

# Women and music in the 1890s: The Princess Ida Club, University of Melbourne

Catherine Wilson

The last decade of the nineteenth century has long held an extremely important position within the field of Australian history. The initial significance of the 1890s to our history lay in the development of an Australian national identity, an identity inspired by the stories of Henry Lawson and championed by prominent newspapers such as the *Bulletin*. This period is currently of interest to feminists who are working to expose our Australian national discourse as gender-specific and exclusive, and to reveal that 'the single most striking feature of our national identity is a womanlessness that amounts in some senses to her obliteration'.<sup>1</sup> The history of the 1890s has been transformed by this feminist research. It has exposed the supposed unification of the decade as a myth and has instead revealed it as a site of contest, characterised as it was by a 'bitter confrontation between masculinism and feminism' as the 1890s woman began to fight for more rights in both the private and public spheres.<sup>2</sup>

Within these changing views of Australian society in the 1890s, the issue of women and music is of critical importance, yet it is almost uniformly overlooked. Feminist research has tended to undervalue the importance of music within society, and in particular to the lives of the vast majority of women expected to have at least some form of musical knowledge in order to be seen as 'accomplished'. This question of women and music is one which requires knowledge and understanding of the specificities of societal expectations of women and the role of music in their lives. Such an understanding is essential when analysing the contributions of women. The study of women and music and the relative merits of women and men is a largely ignored site of contest within the context of *fin de siècle* Melbourne.

The amateur music-making activities of women were generally confined to the private sphere where they could be easily ignored or belittled. With women steadily increasing their demands to be heard in the public sphere, the advent of the Conservatorium of Music within the University of Melbourne encouraged a new kind of musical

proficiency in women amateurs, which in turn led to more 'professional' performances. Music becomes an area where the private and public spheres of women uncomfortably meet, uncomfortably because of society's insistence on maintaining the purely domestic role of music in women's lives. The standard reception of the efforts of female performers is revealed by reviews of concerts by the Princess Ida Club, found in the university's journal *Alma Mater*, which provide just one example of the acrimony directed at the growing demands of women in society.

## The Princess Ida Club

The Princess Ida Club was formed in 1888 for the few women students, undergraduates and graduates alike, from the University of Melbourne. As a network designed to promote a relaxing social environment and 'bond of union between the present and past women-students', the club became a form of support for women hopelessly outnumbered within their university environment, providing them with a 'room of their own' in which to meet and converse with other women.<sup>3</sup> The club organised an annual social consisting of music, recitations and tableaux, promoted an interest in debating and arranged outside social events, such as picnics. The function of such a club as the Princess Ida cannot be underestimated, for being within such a traditionally male-dominated university would have been difficult for the women concerned. The formation of a club gave these women a secure place within the university society, and an area in which they could experience some measure of power and control over organising the various club activities. In fact, this may have been the only area in which the women could wield responsibility freely within the university circle.

Having entered the inherently masculine power structure of the university as students—a radical step in itself—it appears from the club archives that the fight to change female stereotypes was not high on the club's agenda. The minutes of various

meetings are mainly concerned with 'domestic' matters such as the level of noise and general tidiness of the Princess Ida Club Rooms,<sup>4</sup> while the club interests in music and drama (as well as debating) further reinforce the typical female roles expected of women. The social emphasis of the club is not surprising considering the sentiments of the day. Many were 'unsettled by the presence of women in the universities' which led to the argument that educated women were in danger of losing their 'femininity'.<sup>5</sup> A woman could be educated with the blessing of society as long as her interest in study was in preparation for her true goal in life—not a career, but motherhood.<sup>6</sup> Society's concerns with women's education, and the backlash against the career woman, are in part evident in the reviews of the Princess Ida Club's musical evenings—their 'At Homes' and 'Conversazioni'—found in the university journal *Alma Mater*. A description of the Princess Ida Club concerts is required in order to appreciate the large scale of these concerts, and the notable efforts of the women as performers and organisers themselves.

