

## Virtuosi from the Australian Big Scrub:<sup>\*</sup> Australia, Empire and the Meaning of Musical Journeys in the Long 19th Century

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ABSTRACT: Born in the 1890s in Brushgrove near Grafton, Northern NSW, Lena and Maggie Chisholm undertook their musical training for examination by London Trinity College first at the Roman Catholic College at Brushgrove, then at St Mary's Presentation Convent in Lismore. In 1902, Maggie Chisholm, aged 11, was ranked second in the Trinity list of piano examinations throughout Australia and abroad, winning the W.H. Paling's gold medal in Grafton. In 1920, the Maharajah of Tagore presented Lena with a gold medal as the London Royal College of Music's most brilliant student. She also won the Royal College prize for best string player of 1920. While the Chisholm sisters received European recognition in the early years of the twentieth century after graduating from the Royal College of Music, their success was also influenced by the nurturing cultural environment and the outstanding musical education they received at the Presentation Convent; a standard of tuition established with the convent's foundation in 1886. In fact, from its settlement in the 1840s, the Northern Rivers region was remarkable for producing and fostering internationally acclaimed musicians. This article examines how this outpost at the edge of Empire produced the exceptionally talented Chisholm sisters and how their careers were affected by their travel to London.

'We Australians are becoming a musical people, and it is an honour to us to send talented artists to the Old Country who will reflect credit upon Australia, and an honour to us to do what we can to bring this country into the vanguard of the musical world.'

Thus spoke Sir William McMillan during the interval at the complementary concert tendered to the Misses Chisholm (who are about to leave for Europe to continue their studies) at the Concordia Hall on Tuesday evening.

*Freeman's Journal* [Sydney], Thursday 5 March 1914, pp. 28-29.

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\* [Ed.] 'The Big Scrub' was the name given to the large rainforest area which covered much of the Far North Coast of NSW at the time of settlement. Its name represented bounty, in both timber and wildlife, as well as challenge, in the necessity of clearing it for farmland. Today, only a few remnants remain.

On March 25th 1914 the two gifted young musicians referred to by Sir William left Australia for England on the S.S. Orama to take up scholarships at the Royal College of Music in London. They were the sisters Maggie Chisholm, age 21, a pianist and Lena (Helena) Chisholm, 16, a violinist; born in Brushgrove, Northern NSW. It was a quest in which they were to navigate many potentially treacherous currents as the 19th century transformed in the 20th – an adventure signposted by religious allegiance, competition for scholarships, the social disruption of war and continual reinvention to make careers as professional musicians. Their journey ‘home’ represented a convergence of the Old World and the New Colonial World market forces: a performer might possess exotic popular appeal as an Australian—as Nellie Melba and Annette Kellerman proved—but a career on the world stage could only be established in the Northern Hemisphere. The sisters’ Australian teachers had travelled from Europe and the British Isles to the Antipodes in fulfillment of their own musical and religious teaching vocations, and in providing tuition, laid the foundations for their pupils to make the return journey. As it transpired, wartime enlistment for men meant that the Chisholm sisters established their careers in an era of unprecedented employment opportunities for women musicians.

Travel between Europe, the British Isles and the Antipodes remains a fundamental cultural current in the lives of Australian musicians today, and the story of the Chisholm sisters represents an episode in how this pathway was established for all serious performers. This paper presents the journey of Lena and Maggie Chisholm from the ‘Big Scrub’ on the Northern Rivers of NSW to the royal College of Music, onto the stage of the Palladium and into the world of radio performance.

I first read about the sisters in 1974 in a newspaper article by Maurice Ryan when I was a school student in Lismore NSW. They had been students of St Mary’s Presentation Convent—where I was receiving music tuition. In the article, Maurice Ryan demonstrated that Lismore’s thriving contemporary musical life was founded on ‘a rich musical tradition, dating back to the early decades of Lismore’s history’. As a student, the discovery of being part of an established tradition was fascinating and inspiring.<sup>1</sup> The question of what had happened to the sisters once they had arrived in London with their scholarships has intrigued me ever since. No diaries or letters written by the sisters have come to light, so the primary sources for my research have been newspapers of the time, a published history of the London Palladium,<sup>2</sup> conversations with surviving members of the Presentation Order in

<sup>1</sup> Ryan, Maurice, ‘Musical Traditions’, Broadsheet on Education—No. 1 1974, *Northern Star*, Friday, May 17th, 1974, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Woodward, Chris, *The London Palladium: The Story of the Theatre and its Stars* (n.p.: Northern Heritage Publications, UK, 2009).

Lismore and documents from the St Mary's Archives, and also from the Royal College of Music. I hope that this article may elicit further information from Northern Rivers' residents.

