Opera in the Antipodes

A FORGOTTEN ASPECT OF THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY TRANS-TASMAN ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

DURING THE nineteenth century, social life in New Zealand was enlivened and enriched by the activities of a multitude of touring theatrical companies. The largest of these were the opera companies that delighted audiences from Invercargill to Thames with their wide-ranging repertoires of French, German, Italian and English works. Looked at from today’s standpoint, opera is a subject scarcely recognized as having historical and social significance in the context of early European settlement. In a country still coming to terms with its own growth to nationhood it is not difficult for the general public to understand why a scholar should study, for example, the colonial New Zealand wars. It is less easy to generate similar recognition for work that investigates the recreational activities of the colonial world at peace. Yet there can be little doubt that most citizens in nineteenth-century New Zealand would have spent more time enjoying various forms of recreational entertainment than worrying about the wars. To arrive at an understanding of what life was like for the European settlers in this land, it is just as valid to study the leisure-time activities of colonial society as to study the dramatic events of history. Since colonial society enjoyed a musical and theatrical life of quite astonishing richness and diversity, an examination of the impact made by touring operatic troupes is not only interesting in itself, but helps to illuminate the flourishing early entertainment industry as a whole.

Even a cursory examination of primary sources reveals the extent to which Australia and New Zealand represented a single market for those involved in providing all forms of colonial entertainment. The same names appear on both sides of the Tasman. In contrast to the scanty amount of existing research on New Zealand’s nineteenth-century entertainment industry, Australia is rich in specialist studies. Few, however, adopt an Australasian perspective. Australian writings on operatic history contain little mention of the New Zealand activities of performers, entrepreneurs and companies and so tell only part of what is a colourful and far from negligible story.¹

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¹ The first important survey of operatic activity in Australia is F.C. Brewer, The Drama and Music in New South Wales, Sydney, 1892. Modern studies include Harold Love, The Golden Age of Australian Opera: W.S. Lyster and his Companies 1861-1880, Sydney, 1981; Alison Gyger, Opera for the Antipodes, Sydney, 1990 (which despite its title deals only with Australia); and Robyn
Opera was one of the most admired forms of colonial entertainment. Its status was enhanced by royal approval. Queen Victoria’s enthusiasm for opera and her patronage of such opera singers as Giulia Grisi and Luigi Lablache were both well known and influential. In Victorian times opera was so popular that arias and orchestral passages from favourite works were regularly transcribed for almost any instrument, but particularly for the ubiquitous piano that was the centrepiece of so many colonial parlours. Bringing your piano with you was strongly recommended to prospective migrants. As one New Zealand commentator put it in 1856: ‘if a lady were hesitating whether to pay freight for her piano or a chest of drawers, I would decidedly recommend her to prefer the piano.’ Surviving evidence suggests that the singing and playing of operatic selections was an integral part of the music-making that flourished in colonial homes.

When booksellers set up in business in the colonies they offered such wares as a matter of course. Advertisements regularly featured vocal scores and books of well-known arias for sale. Outside the home, the military bands that were the backbone of early musical life relied heavily on operatic repertoire. At the band contest held in connection with the 1885 New Zealand Industrial Exhibition, the Invercargill Garrison Band offered nothing else. Its programme began with an arrangement of Rossini’s overture to *William Tell*, continued with two ‘own selections’ from the Verdi operas *Rigoletto* and *Il Trovatore* and concluded with excerpts from Donizetti’s *Lucrezia Borgia*. Many similar examples can be gleaned from newspapers and surviving programmes.

That the plots and the music of famous operas were part of the nineteenth century’s intellectual stock-in-trade is shown by the repertoires of travelling burlesque companies. These represented one of the lower common denominators of public entertainment, yet they routinely offered colonial audiences skits and parodies of standard operas, with titles like *Ill-Treated Il Trovatore* and *Carmen-up-to-date*, in perfect confidence that their patrons were familiar enough with the originals to understand the point of the joke.

Singing was itself a highly acceptable accomplishment. The choral tradition was strong in both countries from the early years of settlement. Operatic repertoire figured largely in the music sung by choral societies, many of whom mounted concert performances of favourite works such as Wallace’s *Maritana*. The Australian music historian, Roger Covell, commenting upon what he called ‘the insatiable appetite for opera’ in colonial society, suggested that the ‘elements of sheer display and brazen dexterity’ in opera singing related closely to the

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4 Alexander Turnbull Library, Ephemera B Music 1885.
appeal that sport had for his fellow countrymen. Certainly the best colonial opera singers seem to have been as much admired in their communities as local sporting heroes. Similarly, the exploits of international singers were widely reported in Australasian newspapers in a fashion not found today.

