

## ***SYDNEY MALE CHOIR*** 2008 NEW ZEALAND TOUR.

Commentary by Tom Coghlan, Vice President & Tour Leader.

Red choir jumpers were certainly visible around the Sydney Airport just after 7.00 a.m. on Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> October though they of course disappeared with our take-off for our New Zealand tour which was a little after 9.30 a.m.

A smooth flight followed and by 2.30 p.m. we had landed at Auckland and enjoyed a quite snappy cruise through customs. Our excellent accommodation at Spencer on Byron was north of Auckland City to with water views across the Waitemata Harbour to the city skyline.



We were met by the early departees of our tour group who had taken the opportunity to get in some sightseeing activities around the nearby harbour shores before joining up to head off for our first concert that evening.

St Heliers on St Heliers Bay provided very efficient organisation and an audience of over 250. This was a great start, the venue was good. Our hosts, the Auckland Boys Choir, were alert, sung well and very capably (They also bought many of our CDs - pop stars!)

What a start to the tour!

The next morning, Monday 20<sup>th</sup>, our two silver coaches, driven by Ron (Dad) and Brent (Son) took us through the lush, iridescent green paddocks of the famous horse breeding area of Hamilton to Rotorua, a pretty and sometimes smelly venue.

A Maori hangi and concert introduced us to the indigenous culture. Jim Layton was acknowledged as our Chief and we were required to sing a song to pacify the local indigenous tribe according to ritual. He announced that he had to consult the "second chief" (not a diplomatic was of describing Alan Thrift, our MD - but the guys enjoyed it!)

We sang our way to their hearts and a rich dinner of sumptuous food.

The next morning, before departing Rotorua, we visited Te Puia, where the Sydney geysers saw the world famous geysers, and the geysers sang for the guides and staff (earning a CD of slides each of the venue).

Then it was on to Napier which proved to be an interesting Art Deco town and everyone got a taste of quality accommodation that we were in for. The hotel's location allowed us to compare the various cuisines of the town and some colourful harbourside gardens.

A short run to Palmerston North took us to our next concert. The College of Education offered seating for the 400 capacity crowd. The Manawatunes were a competent barbershop group, joined by the Harmony Four, three girls and one boy in one Samoan family - very strong performance.



Our style of music, with piano, provided a good contrast to our fellow performers which resulted in some good sales of our CD's

The enjoyable 'afterglow' back at the hotel was full of song, including some cross-fertilisation of styles.

The next morning was just a short run to Wellington, arriving by lunchtime. By now, the new and the old, the married and the single, and the singers and the listeners on the buses were mixing really well.

The Te Papa Museum offered a modern museum experience, including an 'earthquake' - oh! and lunch. In the evening, the St Andrews on the Terrace Church proved to be an excellent venue. The groupies and guests enjoyed an enthusiastic concert on a stark Thursday before the long weekend.

Early Friday, the 24<sup>th</sup>, and we are on an interisland ferry for three hour very smooth trip by ferry to the South Island of New Zealand. This was a most welcome surprise as there had been some horror stories about crossing from the North to South Island (one reported to have taken 14 hours), so we all were able to enjoy the pleasant scenery on the way. It was so calm, on the way in an outside deck corridor there gathered twenty SMCs repeating Welsh phrasing, after Nick Brown, to 'Counting the Goats'. Strange men in red jumpers speaking strange tongues kept the passers-by mystified, accompanied by the many an odd stare. After disembarking at the port of Picton, we continued in our coaches to Nelson where we booked into another delightful hotel, beautifully located on the banks of a river. That evening, we were presented with a fine a la carte service to our group of over 60 people and it truly prepared us for a great weekend. That evening, a massed choir of 100 men quickly jelled into a fine sounding unit in under the three conductors, as we rehearsed the first part of the Massed Choir program for the Nelson Male Choir Festival Performance. The location for the rehearsals and performances was the purpose built Nelson School of Music Hall. A massed choir rehearsal of the second half and logistics of staging occurred on the next morning, Saturday,



after which the choristers dispersed into the bustling town and local markets for lunch. Whilst our choir members were rehearsing, partners and supporters headed off again on the coach to Mapau, some 40 minutes away to sightsee and buy! At 3.00 p.m., the SMC had a thorough rehearsal for all aspects of our two brackets for the evening's performance, closely overseen by Alan Thrift, our MD.