The Chisholm sisters were taught by highly accomplished nuns at the Cowper Convent, followed by those at the Presentation Convent in Lismore and then by lay and religious teachers in Sydney. I propose that while the opportunity to attend the Royal College of Music shaped the careers of Maggie and Lena, their early life and education in the 'Big Scrub' was equally important in enabling them to take their place as versatile performers in a time of profound political and economic upheaval from 1914 to 1932. The fact that they chose careers in popular music may reflect their experience throughout the First World War entertaining soldiers on leave with popular musical repertoire providing the best distraction from thoughts of the trenches. While their names do not appear in any of the major histories of Australian Music, research into newspaper coverage of their careers from 1910 up to 1937 reveals that the women gained widespread critical and popular recognition in the UK. News of their achievements was reported eloquently in the Lismore *Northern Star*, the Sydney *Freeman's Journal* and the Sydney *Morning Herald* throughout this period, keeping alive the adventure of the two youthful prodigies who journeyed across the seas and achieved the 'brilliant future' prophesied for them.<sup>3</sup> In 1926 a typical report in the *Northern Star* linked the sisters' fame back to their hometown, referring to their success in the revue *Mind Your P's and Q's*, which had 'a splendid run of 68 weeks' throughout Britain:

One of the songs introduced by Miss Lena in this revue is called 'Tell All the World'. It has since become very popular and many Lismore people have danced to the strains of this song first sung by the former Lismore girl.<sup>4</sup>

NSW Northern Rivers' readers could enjoy a pleasurable moment of connection with the musical life of the UK.

The traffic of musicians between the old world and the new was founded on stories of opportunities propagated by teaching institutions, religious teaching orders (consolidating their influence as global organisations) and those with positions of civic authority in Australian country towns: The Royal College of Music promoted the belief that its teaching methodologies were the finest preparation for a musical career available to musicians within the British Empire; The orders of Roman Catholic nuns who taught music in Australia did so to bring the highest

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<sup>3</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, Sydney, Thursday March 5th 1914, p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> *Northern Star*, Lismore, Saturday, September 11th, 1926, p. 4.

standard of education to remote corners of the world; Civic fathers, such as Sir William McMillan quoted above, earnestly believed that the musical life of the community provided a barometer of cultural health, and as such it must be cultivated. Were any of these stories founded on social realities? What power did the individual have to shape their destiny? Were Lena and Maggie really an extraordinary musical success—or was their fame, reported repeatedly in the press from 1914 on, simply a fairy-tale to please Australian readers and encourage parents to send their daughters to be educated in convents? I will examine the surviving evidence of these musicians from 1890 to 1930 to propose answers to these questions.

The choices the Chisholm sisters made in their musical careers reflected the tensions between Britain's imperial, hierarchical musical traditions and the expanding, more socially inclusive world of popular musical variety performance of the war years and afterwards. Through analysis of articles and photographs in the press spanning the years from 1905 to 1937 one gains a vivid visual impression of how the sisters adapted to changing times in a metamorphosis from the constricted Edwardian feminine ideal to the freedom of the flapper. The earliest photographic images depict demure young girls with long flowing hair in white frocks. As time passes, their hair is bobbed, their dresses become short, floral-patterned and figure-hugging and their portraits project vivacious energy. Lena and Maggie Chisholm, as representatives of a generation of Australian women musicians who made similar journeys, deserve an acknowledged place in the history of Australian music.

The first part of this article describes the Northern Rivers region where the Chisholm sisters were born and educated. It will provide context with discussion of other musical celebrities who travelled to Europe to further their careers and established the musical competitions of the era. Secondly, I examine Lena and Maggie's musical education in the convent and as scholarship students at the Royal College of Music in terms of technical achievement. Section three investigates the transition from the concert platform to music halls and later radio broadcast. In Conclusion, I propose that the Chisholm sisters are representative of a large category of musicians, particularly women, who have been neglected by scholarship. These performers expanded the possibilities for modern musical careers in the early years of the twentieth century.

### *The Northern Rivers of NSW*

The Northern Rivers region was settled relatively late, and so residents of the area were still regarded as pioneers in the late 19th century. Establishing cultural activities and schools was a priority as the

region was settled in an attempt to remain connected with settlement in the South of the state.