Telling confirmation of opera’s popularity can be obtained by examining two examples drawn from New Zealand’s sporting history. In August 1876 a rugby team representing Christchurch came north to play a match against Auckland. It was a special occasion and the hosts were anxious to entertain their visitors well. They offered the players the choice of spending their free evening at the skating rink or at the opera. There was an excellent opera company in town — one which, as it happened, had already played a season in Christchurch. Contrary to twentieth-century expectations, the young men of the rugby team chose to attend the opera. This is not altogether surprising, given rugby’s origin in the English public schools and the probable background of many of the Canterbury XV. In 1876 few, if any, of the players would have been colonial-born. They chose, according to their education and upbringing, to enjoy an evening at what was, for them, an acceptable and popular form of entertainment.

Such factors cannot explain the second example. In 1889, when the so-called ‘Native Rugby Team’ disbanded in Auckland after a successful tour of Australia and Britain, they also patronized the opera as one of their farewell gala events. This team, the first to tour internationally from New Zealand, was a combination of full Maori, players of mixed race and colonial-born players of European descent. That they should patronize the opera indicates much about the continuing audience appeal and general acceptability of the form to a generation that had no first-hand knowledge of opera in Europe. It also emphasizes how dangerous it is to judge the past by the attitudes of the present. The still-prevalent modern concept of opera as a specialized art form enjoyed only by a few has led — at least in New Zealand — to an underestimation of the extent to which it permeated all levels of nineteenth-century society. Today it may seem elitist; then, it was a popular commodity. Its subject matter was usually melodramatic in an age when melodrama was the predominant theatrical style and its amalgam of stage spectacle, music, dance, drama, and vocal virtuosity gave it wide appeal.

Opera in the Antipodes was a remarkably egalitarian phenomenon. When early theatres in Australasia were designated ‘Opera House’ the name did not imply, as it tended to do in Europe, a building kept exclusively for opera. Since almost any form of entertainment could take place there, opera was not perceived as something set apart. In addition, many nineteenth-century colonial performers regularly crossed what are today regarded as almost insuperable boundaries. Actors and actresses who trod the boards in melodrama were often to be found in supporting roles in opera companies. In the same way, particularly up to the end of the 1880s, musicians participated both in opera and in touring minstrel or variety shows. The latter often boasted small orchestras and included singers

6 *Daily Southern Cross*, 30, 31 August 1876.
7 Advertisement in the *Auckland Star*, 24 August 1889.
who could perform operatic excerpts as well as folk-songs and ballads. While this may be an indication of standards, it also says much for the versatility expected from contemporary artists. The lines of demarcation in colonial entertainment were frequently blurred.

The labour-intensive nature of opera did, however, make it expensive to tour and produce. It therefore represented the top end of the entertainment market. Given the limited population base it could only exist if it drew a wide cross-section of the available public. This was achieved partly by novelty. New works from overseas appeared in Australasia with astonishing rapidity. Lighter pieces, such as Offenbach operettas or the works of Gilbert and Sullivan, could be seen in Australia within a year of their first European performances and in New Zealand within two. The grander operas frequently did not lag far behind. Verdi’s Aida was seen in both Australia and New Zealand within six years of its original production. The 1877 premieres of Wagner’s Lohengrin on both sides of the Tasman pre-dated those in all American cities save New York.*

Popularity also depended upon the cost of tickets, particularly in recessionary times. Prices for opera were inevitably higher than those for other forms of entertainment, yet even at their most expensive they remained surprisingly cheap by European standards. Moreover, seat prices steadily declined as the century progressed. Where, in 1864, the first opera company to visit New Zealand charged 7s 6d for the best seats, the top price demanded by its successors of the 1880s was 6s. Places in the pit could be obtained for as little as a shilling. Perhaps because of this, Australasian opera audiences appear to have been more representative of the community at large than they would have been in Europe and, although the trend towards a separation between popular and what might be termed ‘intellectual’ culture does show up in both countries prior to World War I, it is only afterwards that it becomes marked.

