

sing

New Zealand

The story of choral
music in Aotearoa

Guy E. Jansen



MASSEY UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Foreword

Guy Jansen is, without doubt, one of the central and key figures in the history of New Zealand Choral Music. My first contact with him was as a student at the Secondary Teachers' College in Christchurch in 1975. After I completed further study in Auckland, and upon my return from the United States in 1986, Guy invited me to work with young conductors at the Inaugural International Summer School in Choral Conducting in Nelson. Guy and I co-directed these summer schools until 2011, when they were handed over to the Association of Choral Directors under the aegis of the New Zealand Choral Federation.

History has shown Guy Jansen's extraordinary contribution to choral music. The formation of the world's first national youth choir in 1979 — the National Youth Choir of New Zealand (ages 13 to 24) — was an initiative of his, and he was its inaugural musical director. For the choir's initial overseas tour, which included singing with Kiri Te Kanawa in London, he made the first arrangement of the New Zealand national anthem to incorporate Māori and English words. He then taught at the University of Queensland, where he established a master's degree in choral conducting, and subsequently he was invited to be conductor-in-residence at Wheaton Conservatory of Music in Illinois, United States. In 2011, he was made a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit in the Queen's Birthday Honours. In 2013, he was made a Life Member of the New Zealand Choral Federation, and in 2017 he was presented with the Federation's first Distinguished Service Award. His passion, vision and big ideas have set the direction for the future of choral singing in New Zealand.

But what of the future? The New Zealand Secondary Students Choir (founded by Guy in 1986), the New Zealand Youth Choir (founded by him in 1979), and Voices New Zealand (founded by Karen Grylls in 1998) have recently come under the umbrella of Choirs Aotearoa New Zealand. As a result, the first Choral Academy, with all three

choirs present, took place in Auckland in January 2019. The academy has accorded us the opportunity to show the work of our vocal and language coaches and our conductors and singers from secondary school to professional level.

There are also the recently established national conducting conferences, Choral Connect, directed by the Association of Choral Conductors, modelled on the pedagogy and choral aspirations of the original summer schools, which Guy initiated. And New Zealand is currently preparing to welcome the World Choral Symposium in Auckland in 2020. This is a festival with 24 of the brightest and best of the world's choirs, including our own New Zealand Youth Choir, and more than 40 eminent choral musicians offering practical workshops, seminars and exhibitions.

Above all, the future must embrace the establishment of a national children's choir and pay attention to the quality of the experience our children have in their choral and musical education.

Very sadly, Guy died as this book was being completed. However, the pages are filled with his entrepreneurial vision, and his passion as an educator and choral pedagogue. Written from his unique perspective, it draws together the stories and history of our musical and choral journey. This is a fine resource and record of our choral history.

Dr Karen Grylls ONZM
August 2019

Introduction

Nau mai, haere mai. Welcome to a story about the beginnings of group singing in Aotearoa New Zealand, how it has developed over the past 200 years, and how the best choirs have become so good.

It has been claimed that gardening is the slowest of the performing arts, but a competitor for slowest could be this country's choral art.

In ancient times, across many continents, our forebears discovered humming and made a range of other vocal sounds. Their descendants and successive generations turned celebratory shouts of joy and cries of anguish into love songs, lullabies, chants of lament and much more. Everyone could take part. Cultural traditions developed; some people danced or moved in procession as they shared their songs — singing and movement were a common combination. Over time group singing developed. From the early nineteenth century it progressed through rank amateurism, easy popularity and well-intentioned passion, offering immediate social rewards and some aesthetic growth. The ease of becoming involved partly explains why group singing in Aotearoa New Zealand is this nation's most popular participatory art form.

The perennial popularity of singing is in contrast to the slow development of a fully mature form of choral music in this country. It has a much longer history than other common musical forms, such as orchestral music (eighteenth century), opera (seventeenth century) and pop music with its attendant technology (twentieth century). The choral world that most New Zealanders are aware of began in communities and churches in medieval Europe, and this mainstream classical tradition is the focus of this book.¹

The formatting, or presentation, of the classical style has changed over the centuries. Initially, choruses were small groups of soloists with other singers added as needed, but the nineteenth century saw large amateur-based choirs emerge. They

were regarded by many as a motley bunch — an unfortunate and unfair generalisation. However, when their often-mediocre standard didn't improve, the opprobrium attached to these large groups remained. So began a volunteer versus elite separation that is seen in choral activity worldwide.

