

# Birgit Nilsson and Other Amenities of Perth, Australia

By Irving Kolodin

*Perth, Australia*

**B**irgit Nilsson is that rare singer who takes with her wherever she goes the day's standard of quality in a whole segment of the vocalist's art. Her first tour to Australia in September–October has been an occasion for the music lovers of the whole continent to cherish. This is a part of the world where the major Wagner operas are rarely heard and, on the Nilsson level, practically never. There may be some aging music lovers in Sydney and Melbourne who recall the visit of Kirsten Flagstad in 1936, but the like of Nilsson with orchestra has not previously been heard in the south (Adelaide) or the west (Perth).

Clearly Nilsson would not be in Australia at this time had she not participated in the opening of the concert hall of the Sydney Opera House. But that much-discussed, long-deferred, celebrated, denigrated construction has even broader bearings on her appearances elsewhere in Australia. It is no mere coincidence that both Perth and Adelaide have dedicated new concert halls this year. Example breeds emulation the world around, and the lavish initiative in Sydney is no exception. Those in Perth and Adelaide are considerably less lavish, but no less positive, contributions to the creation of a continentwide cultural network that will tie together this widely dispersed but interdependent society.

For the first time the best representatives of worldwide performing skills and artistry can plot a course across Australia from east or west, rather than be confined to the great population centers on the Pacific side. Much as this serves commercial convenience for the performer, it serves even more strongly the promotion of local ends by bringing the Nilssons, de los Angeleses, and Ashkenazys of the world to places where they might not otherwise appear. Given the stimulus of such visitors, it is a reasonable presumption that for every Melba, Percy Grainger, John Brownlee, or Joan Sutherland who has emerged in the past from Melbourne or Sydney, there will be two, three, or four others from the south and

west, as well as east, to Australia's and the world's gain.

The lure of a new interest in Perth provided not only a welcome opportunity for reacquaintance, in unfamiliar surroundings, with Nilsson's breadth of sound and grandeur of style in favorite works of Gluck, Beethoven, Wagner (the Liebestod, of course) and Verdi ("Pace pace" from *La Forza del destino* as an "extra" for the deliriously happy audience) but also for appraisal of the present state of the Kirov Leningrad Ballet. The broad, shallow, hard-floored stage of the 1800-seat concert hall served the needs of Nilsson and the Western Australian Symphony, conducted by Henry Krips, better than the requirements of the touring Russians. But even its encroaching walls left little doubt that in Mikhail Barishnikov the Kirov has a twenty-five-year-old crowd pleaser who may come to rival Nureyev, especially if he can be prevailed upon to stay, and mature, at home. Barishnikov is less a balletic boulder or leaper than he is a flyer, capable of long, arching parabolas or the most graceful of multiple aerial turns.

With or without such professional pleasures, the visit to Perth allowed for the memorable discovery that it is perhaps the most beautifully situated of Australian cities, entitled to a place among other such favorites of the world as Vancouver, San Francisco, and Rio. All have in common the presence of abundant water. In Perth it is not only the broad (at this point) Swan River but the Indian Ocean as well. Local residents who have not ventured too far from home are fond of saying, "It's like California, isn't it?" A

comparison with most of California is on the libelous side for Perth, where sailing on the Swan can be a lunchtime diversion, and the sandy beaches by the surf are closer to the center of town than Santa Monica is to Hollywood and Vine.

Perth is basically an administrative rather than a commercial community, with many of the 700,000 inhabitants employed in the functions that go with its place as capital of the huge, productive spaces of western Australia. Civic leaders are restlessly aware that there is such a thing as pollution to be reckoned with; yet it is nearly non-existent in this "open" city, with little manufacturing and a free flow of air from all sides. Proximity to the ocean may bring with it gale winds at unexpected intervals, but the gale winds also bring drenching quantities of rain, which cleanse the air and renew the greenery.

This play of the elements may explain why the terrain is fertile enough to support growth of all kinds, but a jealous sense of community pride preserves the riverbanks for parkland and converts the 7000 kinds of wild flowers found in the region from a statistic to an adornment. In addition Perth has one of the prime educational institutions of the Southern Hemisphere in the University of Western Australia, whose tree-shaded campus does indeed suggest Palo Alto. The community is spawning a ballet company, under the direction of the experienced Rex Reed, that may attain more than local repute. All this, the Kirov, and Nilsson, too? The overseas jets come and go regularly at the Perth airport, only five miles from the concert hall. □