That evening, the Sydney Male Choir opened the Concert and sang its first bracket of opera choruses and traditional hymns (five items in all). We then sat behind the performance area and heard the Wellington Male Choir which was followed by the Nelson Male Voice Choir.

The Wellington choir then started the second half followed by Nelson, with us returning to the stage to 'Put on a Show', stomp 'M'Bube', serenade 'Li'l Liza Jane' and rip into 'The Saints'.

The audience would have been blown away by the contrast with our first bracket. An encore of 'You raise me up' - putting icing on the cake. As always our MD was nervous and ready at the start; at his best during the performance; relieved and pleased at the end.

If nothing else, the fact that we were the only choir that sang without folders, proved a significant difference in performance and performance.

Sunday at 10.00 a.m. we had 100 choristers singing to 60 faithful at the church service, followed by a beautiful spread of salad rolls, cakes and fruit, with drinks, on the first floor of the funeral home located opposite the Nelson School of Music, in preparation for the Massed Choir Concert at 2.30 p.m.

Another full house for the Massed Choir Performance heard quality rich sounds, with some tempos and dynamics requiring more variety in some instances. Our MD Alan Thrift injected enthusiasm and excellent control in the items he conducted.

Andrea Hamilton, who conducted an unusual Welsh Fold Song called 'Counting the Goats', might have nearly won some over to the music. She delighted in extending or truncating notes, increasing and decreasing volume and tempo, and woe betide if you don't watch - an unwanted solo would be yours. In the midst of rehearsing, she announced: "It is me against you, you know! (Pause) And I'm winning!"

The Soiree in the evening at a local Club was a fine smorgasbord, had a good mix of people at the tables, and had an entertaining tabloid of jokes, solos and choral pieces of varying standards.

The choir was presented with a certificate for thoroughly testing out the strength of the Nelson School of Music stage with our rendition of M'Bube.



Sydney Male Choir finished with the song and dance including 'Walking Cane'. The other choirs were left with a few new directions for their choirs, if they want to entertain.

It was a great weekend and Nelson's organisation of the event was outstanding. The members were hospitable, generous, friendly, practical, accommodating and thorough. It was a real tribute to them.

The drive from Nelson to Christchurch on Monday morning (27<sup>th</sup>) was long but beautiful. There were lovely passes and green valleys for many kilometers, with snow still sitting on the tops of the Southern Alps.

We did have an unexpected stop when one of the tyres on one of our coaches was found to be flat by one of our members taking a photo.

As some one asked, a female member of our group: "How many men does it take to change a tyre?"



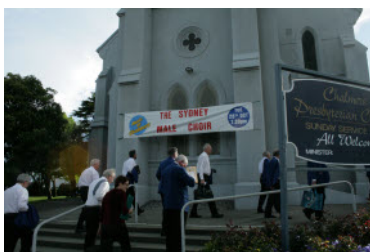
That evening in Christchurch, our Concert was hosted by Mark Walton, Head of the Christchurch School of Music. Mark Walton played clarinet and saxophone with the SMC in the early 90s, and toured NZ with us in 1992.

Mark, accompanied by a brilliant 14 year old pianist/composer, and also the Christchurch Girls Choir, inserted excellent and entertaining music in the midst of two halves of our presentation.

Mark had left the Forbes Musical Festival (yes, in NSW) that morning, to arrive in Christchurch in the afternoon to tutor three students before hosting our concert evening. He continues to be effervescent, oozes music, and loves storytelling, especially the story of the sharing of his shoes, with Alan, who had forgotten his at a concert one time.

After such a long time, it was a great reunion.

Unfortunately, Patricia Ellis slipped and badly skinned her shin while boarding the bus to our Christchurch concert which required several hours at emergency that evening. She and Brian returned to Sydney prematurely due to her incapacitation for walking.