In a little over a century, the public face of the art form changed enormously. The twentieth and early twenty-first centuries saw the emergence of new, smaller ensembles singing a wide range of music spanning many ethnicities and styles. The repertoire included whatever appealed to a director and for which singers would agree to attend rehearsals. There are still large choirs; many are singing fine music to a high artistic level, while others are stuck performing popular warhorses from an old repertoire. But audiences today are presented with a much wider range of choral offerings.

Whether in unison or harmony, regardless of whether musical notation is used or not, and irrespective of qualitative judgements about the experience, singing together has always enjoyed wide appeal. Globally, the spread and diversity of choral activity has been breathtaking.

It is relevant to consider the role choral music plays in modern society. One widely held view is that choral music is significant primarily for its social bonding function.² Another view is that it is a compelling and wholesome activity for individual participants. If playing in a brass band is good for the soul ('a boy who blows a horn won't blow a bank'), the discipline of singing in a good choir is similarly useful and empowering.

Another belief still strongly held is that artistic choral music can engender aesthetic growth while imparting pleasure. It is claimed that aesthetic maturity is developed by music like J. S. Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, Samuel Barber's choral version of his *Agnus Dei*, Ēriks Ešēnvalds' 'Only in Sleep' and *Spring Rain*, or Colin Brumby's 'Come Away, Death'. Two New Zealand compositions that could be regarded in the same vein are Jack Body's 'Carol to St. Stephen', and Ross Harris's 'Requiem for the Fallen'.³ There is also anecdotal evidence that choral music provides an accessible entry point into the other arts.

Choral music also provides the ability to transcend the everyday world. According to Austrian-born American sociologist Peter Berger, ecstasy is 'any experience of stepping outside the taken-for-granted reality of everyday life'.⁴ He, with others, argued that any life that lacks the capacity for ecstasy, wonder or awe is a profoundly impoverished one. An overwhelming feeling of ecstasy can be experienced through choral singing. Through the discipline of finely wrought rehearsals, techniques are

acquired by which the trivial and ordinary are transcended, and the capacity for intense delight is sharpened. There is nothing particularly mystical or unusual about this. Quite simply, quality choral singing provides opportunities to respond to the ecstatic, enriching everybody's lives.

Not surprisingly, Dr John Rutter, one of the world's most prominent choral composers, applauds the worth of choral music. It is not one of life's 'frills', he says, but:

something that goes to the very heart of our humanity. . . . When you sing, you express your soul.

People . . . pouring out their hearts and souls in perfect harmony is a kind of emblem for what we need in this world, when so much of the world is at odds with itself. . . .

Everybody who has sung in a choir tells me that they feel better for doing it . . . somehow you leave your troubles at the door . . . you walk away refreshed.

Music is like a great oak tree that rises up from the centre of the human race and spreads its branches everywhere. [The values of music shine like a beacon] and choral music must stand as one of the supreme examples of it.⁵

One intention of this book was to determine why some of our choirs have become so good. It quickly became clear that the answer was complex. Interviews with skilled practitioners revealed that, learning from their own experiences, they tended to have in mind a three-point model for success: auditioned, coached voices; quality, challenging repertoire; and a trained, visionary conductor. They omitted a fourth (probably necessary) component, which has mainly been ignored: resonant performance spaces. Acoustically reverberant spaces with high, sound-reflective ceilings are necessary if singers and directors are to find reassurance and inspiration in performance and for audiences to feel sufficiently rewarded.

All four components have played roles in New Zealand choral music's rise to excellence. An aim of this book has been to look for specific evidence that the four



The National Youth Choir performing in the fine acoustic space of the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament in Christchurch, 1982. Peter Godfrey is at far left and Guy Jansen at far right. CHOIRS AOTEAROA NZ

points have contributed to the high quality of our best choirs. The search involved, for voices, choirs whose members had voice training, conductors who began with a singing background or had developed their vocal expertise, and groups that invited a vocal coach into rehearsals. For repertoire, it involved looking for the effect of musical choices (from mediocre to artistically imaginative), including New Zealand compositions, on discerning choral musicians and their futures. For conducting, it meant looking for the effect of a trained conductor on a choir's performance. With performance spaces, it involved looking for the influence of nurturing acoustics, comparing Wells Cathedral and the Dunedin and Wellington town halls to the more challenging Llangollen Pavilion in Wales, where New Zealand conductor and musical director Karen Grylls had great success in 1999, and contrasting these with the disastrously dry acoustics of many New Zealand halls that have had to be used; and the confronting demands of outdoor singing.