A few statistics will further emphasize the level of operatic activity in Australasia. In 1965 the English magazine Opera published a survey of opera in London in the year 1865.9 Two opera houses were operating in the city that year. Between them they put on 25 different operas. All bar five of these had already been performed or were about to be performed in Australia. Most had also been performed in New Zealand. In the period equivalent to the 1865 London season Melbourne enjoyed 23 different operas and Dunedin nineteen. Considering the huge discrepancy in population size this is a staggering wealth of activity, particularly as the London theatres were served by resident companies whereas in Melbourne and Dunedin opera was presented by a touring company which criss-crossed Australasia to play seasons in any centre deemed large enough to be profitable.

Professional opera in the Antipodes began as a rather hybrid affair. Not enough skilled performers were available in the early years to present what would be described today as ‘real opera’. What existed, certainly from the 1830s in Hobart and Sydney, were musical plays and ballad-style operas, usually

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presented in a mixed bill with other forms of entertainment. Probably the first true operatic performance in Australia was of Weber’s *Der Freischütz* at Sydney’s Royal Victoria Theatre on 15 September 1838. The earliest production of an Italian opera appears to have been Bellini’s *La Sonnambula*, seen in Hobart in 1842. The first Adelaide performance of the same opera, in June 1851, illustrates the context in which colonial operatic performances usually occurred at this time, for it was interspersed with dances and presented in a double bill, the other half of which was a farce entitled *The Dancing Barber*. Similarly the work’s first New Zealand production, in October 1862 in Dunedin, was accompanied by what was advertised as a ‘musical drama’ called *Sketches of India*.

Such mixed programmes helped establish opera’s accessibility and popularity with colonial audiences.

Once introduced, opera proliferated as quickly as available performers allowed. In the 1850s both Sydney and Melbourne enjoyed irregular opera seasons. By 1860 the first touring company was on the road. It was led by two immigrant Italian singers, Eugenio and Giovanna Bianchi. On arrival in Sydney they joined forces with several artists already resident and were soon taking operatic entertainment to Melbourne and Adelaide. The latter was a small town of some 20,000 inhabitants at the time, but the Bianchi opera season, which began there on 20 February 1861, lasted an astonishing 54 nights. The company consisted of seven travelling singers, apparently augmented by locally recruited extras and chorus, and a five-strong professional orchestra directed from the keyboard. Fourteen operas were presented: five by Donizetti, five by Verdi, two by Bellini, and one each by Rossini and Balfe.

It was while the Bianchis were in Adelaide that Australia’s first fully-fledged and soon-to-be-resident company arrived in Melbourne under the aegis of a remarkable Irish-born entrepreneur, William Saurin Lyster. Like so many others, he was lured to Australia by the discovery of gold. It was gold that provided the catalyst for the rapid expansion of the entire antipodean entertainment industry. The rushes had an immense effect on population, on the provision of amenities, and on the money available to pay for entertainment to fill the leisure hours. These matters have been well-documented elsewhere, as has the history of William Lyster and his operatic endeavours. Lyster’s great achievement was to make touring opera a permanent part of the Australasian scene and to pioneer the type of organization that would be emulated by other impresarios. Under his influence opera became, as an *Argus* critic observed on 25 October 1871, ‘one of the necessities of Melbourne’, and the city was established as the operatic centre of the Antipodes, a position it generally retained throughout the rest of the nineteenth century. From this base, Lyster and his emulators and successors fanned out with their companies to bring opera to many Australian

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10 Holmes, pp.13. 27.
11 Review in *Otago Daily Times*, 31 October 1862.
12 Holmes, p.33.
and New Zealand venues on a surprisingly regular basis. Even towns the size of Nelson, Napier, Wanganui and Invercargill could rely on enjoying frequent visits from touring opera companies.

Recruits for Australasian opera came from both Europe and America, but the majority found their way to Melbourne by way of California where the gold rushes had created a demand for entertainment similar to that experienced in Australia and New Zealand. Because Italian opera was the ruling passion among audiences there was a heavy demand for Italian singers. Some were imported to bolster newly-formed ensembles. On rare occasions an entire Italian company arrived. A good example is the Cagli-Pompei company which reached Melbourne by way of Calcutta and Batavia in 1871 and remained to enrich the operatic life of Australia and New Zealand for several seasons. Many artists who came as short-term visitors, or to fulfil specific contracts, stayed on as permanent settlers. Nevertheless, the pool of talent available at any one time was finite and the advent of a new performer was worth several column inches in the newspapers. Companies revolved around the entrepreneurs who ran them and artists were engaged by the tour. If a tour proved successful they could find themselves in work for many months at a time. If unsuccessful they could be stranded on the wrong side of the Tasman and — at worst — dependent on charity for their steamer fare home. When a tour ended they lived as they could until another opportunity came their way.

