

12th World Symposium on Choral Music (WSCM2020), Auckland, New Zealand

John Rosser, Artistic Director, 12th World Symposium on Choral Music

The Overture

New Zealanders have shown strong interest in the World Symposium on Choral Music (WSCM) from its very first outing in Vienna in 1987. Since then, Kiwi delegates have been regular Symposium attenders and several of the country's choirs and professional practitioners have been chosen to perform or present.

A first concrete step was taken in 2015 when New Zealand Choral Federation (NZCF) Chair John Rosser and CEO Grant Hutchinson met with members of the IFCM ExCom at the 2015 World Choral Expo in Macau to inquire further about the bid process.



Auckland city at night

The Bid

After commissioning a feasibility study, NZCF decided to apply to host the 2020 Symposium in Auckland. Tourism NZ and Auckland City's conventions bureau worked with us on the bid document, which was sent to IFCM in March 2016.

We learned early in July that Auckland had been chosen as host for WSCM12 over bids from cities on five other continents. Reaction from the NZ choral community was rapturous and NZCF won a national tourism award for its successful bid.

The Handover

An operating company was formed to deliver the event, and preparations began for the management team to travel to Catalonia in July 2017 to accept the official handover at WSCM11. Logo, branding, website, stall design, videos and

printed collateral were prepared to help us engage with Barcelona delegates and capture their all-important contact details. At the final Symposium concert in L'Auditori, Manaia (a Māori performance group based in London) performed a traditional pōwhiri and haka. All the Kiwis present then joined the group on stage to sang a waiata.



All the Kiwis performing a traditional pōwhiri and haka at the WSCM11 closing concert (2017)

The Call

IFCM appointed Emily Kuo Vong, Gábor Móczár and Ki Adams to the administrative group, and Tim Sharp, Jean-Claude Wilkens and Jonathan Velasco to the artistic – both strong and experienced teams. The host country offered up a mix of established choral conductors, governors and managers in its respective selections: Juliet Dreaver, Christine Argyle and Lisa Davis, and John Rosser, Karen Grylls and Peter Walls.

A call for choirs and practitioners to present in Auckland had

been sent out in May 2018 and a bespoke database designed to capture the complex replies. Applicants were asked to respond to a theme that is very reflective of Aotearoa New Zealand: 'People and the Land | He tangata, he whenua' – the connections and tensions between people and land, between urban life and the natural world. The response was overwhelming. By the 31 October deadline, 180 choir and 182 presenter applications had been received – a record number for any WSCM. The six members of the Artistic Committee each read and listened to every application, and from their rankings a truly world-class group of 24 choirs and 40 presenters was selected.

The Launch

The successful WSCM2020 invitees were notified and their images assembled on a 'reveal' video, a full registration pricing schedule was prepared and a function was held in Auckland on 20 February 2019 to launch registrations. A 'Surround Sounds' fringe festival was also announced – to bring further top overseas groups and the best NZ choirs together on stage during Symposium week.



WSCM12 at ACDA Convention 2019

The Promotion

ACDA was one of five international choral events chosen for the promotion of WSCM2020. In the summer of 2018, we had attended the massive CICF in Beijing and reassembled our booth at the equally impressive Europa Cantat in Tallinn straight afterwards. The final stop on this world tour was ANCA's April 2019 Choralfest in Fremantle, which provided an opportunity to renew ties with our Australian colleagues and excite them about a world event just 'across the ditch'.

Back in NZ, the team took its road show to various regions around the country and had a strong presence at both the national schools' festival, The Big Sing, and the Association of Choral Directors' biennial conference, Choral Connect.

WSCM2020 was also largely promoted through articles and advertisements in choral journals, engagement with international choral associations and their membership and a large but carefully targeted social media campaign.

The Crescendo

Registration numbers at the end of WSCM2020's Earlybird special were hugely encouraging and outpaced the budget forecast. While they tailed off towards the end of 2019, bookings from the USA and particularly Australia picked up in January 2020 and three large parties from China were about to register. Local interest continued to be strong.

Programming was completed and performance venues and times allocated by late 2019. Preparation of several featured NZ concerts was well underway, including a theatrical opening ceremony, a spectacular showcase of 'kapa haka', and a large-scale multi-composer and multi-choir commission on the subject of Matariki, the star cluster whose reappearance heralds the traditional Māori New Year.

Concert ticket packages were on sale, volunteers were signing up, the WSCM2020 book was in design, delegate bags were ordered...

The End

Early in February 2020, worrying news started coming out of Wuhan. As the month advanced, more countries were affected and a choir was forced to withdraw. Bookings stopped and delegates began to ask for refunds. The management team re-budgeted, twice, and even considered a cut-down version of Symposium, but the speed of the pandemic rendered all our efforts futile.

After several internal meetings and teleconferences between the Symposium team and ExCom, on 15 March IFCM and NZCF decided jointly – but with great reluctance and genuine grief – to cancel WSCM2020. The announcement triggered a deluge of

correspondence from all over the globe, sharing our disappointment while expressing true kindness and understanding. On the day we cancelled, 20,000 new cases of Covid-19 were reported in the world. On 16 July, in the middle of what would have been our Symposium, the number was 250,000.

The Aftermath

In the ensuing months, the infrastructure of Symposium was dismantled and all delegates and expo stallholders were refunded their registration fees. On the day after 'Symposium week', the WSCM2020 team held a function to express its gratitude to those who had contributed to what would, we believe, have been a wonderful festival.

Special mention was made of the IFCM and NZCF boards; the two advisory committees; NZCF's CEOs, Christine Argyle and the late Grant Hutchinson; and our key governors and managers over the four years, Michael Littlewood, Warwick Webb, Briony Ellis, Siobhan Waterhouse, Candice de Villiers and Cathryn Wyllie. I was able to reserve a special thank-you at the end for our superb Festival Manager Kylie Sealy and for Relationships Manager, and my close colleague throughout the journey, Juliet Dreaver.

This loss has only strengthened our desire to hold a World Symposium here in the South Pacific. There's still a warm welcome for all those 'who steer the canoes of our choral waters' waiting in Aotearoa New Zealand.



Edited by Claire Storey, UK