As well as investigating the criteria for successful choirs, it has been relevant to note which individuals have risen to prominence and, more broadly, to see how choral music has been treated in historical works along with its place in the arts today.

Music enthusiasts can be inclined to claim more for their heroes than might be justified, and sometimes the work of other notables in the field is overlooked because of lack of information about them. Of course, there is usually no problem in determining who was 'the greatest of them all'. Phil Garland, called the 'godfather of New Zealand folk music', dedicated over 50 years of his life to collecting, interpreting and preserving the songs of our colonial past; he recorded 19 albums, and received awards for his pioneering work. There were no other front-runners. There was also little debate about Kevan Moore being named the 'godfather of New Zealand music TV' after his unique, creative impact in television musical entertainment in the 1960s and 1970s. In the operatic realm we have been fortunate in being able to accommodate two dames: Dame Malvina Major and Dame Kiri Te Kanawa. It would be a brave person, however, to decide who should be honoured as the greatest in New Zealand's popular music industry.

It didn't take long to find enthusiastic anointing of prominent individuals in the choral sphere. In the late nineteenth century, choral conductor Robert Parker, for nearly 60 years the doyen of Wellington musicians, was described as a 'father of New Zealand music'. In 1936, Victor Peters in Christchurch was said to be as good as the leading British choral conductors of the day. In the same year, Stanley Oliver's Wellington Schola Cantorum was considered by Australia's leading conductor, Sir Bernard Heinze, to be probably the finest choir of its kind in the world. Maxwell

Fernie's Catholic Choir at St Mary of the Angels, also in Wellington, had by the mid-1960s gained a worldwide reputation through its first LP recording.

In 2015, Peter Godfrey was described as the 'father of New Zealand choral music'. Elizabeth Kerr accurately points out that 'our choral tradition was born a century before his arrival [in 1958, from England]'.⁶ She quotes John Mansfield Thomson when describing that formative time: 'The colonial choral society was an awesome sight: tiers of ladies in billowing white, bearded gentlemen in black, beneath a panoply of organ pipes.'⁷

Kerr goes on to say that 'Prof', as Godfrey was affectionately known, 'may not have fathered our choral tradition, but has left an indelible stamp upon it'. What may be relevant for New Zealand's large choral community now is to ponder a generous but more precise place for Godfrey. That is also an intention of this book. I worked with him for several years, having initially invited him into the National Youth Choir organisation as Principal Guest Conductor and, like thousands of others, had the greatest of admiration for him.

A new way will be needed to appropriately acknowledge New Zealand's most prominent female choral conductor, Karen Grylls. She not only enhanced the existing choirs she was appointed to, but also thrust her own creation, Voices New Zealand Chamber Choir, into the international spotlight, drawing comparisons with Team New Zealand in the America's Cup and the All Blacks in world rugby. Her successful postgraduate work with a new generation of choral leaders, and her leading, in 1999, of arguably this country's best ever choir to the 'Choir of the World' triumph speaks for itself.

During research, it became apparent that few New Zealanders know that choir singing is this nation's most popular participatory art form or that New Zealand choirs have been very successful in prestigious overseas competitions. This lack of knowledge is reflected in poor coverage of the topic in general New Zealand history books. Historians Keith Sinclair (1959) and Michael King (2003) are virtually silent on the place of music in society. James Belich's two-volume standard history of New Zealand contains references to music ranging from accounts of lively music, opera and theatre when the major goldfields were discovered in 1861 (including the assemblage of circus, vaudeville, folklore and ballads that existed in the goldfields culture) to a reminder that from the late nineteenth century almost 60 New Zealanders had become international opera stars.⁸ He documents the over-representation of Māori

among professional singers, 'of whom they comprise 32 per cent compared with 15 per cent of the general population'. But in over 1100 pages there are few mentions of group singing.⁹

The arts are referred to in general by Belich. For example, the Wellington Arts Festival is seen as internationally competitive; avant-garde expatriate Kiwi artists, such as Len Lye and Billy Apple, made reputations overseas; Split Enz achieved national icon status by 1984. However, Belich writes not a word about Douglas Lilburn, Dame Gillian Whitehead, Jenny McLeod, Ngāpō (Bub) Wehi, Sir William Southgate or other prominent composers and conductors, nor does he provide any information about choirs and the sizeable choral community that had evolved by the beginning of the new millennium. Standout choral achievers like Robert Parker, Stanley Oliver, Maxwell Fernie and Peter Godfrey are notable for their absence.