The next night, Tuesday 28<sup>th</sup> was our last concert at the Chalmers Church venue at the town of Timaru which was well prepared and an excellent singing stage. A relatively quiet audience enjoyed a bouncy enthusiastic concert. At the conclusion, a standing ovation produced, three encores and a rousing farewell and finish to our singing commitments.

While being her usual chirpy character, our infamous "Groupie", Gwen Maitland, tripped and fell when leaving the Timaru concert last night. Oh dear, Happy Birthday Gwen! - her wrist is in plaster, but being the trouper she is, she continued on the tour, intent on missing out on nothing.

Good weather (apart from a couple of showers) was with us for most of our tour but in Queenstown a light windy rain was flecking the windows of our rooms. We have again seen some great scenery, people continue to enjoy each others' company, and the drivers work hard and are happy members of the tour. We feel like we have been away for ages.

It is Thursday 30th October, and it was a 6.45 a.m. departure for Milford Sound. A stop at Te Apau and we arrived at the sound at 12.30 p.m. We boarded our boat for a cloudy then wet but eerie and beautiful trip. Rain began to fall, but the cruise was well worthwhile. There were a number of photo opportunities on the way up to a 1.2 km tunnel, hand constructed in the 1930s. There were pesky Keas to see looking like little, fat clowns and, later on, snow and fresh waterfalls. The drive was demanding and Ron and Brent did well, and we arrived back at Queenstown at 7.15 p.m. – an exhausting but interesting day.



Unfortunately a tummy bug was flooring a number at a time over the rest of the tour. It was nasty and lasted twelve hours or more. It was a problem not just on our coach, but a NZ problem (they closed the Napier Hospital because the bug went through patients and staff). So a day of relaxation in Queenstown on Friday was appreciated. People headed off on the good ship, TSS Earnslaw, or to Arrowtown or just downtown. At 6.00 p.m., it was up the Gondola to the Summit Restaurant and fantastic views and fantastic food – this meal had brief speeches because some were departing on the next day. A pleasant evening for those who were well enough.

On the first day of November, we headed off on a 9 hour run to Christchurch. At Lake Pukaki we had photo opportunities of Mount Cook under cloud, with lush green water foreground. We stopped for a sing at the Church of the Good Shepherd – a little 1930s chapel – no photos thank you (but we sneaked some). Later on at the 'Tin Shed', a dear(!) source of merino and possum knits, Brian Lawler informed an American tourist that there were better knits to be bought in Australia, because they bred sheep and kangaroo to produce, wait for it! – woolly jumpers!! Her reply: "I'll sure check them out."

The remaining day and a half gave us more great weather unfolding, despite dire forecasts, and we were able to do our own thing and lap it all up. Again another final dinner finished it all off, and a poem from Brian Lawler, appended below, to round it all off. A number of the choristers went off to Sunday morning and evening prayer in Christchurch cathedral, and heard some beautiful music from the male choir, and a sermon from a female archbishop. Farewell Tour Time people, and back to the normal routine – great company, great scenery and great music.

Till next time!

*Tom Coghlan*

## New Zealand – at a poetic glance *Brian Lawler*

The uniforms and things were packed, we headed for a plane  
Across the ditch, to Auckland, it was touring time again.

Not much time for dinner, just grab a chicken wing,  
An audience was waiting to hear what we could sing.  
To join us in that concert with a very different noise,  
A group of fresh-faced youngsters – the choir of Auckland Boys.

Next morning heading southward to see what we could find,  
We had to turn one coach around – we'd left poor Jim behind!

A different kind of transport was used at Waitomo.  
We crammed into some little boats to watch the glow worm show!  
Then we showed a group of tourists how "Gwahoddiad" could sound  
In a limestone cave cathedral fifty metres underground.

There was great accommodation when we stayed at Rotarua.  
This place is fascinating but it smells a bit like sewer.

Big chief led his tribe to see the Maori culture show;  
There was a lesser chief as well. What he does, we don't know.

We went to see the kiwi birds. What monster eggs they lay!  
But when we got to their house, they had gone on holiday.

After watching geysers blowing and falling down like rain,  
Some sang a song while riding on a funny little train.

