

Welcome to a musical journey that starts close to home and takes us nearly all the way round the world.

Our enterprising friends at the Kāpiti Concert Orchestra celebrated their twentieth anniversary last year and marked the occasion by commissioning a work from composer, conductor, radio presenter and university lecturer Kenneth Young. This was enabled by a grant from Dr Robin Phillip, a former Chair of KCO. Kenneth Young, a long-term resident of Raumati, says of this work: “The Kāpiti coastline and environs have a special place in my heart. I simply wanted to write something gentle and lyrical with plenty of light, in order to express my affection for this beautiful place.” *Kāpiti* brings together old and new Aotearoa-style, beginning with birdsong represented by a kōauau, the Māori version of the flute that is apparently renowned for the power of its players over the affections of women. The music morphs via a flute solo into full, directed orchestra that invokes the sounds of native bush.

Maurice Ravel’s *Pavane pour une infante défunte* (*Pavane for a dead Princess*) was dedicated to an actual Princess, la Princesse Edmond de Polignac (née Winnaretta Singer, of the New Jersey sewing machine manufacturers). As if that wasn’t enough, she had previously been la Princesse Louis de Scey-Montbéliard. Anyway, she and Prince Edmond hosted an avant-garde arts salon in 1890s Paris which was attended by luminaries including Debussy, Chabrier, Proust, Isadora Duncan, Cocteau, Diaghilev and Monet as well as Ravel, who would have played the piece there. He described it as “an evocation of a pavane that a little princess might, in former times, have danced at the Spanish court”. The orchestrated version followed in 1910 and was played in Manchester in 1911, where a contemporary critic found that “The piece is hardly representative of the composer, with whom elusive harmonies woven in rapid figuration are the usual medium of expression. In the Pavane we get normal, almost archaic harmonies, subdued expression, and a somewhat remote beauty of melody.”

As an eighteen-year-old at the Paris Conservatoire Ravel had studied piano under noted teacher and composer Charles-Wilfrid de Bériot, who found him “too romantic” and commented that he played “with feeling and warmth, but not always under control ... plenty of temperament, but a tendency to overdo his effects ... must be held in check”. The values implicit in these remarks are consistent with those of Charles-Wilfrid’s father, Charles-Auguste de Bériot, who was chief violin instructor at the Brussels Conservatory in the 1840s. His Franco-Belgian school of violin playing placed emphasis on balancing the elegance and emotional sensitivity of the classic French tradition with the virtuosic fireworks embodied by Niccolò Paganini. His *Fantaisie Scène de Ballet* provides the solo performer with opportunities to show off their musicality as well as their technical whizzbangs. After

the forthright introduction there's an Adagio, a Bolero and a Waltz before we race *appassionato* to a rousing finish.

Interval

By 1892 Antonín Dvořák, then aged fifty, was a very well-established composer, with his works being performed throughout Europe. He was also married with six living children aged three to eleven. Not circumstances where many people would feel the urge to emigrate to the other side of the world, and Dvořák was all for turning down the offer to become director of the National Conservatory of Music of America in New York City - until his wife Anna found out that the Conservatory was offering twenty-five times what the Prague Conservatory were paying. Westward they went.

The Conservatory had been founded by Mrs Jeanette Meyers Thurber, the wife of a millionaire grocery wholesaler, in pursuance of her belief that a nation should cultivate its own unique music. This was a concept familiar to Dvořák who had long been using musical idioms from his native Bohemia. She also championed the rights of women, people of colour, and people with disabilities to attend her school. This enabled one Harry Burleigh, a 26-year-old African American, to enrol. He mopped floors to pay for his tuition and sang spirituals as he worked. This brought him and the musical genre to the attention of Dvořák, who subsequently said, "In the Negro melodies of America I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music ...These can be the foundation of a serious and original school of composition, to be developed in the United States." Burleigh was to go on to assist Dvořák as amanuensis and became a well-known baritone and composer in his own right. His setting of "Deep River" remains one of the best-known spirituals.

Dvořák's ***Symphony No. 9 in E minor*** – the name "From the New World" is believed to have been suggested by Mrs Thurber - was composed in Spillville, Iowa, where Dvořák spent much of 1893 among other Bohemian immigrants. The symphony makes extensive use of spiritual idioms and contains material that Dvořák was intending to work up into a setting of Longfellow's *Hiawatha* which, sadly, never happened. It premiered in New York City's Carnegie Hall in December of that year, when every movement was met with enthusiastic applause and the composer kept having to stand up and bow. It rapidly took its place as one of the most popular symphonies in the world - and beyond, since it was included in a tape recording that Neil Armstrong took to the Moon in 1969.

Mrs Thurber's school is no more. Other schools sprang up, competing for faculty and students, and hers was dismissed by the musical establishment for being "specifically successful in helping students of foreign birth and certain special classes, like the blind and those of Negro blood" and derided for the presence of "a sprinkling of girls", as the New York Evening Post put it, in its orchestra. The school, and she, died largely forgotten; but this is a mighty monument to her vision.