More recent histories by Giselle Byrnes (2009) and Philippa Mein Smith (2012) also ignore choral dimensions.¹⁰ There is virtually no mention of choral works in the 2011 book *Just Like Us: Aspects of New Zealand Music*.¹¹ Peter Lineham (2017) is one of the exceptions among historians, with perceptive, scholarly comments about choirs in colonial society, the many roles of choirs in all church denominations, music being 'a symbol of intellectual cultivation' in the new colony, and a heavy English influence, including 'the Victorian love of ornateness'.¹² Passionate New Zealander John Mansfield Thomson was a knight in shining armour for the choral cause. His recorded talks and writings often illuminate the subject, including entries in his milestone publication, *The Oxford History of New Zealand Music* (1991).¹³

The challenge for historians is to not marginalise the arts, and the fact that they have not adequately described how the arts have contributed to our national life and vision has made it more difficult to discern the distinctive character of Aotearoa New Zealand. William Renwick, scholar and Director-General of Education from 1975 to 1988, often commented on New Zealand's emerging sense of national identity. In an address in which he noted how two very different traditions — Pākehā painting and Māori carving — had influenced each other, he made the observation that 'encouraging the arts in cultural diversity is one consequence of taking multiculturalism seriously'.¹⁴ Renwick would undoubtedly have agreed that before the arts can be encouraged, people must know about them in their diverse cultural contexts and how they enhance our lives in a multicultural society.

Cambridge historian G. M. Trevelyan once wrote: 'Let the science and research of the historian find the fact and let his imagination and art make clear its significance.'¹⁵ We need better coverage of the wide range of the arts now functioning in society,

with greater attention given to the influence of social and cultural institutions.

Perhaps the reason a book telling the choral story has not previously been produced is that experienced choral practitioners have been too busy. They are usually drawn into over-engaged, year-round commitments, leaving almost no time for reflection or research. It was only in 2011, when I took permanent leave of the three choirs I was conducting, that I thought I would have the time, inclination and energy to consider taking up the challenge.

Along with prominent figures in choral history, the names of many choir accompanists are mentioned. Good accompanists often don't receive the respect that they deserve, and poor accompanists can effectively derail the best of choirs. Of course, it's not only accompanists but also assistant conductors, vocal coaches, committee members, administrators, managers and musicians who train choruses for operas and musicals, among others, who help the choral industry thrive.

If accompanists have often had a bad rap, conductors have sometimes been completely painted out of the picture. There's an odd practice of naming a choir without identifying its conductor, as though a choir can do a wonderful job without a director. While some ensembles are set up to work well without an obvious conductor, the majority of choirs rise or fall according to the abilities of the person out front, so a conductor's name has been added where appropriate.

Composers and arrangers can also find themselves in the forgotten brigade, with often a choral title mentioned but without the name of composer or arranger. We need to know the composer's name for each choral piece. If it's not given, there can be amusement, frustration or bewilderment — and there's also the small matter of disrespect to the composer.

The narrative is placed in the context of New Zealand's changing social and cultural life and it also takes some account of national personality traits. New Zealanders are often depicted as laid-back, understated, suitably humble, sometimes self-deprecating and not wanting to be taken too seriously, and also displaying a 'can-do' attitude. This theme is taken up again in the final chapter.

Nau mai rā ki ngā kōrero i huataki mai nei i te whitu rau tau ki muri i te wā ko Aotearoa tētahi o ngā whenua takitahi o te ao kia nohoia e te tangata.

So, welcome to the story which began about 700 years ago, when Aotearoa New Zealand was one of the few countries in the world still to be settled.