Some performers became primarily associated with one operatic manager, particularly in the 1860s and early 1870s when the redoubtable Lyster dominated the circuit. But most moved from company to company, depending on the work available. It was the entrepreneurs, many of whom were themselves performers, who dictated the direction of antipodean operatic taste. Repertoire was heavily biased towards Italian operas by such composers as Donizetti, Bellini and Verdi. Meyerbeer was much featured in the earlier years, while compositions by the English school of Wallace and Balfe remained standards throughout the period. As the century progressed, operetta and opera-bouffe became prevalent, with works by Offenbach, Lecocq, and Gilbert and Sullivan. In Sydney and Melbourne the five most popular works, judged in terms of number of performances taking place between 1849 and 1914, were Wallace’s _Maritana_, Gilbert and Sullivan’s _H.M.S. Pinafore_, Gounod’s _Faust_, Balfe’s _The Bohemian Girl_ and Verdi’s _Il Trovatore_.

Although a survey has not yet been undertaken for New Zealand, it seems probable that findings would be very similar.

Touring company sizes varied considerably. In New Zealand, shoe-string enterprises such as the companies brought in 1882, 1892, and 1894 by the husband and wife team of Annis Montague and Charles Turner had a nucleus of around thirty permanent members and concentrated on operas which did not demand too much in the way of chorus. The Montague-Turner companies belonged to the cheaper end of the market and their selling point was the vocal expertise of the entrepreneurs themselves. By contrast, the first of four companies brought to New Zealand by another husband and wife team, Fanny and

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Martin Simonsen, arrived in 1876 with nearly 60 performers, including a double cast of principals and a small corps de ballet.\textsuperscript{15}

In Australia, company sizes were higher on average than in New Zealand. A 12 strong orchestra was considered large by New Zealand standards, but 18 or 20 players would be the norm in Melbourne or Sydney. The 1877 Nobili Company astonished Melbourne with a 40 strong orchestra for Wagner’s \textit{Lohengrin}, but that remained far from usual until the advent of the great Musgrove and Williamson ensembles. The 1901 and 1907 Musgrove and 1910 Williamson companies broke the bounds of economic possibility by presenting grand opera, on both sides of the Tasman, on a lavish scale with specially imported principals and up to a hundred performers. All companies, large or small, toured with their own ancillary staff: a machinist to work the stage effects, a costumier or wardrobe mistress, and a business and/or an advance manager whose task was to travel ahead of the company to arrange bookings and strike, if possible, advantageous financial deals. Each company also had a stage manager — a title which during this period usually implied some responsibility for production and was almost invariably combined with performance duties.

The tours undertaken by these companies varied greatly in length. An outline of that made by Simonsen’s New Royal Italian Opera Company provides an example of what was possible in Australia. This ensemble opened its tour in Melbourne on 11 December 1886. After a three-month season, it travelled to Sydney where it played for a further three months. The orchestra was then reduced from 28 to 18 musicians before the company moved on to Brisbane for a five-week season. This was followed by five weeks in Adelaide and a 12-week return visit to Melbourne. A couple of weeks spent in the smaller towns of Victoria, including several particularly successful days in Ballarat, served as a prelude to a final five-week sojourn in Melbourne and a visit to Geelong. The tour ended after a season in Hobart, where the company was finally disbanded. During its 15 month life-span it played a repertoire of 21 operas in all, six of which were new to Australia and one of which was actually by an Australian composer.\textsuperscript{16}

Simonsen’s Royal Italian was too large a company to be taken across the Tasman. Lacking centres of population to match Melbourne and Sydney, New Zealand had no town that could sustain a three-month opera season. The longest a company could hope to stay in one place was four or five weeks. Touring New Zealand meant more frequent travelling and therefore much greater cost. While opera troupes regularly travelled Australia for over a year, six or seven months tended to be the average duration of a New Zealand tour, although longer visits were not unknown. A company would aim to present at least six performances a week while on tour, except when moving between towns. If a matinee or a Sunday concert could be squeezed in as well, so much the better. The stamina and work-rate of the nineteenth-century artist have to be marvelled at, particularly

\textsuperscript{15} This company is given detailed coverage in Adrienne Simpson, ‘The Simonsen Opera Company’s 1876 Tour of New Zealand’, \textit{Turnbull Library Record}, XXIII, 2 (1990), pp.99-121.

