

# Quakes in the Quire: A Snapshot of Choral Church Music in New Zealand

*By Michael Stewart, Choral Conductor and Organist*

For a small, increasingly secularised country, New Zealand has a strong church music scene. This is particularly centred on the Anglican cathedrals in the four main centres and in some notable parish churches. The aim of this article is to give a general background into this facet of New Zealand choral music.

On 22 February 2011 the southern city of Christchurch was hit by a magnitude 6.3 earthquake, causing extensive damage and claiming the lives of 181 people. Six months earlier the city had suffered a 7.1 magnitude earthquake that, despite miraculously causing no direct fatalities, significantly weakened buildings. Images from the February earthquake have been broadcast throughout the world, with one of the most poignant being the ruined ChristChurch Cathedral, the icon of the city in Cathedral Square.



## *Cathedral west end bracing*

ChristChurch Cathedral provides a fitting starting point for this investigation into church music in New Zealand, as its continuing music programme is the most similar to the British Anglican cathedral choir model. With the Cathedral's services now transplanted to nearby Christ's College chapel, Director of Music Brian Law conducts the only professional boys' and men's' choir in New Zealand, which is one of only two of its kind in the southern hemisphere[1]. It is no coincidence that this programme should have taken root in Christchurch, as it is a city particularly proud of its English heritage. Indeed, Christchurch was founded specifically as a model English society by graduates of Christ Church College, Oxford; a reciprocal choral exchange has taken place between these two cathedral choirs for the past twelve years. Prior to the earthquake, ChristChurch Cathedral Choir consisted of 16 boys who held scholarships to the nearby Cathedral Grammar School, and 12 men who held lay clerk positions. The choir has flourished under the direction of Law, who toured with them to the UK in 2008. There are plans to rebuild the damaged cathedral, but exactly when and how long this will take is impossible to guess at this stage.

New Zealand's early colonial heritage being predominantly English, the Anglican Church has always been the most significant denomination in the country. The remaining seven Anglican cathedrals are located in Auckland (Holy Trinity), Hamilton (St Peter's), Napier (St John's), New Plymouth (St Mary's), Wellington (St Paul's), Nelson (Christ Church) and Dunedin (St Paul's). Of these, the cathedrals of Auckland, Wellington and Dunedin maintain a similar programme to that of ChristChurch Cathedral. 2011 has proved to be an interesting year for these four cathedrals: while Christchurch has had to deal with the effects of the earthquake, the latter three have

either just appointed or are in the process of appointing new Directors of Music.

With its position directly opposite the Parliament Buildings in the country's capital, Wellington Cathedral of St Paul is often used for state occasions and broadcast services. The 30-strong mixed voice Cathedral Choir has developed a reputation as one of the finest choirs of its kind in Australasia and is often heard in concert in addition to its regular liturgical programme. It too enjoyed a successful tour to the UK and France in 2008 under previous Director of Music Michael Fulcher. The Cathedral Choristers are a choir of up to 30 boys and girls aged 8-15 who sing with the Cathedral Choir, as well as being engaged by both the regional and national orchestras resident in Wellington for concert work, most notably forming the backbone of the Knabenchor for a performance of Mahler's Symphony 8 under Vladimir Ashkenazy in the 2010 New Zealand International Festival of the Arts.

Another magnificent building to suffer in Christchurch's February earthquake was the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament. This splendid basilica was the finest example of the many Roman Catholic churches designed by New Zealand-born architect Francis Petre. Another cathedral designed by Petre is Wellington's Metropolitan Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, one of two Catholic churches in New Zealand that maintain a programme of Gregorian chant propers and Renaissance polyphony. The other, also in Wellington, is the inner-city St Mary of the Angels Church. This church's distinguished choral history dates back to the leadership of Maxwell Fernie (1910-1999), a Wellington-born conductor and organist who for five years directed the music at Westminster Cathedral. On his return home in 1958 he took up the directorship of St Mary of the Angels and instituted the traditional Catholic music programme that exists to this day.

Although there are many parish churches in New Zealand that do not have a regular choral programme, there are some notable

exceptions. The southernmost provinces of Otago and Southland originally attracted Scottish settlers, and as a result the Presbyterian Church has continued to thrive there, particularly at Knox Church in Dunedin which maintains a proud tradition of choral music. Other notable parish choirs in the country include that of All Saints Anglican Church in Palmerston North, and St Mark's Anglican Church in Auckland.

The church choirs of New Zealand are supported by the New Zealand branch of the Royal School of Church Music. The RSCM holds a residential Summer and Winter choir school every year, the latter focussed exclusively on children and youth. Internationally renowned church musicians are sought to lead the Summer School each year; the previous course in January was led by Timothy Noon (formerly Director of Music at Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral) who in September will take up the position as Director of Music at Auckland's Holy Trinity Cathedral. The RSCM training scheme 'Voices for Life' is used extensively throughout the country as a means to educate young singers in theory and vocal production.

In terms of writing for the church, Shirley Murray is perhaps our most well-known hymn writer, with her texts appearing in more than 100 collections worldwide. Murray has been honoured as a fellow of the Royal School of Church Music (2006) and was named a Fellow of the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada in 2009. The cathedrals of New Zealand have always encouraged composition of new music, particularly Richard Madden in Dunedin, and Katherine Dienes-Williams (now Organist and Master of the Choristers at Guildford Cathedral) in Wellington. Following a fruitful period as Composer in Residence at Wellington Cathedral of St Paul, young composer Andrew Baldwin has produced a number of highly effective works which bodes well for the future.

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[1] The other being the Cathedral of St Andrew in Sydney, Australia.

*Edited by Irene Auerbach, England*