

something of a yardstick against which other performers could be judged.⁷ Since settling permanently in Melbourne in the 1870s, Fanny's success as a leading prima donna for W. S. Lyster had been noted in the New Zealand papers. Her husband's situation in Australia had been less happy. He was valued as a violinist and as a chorus trainer, but Lyster preferred other conductors. Martin's ambitions as an operatic conductor and director almost certainly motivated him to organise a company of his own. Lyster's virtual monopoly of the Australian market dictated the choice of New Zealand as a touring venue.

The performers who came together in Dunedin for the 1876 Simonsen tour had never previously worked as a team. Some, including the leading contralto Miss E. A. (Nelly) Lambert, came from Allen's Royal English Opera Company, having declined to follow that company on its tour of India. Others, like baritone soloist Albert Richardson, had been working for Lyster in Australia. The leading tenor, Carmini Morley, was completely unknown in New Zealand, but had apparently worked with Fanny and Martin in America. His colleague, Charles Florence, was making his operatic debut. Since creating a unified ensemble from such disparate elements was bound to take time, the first few days were spent in rehearsal. On Saturday 11 March 1876, the Company opened an advertised twenty-four night season in Dunedin with a production of *The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein* at the Queen's Theatre.

The omens for success were not altogether propitious. Although Fanny Simonsen had created the role of the Grand Duchess at the work's Australian premiere, it was not her best part. Carmini Morley, an Italian-style *tenore robusto*, was even less suited to play Fritz, the hero. He was also suffering from a dreadful cold. The opera was decidedly under-rehearsed. Moreover, in a clash typical of New Zealand's congested entertainment calendar, the Simonsens' first night coincided with that of 'Blondin, the hero of Niagara' who offered patrons the thrill of witnessing his famous rope walk across the Niagara Falls, re-created in a giant canvas arena off the St Kilda Road. Fortunately there was a sizeable and tolerant audience at the Queen's Theatre. They found much to enjoy. 'Making the usual allowance for a first night appearance, and the fact that on Saturday the whole of the troupe appeared together in public for the first time, the performance was most satisfactory to the audience', commented the *Otago Witness* reviewer. He also noted that 'the costumes, properties, &c., are superior to anything we have seen here before'.⁸

The introduction of the Company's Italian repertoire, with its heavy reliance on the leading soprano and tenor, brought excellent reviews and well filled houses. The orchestra came in for particular praise:

It is seldom, in the Colonies, that orchestral music is heard to so great advantage. The precision, expression and taste with which the accompaniments are played give