\textsuperscript{16} Gyger, pp.38-49.
when the usual pattern was for a different work to be performed each evening. Only an opera new to the audience would be likely to run for several nights in succession.

The quality of theatres was variable. In the early days some were little better than rooms adjoining taverns. Dunedin’s grandly named Princess Theatre, opened in 1862, was established in the local horse bazaar or auction mart adjoining the Provincial Hotel. When the day’s work was over the horse stalls were hidden behind ornamental partitions and the central area filled with seating. While sophisticated, purpose-built theatres soon came into being in larger centres, most entrepreneurs and artists seemed prepared to put up with exceedingly uncomfortable and dangerous conditions in smaller towns. In the 1880s, particularly in New Zealand, operatic productions were still being mounted in crowded Oddfellows halls, fitted out with wooden benches and evil-smelling oil lamps, long after big city theatres had changed to plush seating and the softer glow of gas.

Because opera demanded larger forces than other forms of theatrical entertainment it was always expensive to present and difficult to make profitable. Several factors combined to tip the financial scales when touring. The first and most obvious was the economic climate prevailing at the time. Sometimes, even in a recession, entrepreneurs could do surprisingly well. During 1880/81 Fanny and Martin Simonsen toured a particularly well-organized company through Tasmania and New Zealand. While some patrons grumbled about the prices charged (usually 6s for the dress circle, 4s for the stalls, and 2s for the pit), these were actually cheaper than those prevailing twenty years earlier. Audience numbers remained high and at the end of nine months on the road, Martin Simonsen declared the tour ‘pecuniarily successful beyond his expectations’. Such good fortune did not attend his next venture, less than two years later. By then New Zealand’s financial situation had deteriorated further and fewer people could afford to patronize the opera. The Simonsen tour came to an early end in Napier on 6 April 1883, when the entrepreneur closed his English Opera Company down before his losses became too great. Another impresario, Duncan Macallum, was less fortunate. His Tambour-Major Opera Comique Company came to grief in Wellington that same year. The insolvency proceedings showed him to have liabilities amounting to £4,006. His assets were listed as ‘Nil’. The fine line between financial success and disaster became steadily harder to negotiate as economic conditions declined, particularly in the early 1890s in Australia.

An important factor determining the success of touring companies was the existence of commercially viable routes. In this regard, density of population and the relative prosperity of one area as compared with another were fundamental. Ease and availability of transport were also important. In New Zealand the task of transporting theatrical groups around the country was made easier by the
founding of the Union Steamship Company in 1875. This created a fairly standard route which embraced Invercargill, Dunedin, Christchurch and Nelson in the South Island and towns such as Wellington, Napier, Auckland and Wanganui in the North. There were, however, examples of opera companies performing in unexpected places. The first company to visit New Plymouth did so in 1876 because an enterprising advance agent sold its services to a consortium of Taranaki businessmen anxious to bring large-scale, spectacular entertainment to their town. At the time New Plymouth boasted less than 3,000 inhabitants. There was not even a wharf. The company and all its equipment — including long rolls of canvas backcloth and a double bass — came ashore by surf boat from the steamer anchored in the bay. The people of New Plymouth and its surrounding districts flocked to the entertainment and the five-night season was so successful that the town became a standard operatic venue thereafter.19

The success or otherwise of a season often depended on whether there was competing entertainment. Tours were not fixed well in advance as they are today. Entrepreneurs relied on responding flexibly to prevailing circumstances. To find all the theatres already booked in a major town could spell disaster. The overcrowded world of colonial entertainment is well-illustrated by the variety of acts which passed through Dunedin during the space of a few months in 1876. In addition to an opera company there was a famous international prima donna, Ilma di Murska, and her concert party, five different dramatic companies, two circuses, two variety shows, a dorama, several itinerant lecturers, and Blondin, ‘the hero of Niagara’ who recreated his rope-walking feats in a great canvas arena set up off the St Kilda Road. All these attractions apparently found enough custom to sustain them through seasons of several weeks’ duration. This was not always the case, particularly when similar forms of entertainment inadvertently toured in close proximity.