### Music Concerts

One of the most important interests of the typical all-female clubs in the 1890s was the focus on the various arts, and the Princess Ida Club was no exception. The annual music concert had always been the largest and most successful event on the Princess Ida Club's calendar,<sup>7</sup> beginning in 1889 and gradually increasing in size and diversity of programme. By 1898, the club's annual 'At Home' concert was already well 'established as one of the events of the year' for the whole university.<sup>8</sup> These events received a welcome boost from 1897 on, with the club membership being opened to 'women members of the Musical Conservatorium who have completed the First Year for the Diploma of Musical Association who are proceeding to the second or third years'.<sup>9</sup> These women became the main contributors to the programme, giving the concerts added variety and musical experience. A few days after the Princess Ida Club voted in its new Conservatorium members, a musical sub-committee was formed which included the Misses Towl, Lambert and Ellis. Between 1897 and 1899 when music positions within the club were filled, the varied programmes consisted of a mixture of

tableaux, amateur soloists, the occasional chamber work and performances by professional bands and orchestras. Musical sub-committees did not continue between 1899 and 1905. Florence Towl, a conservatorium student who took part in Marshall-Hall's first performance of *Alceste*, was involved in organising the Princess Ida Club's music and entertainment during both 1897 and 1898. In these years many women associated with the conservatorium performed in the annual 'At Homes', including vocalists Elmhirst Goode, Meta Buring, Jean Connell, violinist Constance Ellis, and pianists Meta Blaubaum, Nellie Billings and Mona McBurney. Unlike earlier years, where a fair proportion of performers—including men—came from outside the club itself, the conservatorium students later dominated the programmes, thereby allowing the vast majority of the evening entertainment to be provided by the women club members themselves.<sup>10</sup>

The elected musical committee ordered professionally printed programmes, applied to the University for permission to hire Wilson Hall for an evening and set about acquiring the various instruments and performers required. According to remaining receipts, grand pianos were rented: a Steinway grand from R.G. Anderson in 1895 and a Brunsmead semi-grand in 1897.<sup>11</sup> The Lyric Club Orchestra under the direction of Mr Charles Levy was engaged to play five orchestral numbers in 1896,<sup>12</sup> and a regimental band 'played selections throughout the evening' in 1899.<sup>13</sup> The soloists were members of the club, and duets and chamber works—mainly duets—were included where possible. Audiences at the club's concerts certainly increased with the inclusion of the Conservatorium women, with up to five hundred invitations issued in 1898 to the university academic staff and other prominent members of Melbourne society.<sup>14</sup>

The club archives hold only one remaining copy of a printed programme from the 1890s. The programme of the Princess Ida Club's 1897 'At Home' consists of ten musical numbers interspersed with three tableaux on various themes. Dominated by vocal solos, the majority of contributions were performed by women from the Conservatorium, as revealed in the following programme of an 'At Home' in 1897:<sup>15</sup>

1. 'I would that my love' by Mendelssohn. (Vocal Duet, Misses Florence Towl and Meta

Buring)

2. 'Not Quite Alone' by F. Allitsen. 'A May Morning' by Denza. (Song, Mr Gladstone Wright)

3. 'Sappho and her Maidens'. (Tableau)

4. 'Ich Liebe Dich' and 'Morgenthau' by Grieg. (Song, Miss Meta Buring)

5. 'Wood Wanderings' by Grieg. (Song, Miss Jean Connell)

6. 'Sonate' by Neils Gade. (Violin Solo, Miss Constance Ellis)

7. 'Joan of Arc'. (Tableau)

Interval

8. 'Impromptu in A flat' by Chopin. (Piano Solo, Miss Meta Blaubaum)

9. 'The Little Dustman' by Brahms. (Song, Miss Meta Buring)

10. 'Queen Guinevere'. (Tableau)

11. 'Wanderer's Night Song' by Rubinstein. (Vocal Duet, Misses Jean Connell and Meta Buring)

12. 'Britannia and her Empire'. (Tableau)

Other programmes offered by the Princess Ida Club's 'At Homes' are not to be found within the club archives. Information on musical contributions can be found in *Alma Mater*, but this information is characteristically sketchy. Despite the musical success of the concerts suggested by the growing numbers of the audience and the contributions of conservatorium students in the latter years of the decade, it was not the practice of the reviewers from *Alma Mater* to acknowledge this success. Within the context of the social upheaval caused by the changing role of the 1890s woman, the reception of the Princess Ida Club concerts becomes one site of contest.

