A BLUSTERY SPRING DAY

Opened in 1973

Queen Elizabeth II opened the Sydney Opera House on 20 October 1973, and said the human spirit must sometimes "take wings or sails."

The official opening was not the first time the house was used, and it was not the first time someone sang on the site. The curtain had already gone up in September. A song had already been sung from the scaffolding, thirteen years earlier.

When	What happened
1960	Paul Robeson climbed the scaffolding and sang "Ol' Man River" to the construction workers as they ate lunch. The official facts page calls him the first person to perform at Sydney Opera House.
28 September 1973	Almost a month before the official opening, "the curtain in the Opera Hall rose on its first production: Prokofiev's epic War and Peace, performed by the Australian Opera." The first Concert Hall performance was a Wagner programme, with Birgit Nilsson and Charles Mackerras.
20 October 1973	On a blustery spring day, the Queen opened the house. "The Sydney Opera House has captured the imagination of the world, though I understand that its construction has not been totally without problems." She went on: "The human spirit must sometimes take wings or sails and create something that is not just utilitarian or commonplace."
28 June 2007	The Sydney Opera House was included on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The official heritage page quotes UNESCO calling it "a great architectural work of the 20th century."

A descendant of Bennelong, on the shells

At the opening ceremony, Ben Blakeney, a direct descendant of Bennelong, appeared silhouetted at the apex of one of the high shells. The Queen has since visited four times, the official facts page says, most recently in 2006.

A hall kept at 22.5 degrees

When the Sydney Symphony Orchestra is on stage in the Concert Hall, the temperature must be 22.5 degrees, so the instruments stay in tune. The same official facts page records that Arnold Schwarzenegger won his final Mr Olympia title there in 1980, and that a net was later installed above an orchestra pit after a live chicken, in a performance of *Boris Godunov*, walked off the stage and landed on a cellist.

A short quiz

1. On which date did Queen Elizabeth II open the Sydney Opera House?
2. What production opened in the Opera Hall on 28 September 1973?
3. In which year did Paul Robeson sing from the scaffolding?

Answers. 1. 20 October 1973. 2. Prokofiev's *War and Peace*, performed by the Australian Opera. 3. 1960.

Sources: sydneyoperahouse.com, "Interesting facts about Sydney Opera House," "50 years of extraordinary moments," "Jørn Utzon AC," "Construction begins," and "Conserving and celebrating our heritage," checked 17 November 2026.