Another crucial factor governing success or failure was, surprisingly, the weather. It is easy to see how wet weather could adversely affect other forms of entertainment, such as circuses. Indeed in Thames, in 1876, a circus and an opera company came to town at the same time. Since the weather was wet the circus could not open, and the entertainment-hungry gold miners flocked to the opera which did excellent business. But inclement weather could easily play havoc with an operatic season. Ladies in their long dresses were disinclined to venture out when rain turned unpaved roads into quagmires. The demise of the 1883 Simonsen company, although probably inevitable, was precipitated in Napier when torrential rain found out the leaks in the theatre roof and caused the cancellation of performances. With profit margins so slender, a few unscheduled days without income were often enough to tip a company’s balance sheet into the red.

It would be a mistake to look at opera in the Antipodes simply in terms of the companies themselves. Where they went, what they performed, the personalities involved, and the incidents that befell them provide many enthralling vignettes,

but not the entire picture. There were many ways, well beyond the simple fact of providing entertainment, in which these nineteenth-century operatic companies entwined themselves into the social fabric of the communities they visited. Firstly, they brought skills which smaller centres needed. Newspaper advertisements show company members offering services such as piano tuning and instrument repairs. Teaching, too, was an important side-line. The young Alfred Hill, a pioneering composer in both an Australian and New Zealand context, received much of his early tuition on the cornet and violin from members of a touring opera company orchestra.\(^{20}\) Singers such as Tom Riccardi, Pietro Luisetti and Carmini Morley, who settled in New Zealand after touring with various opera companies, helped establish a tradition of Italianate vocal teaching in this country. Nor should it be forgotten that Melba’s first teacher, Pietro Cecchi, arrived in Australia in 1871 as a recruit for one of Lyster’s operatic ensembles.

The touring companies also offered valuable opportunities for local performers to be involved in professional music-making. Examples range from the common practice of hiring local supernumeraries, and the expedient of augmenting an under-strength chorus with available amateurs, to the ready acceptance of suitable talent for professional training which was a hallmark of the Pollard light opera companies.\(^{21}\) Sometimes an instrumentalist in a smaller centre might be considered good enough to join a touring company, either for an extended period or, more usually, for the duration of the local season. Organists and members of military bands were often recruited to augment the travelling orchestra for performances of particular operas, most notably Gounod’s \textit{Faust}.

One important aspect of any travelling company was its economic effect upon the community. Many tradespeople benefited. Board and lodging for a large company brought a great deal of income to those who provided it. Florists did a roaring trade in nosegays, buttonholes, and in the bouquets with which audience members showered their favourite singers. Popular artists often received more substantial tokens of regard. In 1874, for example, a Dunedin jeweller put on display ‘nearly £400 worth of jewellery presented by the New Zealand friends of Miss Alice May, prima donna of the English Opera Company’.\(^{22}\) Printers did well from all touring theatrical ventures, with orders to print programmes, handbills and advertising sheets. In addition, opera companies required libretti which could be sold cheaply to patrons. Small boys were generally hired locally to sell these in the theatre and the audience could read them during the performance since, for most of this period, auditorium lights were commonly left up.

Some traders were able to take advantage of the publicity generated by a company’s arrival in their town. It is noticeable, for instance, that music teachers, and booksellers with musical wares in stock, promoted themselves heavily during opera seasons. Opera cloaks, gloves and other necessary adjuncts were


\(^{22}\) \textit{Otago Daily Times}. 25 December 1874.
also advertised. The transport industry was a major beneficiary. Forty or more people, travelling with many tonnes of equipment from one centre to another, constituted valuable business. At a local level special trains, ferries, or horse omnibuses were frequently required to bring patrons from outlying suburbs or country regions when something as important as an opera company was in the vicinity.