Huka Falls was mighty where all that water ran  
But, to some, more fascinating, was hot coffee in a can!

Napier had an earthquake which showed off nature's might.  
It even bent the nice hotel in which we spent the night.

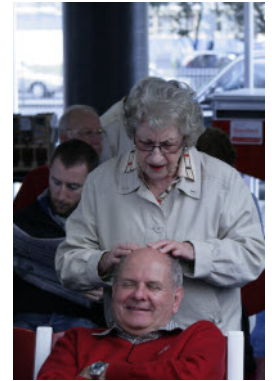
Then onward to the city that the locals know as "Palmy"  
So many singers there that night, we could have formed an army;  
But firstly a rehearsal at the university  
We really got it right that night – we'd learned it "by degree".



Having had two in a row with "house full" signs displayed,  
We figured that at Wellington, we'd really have it made!

The afterglow that evening had a mix of harmony.  
There was quite a bit of barbershop – and quite a bit off key!

Onward next to Wellington, where wind is often blowing.  
Another chance, we thought, to fill a hall to overflowing.  
But as it happened, seats that night weren't really in demand.  
The audience was counted on the fingers of one hand.  
The resulting disappointment left someone not too merry;  
So Gwennie offered massage as they waited for the ferry.



On the ship named "Arahura" which between the islands floats,  
We amazed some other passengers by counting those Welsh goats.

A long weekend in Nelson with beaut accommodation;  
Looking forward to the festival with much anticipation.

To begin, a Maori welcome – you must have one of those.  
Then introductions, man to man and even nose to nose!

Rehearsal in the morning for all the guys combined;  
They'd even drawn a diagram with each one's place defined.

An evening concert Saturday where no one got in strife  
And we heard a new arrangement of "The Rhythm of Late in Life"

The Sunday morning service – no problem – piece of cake!  
But some bloke talked and talked and talked till no one was awake.

And after that we went to get a bit of lunch to eat  
Where else but in the local funeral home across the street.

We were wary of the afternoon with "goats" and "Boga Boga"  
Under Andrea's conducting. But she's really not an ogre.

The programme was completed and no one made a mess.  
The festival was said to be a wonderful success.

And finally a dinner where all could eat their fill.  
It was great; except we had a little problem with the "Bill"

A final Trailways breakfast, then each one to their bus;

The choir girls of Christchurch were to share a stage with us.

The coffee break at Murchison was somewhat elongated  
Because a tyre on the bus was found to be deflated.  
But the lady in the gift shop was really quite elated;  
Her sales were far, far higher than she had anticipated.

Some say our Christchurch concert was a little less than beaut  
But who cares about the music – those girls were pretty cute!

We reckoned that this touring choir was really pretty hot  
And that was proved next morning at the hotel brekkie spot.  
For, just as many got their eggs and bacon on their plate,  
The fire sirens sounded – “all out” – “evacuate”.

We weren't all burnt or toasted but it must have scared a few,  
'Cause they went home. The rest of us took off for Timaru.

Arriving after being on the road for several hours,  
We stopped outside a place that looked a bit like Fawlty Towers.  
Then, going to our upstairs rooms, our bags we had to carry,  
Because the tiny little lift could just hold Bob and Harry.

And so, the final concert, which sounded really fine.  
There even was an extra second tenor in the line.

Heading next for Queenstown via Canterbury Plain;  
The weather looking dodgy; with a chance of snow or rain.

All our rooms had balconies and each one had a view  
Of snow-capped mountains everywhere and Lake Wakatipu  
We could sail aboard the “Earnslaw” or merely wander round,  
Or take a trip to Arrowtown and even Milford Sound.

And then, just to avoid the chance of someone getting thinner,  
Our gondolas ascended to a special buffet dinner.

Heading back to Christchurch, would we get to see Mount Cook?  
Alas, we couldn't do it 'cause the weather was too crook.

This left the guys still travelling with one more thing to do;  
We sang inside the lovely little church at Tekapu.

And then, an opportunity to catch up on some sleep;  
That wasn't any problem after counting all those sheep!