

LEON CARON

One of the leading conductors and theatre composers working in Australia during the last decades of the 19th century, Leon Caron came to Australia in the late 1870s and soon afterwards took up a position as conductor with W. S. Lyster's Opera Company. It was as music director for J. C. Williamson's Royal Comic Opera Company, however, that he is most associated. He joined Williamson in 1889 and maintained a working relationship with the company until his death in 1905. During his career in Australia Caron was associated with a number of other high profile companies, dramatists and performers including Garnet Walch, George Musgrove, Alfred Cellier, the Montague-Turner Opera Company, Farley's English Opera Company, Francis Hart and Sir William Robinson, and Nellie Stewart. He wrote the music for such pantomimes as *Djin Djin*, *Matsa* and *Australis; Or, The City of Zero*, while also composing his own works – including string quartets; a choral symphony, a violin concerto; and several orchestral works. Caron died in 1905.



Source: State Library of Victoria

Born in Boulogne-su-Mer, near Calais (France), on 14 January 1850, Leon Francis Victor Caron's passion for music and desire to follow a career as a musician were very much against the wishes of his parents. He continued his studies with the violin, however, and was eventually sent by the Boulogne Municipal Council to study at the Paris Conservatoire in the late 1860s. It was here that he became a pupil of Guilman, the noted organist. In 1870 Caron was one of three musicians short-listed for the Grand Prix de Rome, at that time one of the most valuable musical prizes on offer. The award was cancelled that year, however, when the Franco-Prussian war broke out, and thus dashed his chances of winning it. The war also led Caron to seek refuge in London, where he subsequently found himself engaged as a violinist for the Jules Rivi re Orchestra at the Alhambra Theatre in London. In 1872 he travelled to America and accepted a position with the French Opera in New Orleans. He later joined the Theodore Thomas Orchestra, touring the United States until the group disbanded after playing the 1876 Philadelphia Exhibition. Shortly afterwards he travelled to Australia, arriving in the country in December that year. Settling in Melbourne his first musical engagement is believed to have been as a solo violinist at the Melbourne Opera House. This led to him being offered the

position of violinist and part time conductor for William Lyster's Opera Company. By 1879 he was the company's regular conductor. 1879 also saw him performed in the orchestra for Garnet Walch's pantomime, *Babes in the Wood*, staged at the Theatre Royal (Melb).

In 1880 Caron won a competition held during the Melbourne International Exhibition for his cantata *Victoria*. It was subsequently used to open the exhibition, and involved a 1,000 strong chorus and orchestra of 125 musicians. During the early 1880s he conducted and arranged a number of opera productions for the Montague-Turner Opera Company (which came to Australia initially under the auspices of Lyster) and Farley's English Opera Company (Sydney 1886). While in Sydney during June 1881 Caron nearly drowned when he slipped from rocks on Sydney Harbour at Tennyson. Rescued by Government Printing Office employee, Caron penned a poem in his honour. The piece was published in the *Bulletin* the following week (18 June 1881, 8). The conductor appears to have settled more or less permanently in Sydney by 1885. Along with several other prominent Sydney-based musicians Caron founded the city's Orpheus Club (1887-91), which held promenade concerts and private soir es. Between 1887 and 1888 he found engagements as music director for F. E. Hiscocks (Academy of Music, 1887); B.N. Jones (Opera House, 1887); and John Solomon (Criterion Theatre, 1888). During this period he worked with celebrated variety performers like father and son vocalists Edward and Arthur Farley; and W. Horace Bent Louis Brahm, Beaumont Read and J. S. Porter (of Hiscocks' Federal Minstrels fame). On 14 March 1888, too, he premiered another of his classical works, the *National Cantata*, as part of the centenary celebrations (the cantata was revived in Melbourne in 1972).

