

Barnet 'Baron' Nathan, who as the first Master of Ceremonies at the famous Rosherville Gardens at Gravesend became a minor celebrity, was a younger brother of Isaac Nathan.

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Sources:

Figures 1, 2 and 3 are taken from the book by Catherine Mackerras detailed below.

The Hebrew Melodist: the Life of Isaac Nathan, Catherine Mackerras (Sydney: Currawong Publishing, 1963)

Byron's 'Hebrew Melodies', Thomas L Ashton (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972)