In 1828 Captain Henry Rous sailed up the eastern coast of Australia in his ship *Rainbow* and named the Richmond after his patron, the Duke of Richmond and Lennox. There was no settlement on the Richmond until Cassino Station was founded in 1840 and the Wilson family moved into Lismore station in 1845 ready to receive the district's first piano—a Collard & Collard upright, brought up river from Sydney in a schooner and thence in a sailing boat to its destination. What was the attraction of this wild and thickly forested region? The answer to this question was to be found in the red cedar trees so beloved by cabinetmakers and carpenters. Cedar-getters came in their hundreds to clear out the trees, float them down river to the ports and send them off to cities in Australia and abroad to make their fortunes. The natural beauty of the place enchanted settlers, as described in early correspondence:

The sub-tropical growth was so dense on that fertile soil, with its bounteous rainfall, that the place was always in semi-darkness. There were great fig trees, with spurs extending from perhaps twenty feet up and portioning off spaces large enough for a small castle, with great branches reaching out to enormous distances...the barrel and limbs of the trees were often bedecked with orchids, nest ferns, elkhorns and great staghorns...Down in the valleys where the crystal water was a delight there were great tree ferns with the largest and softest of fronds...and the birds! They were there in their hundreds.<sup>5</sup>

Sixty miles south of Lismore the Richmond and the Clarence rivers formed the boundaries of the region where the Chisholm family lived while Lena and Maggie and their siblings began their musical education. By 1870 the transformation of the wild Eden-like rainforest into a landscape supportive of European settlement:

Not many years ago the inhabitants of this vast district consisted only of squatters and timber getters, with some ships carpenters and sawyers. The banks of the river were only a continuation of dense scrubs on both sides; beautiful to look upon, but otherwise useless for man or beast...The case is much altered now...the banks of the river present to view a succession of farmers' houses, and cultivated homesteads with occasionally the signs of municipal life, ...agriculture cannot thrive in isolation, and must be connected with the centres of population and city markets by direct and rapid communication.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Letter from Mr Ronald McDonald to his daughter, Mother Berchmans McDonald, in *Centenary: Presentation Sisters, Lismore NSW, 1886-1986*, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Town & Country Journal on the Richmond: Settlement and progress in the Richmond River District 1870-1892*, ed. by Marcia Mullins (Lismore: RRHS, 2001), p. vi.

Road, rail and sea networks supplied the region surprisingly well with a range of city goods including sheet music and travelling music teachers. It was also an environment in which contradictory cultural forces collided, beginning with the initial white displacement of the established indigenous culture and continuing as musical development in the region became strongly influenced by catholic and protestant rivalry. This rivalry was a stimulus to promote musical excellence in the two factions. The first episode in this opposition occurred when the Lismore Musical Union planned its first concert for March 16th 1877. Their non-partisan motivation was declared in the local newspaper:

In these quiet-going communities where amusement is scarce, a source of rational enjoyment like music should be extensively cultivated and patronized, ...all right thinking persons should encourage the cultivation of the divine art!<sup>7</sup>

These lofty ideals were thwarted by the sons of the Temperance Society in whose hall the concert was to be staged, and who opposed the event because it was to be followed by—dancing!<sup>8</sup> An attempt to counter the objections of the Temperance Society, the Editor of the *Northern Star* wrote an article on the civilizing influences of music, arguing that

Music has a most humanizing effect. The cultivation of the art has a most favourable influence upon public morals.<sup>9</sup>

Stirring words were not, however, sufficiently persuasive to break the stalemate. It was the completion of the new Catholic Church in 1877 that provided a new building to enable the postponed concert and dance to take place finally, and the *Northern Star* reported that ‘being a fine moonlight night the attendance was good.’<sup>10</sup>

Prior to institutionalized teaching, well educated women settlers in the towns and on farms taught their families on pianos brought up the river to their homes, passing on their technique and more importantly, the vocation of fostering music making in the community. A number of dedicated musicians visited the region from the earliest days of settlement: In 1871, Abbe Felix Schurr settled in the region, travelling to see his parishioners in a small boat along the river and connecting

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<sup>7</sup> *Northern Star* Saturday, March 3rd, 1877, quoted in Ryan, ‘The Musical History of the Lismore Region’, p. 3. Unpublished article sighted in “Lismore Music” special topic file in the RRHS, Lismore.

<sup>8</sup> *Northern Star*, Letters to the Editor, Saturday, March 17th 1877, Saturday June 30th 1877, Saturday July 7th 1877, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Northern Star*, Letters to the Editor, Saturday, March 17th 1877, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Northern Star*, Letters to the Editor Saturday June 30th 1877, p. 3.

waterways, carrying with him a portable organ to entertain those early settlers in isolated timber camps; Mr William Webster (d. 1884), a professional violinist from London who fled to the antipodes to find a new life after witnessing the tragic death of his wife in a stage fire was a positive influence through his teaching; and Mr L.G. Snow, an American with interests in the timber trade settled in 1864 with a large quantity of classical sheet music and books.<sup>11</sup> These music collections did much to create a sense of connection between Northern Rivers musicians and the outside world.

