

The Big Sing: New Zealand Youth Choral Phenomenon

by Peter Watts

The stage and ground floor of the Town Hall are packed with young people in a variety of colorful uniforms. The circle is full of parents and other audience members. In the excited moments before the concert begins, Mexican waves swirl noisily around the hall. Fragments of familiar songs can be heard from different corners of the auditorium. Suddenly the excited buzz dies away and a respectful quiet greets the appearance of the compère. We are at the final Gala Concert of The Big Sing 2019 in Dunedin, New Zealand. Over the next two hours, twenty-four of New Zealand's finest secondary school choirs present a breathtaking range of music in an equally breathtaking range of languages and styles.

The Big Sing is a Kiwi phenomenon. Almost half of New Zealand's secondary schools send choirs to this annual national choral festival, and nearly all of the country's top singers, solo and choral, from the past several decades, have emerged from its crucible. It is the flagship event of the New Zealand Choral

Federation, and the generous support it receives from our national arts council Creative New Zealand is testament to its massive success.

My introduction to The Big Sing began before it even existed. In 1985, I entered my school chapel choir into the country's chamber music competition, which involved a large number of instrumental ensembles and very few choirs. Two years later, I was engaged to adjudicate the choral section of the competition, and while it was fascinating to traverse the whole country listening to school choirs, I had a rather easy time—there was only one choir for every ten instrumental groups.

Soon after, the newly formed New Zealand Choral Federation took over the choir part of the competition and eventually renamed it The Big Sing. This heralded a period of astounding growth: from the handful of groups I heard in 1987, to 280 choirs (involving some 10,000 singers) by 2017, and in a country of just 4.8 million people. It also brought The Big Sing to in-

ternational attention and meant that it could attract a number of renowned adjudicators, including Bob Chilcott, Simon Halsey, Ebbe Munk, and Tim Sharp. Many top Australian practitioners have also been judges, and prominent Adelaide conductor Carl Crossin commented at one Finale, "If The Big Sing is anything to go by, New Zealand punches far above its weight internationally. I'm a huge fan!"

I too have had the privilege of adjudicating both regional festivals and the National Finale several times over the last two decades, and it has been a great pleasure to watch The Big Sing's development. Just as important as its numerical growth, the standard of choral singing and choral direction has also been continually rising so that today the level of expertise demonstrated at the National Finale is of the highest order.

There have been many refinements and changes to the regulations of The Big Sing over the years, but the goal of encouraging choral excellence among young

The Big Sing: New Zealand Youth Choral Phenomenon

people has always been paramount. These days, choirs compete first at a regional level, where they sing a ten-minute program of three pieces of their own choice but selected from three distinct categories. Category One recognizes the importance of performing music from New Zealand, and here choirs perform a NZ art music composition or folk arrangement, or a piece of Māori or Pasifika music, often incorporating traditional movement. (Promotion of Māori and Pacific Island choral music is an important aim of The Big Sing.) Category Two covers secular or sacred music of any period written specifically for choir, and Category Three is essentially a “Director’s Choice” section that encompasses all other choral music and the first two categories as well.

If the disadvantage of this simple system is that it does not give scope for specialisation—as, say, separate Renaissance or other historical categories might—it does encourage choirs to examine and try out a range of genres (healthy from an educational perspective), as well as making for clean and transparent adjudication. Choirs at a regional level who are not able or willing to enter all three categories are still encouraged to participate and receive assessment but are not eligible for the National Finale.

In fact, very few choirs at this level will make it through to Finale, so there is a strong element of competition, but one of the most frequently commented-on features of The Big Sing is the encouragement choirs offer one another. That



Wellington East Girls' College Senior Choir in the Wellington Region, The Big Sing

support carries right through to Finale itself, where choirs frequently give each other shouts of encouragement (usually at appropriate moments) and standing ovations. Although the awards are hotly contested, I am always moved by the camaraderie, enthusiasm, and love of choral music that is in evidence.

The three days conclude with a Gala Concert, where each choir performs one of their competition pieces along with a massed item. Adjudicators' comments are given and awards presented, with the whole event live-streamed to the world and recorded for broadcast by Radio New Zealand. It all ends with the NZ anthem and, often, one or more haka performed by emotional choirs. A student, hav-

ing recently arrived in New Zealand, commented in her feedback report: “Singing the national anthem at the end with twenty-four of the top choirs in New Zealand was magnificent. It felt magical to be a part of a crowd of people, all happy and proud of their country. And as these young people put their arms around the shoulders of those around them, I felt so, so connected. I felt truly part of that gathering. I felt like I belonged in NZ.”

The Big Sing continues to develop. While the relatively small size of New Zealand enables it to be a truly national event, and moving the Finale between main centres each year allows people from throughout the country to enjoy this remarkable display of young choral talent, there



Christ's College Chapel Choir in 2008 Finale of The Big Sing

the Ministry of Youth Development, that quotes a comment from a school principal: "Such positive role-modelling, aimed at promoting the love and enjoyment of singing, embodies for me the essence of The Big Sing: the encouragement of leadership, participation, collaboration, innovation, and of course excellence in performance." The Big Sing is responsible for much great music making, social, and personal development in Aotearoa New Zealand. Long may it continue!

has been a growing feeling that the level and spirit seen at Finale should be available to more choirs. Hence, in 2019 a "second tier" of thirty-six choirs was invited to participate in one of three new festivals called "Cadenza" (the flourish before a finale!), which were held successfully in smaller, regional centres around New Zealand. In many ways, they mirrored the Finale experience but also had a more teaching-oriented focus so that choirs could learn from experts and watch each other perform.

One of the most rewarding elements of The Big Sing is its spin-off into other areas of New Zealand's musical life. The NZCF's Association of Choral Directors has always offered training in choral direction but more recently has been able to target some of this specifically toward conductors taking their choirs to The Big Sing. A choral compo-

sition award has been linked to The Big Sing with a prize offered by SOUNZ, the Centre for New Zealand Music. Many members of school choirs taking part in The Big Sing audition for the NZ Secondary Students Choir and may then go on to try out for the NZ Youth Choir. In fact, a significant number of current directors of The Big Sing choirs have taken that path themselves, and their subsequent experience with top national or city chamber choirs has informed their own practice.

The value of choral singing, its social, academic, and personal impact, has been well researched and commented on worldwide. A number of studies in New Zealand also attest to this fact and to the role The Big Sing has played in these areas of our life together. It is confirmed by a specific, annual survey run by one of the event's funders,

To find out more, visit:
<https://www.nzcf.org.nz/activities/for-singers/the-big-sing>

If you are planning to come to New Zealand for WSCM2020 in July, stay for a while and experience The Big Sing National Finale in Christchurch August 26-28. Or find The Big Sing on Facebook and stay in touch until you can attend an event: <https://www.facebook.com/thebigzingnz/?fref=ts>

Peter Watts is a freelance musician based in Auckland, New Zealand, who has had an extensive career working with choirs, teaching at school and university level, and performing. In 2005 he was awarded Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to Choral Music.