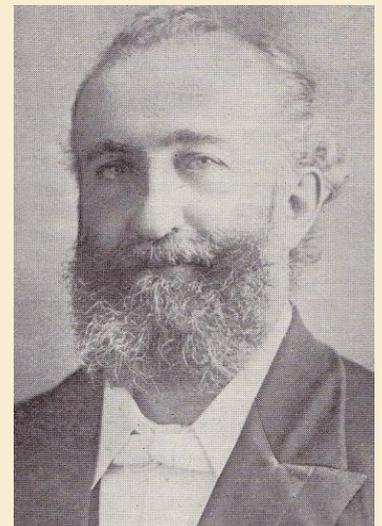
Caron joined J. C. Williamson's Royal Comic Opera Company in 1889 as Music Director and went on to conduct many music theatre productions for the firm, including the numerous Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, and other works such as *Marjorie*, *The Old Guard*, and *The Merry Monarch*. He also conducted the first professional production of Sir William Robinson and Francis Hart's operetta *Predatoros*. Starring Nellie Stewart it was presented by Williamson and Musgrove at the Princess's Theatre (Melb) in November 1894. In later years he conducted such prominent productions as *The French Maid* (1898), Alfred Cellier's *Dorothy* (1898), *The Geisha* (1899), Audren and Sturgess's *La Poupee* (1899) and *Florodora* (1900). His "Bird Ballet" was included in Williamson's 1897 pantomime, *Babes in the Wood*

(Her Majesty's Theatre, Sydney). Caron also directed the incidental music for many of Williamson's straight theatre works including, for example, *The Silver King* (1898) and *The Manxman* (1898).

A good deal of Leon Caron's work was published in Australia, the examination of which has led to him being generally regarded as a composer of real, if minor, talent, and a polished craftsman. In this regard it might be argued that Caron's most successful compositions were for the pantomimes staged by J. C. Williamson, notably *Djin Djin* (1895) and *Matsa* (1896). However, he also wrote other music forms including three string quartets; a choral symphony (*Symphonie Poème l'Idéal*); a violin concerto; and several orchestral works, including *Souvenir Patriotique; Or An Episode of '93* (which evokes the mood of a mob of revolutionaries in Marseillaise), and *Birds of the Forest*, an overture described in the *Sydney Morning Herald* as a "vivacious pastoral" (29 Apr. 1899, 4). An opera *Mata-Mati* was completed but has never been performed. Other compositions of note include "Invocation To Love" written especially for Nellie Stewart in her lead role in the operetta *Mam'zelle Nitouche* - staged by Williamson and Musgrove's Royal Comic Opera Company at the Lyceum Theatre in Sydney (8-14 June 1895) - and an accompanying waltz for the production "Gavotte Fantastique" (aka "Nitouche Galop"). The same year other of his songs, "My Wedding Day" received much success. Advertised as the "rage of Melbourne" by publisher H. J. Samuel, it was first performed by request in Sydney by Laura A. Carr during a Fisk Jubilee Singers' concert at Centenary Hall on Easter Monday.

In 1899 Caron was granted six months leave by Williamson so as to be able to return to France in order to visit his aging mother. Following a well-supported testimonial Caron sailed for Europe, where he also planned to immerse himself in all the latest music on offer. He returned by the end of the year at which point he again took up duties as the Firm's senior music director and conductor. In February 1905, while conducting a season of Gilbert and Sullivan for Williamson's Repertoire Company, Caron suffered the first of several heart attacks. Sometime that year, however, he again took to the stage, with his final ever appearance in Australia being a concert in which Dolly Castles and Alexia Bassian made their debuts. Against medical advice he toured with the company to New Zealand, but was forced to return in May due to his poor health. His place was taken by seasoned Sydney music director, Auguste W. Juncker. Interestingly, despite the fact that Caron had never met either Gilbert or Sullivan his long study of their operettas had not gone unnoticed by the either collaborator. According to the *West Australian*, Sir Arthur Sullivan had instructed his executors shortly before his death to forward a memorandum to Caron thanking him for him for all he had done to present the works in their best light ("Musical and Dramatic Notes" WA: 5 June 1905, 4).

Leon Caron died on the 29th of May at Sydney's Gresham Hotel, and was buried at Waverly Cemetery after a large and spectacular funeral procession. "The funeral," wrote a *Theatre* representative "was the largest [this] writer has seen since that of Sir Henry Parkes" (1 June 1905, 17). Indeed, "three bands played Handel's 'Dead March,' Beethoven's 'Funeral March' and the Chopin March. All along the route great throngs of people gathered." The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on the obsequies which took place at Waverley Cemetery: "Very late in the afternoon, with the slant beams of the slowly setting sun falling upon an azure breadth of ocean, giving radiant whiteness to innumerable headstones, and placing in bold relief the great concourse of people that surrounded the last resting place of the French musician. Here also a band of choristers from the Royal Comic Opera Company, rendered as a last and sad anthem, 'The Long Day Closes.' Sullivan's music swelled out upon the evening air with melancholy sweetness in a tender sequence of unhurried harmony" (ctd. Corry, 44).