As families settled the area, music education was formalized. A strong tradition of fine string players began to emerge in the late 19th century with William Webster then Sister Patricia D'Arcy as foundation teachers. In the early 1900s, Geraldine Spring returned to teach in Lismore after studying in London. Lena Chisholm and Meta Cottee followed in her footsteps. Child prodigy Winifred Roberts (1923-2012) was taught by Geraldine Spring and left in 1930 to study in England at the age of 7. She later married Geraint Jones, and with him in the 1940s and 50s specialized in historically informed performances of baroque music. Perry Hart (1928-1999), a gifted violin player of the 1950s, was selected by Szymon Goldberg to study in Europe. She became leader of the Oronte String Trio in London and toured in Australia as soloist with the ABC.

The arrival of teaching orders of nuns on the Northern Rivers in the 1880s established institutional music teaching designed to train musicians who would be judged and ranked according to international examinations systems such as the Trinity College London. In this era, the Catholic Church in Australia was intent on competing with other education systems by employing religious teachers who were refined and highly educated with a vocation for demanding excellence from their pupils. In this they were very successful. The Mercy and Presentation Orders of nuns who taught the Chisholm sisters and hundreds of their peers were a formidable force in shaping the kind of musicians who left Australian shores for European performing careers, as well as those women who remained and entered society as teachers, business women and wives. The nuns had travelled to Australia from Ireland, Italy, France, England and Germany, and the influence of their own educational and vocational journeys strongly influenced the career paths of their pupils.

Religious women were strong role models for the girls they taught. Whatever privations they endured as part of convent life, nuns were

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<sup>11</sup> It is just 100 years since Mr L.G. Snow and party rowed the first boat up north Arm, now Emigrant Creek, Teven Creek and Duck Creek, looking for handy cedar. They also brought the first American axes into the Big Scrub.' *Northern Star*, Lismore; Wednesday, December 20th, 1944, p. 3.

single women who had escaped the constraints—some would say slavery—of catholic motherhood in this era, to pursue excellence in intellectual and musical education. Another force in shaping the aspirations of the women who were educated by Catholic orders was the integral role of the teaching nuns in the cultural life of the entire Northern Rivers community, not just the Catholic population.



*Maggie and Lena Chisholm,  
c1902.*

### *Biography and Family History of the Chisholms*

Margaret Mulligan and James Chisholm were married in Grafton in 1881 and lived in Brushgrove, the largest inland island in the world and with its own mountain range. Originally settled because of the wealth of red cedar on the island, Brushgrove was a major trading hub for timber, sugar and other agricultural goods due to its location on the Clarence River. By the turn of the nineteenth century the village supported eight shops, three blacksmiths, a saddler, livery stable, two restaurants, two hotels, a hospital, two doctors, auctioneers, carriers and a post/telegraph office, police station and three churches. a bakery, butcher shop (owned by James Chisholm), a bank and a school. Chisholm was a Justice of the

Peace and at various times served as director of the Brushgrove Dairy Company; as president of the School of Arts Hall committee; Chairman of the Musical Society and was an officer in a number of other organisations and sports clubs, and the family was comfortably well-off.

There were 8 children—6 girls and 2 boys. Mary, the eldest child was a fine musician who won a series of medals and other awards, and after her mother's death she brought up the younger children as well as continuing her music and finally setting up a music school that flourished in Lismore from 1910 until the 1970s. Maggie (Margaret) was born in 1892 and Helena (Lena) born in 1897. When Maggie was 11 and Lena 8, their mother died, and despite the shadow of her mother's illness, Maggie won the W.H. Paling gold medal in Grafton and 'was ranked second in the list of examinations for London Trinity College throughout Australia and abroad'.<sup>12</sup> Lena, who excelled as a violinist, had her first lessons from Sister Mary Aquin Kilkelly at the Cowper Convent.

All the Chisholm children were instructed by the Sisters of Mercy at the Roman Catholic College at Brushgrove and the newspapers for the region document the activities of the talented musical family as they supported the social functions of the Cowper Convent, Brushgrove and later, Lismore and Parramatta as the family moved.

In 1905 James Chisholm took out an Auctioneers licence and in 1906 the family left the area after 25 years to move to a large property near Lismore.

#### *Musical Education in St Mary's Presentation Convent, Lismore*

The family's move coincided with the opening of the new St Mary's College in 1907 after the earlier timber building had burned down in suspicious circumstances. It was a grand building: the exterior influenced by Gothic Revival architecture, incorporating references to significant buildings relating to the homes of each of the founding nuns; the interior designed in the Arts and Crafts style; and the whole estate described as one of the finest in Australia with a seven acre river-facing park; sanitary arrangements described as 'scientific and complete', and the Musical training 'based on the system in the German Conservatories.' This method of teaching placed an emphasis on a firm foundation of rhythmic understanding from which children could develop use of melody, harmony and musical structure. The connection between dance, song and melody was stressed, and students often competed in dance as well as music events in competitions arranged by the nuns.