The *Alma Mater* reviewers appear to be responding negatively to both the presence of women in the university and to the prominence of both the concerts and the female performers within university life. This negative response is brought about by generally ignoring the musical efforts of the Princess Ida Club. Other than listing the names of the performers and their choice of works, little space is given to a critical response to the performances in the reviews between 1895 and 1898. What space is given is almost exclusively reserved for the (very few) male performers. In 1895, the Lyric Club Orchestra conducted by Charles Levy 'added much to the effect of the musical entertainment' at

that concert.<sup>16</sup> In 1898 the same orchestra was praised for 'the extremely well-chosen music' with a movement 'from Raff's "Lenore" Symphony being especially delightful'.<sup>17</sup> A recitation by Mr M. Jacobs was 'highly appreciated' in a later concert in the same year.<sup>18</sup> Only one woman is given any kind of critical mention and this was *because* she was a woman: Miss Annie Cubitt, who sang twice in an 1895 concert, was surprisedly commended for actually being able to fill 'that great Hall' with her (female?) voice.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the following final stanza of a poem/review printed in *Alma Mater* gives the clearest picture of how little the women's musical contributions were esteemed: 'There was singing—of course it was good— / And reciting—that too was *au fait*, / But don't think my judgement is crude / If between you and me I should say / That the gay / Girlish laugh was more *charmant* than they'.<sup>20</sup>

*Alma Mater* reviewers not only failed to seriously recognise the musical efforts of the female club members, but they also chose to focus on and reinforce the domestic side of the event. The reviews are filled with descriptions of hall decorations and food and drink arrangements, the reviewers helping to maintain all the feminine stereotypes of the day—and perhaps, in fact, to place these women students firmly into the category of future wife and mother. We are invariably told that '(c)onversation and tea ... are the primary objects of the Princess's At Home', and this is presumably the reason for so much attention to these details.<sup>21</sup>

'Princess Ida At Home' by a 'Lady Psyche' is an interesting example of this kind of treatment.<sup>22</sup> The reviewer concentrates not so much on the musical performances themselves, rather choosing to focus on the performance of the various domestic and social activities required for the day. 'Lady Psyche' relies on a traditional portrayal of women's endearing silliness and preoccupation with the domestic by spending a fair proportion of the review describing 'girls with baskets of flowers' and 'girls with trays of cups' as the women prepared the hall for the ensuing entertainment. The club is advised by the reviewer to feel flattered 'to find so large a number of people evidently pleased to accept their hospitality', and that the pleasure this flattery should create 'well repays all the heartburning over tea-urns that suddenly refuse to act, and the fatigue of running about with big trays full of cups'. This particular review is extremely successful in belittling the members of the

Princess Ida Club, treating them as simple-minded women concerned with simple-minded activities, rather than the serious business of organising and performing in a large concert. The conversations between the women are made to appear superficial and extremely banal: 'each one greeted the other's first appearance with the invariable "Isn't it a lovely day?" in which remark the note of wonder never lost its freshness'. Even when finally mentioning the real business of the day—that is the concert itself—this too is used to further emphasise the social role of women: 'The programme consisted of nine numbers, taken at intervals of a quarter of an hour, in order to leave plenty of time for the moving about and chatting with one's friends, which is meant to be a chief feature of the afternoon'. It is clear that the time and effort spent on organising the concert, and preparing and practising the programme is only a sideline to the 'real business' of the day, according to *Alma Mater*, namely an excuse to revel in that most feminine of activities—gossip.