The wider social effect on those attending the opera can be glimpsed only through random and tantalizing remarks in letters and diaries. Some enthusiasts were prepared to travel long distances to enjoy a performance. In 1898 George Yeates, writing to his brother from Karioi sheep station in the Wanganui region, declared that he had often ‘ridden 30, 40 or even 70 miles to hear a good operatic company’. Others expressed curiosity about relative standards. As W.J.W.Hamilton in Christchurch wrote to his son, who was visiting Europe, in 1879: ‘We only want just a clear idea of the stamp of those you see & hear as contrasted with what we all out here have seen & heard, of reputed good or fair professional’. The matter of standards was also touched upon by Rachel Henning in a letter to her sister written from Sydney in 1862. Having attended five performances during the opera season she noted that ‘the singing and acting are exceedingly good. Not, of course, equal to London opera but better, it is said, than in any provincial town in England . . . . I know it is the sort of thing I should get a great deal too fond of.’

It is hard to gain a clear idea of the standards achieved by touring opera companies. They obviously varied from troupe to troupe. Newspaper criticisms do not always provide a reliable guide. In some small centres the overwhelming enthusiasm of a review must be tempered by the manifest ignorance of its author on musical matters. J.E.Nield who, under the pen-name ‘Jaques’ in the Australasian was Melbourne’s leading theatrical critic from 1865 to 1890, had little fondness for opera and his often caustic remarks must be understood in that light. On the other hand, the anonymous critic of the Otago Daily Times in the 1860s had an extensive knowledge of the art form and was able to compare Lyster’s 1864 company with those he had seen in Europe. He was generally well satisfied, describing a performance of Meyerbeer’s Les Huguenots as ‘placed on the stage and performed throughout with an ability we scarcely expected to find’. The Argus critic, on 25 October 1871, described a later Lyster company as ‘marvellously good, taking into account the difficulties with which our impresario has to contend’.

The idea of operas presented with limited orchestral resources and scenic effects, by companies in which a few singers were required to do duty over a wide range of roles, may seem unacceptable today. It was, however, a common circumstance in nineteenth-century provincial Europe and America as well as in Australasia. The deficiencies of colonial opera would appear to have been more

23 George Yeates to Bert Yeates, 20 February 1898, G.H.Yeates Papers, MS 3793, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.
24 Letter dated 26 August 1879, in the possession of a family descendant.
26 Otago Daily Times, 13 September 1864.
than compensated for by enthusiasm and by a strong sense of rapport between performers and audiences. Contemporary extracts from letters and diaries also suggest that opera brought colour and glamour to people’s lives and provided an exciting topic of conversation. A typical example is Dorothy Richmond’s letter to a friend about the visit of an opera company to Nelson in 1881. The special effects caught her attention during a performance of Weber’s *Die Freischütz*, which came complete with elaborate fireworks during the supernatural Wolf’s Glen scene. ‘The fire brigade were waiting outside the theatre’ she wrote. ‘The hose was prepared — we wished we had brought our umbrellas. In the programme we were requested to keep our seats as there was really no danger whatsoever.’

Surviving commentary from the point of view of the operatic artists themselves is scarce. Such busy and itinerant lives seem to have allowed little time for literary reflection. Where it exists, it is rarely concerned with audiences or performances but rather with observations upon people, places and customs — as for instance in the memoirs of Emily Soldene, a renowned light opera performer who played several Australasian seasons and left a lively picture of her experiences. ‘We landed at “The Bluff” on Christmas Day,’ she wrote in her memoirs, recalling her arrival in New Zealand in 1878. ‘I had a chop, a delicious mutton chop, and sat in the shining sun out on the grass to eat it. The young woman who waited on me was not exactly in love with her location, and expressed her opinion that “The Bluff” was the end of the world and God had forgotten to finish it.’

Although newspapers may not provide a good guide to production standards they do preserve extensive records of another social aspect of opera in the colonies, the patronage nights. This term embraced far more than performances given in the presence of such political luminaries as premiers and governors, although these events were frequent. Other institutions and organizations were happy to extend their patronage to such a socially acceptable art form. Military patronage was common and many performances took place with the locally-based regiment or corps of volunteers in attendance, attired in their dress uniforms. A favourite opera for such occasions was Gounod’s *Faust*, in which it was quite usual for the local military band to join the performers on stage for a spirited rendering of the ‘Soldiers’ Chorus’ from Act IV. In New Zealand the Southland militia undoubtedly took the palm for operatic enthusiasm during the 1870s and 80s, and *Faust* in Invercargill must have been a gala night for the whole community.