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<sup>12</sup> *The Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, Wednesday June 14th, 1905, p. 15.

The Presentation nuns who arrived from Lucan, ‘on the Leafy Liffey’<sup>13</sup> in 1886, were of wealthy, well-educated families. Mother Stanislaus D’Arcy who established the Presentation order in Lismore founded a system of governance whereby the central convent would support the satellite convents, sharing resources and personnel to combat challenges of great distances and small population of the colony. The Presentation Order worked with the Mercy Nuns to advance the cause of excellence in musical education, utilizing each other’s networks to further the careers of their students. Survival of the convents was dependent on the good will of all denominations, and to this end, musicians were educated to be adaptable and to be of service to the community. Maggie Chisholm was the official accompanist for the Lismore Musical Festival in 1913, as well as fulfilling this role in the Irish Music Festival.

Competitive musical festivals in the region were seen by teachers and the wider community as an opportunity to inspire and develop talent in all age groups. Since 1908 the Lismore Musical Festival has taken place every year with a period of suspension from 1916-1920 as a result of the Great War and the subsequent influenza pandemic. From 1913 St Patrick’s Day Festivals of Music and Oratory were held in Lismore, formalized as The Irish Music Festival from 1920 into the 1930s. These events provided further opportunities for young musicians to gain experience performing in front of large audiences. Later on in their lives abroad, even as society personalities, Lena and Maggie Chisholm continued their dedication to providing music for worthy causes, including playing for servicemen on leave and at charity concerts.

In an era where women were striving to receive recognition for careers outside the sphere of home duties, the nuns encouraged highly educated and strong-minded young women to excel and influence the shape of the nation. Convent girls were potentially powerful messengers for religion as well as for the music they performed. As Peter Burgis comments:

In the dying years of the 19th century and probably encouraged by Melba’s triumphs abroad, the cultural possibilities of convent girls were realized. Here was a resource of stunning potential. A prima donna might conquer the world. Melba had done it. Might not others follow? A Catholic heroine who acknowledged her faith and who demonstrated her god-given gift might bring credit to herself and her religion.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Centenary: Presentation Sisters Lismore, NSW, 1886-1986*, Centenary Booklet compiled by the Presentation Sisters, Lismore (Lismore, MNSW: Northern Star Print, 1986), p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Burgis, Peter. ‘Weapons of Faith? Australian Catholic Women Who Sang and Recorded,’ Unpublished article c.1986, sighted in the Library of the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia, p. 3.

Like Melba and the Australian Catholic singer, Amy Castles, who set out on her international career in 1899, the Chisholm sisters went into the musical world in short white dresses with hair tumbling down their backs—visions of purity and talent. It was an extraordinarily brave journey to make and the fact that the sisters remained in partnership as performers for so long is a testament to their commitment to each other.

As we observe, following the careers of the girls, beneath the demure exterior, these graduates of the convent music system were artists whose resilience and adaptability enabled them to survive the challenging transition from 19th century musical mores into the thrilling and diverse demands of twentieth century musical life.

How good were these young women as musicians? Some of Lena and Maggie's early examination results are preserved in the Richmond River Historical Society. From the days when the family lived at Brushgrove Maggie's certificate for Trinity College London's Preparatory Grade examination held in Grafton in 1902 survives, for which she was awarded a pleasing 83 marks. In June 1905 Maggie was awarded the Paling's gold medal and was ranked second in her age group in the Trinity College Examinations throughout Australia and the Dominions.<sup>15</sup> There are two Sydney College of Music certificates for Lena—violin (84 marks) and Maggie (92, First Class Honours) singing—for 1909.

Newspaper social columns record the activities of the family as they accompanied dances in country halls and provided entertainment for all manner of charity balls and concerts. Maggie is reported as performing Beethoven sonatas and accompanying comic songs, depending on the occasion. She was employed as a teacher by Paling & Co.<sup>16</sup> to teach