1

The
heritage
of Māori
song and
the birth
of a new
tradition

Over 700 years ago, groups of people in Aotearoa New Zealand were singing together. The story of choral music in this country begins there, and this chapter examines what that group singing was like, how it developed, and how it has influenced choir music in this country over the past 200 years.

Polynesians exploring the Pacific discovered Aotearoa, ‘The Land of the Long White Cloud’, in the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries.¹ Some traditions credit the navigator Kupe, in his waka hourua (double-hulled voyaging canoe), with making the discovery. It is likely that many waka hourua made return journeys between Aotearoa and the original homelands in Eastern Polynesia as migration took place.

These first settlers brought with them a culture and a history recorded in whakapapa (genealogy), arts (including carvings of many kinds), and in waiata (songs).

Waiata were at the heart of the settlers forging a life in this new land. Waiata transmitted knowledge and beliefs, and they were used in rituals and to communicate with the deities. Singing was important in ‘recording the deeds of ancestors, lamenting losses, calling to a lover or marking the birth of a child’, and played a dynamic part in Māori life, for personal, social and spiritual reasons.²

Unison chant, deriving from Eastern Polynesia, was the basis of Māori singing. Chants often employed only three or four notes, within a range as small as a minor third. There were many kinds of chants; for example, for paddling a canoe, or for going to war. There were lullabies, waiata aroha (love songs) and waiata tangi (laments). The pātere was a lively genre with usually abusive lyrics composed by slandered women and accompanied by defiant gestures. According to Māori scholar and composer Sir Tīmoti Kāretu, it was revived as the preferred genre of the younger Māori generation in the late twentieth century. Performed mainly on a rhythmic monotone, the pātere represents a vital part of the ancient unison chant tradition.

Classical, ancient Māori chant is collectively described as mōteatea. Over a 40-year period, scholar and politician Sir Āpirana Ngata gathered and recorded hundreds of waiata, and his collection, *Ngā Mōteatea*, was first published in 1928–29. Lullabies, laments and songs of love were the three main categories of waiata mōteatea, but he also included other forms: ruri (amorous songs), mata (prophetic songs), waiata tira (choral songs without actions) and karakia (incantations and prayers).³

Harmony (singing in three or more melodic parts) was ‘absolutely unknown’ in Māori culture.⁴ Through most of the twentieth century, Westernised four-part harmony has been a standard part of Māori hymn singing, and of waiata-ā-ringa (action songs), but before Pākehā arrived, it was unheard of.

However, a tradition of singing in groups had developed. This was because a chant required a continuous sound from beginning to end. While a solo singer would need to stop regularly to take breaths, members of a group could breathe at different places to keep the sound going. It was because a group was *always* needed that a Māori solo

singing tradition didn't develop. As Kāretu points out, 'a solo singer would never have been able to satisfy the dictates of the art'.

The pre-eminence of chant singing before the arrival of Europeans is clear, and it must have required a very disciplined approach, because each category of traditional chant had its own distinctive melodies and tempi. Some chants were microtonal (a microtone being any interval smaller than a semitone) and these chants must have required intensive listening and practice.⁵ Westerners tend to find quartertones or other microtones difficult even to hear, let alone sing.

A Māori group singing a chant would have been heard by the crew of James Cook's *Endeavour* in 1769 when they went ashore in Poverty Bay on the North Island's east coast. Cook was the second significant European explorer to arrive in New Zealand, the first being Dutchman Abel Tasman in 1642, who did not venture ashore. Cook himself found the music 'very doleful to a European ear', and thought that they sang 'in semitones', while his officers were dismissive of the musical ability of 'the natives'. On a later voyage, Cook had on board a young James Burney, son of Charles Burney, the famous English music historian, and Burney thought that there was 'no great variety in the Music'. There were other remarks in a similar vein.

There is a mystery, however, about what was meant by James Burney's comment in 1773 after he heard a performance by a young warrior, Ihaka Te Rangihouhia, and his party: 'Sometimes they sing an underpart which is a third lower, except for the last 2 notes which are the same.'⁶ Choral expert Karen Grylls and others interpret the comment as demonstrating singing in harmony.⁷ It could be argued, however, that the underpart was a horizontal variant of the chant, not vertical note-clusters or harmony. There are no triads (three-note chords) involved, therefore there is no 'harmony' as traditionally understood; it is made up solely of intervals, which, by definition, consist of two notes only.⁸

Understandably, Burney's Western ears would have perceived the underpart harmonically, not realising that the indigenous people didn't employ harmony, though the aural *impression* of harmony that the Te Rangihouhia performance could have given was real enough. But the motivation of the singers could have had a much different aim: to give variety to the chant and to respect the status of the chant by coming back to it every now and again with unisons.