*The orchestra rehearses for the opening of the Perth Concert Hall.*

Mike Brown



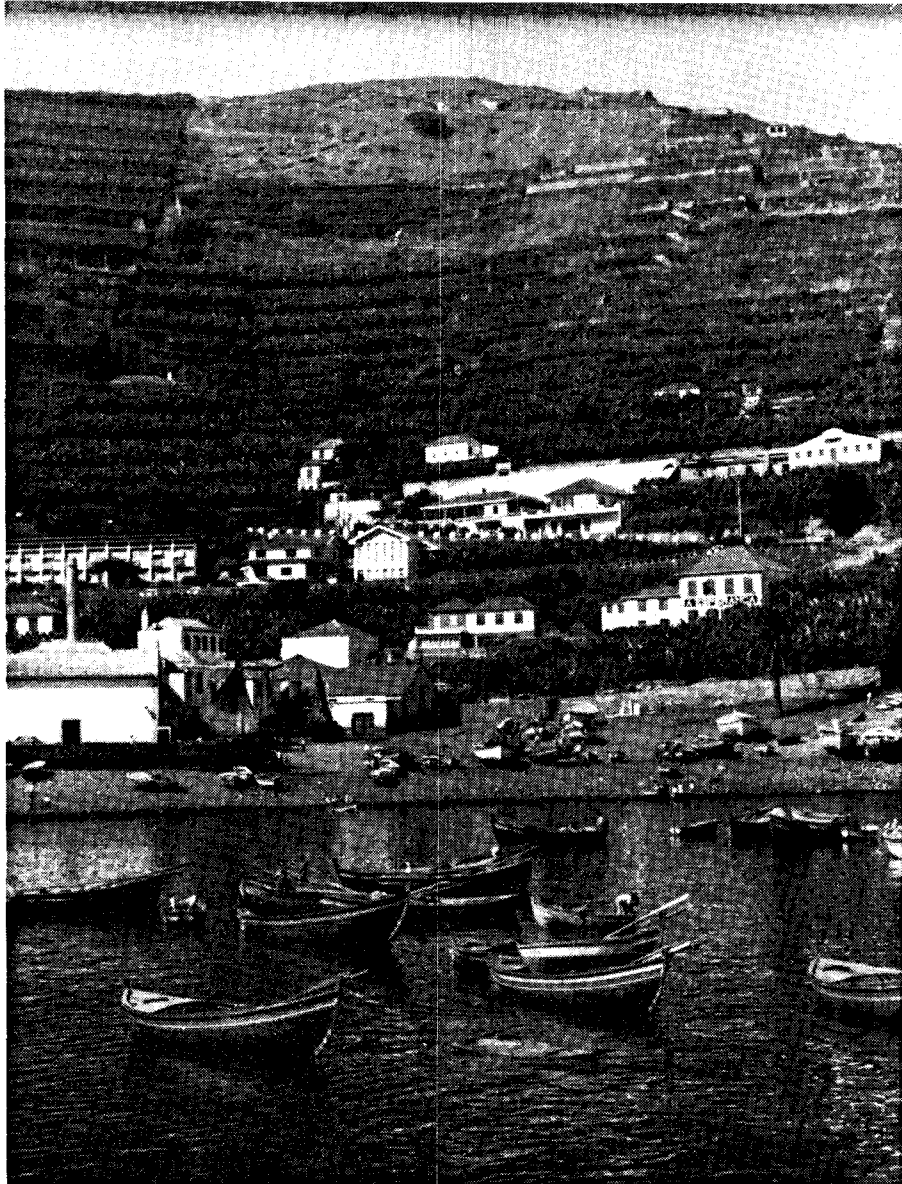
# Have Some Madeira, M'Dear

By Horace Sutton

In their relentless combing of the world, looking always for some new, some unbidden land where the air is sweet, the skies fair, the people friendly, is there a place Americans have overlooked? Yes, and an obvious place, too, an island discovered by the Portuguese more than seven decades before Columbus looked in on the New World. It is an island long coveted, twice occupied, and still revered by the British, who find a certain solace there in the warm sun and the cheering wine. What else could this place be but Madeira, a thirty-five-mile-long island that bursts with more flowers than Hawaii; an island of magnificent mountain views that rival those of America's western national parks; an island of postcard fishing villages, thatched-roof highland houses inhabited by peasant farmers who still affect a rural dress?

Madeira has long catered the needs and pleasures of the traveler, an arrangement that through centuries has bred no discernible envy or loathing. So handy to Africa—it lies dead west of the coast of Morocco—and so near to Europe, it long ago became a staging area where travelers who had spent long periods in Africa could pass some intervening weeks in the amiable decompression chamber that Madeira provided.

The island, which the Portuguese had found uninhabited and which they so successfully colonized, has long been coveted by other European nations. It was part of the dowry of Catherine of Braganza when that Portuguese lady married Charles II of England. But the king needed money, not islands, and he asked instead not for an outright grant of the real estate but for cash and the right to trade in Madeira's sugar and wine. During the Napoleonic Wars the English families, descended from the first traders, feared a French attack, and they asked London to dispatch a force



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*Câmara de Lobos—"Blue-eyed children and recollections of Winston Churchill. . ."*

to defend them. Twice the English sent troops to occupy the islands until at last Madeira pleaded with the king of Portugal to dislodge them.

It was the English traders and invaders who bequeathed the island its many blue-eyed children, who are seen among the dark Latin and Moorish faces. The British names on shops and industries are a legacy, too, and so is Reid's, the quintessential British hotel abroad, owned for six generations by the Blandy family, which descends from a Scottish soldier who was on his way to serve in Africa (he got a look at Madeira en route and decided to stay).

Madeira remains a British refuge from the cold, gray winters of the blessed realm. To this day the English book rooms at Reid's, take afternoon tea on the terrace, admire the flowers in the splendid gardens, and, of course, dress

for dinner. With just 170 rooms and fifteen suites, Reid's has tried mightily to keep up with the competition. It no longer hand-carries its clients in swaying hammocks up and down the steep cliff walks to the sea, but it maintains a platoon of attendants down by the water, and it still keeps a lifeguard in a boat to follow a guest who swims out into the Atlantic waters too far from the shore.

SOON MADEIRA will be no private English preserve. The brand-new airport, with its restaurants and shops and spacious waiting areas, is the signal of new times. The jets come down from Lisbon in eighty minutes, but the mountainous island that rises out of the sea like half a cantaloupe turned upside down leaves little room for long runways. Even the existing strip, fashioned out of a sheared-off mountain, gives the arriving passenger—perhaps