<sup>15</sup> *The Sydney Mail and NSW Advertiser*, Wednesday June 14th 1905, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> Paling, William Henry (1825-1895), musician, merchant and philanthropist, was born on 1 September 1825 at Woerden, Netherlands, son of John Paling, pianoforte manufacturer. He was trained in music under Berthold Tours, a leading violin pedagogue, who favoured Paling as a pupil and made possible his appointment as violin teacher at the Academy in Rotterdam. In later advertisements he described himself as 'first violinist of the Royal Holland Academy' and as director of an academy of music in that country. He sailed for Sydney and arrived in 1853. Paling attracted quick recognition as a music teacher and entrepreneur. He offered private tuition in both violin and piano, and was also a 'professor of music' at Springfield College, a ladies' boarding school founded at Darlinghurst by Lady Murray. From the same period dates the first W. H. Paling music warehouse at 83 Wynyard Square, 'an unpretentious place, built of timber and galvanized iron, and surrounded by an uneven wooden fence'. As composer he issued his 'Sydney Railway Waltz' to commemorate the inauguration of the Sydney to Parramatta railway on 26 September 1855. Later that year he appeared in concerts as soloist in the Beriot concerto and in association with Edouard Boulanger, Flora Harris, Sara Flower and the Sydney Philharmonic Society; the most favoured venue was the concert room of the Royal Hotel. In November Paling announced the opening of a 'New South Wales Academy of Music—arranged on a continental system'. It was established at 5 Bligh Street although the notices were issued from Paling's residence at 66 Macquarie Street. He also inaugurated a Quartette and Glee Club for Gentlemen Amateurs, and a society, *Erudito Musica*, which first met in January 1856. In that year he assumed exclusive direction of the Academy of

piano. At a ‘poster ball’ her dress, advertising the virtues of a number of pianos, was described in the *North Coast Daily News*:

A beautiful rich pink satin, with a deep moss green band around the trained skirt, with gold lettering giving the names of the numerous high-grade pianos and organs supplied by that celebrated firm. On the front panel was written in green and gold, ‘Paling and Co., Limited, Molesworth Street, Lismore, importers of band and orchestral instruments of all kinds. Immediately below was painted in gold the British ensign, and the words ‘Under Vice-Regal patronage’. The bodice was handsomely draped spangled chiffon, and looped with gold harps, violin and lyre brooches. The sleeves were finished off with a green velvet band, on which were painted in gold letters, the words, ‘Expert tuners.’ A handsome gold crown, engraved with ‘Paling and Co., Limited, made a very pretty finish to this handsome costume.’<sup>17</sup>

The costume description sounds almost comical with its extravagant entrepreneurial slogans and spangles, but in the 21st century Kylie Minogue’s success in becoming a music and fashion brand resonates with the same determination shown by Maggie to align herself with Palings—a prestigious player in the music industry.

The sisters had Sydney connections through Maggie’s association with Palings and through the Sydney College of Music and its associated teachers (they travelled to Sydney from Lismore for lessons there, as well as with the Parramatta Sisters of Mercy). In 1913 Maggie was made Associate Pianist of the Sydney College of Music and Lena won the Exhibition of Advanced Grade Violin and Junior Grade Exhibition for singing and two silver medals for violin and singing. Lena’s teacher was Sr Mary Stanislaus of the Parramatta College of Mercy. Both girls secured exhibition scholarships to attend the Royal College of Music and the results were announced in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Northern Star* and the *London Times*.

An article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* titled ‘Music in the Empire’, announced that for the year 1912-13 there were 50,000 candidates sitting for examination in the British dominions by the associated Boards of the Royal College of Music (RCM) and the Royal Academy of Music (RAM). Each year the board offered three Exhibitions entitling the holders to free musical tuition at the RAM or the RCM and that these awards were an international ranking certifying the excellence of the musicians:

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Music, took charge of piano classes at the School of Arts, appeared as organist with the Sydney Choral Society and conducted a Philharmonic Society concert.

Entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/paling-william-henry-4356>, [accessed 19.2.15].

<sup>17</sup> *North Coast Daily News*, Saturday July 20th 1912, p. 3.

The opportunities afforded at these colleges for attaining to high eminence in the musical world were unequaled by any other body in the British Empire... the standard and the pieces and studies, technical exercises etc required of the candidates were the same in England and wherever examinations were held.<sup>18</sup>

With London in their sights, on Wednesday 3rd of March 1914 the complimentary concert at Concordia Hall in Sydney given by Lena and Maggie Chisholm 'attracted such an overflowing audience that many people were unable to gain admission' and the Manager was able to taking £92. Maggie who was silver medalist and winner of the Emmeline Woolley scholarship in 1913 played Mendelssohn's G minor piano concerto, assisted at the second piano by her teacher, Mr J. Hugh McMenemy, and was reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)* as 'exhibiting the foundation of a fine technique and no lack of animation.' Miss Lena Chisholm played the finale of the Max Bruch violin concerto, and the critic enthused:

As she possesses dash and a good deal of tone, she promises to develop into something exceptional. The enthusiasm was so pronounced that she accepted a double encore.<sup>19</sup>

Sir William MacMillan, president of the associated board of the Royal Academy and Royal College thanked the audience for their support and explained that the scholarships did not pay for maintenance of the holders in London, and it was right for Australians as a musical people to foster talent with generous financial gifts. He stated that he would continue to appeal to music lovers 'to subscribe further to those two brilliantly deserving girls, so that they might be placed in a position to enjoy every advantage of their new surroundings, and ultimately return to Sydney crowned with laurels.' His words were greeted with Cheers and his final announcement was that the sisters would leave on a tour of the Northern Rivers, 'where they have many friends and admirers.' The girls gave one final concert in Sydney after completing their Northern tour before their departure for London on March 25th, 1914.