No Europeans coming in contact with the original inhabitants of Aotearoa could discern the practised microtonal idiom and idiosyncratic musical style that Māori were displaying. And visiting sailors weren't to know that they had come upon a group singing culture, whose songs had for centuries been an integral part of both ceremonial occasions and everyday life.



Māori culture group Ngaru Kaha,
from Whangārei, during Waitangi Day
celebrations in 2009. ALAMY/PAUL KENNEDY

When the missionary Samuel Marsden sailed from Sydney to New Zealand for a second time in 1815, his right-hand man, John Liddiard Nicholas, wrote a very different account of the singing of Māori who were travelling on board the ship:

a plaintive and melodious air and seemed not unlike some of our sacred music . . . as it forcibly reminded me of the chanting in our cathedrals, it being deep, slow and extended. . . . It was divided into parts, which the chiefs sang separately, and were joined in chorus, at certain intervals, by the other New Zealanders, while they all concluded it together.⁹

In time, harmonised singing became a part of the Māori repertoire, and kapa haka (performing groups) included songs based on popular Pākehā tunes. Tin Pan Alley in Manhattan, New York, was the source of many popular traditional American songs borrowed by kapa haka groups in the early twentieth century. Māori culture became infiltrated by a Western musical system, but there were differences: finding the harmony of a song was not taught by a tutor but was left to individuals within the group. There was no conductor; the singer's ear dictated where one should go musically. This aural/aesthetic ability is not confined to Māori but has become a marked feature of disciplined, beautiful choral singing at Māori performing arts festivals (see Chapters 7 and 13).

As Kāretu points out, all latter-day performing Māori groups could, in the broadest sense, be called choral groups, including those that sing the waiata-ā-ringa (action songs), which is often performed with the poi, a lightweight ball swung rhythmically on a string. The combination of polished harmony with fluid movement results in a 'beautiful amalgam of sound'.¹⁰ It is finely rehearsed, yet spontaneity is never lost, and the passion and power of the performance is as evident in faces and body movement as it is in the voice.

One of the best-known forms of Māori group performance is the haka. The term kapa haka (which literally means a group of people lined up in rows, or a haka group) refers to the art forms of waiata, poi and waiata-ā-ringa, as well as to haka such as 'Ka Mate!', composed by Ngāti Toa leader Te Rauparaha and made famous by New Zealand's national rugby team, the All Blacks. The haka is a song, or rhythmically shouted cries, accompanied by vigorous dancing, expressing a life force and traditionally used as part of the formal process of challenge and response when two parties meet. There have been many variations of haka and they run the whole gamut of human experience.¹¹



TOP 'Messieurs Marsden and Nicholas passing a night with the Zealanders'. Samuel Marsden and John Liddiard Nicholas prepare to sleep with Māori at Matauri Bay, Bay of Islands, November 1814. ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY, PQ266CHO1838[4406]

BELOW The All Blacks perform the haka before a match against the Australian Wallabies at Eden Park, Auckland, on 15 August 2015.

DPA PICTURE ALLIANCE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

In 1942, New Zealand poet Allen Curnow wrote tellingly: ‘Always to islanders danger is what comes over the sea.’¹²

The artistic danger for the New Zealand ‘islanders’ was that, at any time after the arrival of Abel Tasman or James Cook, Māori might begin to lose their musical heritage with its microtonal legacy, vocal embellishments and powerful impact. There appears to have been little research on the typical nature of Māori vocal tone, but it is likely affected by factors such as how often the singing voice is used, whether the singing is outdoors (more nasal quality and chest voice) and whether they sing on the larynx or from the diaphragm.

