

The Big Sing 2016 National Finale: Celebrating New Zealand's Cultural Diversity through Choral Singing

By Agastya Rama Listya, choral conductor and composer

The Big Sing 2016 National Finale just ended on August 27 2016, but its reverberation remains strong throughout New Zealand. The Big Sing is just one of four major choral events held regularly by the New Zealand Choral Federation (NZCF). The Big Sing enables high schools' choirs across New Zealand to compete at the regional as well as national level. The Big Sing and three other festivals (The Kids Sing, Sing Fest and Sing Aotearoa *Te Puna o te Wairua*) have become part of the NZCF's program to promote high-quality choral singing within New Zealand by providing a basis for improvement and assistance.

All finalists of the Big Sing 2016 National Finale were selected from nine regions (Auckland, Canterbury/West Coast, East Coast, Manawatu/Whanganui, Otago, Southland, Taranaki, Waikato/Bay of Plenty, and Wellington). Surprisingly, this year there were around 250 choirs from 150 high schools involved in the regional festivals, and twenty-four choirs made their way through to the National Finale. This year, Dunedin had been chosen as the host of the Big Sing 2016 National Finale. The National Finale lasted for three days, from August 25 to August 27, at Dunedin Town Hall. More than 9,500 singers took part in the regional competition with approximately 750 competing in the Finale.

The festival was divided into eight sessions, with each session consisting of five to seven choirs. All Finale choirs

were required to perform twice. In the ten-minute recital each choir chose three pieces to be sung, while in the eight-minute recital they performed two songs. In order to promote New Zealand composers and Pasifika composition, the NZCF required each choir to include at least one New Zealand or Pasifika choral composition in their repertoire (Category One). Classical pieces belonged to Category Two, whereas Category Three was for any music other than works from Category One and Two. For instance, folksong, spiritual, gospel, musical theatre, popular and world music were considered Category Three.



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The NZCF provided five categories of awards to be competed for by the finalists: 1) the NZCF awards were presented to all finalists based on their whole performances. The awards were awarded at gold, silver and bronze levels. A platinum award went to the choir with the highest aggregate mark, of ninety percent or above); 2) the Hutt City Trophy was awarded for the best performance of a New Zealand or Pasifika composition; 3) the Tour Time Trophy was awarded for the best performance of a classical choral work; 4) the Auahi Kore Performance Award was presented for the best performance of a work using Māori text; and 5) The Big Sing Youth Ambassadors Award was presented to the choir which demonstrated outstanding engagement with all elements of the Finale.

The three adjudicators for this National Finale were Peter Watts, a music lecturer at the Auckland University School of

Music; Debra Shearer Dirié, editor of the Australian National Choral Association's Publication, *Sing Out*; and Michael Leighton Jones, a music lecturer at the University of Queensland. On their brief speeches prior to the results announcement, Mr. Watts's spoke about how well the finalists communicated the meaning of their chosen songs' texts to their audience; Ms. Dirié looked at how perfectly these choirs executed every detail in each song they chose. Mr. Jones, quoting Baron Pierre de Coubertin ("the essential thing is not winning, but taking part"), spoke more about the process rather than the result. The Auahi Kore Performance Award's winner was decided by Kelly-Ann Tahitahi, the Coordinator for the Māori Mentoring and Orientation Program at Te Huka Mātauraka-Māori Center at the University of Otago.

It was a privilege for the Dunedin public to enjoy the last performance of the 2015-2016 New Zealand Secondary Students' Choir (NZSSC). It was their final performance as their program ended in August 2016, having worked together for eighteen months under the direction of Andrew Withington. The 2017-2018 NZSSC is planned to start soon in early 2017. The auditions for the 2017-2018 NZSSC membership were held between September 26 and October 4, 2016. The members of the NZSSC comprise ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth graders (according to NZ years, from tenth to thirteenth graders) selected from high schools throughout New Zealand. The variety of choral pieces the NZSSC performed made the afternoon's concert entertaining, enjoyable and educational as well. Their repertoire spanned from Baroque to twentieth century music, from Pasifika to jazz music. For example, *Psalms 68* by Heinrich Schutz, *O magnum mysterium* by David Childs, *Loch Lomond* a Scottish Song arranged by David Lantz, *Rotala* by Juris Karlsons, and *I Got Rhythm* composed by George Gershwin and arranged by Mark Hayes.

The Big Sing 2016 National Finale ended on August 27, 2016 with a Gala Concert. At the Gala Concert, all finalists

performed one piece that they enjoyed from their Finale repertoire. The competition's results followed immediately after the Gala Concert. The Platinum Award went to Choralation from the Westlake Boys' and Girls' High Schools, Auckland. As well as the Platinum Award, Choralation also won the Tour Time Trophy. Euphony from Kristin School, Auckland, won the Hutt City Trophy and the Auahi Kore Performance Awards. Finally, The Big Sing Youth Ambassadors Award was awarded to Fortissimo from Dilworth School, Auckland.

With fifteen sopranos, thirteen altos, thirteen tenors and thirteen basses, Choralation had a very good balance of singers. The voices of their tenors and basses were solid and mature, so they were able to compete with sopranos and altos. The selection of their repertoire was superb. In the first recital they performed Stanford's *Caelos ascendit hodie*, Ešenvalds' *Stars*, and Runestad's *Alleluia*. In the second recital they sang a Swedish work *Uti vår hage* arranged by Hugo Alfvén, and *Joy* composed by David Hamilton. Overall, Choralation's performance was excellent. Their closest competitors in this National Finale were Kentoris from St. Kentigern College, Bel Canto, and Senior Chorale from Burnside High School.

The dominance of Auckland high schools' choirs over the other choirs from different regions was very obvious in this competition. All the winners were choirs from Auckland, and five out of the total seven choirs who received gold medals were from Auckland. There is a big gap that should be filled by the other regions to be competitive at the national level. Hopefully in the coming years, the gap between the choirs will close.

More information on the Big Sing 2016 National Finale is currently available on <http://www.nzcf.org.nz/activities/for-singers/the-big-sing/> and on YouTube as well.

Edited by Samuel Hemsworth, Poland