The extent to which touring opera companies took part in charity work is another social aspect that has been little acknowledged. This usually took the form of benefit concerts to assist local causes. In 1876 the Simonsen company gave a concert in Dunedin in aid of the Jewish Philanthropic Society, and

contributed performers to a gala at Wellington’s Basin Reserve to raise money for three young men injured in a savage attack by a deranged work-mate. Some companies also became heavily involved in sporting events, generally of a charitable nature. The next Simonsen opera company to tour New Zealand, in 1880/81, offers several examples. During their Christchurch season they gave a performance of Donizetti’s *Lucrezia Borgia* under the patronage and in the presence of the touring Australian cricket XI and their Canterbury opponents. At the end of the first act the stage was cleared and cups presented to the leading batsman and bowler. There were several speeches and a personal appearance by the great bowler, Spofforth. After this, the next scene was set and the opera proceeded. To judge from newspaper reports, both *Lucrezia Borgia* and the cricketers were enjoyed and applauded in equal proportions.²⁹

At various venues thereafter, cricket and the opera company coincided. At Napier a team from the opera played one drawn from the local publicans for the benefit of the Charitable Aid Society. In Auckland a costume cricket match was arranged to help raise funds for the installation of seating at the Domain. The company’s opponents were organized by a prominent local businessman, and the newspaper announcement that appeared a week prior to the match promised ‘novelties in cricket never before seen in New Zealand, got up on a grand and magnificent scale. The teams will parade the town in costume, attended by a brass band, leaving the theatre at 1pm. Play to commence at 2.’ The spectators were certainly treated to something new. An Auckland fieldsman appeared dressed as a Canadian hunter, complete with snowshoes, while one of the umpires was attired as a bottle of Bulldog ale. As the match report observed: ‘Its decisions, considering it was supposed to be full of beer, were very rational.’³⁰

Such light-hearted incidents can be duplicated throughout the Antipodes as opera company and local community interact. The point they illustrate is, however, a serious one. ‘Community histories have a tendency to concentrate upon political events, or economic development’, observed the music historian, John D.Drummond, in 1989. ‘But the growth of a community can also be traced in the development of its leisure activities, and a community’s values are very clearly shown in the way its members choose to spend their leisure time.’³¹ In Australasia, during the nineteenth century, opera was a ‘popular’ leisure activity in all senses of that word. While it would be naive to claim a false importance for it in colonial society, opera’s position as an integral part of a richly diverse entertainment industry is unassailable.

That it failed to maintain this position beyond the first decade of the twentieth century is equally apparent. Several reasons can be advanced for its declining popularity. In Europe, where stratification by perceived social class was an important factor, opera became gradually marginalized towards the end of the nineteenth century. Transformed into an emblem of cultural superiority, its patronage largely passed into the hands of a wealthy and intellectual urban elite.

²⁹ *Lyttelton Times*, 2 February 1881.
³⁰ *New Zealand Herald*, 14 April 1881 and 18 April 1881.
³¹ John D.Drummond, *Choirs and Clogs, Mr Ballads and Mr Bones*, Dunedin, 1991, p.4.
Although there is evidence of similar attitudes developing in Australasia, the movement towards cultural division was not strong enough to be a major factor in the decline of colonial opera.\(^{32}\) The root cause was worsening economic circumstances. Recession in New Zealand in the 1880s and, more particularly, in Australia in the 1890s, created a demand for entertainment at the cheapest possible prices — a demand which an expensive theatrical form such as opera could never hope to fulfil. Operatic tours became increasingly irregular events, largely confined to major centres of population. However the ultimate demise of opera as a popular form of entertainment was brought about by the growth of the industrialized mass media, and in particular the movies. Well before the outbreak of World War I many theatres, previously venues for live stage shows, had been given over entirely to the new technology. 'All through the North Island the small towns have picture companies and picture circuits', observed a commentator in Wellington's *Evening Post* on 29 March 1910. 'The picture shows are undoubtedly deserving of patronage, but as yet they cannot supply opera, comic opera, or even good comedy . . . . Therefore, if opera companies are to be kept in New Zealand it really behoves the playgoers not to acquire too firmly the picture habit.' But the cheapness and novelty of moving pictures proved irresistible. Within a few years the live entertainment industry as a whole was under threat and the golden age of Australasian opera merely a fading memory.

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\(^{32}\) For a useful discussion of cultural division in the Australasian context see Richard Waterhouse, *From Minstrel Show to Vaudeville*, Kensington, NSW, 1990, pp.139-43.