In 1949, Ngata, in an introduction to *Ngā Mōteatea*, lamented this loss, which resulted from the dominance of a Pākehā scheme of education: ‘The ear of the Māori has become less and less receptive to the notes of his native music, less discerning of its scale of quarter tones and more inclined . . . to be satisfied with the songs and the music, which the races of the world, except his own, serve out to him “ad nauseum”.’¹³ While Māori were, in fact, to lose aspects of their traditions, Pākehā settlers were to gain enormously in the long term. Pākehā choirs, trained in an English style, at first did not understand Māori music and as a result brought prejudicial judgements to it. But, over time, early settlers came to appreciate the natural resonance, the rich vocal timbres, and the vitality and innate musicality of Māori music. The taonga of Māori singing came to be seen for the gift that it was.

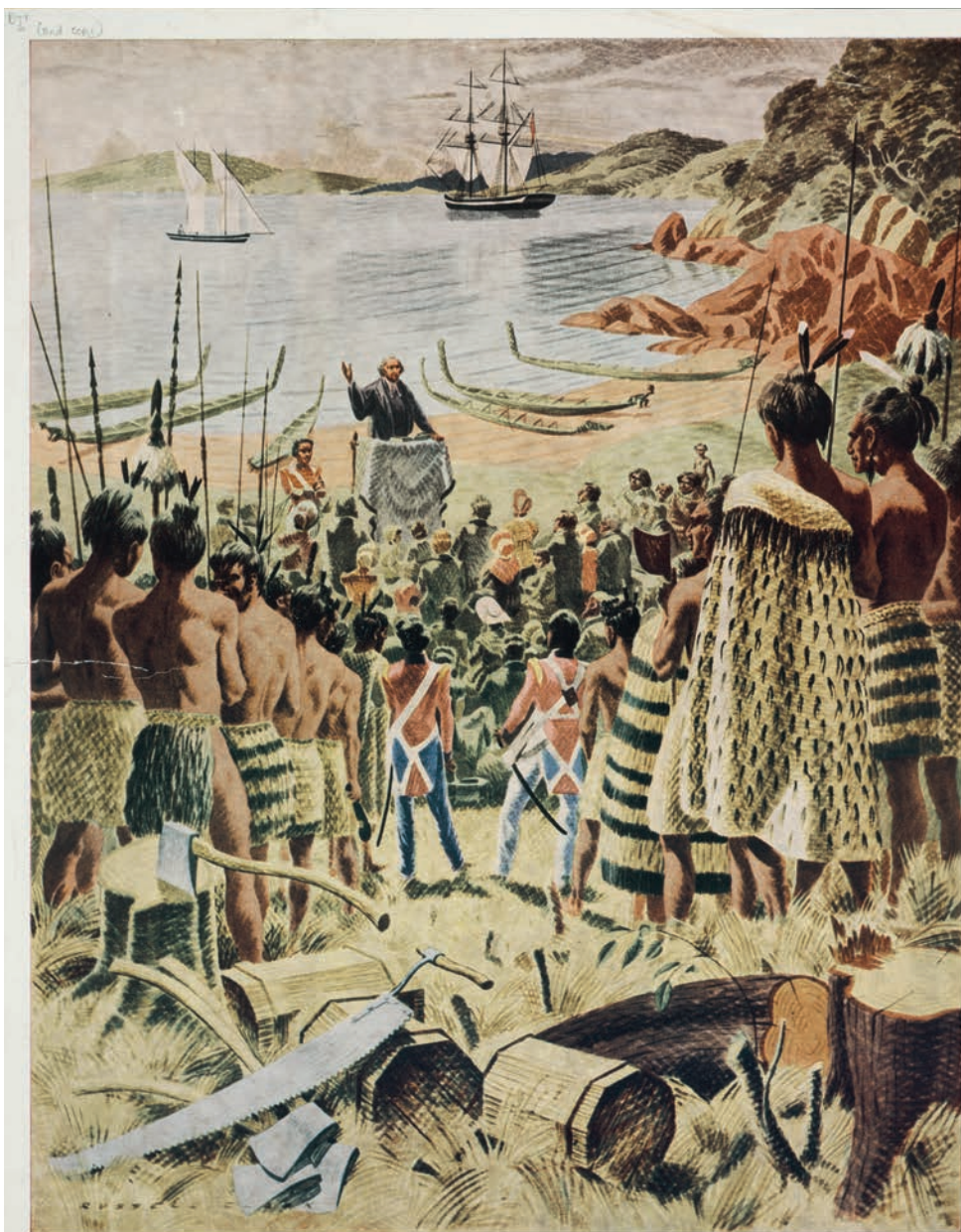
Samuel Marsden’s own story, recorded in his journal, about the first Christian service on New Zealand soil on Christmas Day 1814, is that he began it with a psalm commonly known as the ‘Old Hundredth’. This part of our nation’s history was begun by a sizeable crowd formally singing together.

