

was rapid and he was asked to execute many solos. Invitations to the exclusive musical evenings held at Wagner's house 'Wahnfried' followed, where Balling met leading musical personalities of the day, such as Ernst von Wolzogen, the Wagner proselytizer, the conductor Hans Richter and the composer Humperdinck. At this stage of his career fate deflected him to New Zealand.

The fuller story of how Michael Balling came to Nelson in 1893 as conductor of the Harmonic Society, a substitute for a certain Herr Schultz who had originally accepted the position, is told elsewhere.² Balling's reasons for accepting the engagement are not known other than that he is reported to have been suffering from a nervous breakdown: a long sea voyage followed by new surroundings might have been expected to work its customary beneficence. On his arrival in Nelson, Balling was immediately drawn into the activities of the town. At his first concert it is noteworthy that not only did the Nelson public welcome Balling himself with a warmth that soon became fervour, but also accepted quite without question, the viola alta. Herr Balling received a cordial welcome on his appearance on stage and the audience was evidently awaiting with deep interest his performance on the viola alta of *Lorelei*, a paraphrase by himself, wrote the Nelson *Colonist*.

In a few moments the audience became, as it were, spellbound with the performance, which was given with really dramatic power. The artist at once displayed himself, and the instrument now gave expression to the most delicate feeling, and then the audience was affected as by a grand organ. No one even moved, and the stillness that prevailed was a higher compliment to the performer than were the recalls with which he was honoured at the conclusion.³

Balling was equally successful as a conductor: 'We heartily congratulate Herr Balling on his success and certainly his marked ability was highly appreciated . . .'. Of Mendelssohn's Overture *Walpurgis Night*, the *Colonist* wrote: 'the result was quite a revelation'.⁴ Balling introduced the viola alta at a variety of musical occasions in the town and would play until late at night at the Musical Evening Society. Frederick Gibbs, headmaster of the Central School, who along with the shipping agent J. H. Cock became a firm friend, noted in his diary that only a man of enormous strength and reach could attempt to hold it.⁵ At meetings held after the Harmonic Society practices Balling would often play well into the early hours of the morning. If there had been a poor attendance he would refuse to conduct, entertaining those present with improvisations at the piano.

During his holidays Balling travelled throughout New Zealand giving concerts. On one memorable occasion he ventured into the heavily-forested Urewera country, still a Maori stronghold and particularly difficult for a European to penetrate. He succeeded in charming his way into the hearts of his Maori listeners through the force of his personality, being entertained as a royal visitor and showered with