

Response to a Vision: The first hundred years of the Nelson School of Music. By Shirley Tunnicliff. The Nelson School of Music, Nelson, 1994. 168 pp. NZ price \$39.95. ISBN 0-473-02689-9.

WITHIN THE WEFT and warp of New Zealand's somewhat patchy musical history there are few strands more intriguing and chronicle-worthy than those relating to the Nelson School of Music. The idea of a conservatorium in Nelson was proposed by a visiting German musician, Michael Balling, who at 27 had established close connections with the Wagner circle at Bayreuth and stood on the brink of a distinguished career. That Balling's vision was taken up by influential Nelsonians and translated into reality within nine months of his arrival in the colony says much for his energy, organizing ability and powers of persuasion. A charismatic and somewhat romantic figure, Balling stayed in Nelson only two and a half years before returning to Europe, yet he remains a dominant figure in the school's background and identity.

Within a few years of Balling's departure the school acquired the fine hall which still stands (though greatly refurbished in recent years) with its impressive organ provided by the generosity of Thomas Cawthron, better known for the scientific institute which bears his name. The school was affiliated with the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music. Even more remarkable, perhaps, than its early success, is the fact of the School's survival in an environment which has often been highly uncongenial, so that only relatively recently, with government recognition and support, has the school's always distinctive place in the national music education landscape become relatively secure.

Shirley Tunnicliff's engaging and attractive book traces the rises and falls in the school's fortunes over its century of existence. The book's strength is its emphasis on the people, some of them quite remarkable characters, who charted the school's course and kept it afloat, sometimes at considerable personal cost. The central focus is on the principals (later directors) who bore the chief responsibility for the day-to-day management of the school and its teaching programme. A crucial figure in this regard is Julius Lemmer, appointed in 1899, whose retirement in 1944 coincided with the school's fiftieth anniversary. Lemmer may have been ultra-conservative in his musical taste, but his professional skills as teacher and administrator, and the community support he was able to inspire, were unquestionably vital factors in the school's survival during that period.

Tunnicliff's first two chapters set the scene with a lively account of artistic activity in early Nelson, and do much to explain why Balling's proposal fell on fertile ground, but might have failed to do so elsewhere. The chapter on the Balling era has been contributed by John Mansfield Thomson, an authority on Balling to whom the author pays a debt of gratitude for his advice and assistance throughout. The later chapters were contributed by the most recent directors of the school, and while they were undoubtedly able to write with authority and conviction on the developments and events in which they were involved, one regrets just a little the loss of a unified and consistent authorial viewpoint which might have placed the recent history of the school in a wider perspective more effectively.

Musical jargon and terminology are a notoriously tricky area for non-musician historians, but Tunnicliff writes knowledgeably and informatively about musical repertory, concert life and related matters. One minor irritant is the consistent mis-spelling of 'violoncello' (even in direct quotations); there is a puzzling reference to the compass of the organ extending from 'C2 to C3'; and the hero of Verdi's *Ernani* is turned into a composer! On p.114 we are told that 'university music departments were awaiting upgrading their faculties' when presumably 'facilities' was meant. But these tiny blemishes in no way detract from a useful contribution to our musical historiography and an achievement for which the author and all concerned are to be congratulated.

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