

A general map of New Zealand would have helped but this is another good book, nicely illustrated and beautifully designed that, one suspects, might not have seen the light of day but for the dedication of its publisher, Steele Roberts.

DAVID YOUNG

Nelson

On and Off: Opera in Auckland 1970–2000. By Nicholas Tarling. Dunmore Press, Palmerston North, 2002. 179 pp. NZ price: \$37.00. ISBN 0-86469-431-8.

THE PRESENTATION OF GRAND OPERA in Auckland from 1970 to 2000 was, writes Nicholas Tarling, an ‘on-and-off business’ (p.7). The reasons for this, he suggests, were the high cost of producing and touring grand opera, coupled with high audience expectations, the small size of Auckland (in terms of the population numbers needed before grand opera is financially viable), the city’s distance from the country’s political centre, and the failure of various Auckland-based opera ventures to attract corporate sponsorship. The changing fortunes of opera in Auckland are conveyed through Tarling’s descriptions of what was presented periodically on the city’s stages and the activities that took place offstage in order to achieve this.

This book is described by its publishers as ‘a colourful contribution to Auckland’s history’, of special interest to opera lovers and ‘those who manage and who fund organisations that deal with various art forms’ (p.7). The interests of the latter group are privileged by Tarling. This is evident in his emphasis on the business behind the presentation of opera, specifically the business of lobbying for its ongoing financial support, rather than the nuts and bolts of actually producing it. Such a focus sets Tarling apart from Adrienne Simpson, who highlights the performance side of our operatic heritage, and is the only historian consistently publishing in the area of New Zealand’s opera history.¹ Elsewhere Tarling has called for historians to take ‘fuller account of the performing arts’ than this, and perhaps *On and Off* might have been written along these lines.² However, the issue is not overtly taken up in this book. Instead, the author’s intention is to explain opera’s chequered past in Auckland — without accusing its administrators of mismanagement or Aucklanders of philistinism — so that readers involved in the business side of opera and other art forms may profit from past mistakes (pp.7–8).

Tarling’s narrative begins with opera’s rather dented public profile after the New Zealand Opera Company’s collapse in 1970. The book goes on to trace the various Auckland-based organizations set up to keep professional grand opera going on a national basis. The formation of these groups coincided with changes to the forms, function and funding of national culture. Cultural expressions and forms that were perceived to be more relevant and appealing to a wider community gained both the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council’s favour, and its financial support. This ideological reorientation — which Tarling does not draw out as fully as he might for general readers — affected opera directly. It was dismissed and marginalized by the Arts Council for being expensive, elitist and obsolete. It was this attitude, and associated erratic funding, that made it almost impossible for opera to continue.

This discouraging state of affairs was turned around in the 1980s and 1990s. According to Tarling, it was Jonathon Hardy, the director of Auckland’s Mercury Theatre at the beginning of the 1980s, who rescued opera from its maltreatment. This was because Hardy responded to the Arts Council criticisms with a sophisticated and relevant theory of opera and operatic practise — one that spelt out how and why it should be supported as a New Zealand art form (pp.61–5). As a result, through the 1980s the Mercury received,

on top of its theatre grant, Arts Council funding to stage productions by the National Opera of New Zealand.

For many opera lovers and lobbyists the official opening of Auckland's Aotea Centre in 1990 created new artistic opportunities, and greater administrative and financial challenges. For the Mercury Theatre, it signalled instability. At a time when its audience numbers were falling and its debts were increasing, Mercury's Arts Council opera funding was transferred to a consortium of operatic interests with plans to present opera at the centre. This was to inflame the theatre's problems. Tarling provides a useful appraisal of the role that these events played in the Mercury's sudden closure in 1992 and a frank account of the divisions within the opera community as it tried to devise a viable and united approach to take advantage of the new venue.

The merger of Auckland-based Opera New Zealand and the National Opera of Wellington in 2000 to become the *National Business Review*-sponsored New Zealand Opera concludes Tarling's account. After 30 years opera was thus reconstituted as national, corporate and (aspirationally) international. Moreover, the future of opera was dependent on a new generation of professional arts administrators who embraced a business model derived from the economic reforms of the 1980s.

Both an opera lover and critic, Tarling was a key participant in the offstage lobbying he describes. Whilst personal involvement has armed him with an intimate and detailed knowledge of these matters, Tarling is aware that it may also have distorted his account of it. This prompts a disclaimer that he may have been 'less than objective' (p.7); the book's rather scrappy endnotes confirm that it is based on hard documentary evidence, and not Tarling's memories. However, the effect of his participation is not so much on historical objectivity but on perspective. For example, Tarling prefers frequent extended quotation from his primary material, rather than its synthesis. The result is an unnecessarily close view of events, which slows the book's narrative flow. More importantly, *On and Off* would have benefited from sustained analysis of what was particular about the time period that frames it, and the broader relationship between the history, economy and business of cultural production and consumption. Tarling's version of New Zealand opera is certainly franker and less harmonious than other accounts. However, for the reasons outlined above, he has not produced a much-needed, 'integrated' history of New Zealand's performing arts for a non-specialist audience, nor an account that will occupy a more centralized place within the historiography of New Zealand.³

KIRSTIE ROSS

Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

1 For example, Adrienne Simpson, *Opera's Farthest Frontier: A History of Professional Opera in New Zealand*, Auckland, 1996; *Capital Opera: Wellington's Opera Company, 1982–1999*, Wellington, 2000; *The Greatest Ornaments of their Profession: The New Zealand Tours by the Simonsen Opera Companies*, Christchurch, 1993.

2 See Tarling's review of Simpson, *Opera's Farthest Shore*, in *New Zealand Journal of History*, 31, 2 (1997), p.289.

3 *ibid.*