If the underlying aim of this review was to unabashedly emphasise that a woman's true domestic and social nature is inescapable, despite the involvement of these women in academic life, its intention was brought across with equal success in an 1897 review which states: 'The sweet girl graduate appeared in a new and not unpleasant light as the dispensator of hospitality. Our former idea of her as "a female receptacle for Greek and Latin" was at fault. We live to learn'.<sup>23</sup> This is perhaps a none-too-subtle reminder that a woman's real skill is to be found in the role of homemaker, wife and mother. The image of the passive woman student—or 'female receptacle'—is contrasted with the active role of 'dispensator of hospitality', perhaps in an attempt to convince the women themselves that the only truly active role for a woman is within the home, and even perhaps to reinforce a sense of the impossibility of a dynamically thoughtful woman within the realms of academia. This limited concept of the capabilities of women is also reflected in one review's comparison of the domesticity exhibited in the 'At Homes' and university examinations. Those women, we are told, who have the 'fortune to be students will once more settle down to the business of preparing for exams, which, after all, is but a secondary object compared to the responsibility of carrying out arrangements for the annual function

to everyone's satisfaction'.<sup>24</sup>

These reviews reveal the deep-seated trivialisation of the abilities of women organisers and women musicians. By failing to acknowledge their efforts in this capacity and by focussing on a domestic line of thought, the reviewers are expressing some of the acrimony felt towards any woman who chose to step out of the traditional female roles. Whether the women themselves were discouraged by such treatment, or whether they too felt that the emphasis on the social and domestic aspects of their work was just, is impossible to say—no records remain of the women's attitudes and beliefs towards their true role. However, the remaining Princess Ida Club records suggest that these women took their club's musical activities very seriously, forming musical committees in order to organise large and successful concerts. In so doing, they provided not only an invaluable performing outlet for university women generally and for the Conservatorium students in particular, but also an outlet in which women's organisational and performing abilities could be showcased in a relatively public arena.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Miriam Dixon, *The Real Matilda* (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Allen, '“Mundane” Men: Historians, Masculinity and Masculinism', *Australian Historical Studies* 22.89 (October 1987), p. 617.

<sup>3</sup> Princess Ida Club archives, University of Melbourne, box 2, first club book.

<sup>4</sup> Princess Ida Club archives, Gr 2, Reports Presented to Meetings 1895-1912, box 2/1, 2/2.

<sup>5</sup> Josie Castle and Helen Pringle, 'Sovereignty and Sexual Identity in Political Cartoons', *Debutante Nation: Feminism Contests the 1890s*, ed. Susan Magarey, Sue Rowley and Susan Sheridan (St Leonard's, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1993), p. 137.

<sup>6</sup> Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police* (Ringwood: Allen Lane, 1975), p. 329.

<sup>7</sup> Princess Ida Club archives, first club book, April 1892, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> 'The Princess Ida "At Home"', *Alma Mater* 3.6 (September 1898), p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> Princess Ida Club archives, Annual Report 27 March 1897.

<sup>10</sup> See surviving programme 24 April 1897, and *Alma Mater* 3.6 (September 1898), p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> Princess Ida Club archives, minutes 27 June 1896-15 September 1897, box 8/6.

<sup>12</sup> *Alma Mater* 1.7 (July 1896), p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Princess Ida Club archives, Gr 4 Other Papers 1897-1916, box 4/2.

<sup>14</sup> Audience numbers are estimated in the first club book, and the increase is illustrated by the following two examples: 22 June 1889 (First Annual Social)—120 in audience; 1 July 1893—300–400 in audience (Princess Ida Club archives, box 2, First Club Book).

<sup>15</sup> Princess Ida Club archives, surviving programme 24 April 1897.

<sup>16</sup> 'Lady Psyche', 'The Princess Ida Club At Home', *Alma Mater* 1.1 (July 1895), p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> 'The Princess Ida Club', *Alma Mater* 3.6 (September 1898), p. 18.

<sup>18</sup> 'The Princess Ida Club', *Alma Mater* 3.6 (September 1898), p. 22.

<sup>19</sup> 'Lady Psyche', 'The Princess Ida Club At Home', *Alma Mater* 1.1 (July 1895), p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> 'Princess Ida At Home', *Alma Mater* 3.5 (August 1898), p. 30.

<sup>21</sup> 'The Princess Ida Club', *Alma Mater* 1.7 (July 1896), p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> 'Lady Psyche', 'The Princess Ida Club At Home', *Alma Mater* 1.1 (July 1895), p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> 'Princess Ida Club At Home', *Alma Mater* 2.5 (August 1897), p. 13.

<sup>24</sup> 'The Princess Ida Club', *Alma Mater* 1.7 (July 1896), p. 18. Italics mine.