### *Experiences in London*

Arriving in London after the long voyage from Australia, the sisters began their studies at the Royal College of Music in 1914, in a world darkened by impending War. They would have welcomed Sir Hubert

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<sup>18</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, Thursday December 11th 1913, p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, Wednesday March 4th 1914, p. 15.

Parry's address in which he acknowledged the 'large proportion of the most gifted young people who attended the College by means of scholarships'<sup>20</sup> and felt



reassured in the early days of World War 1 by his advice to the students that 'in devoting yourselves to your art and fitting yourselves to make its higher examples understood and appreciated by the multitude you may help the world to escape from orgies of brutality such as are now going on.'<sup>21</sup> Copies of the girls' student records from the Royal College of Music document Maggie's graduation with an ARCM (Associate of the Royal College of Music) Pianoforte Solo diploma in April 1917 and Lena was awarded an ARCM diploma in Violin, 1919 as well as the Tagore Medal and Gowl and Harrison Exhibitioner for 1920.

*Lena and Maggie Chisholm as mature performers*

Progress reports of the girl's successes appeared in Australian newspapers such as Maggie Chisholm's performance as soloist playing the Grieg Concerto in A Minor in April 1917, after which she 'enjoyed many recalls ... and was warmly congratulated by Sir Charles Stanford who conducted and by Sir Hubert Parry.'<sup>22</sup> Lena's performance of Farrar's Celtic Suite in July 1919 was described as 'very cleverly played'.<sup>23</sup> In December 1919 the *Sydney Morning Herald* congratulated the girls on their loyalty and devotion to entertaining the Australian

<sup>20</sup> Parry, C., and H. Hubert, *College Addresses Delivered to pupils of the Royal College of music by C.H.H. Parry, Director, 1895-1918* (London: Macmillan, 1920), p. 266.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>22</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday, April 21st 1917, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> *The Times*, C19 p. 10g.

soldiers on leave in London at the home of an expatriate matron, Miss Alice Wyatt.<sup>24</sup> *The Bulletin* also noted that throughout the war the sisters had ‘helped wounded Aussies to pass many a cheerful afternoon under the spell of their music’.<sup>25</sup> Again in 1920 Lena was congratulated in the *Times* for her ‘exceedingly clear and well finished performance of Lalo’s Violin concerto in F conducted by Sir Adrian Boult’.<sup>26</sup> There is no doubt that the sisters were playing at the peak of their ability and that the praise reported was merited given the difficulty of the works and the fact that they were both given the privilege of performing with an orchestra—an expense that could have been avoided by the RCM if Maggie and Lena were musicians of lesser caliber. However, it was at this time that the girls must have been contemplating a change in their career path. What precipitated this decision? Was there word from home about financial constraints? Were there just too few opportunities for paid work on the concert platform?

Parry had foreshadowed that as the War changed the world musicians ‘shall have to look at our art from outside as well as inside, and develop capacity to take interest in wider spheres of existence... We shall have to learn to judge it from the standard of its value to humanity’.<sup>27</sup> and indeed this seems to have been a process that the Chisholm sisters went through as they left the Royal College to work together in venues such as the Alhambra, the Empire and Palladium. Braving what Parry condemned as ‘the vapid trash and suggestive ineptitudes of music halls and cinemas’<sup>28</sup> they discovered popularity, fun and rather a lot of money.

### *A Career in the Halls*

It was probably late 1920 when the girls embarked on their Music Hall career. *The Bulletin* reported in March 1921 that the girls were at the Palladium performing as a duo ‘splitting 100 guineas a week between them’ rubbing shoulders with turns like Harry Houdini, Toots Pounds, Gladys Cooper and Gerald du Maurier.<sup>29</sup> An astute comment is made in *The Times*, 11th September, 1923, about a revue at the Palladium: ‘Miss Peggy [note the name change from Maggie] and Miss Lena Chisholm, who play popular music on the piano and violin in a way that suggests that they might safely be a little more ambitious.’ The girls were clearly under-challenged by the new repertoire, no matter how well paid they might be.

<sup>24</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, Friday, December 5th 1919, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> *The Bulletin*, Thursday, March 24th 1921, p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> *The Times*, Saturday, December 4th 1920, p. 8a.

<sup>27</sup> Parry, C., and H. Hubert, p. 286.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274.

<sup>29</sup> *The Bulletin*, Thursday March 24th 1921.