Theatre 15 Aug. (1905), 10.

Caron was survived by his second wife, Eliza (nee Sherwin, a relation of the "Tasmanian Nightingale," Amy Sherwin) and a daughter, Irma. Madame Caron, was herself well-known in Sydney musical circles as a long-established teacher of singing. She and Irma, who from an early age had appeared in theatrical productions in Australia, left for London in August of 1905 to follow through with Caron's wish that his daughter receive Continental musical training. Irma eventually entered the Dresden Conservatorium of Music, where she studied violin, piano and singing. Some eight years later Madame Caron and her daughter returned to Australia so that Irma might re-enter the theatrical profession in her home country. They are believed to have resided in Melbourne for some time. Irma was engaged for the Melbourne revival of the musical comedy, *Stop Your Nonsense* (produced by Beaumont Smith and Leslie Hoskins at the King's Theatre, beginning 18 December). The *Age* critic notes that her singing was far above the average for that class of work and that her appearance in any musical comedy was bound to assure ample success (20 Dec. 1915, 9).

MUSIC THEATRE WORKS

- 1895: **Djin Djin the Japanese Bogie-Man** [pantomime]
 1896: **Matsa, Queen of Fire** [pantomime]
 1898: **Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves** [pantomime]
 1899: **Little Red Riding Hood** [pantomime]
 1900: **Australis; or, The City of Zero** [musical extravaganza]
 1902: **Dick Whittington and His Cat** [pantomime]
 n/e: **Mata-Mati** [opera, not performed]





VICTORIA.



CANTATA, BY LEON CARON.
 Words by J. W. MEADEN.

Performed for the first time at the INAUGURATION of the
MELBOURNE INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION.
 1st OCTOBER, 1880.
 UNDER THE DIRECTION OF THE COMPOSER.

ARTISTS:

SOPRANO	MME. FANNY SIMONSEN.
CONTRALTO	Mrs. CUTTER.
TENOR	Mr. ARMES BEAUMONT.
BASS	SIGNOR VERDI.

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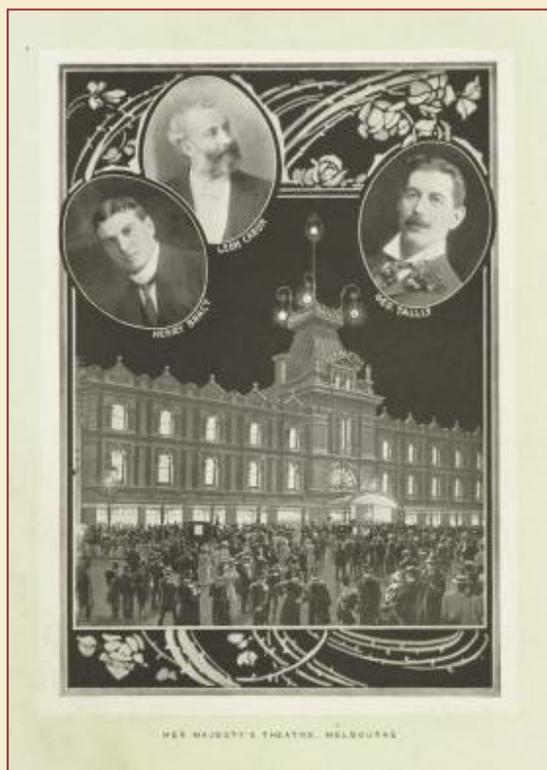
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Henry Bracy, Leon Caron and George Tallis
Her Majesty's Theatre (Melb) ca. late 1890s.
Source: National Library of Australia

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Expanded and updated from Clay Djupal, "What Oh Tonight." Ph D Diss. U of Qld (2005), Appendix D.

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