Oihi Beach, Bay of Islands 1814

A very solemn silence prevailed — the sight was truly impressive. I rose up and began the service with singing the Old Hundredth psalm . . .¹⁴

It was a fine, still morning in a secluded bay in northern New Zealand. The crowd gathered on a white-sand beach, with scarlet pōhutukawa in bloom along the shore. Fantails, tūi, the shining cuckoo and the rasping kākā — New Zealand’s exceptional abundance of birds provided a spectacular singing soundscape.¹⁵

All this was a surprising setting for the birth of a new singing tradition. Slowly,



(By courtesy of the artist, Russell Clark.)

“BEHOLD I BRING YOU GOOD TIDINGS OF GREAT JOY”

*Thus was the Gospel of Jesus Christ First Proclaimed on these Shores by the Rev. Samuel Marsden
at Oihi, Bay of Islands, Christmas Day, 1814*

N.Z. CHURCH MISSIONARY SOCIETY

Samuel Marsden at Oihi Beach, Bay of Islands, Christmas Day 1814. To Marsden's right is Ruatara, a Ngāpuhi leader, dressed in British regalia. PAINTING BY RUSSELL

STUART CLARK, ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY, B-077-006

about 300 people gathered, including Māori and a handful of Pākehā, from a ship anchored in the bay, plus 30 or so from Marsden's brig, *Active*. Many of the passengers would have known the psalm as 'All People that on Earth do Dwell'. There were five missionaries and their wives aboard the *Active*, and some of their children would also have been familiar with the piece. Also present from the ship were Ruatara, a young leader of the local iwi Ngāpuhi, other Ngāpuhi leaders Hongi Hika and Korokoro, and up to four other Māori. They had been to Marsden's Sydney home for extended periods where this, the most common of psalms, would have been sung from time to time. Perhaps that is why Marsden chose it for this first service.

Ruatara had invited Marsden to preach at his settlement, Rangihoua, and he translated the sermon as it was delivered. He and other local Māori would have been keen to make the event a success, and the half dozen Māori who had sung the song before would arguably have sung it with gusto. The de facto 'choir' of the day could also have included some of the crew and companions of Marsden's ship — sailors, sawyers, a blacksmith and a stowaway convict — unauditioned raw recruits who formed a most unlikely ensemble for such a prestigious occasion. No doubt clarity of words and unified vocal tone were absent, as were blend, balance and breath management, or vibratos wide enough to jump through. Certainly the 200-year-old classic psalm would not have been heard in 'a magnificent burst of harmony', such as at an English part-singing festival. If Māori and Pākehā did sing together on that summer morning, the musical offering must have been culturally odd-sounding and diffident. A Māori heritage of sensitive microtone singing was being overtaken by a Western diatonicism. Perhaps, at best, the performance was a kind of ragged, bilingual choral chant.

Regardless of the aesthetic quality and impact of the performance, however, the beach congregation shared in an experience that could legitimately be called 'choral'. It didn't matter whether the unison singing with a little harmony was in tune or out of tune, in time or out of time, even barely audible, or whether Marsden's leadership was musical or merely 'happily enthusiastic'. After all, the 'choir' wasn't rehearsed.

Māori had sung corporately (gathering 'in the bonds of love') for several centuries before 1814. Equally, the Europeans present shared a long history of group singing. Two very different traditions came together on that sunny Northland beach. So, did Christmas Day 1814 witness the birth of a distinctively new choral tradition in New Zealand, one that would eventually blend Māori and Pākehā? Or is that claim too audacious?

In time, the new choral art form being established in New Zealand would feature

indigenous and introduced elements, high art and popular art, many musical genres and styles, fabulously deep performances as well as fads and fashions. Choir music would become societally pervasive and widely accepted everywhere.

The basic fabric of Māori communal singing was already in place. The foundations of a European-influenced choral edifice were, however, to be laid slowly; for a long time they would look a little like a patchwork quilt. To understand the beginnings of the Pākehā culture in New Zealand it is to the musical scene in England at the time that we now must turn.