The enlistment of men and the subsequent loss of lives in the First World War had created employment opportunities for women musicians to earn wages equal to those of men and to establish a permanent place for women in a variety of related careers. Once signed to the management of a particular Hall and its satellites, work was guaranteed on a grueling touring circuit throughout the British Isles, each performer moving on after a few nights or a single night in each location. There were usually three performances a day: at 2pm, 4.30pm and often a later evening session. The country was in a mood for diverting, cheerful entertainment and audiences were prepared to pay for a night's distraction from widespread grief and economic hardship. During this era, elite artists such as Anna Pavlova appeared in music halls amidst acts that included conjuring, acrobatics, opera, vaudeville variations, comedy skits, animal routines, scenes from Shakespeare's plays, ballet productions and all manner of popular musical entertainments. While Maggie and Lena began their Music Hall career playing a classical music repertoire as a duo, in time they developed their own stage personas in comedy and popular musical routines and later revues.

In 1924 their names were on the bill at the Palladium in a Grand tribute Concert to Mr. Harry Masters, late booking amender and chief of staff of the London Theatre of Varieties. This was a gala evening including notables Ella Shields, Little Tich and Harry Tate, and it is a measure of the sisters' standing that they are billed equally with these legends in the description: "A Night with the Stars". In September 1926 the *Northern Star* reported that the sisters had just celebrated a year touring with a Walter Williams's revue in the English provinces and quoted from 'a London paper' that the girls,

came into Vaudeville unknown and were stars inside a month. One is a fiddler and fascinating; the other a vivacious brunette at the piano. Most people who knew them thought that their talent would be lost in revue, but strange to say, the sisters have never been more successful... The two girls.... found the musical halls more profitable.<sup>30</sup>

Advertisements and programs document the Chisholm sisters' performances on the stages of the Palladium, the Alhambra, the Coliseum, and Victoria Palace culminating in the highlight of Lena Chisholm taking the name part in the pantomime Cinderella at the Palladium at the end of 1927. Excerpts from the production were filmed by Pathé, and screened at the Lismore Star Court Theatre in 1928 in a newsreel titled the Empire Gazette.<sup>31</sup> In the same year, Peggy (Maggie) married the London businessman, Mr H.E. Tilbrooke of Brompton

<sup>30</sup> *Northern Star*, Lismore, Saturday, September 11th 1926, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> *Northern Star*, Lismore, Thursday November 22nd 1928, p. 11.

Oratory, honeymooning in Switzerland. This was the end of the duo, but Lena continued to perform for radio programs—notably Billy Mayerl's 1932 revue for radio called 'Hil-ar-ity', a 'Cabaradio' described by one critic as 'the best in its class...the music is refreshingly new in style, delightfully melodious and ideally microphonic'. Lena left England in 1937 for the USA. Her name appears in the *New York Times* both as a performer on the radio and in the social pages. She married Otto Weber, about whom little is written (as reported in the *Northern Star* of 27.5.37). Local newspapers report that Lena returned home to visit her sister, Molly McDermott, a piano teacher in Lismore in subsequent years.

The Chisholm sisters' careers spanned the years that nurtured the birth of modernism. They were women who made their music pay and they followed a trend that was observable as early as the 1880s, when it became clear that 'women rose most successfully within the more popular and commercial areas of musical life, where there was less institutional and ideological rigidity than in the classical-music world.'<sup>32</sup> Ironically, it was their very traditional, classical music education within the Roman Catholic teaching system that equipped them to adapt their careers to the economic dictates of the time: traditional in the sense that a musician must be completely dedicated to the highest technical demands of their art and also be prepared to play music that will meet the needs of the society one lives in. The Royal College of Music, despite its public image as an institution producing elite musicians, in fact catered for 'a mixed clientele' producing highly skilled musicians who found a wide variety of positions within the diverse musical industry of the early 20th century.<sup>33</sup> The Chisholm sisters, possibly spurred to action by thoughts of how tedious a teaching life at home in Australia might be, and having made the first and hardest journey from home to the Royal College, were ready for the next adventure. I believe that it was their childhood in Brushgrove and Lismore—their active role in community music and the influence of the discipline and particular brand of feminism represented by Presentation and Mercy sisters that prepared them to leap from success to success as travelling musicians at the beginning of the 20th century. While they did not return to teach, reports of their successes abroad connected readers to European musical life and inspired those who followed them as music students on the Northern Rivers.

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<sup>32</sup> Weber, William. 'Miscellany vs. Homogeneity: Concert Programmes at the Royal Academy of Music and the Royal College of Music in the 1880s', in *Music and British Culture, 1785-1914: Essays in honour of Cyril Erlich*, ed. by Christina Bashford and Leanne Langley (London: OUP, 2000), p. 319.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

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