

A question of authenticity: Alfred Hill, Ovide Musin, the Chevalier de Kontski and the Wellington Orchestral Society, 1892–1896

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In the late nineteenth century the orchestral societies of the principal cities and towns of New Zealand flourished as never before. Existing without subsidies, without help from civic bodies, they were sustained by a love of music and a consciousness that they had a special role to play in colonial musical life. In the 1890s the Wellington Orchestral Society was considered New Zealand's finest ensemble; it gave four or five concerts a year, accompanied visiting artists, and generally played an energising part in the musical life of the capital. From 1892–6 Alfred Hill was its conductor. He was twenty-two, freshly graduated from the Conservatorium of Music at Leipzig, where he had played in the first and second violins of the celebrated Gewandhaus Orchestra, then conducted by Carl Reinecke, a conservative musician, whose reputation as a Mozart pianist earned him the nickname 'Mozart fingers'. Visiting artists and conductors during this period had included Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Joachim and Clara Schumann. Recipient of the Helbig Prize and a notable diploma, Alfred had not, however, studied conducting as at Leipzig the subject was not taught—students learned by playing in an orchestra and by observation.

It is always difficult when a talented artist returns to the place of his birth. He is likely to be remembered as he was before he went away, likely to be accused of 'putting on airs', of being superior and having 'changed'. All these reactions were aroused when Alfred took up his position as conductor of the Wellington Orchestral Society; he stepped into the midst of a variety of conflicts, which were to reach a climax with the visit of the piano virtuoso the Chevalier de Kontski in 1896, and bring about his resignation. The developing drama is partly told in the Minute Books of the Wellington Orchestral Society from 1890–5¹, and when they cease, before the final explosion, in the pages of the local newspapers and in the *Triad*.

An earlier version of this article was delivered as a talk to Music Librarians as part of the annual Library Conference held at the University of Waikato, Hamilton, 10 February 1978. J. M. Thomson's biography of Alfred Hill, *A Distant Music*, will be published shortly in Wellington by the Oxford University Press. This fuller account incorporates material subsequently discovered.