

From Bayreuth to the Ureweras Michael Balling and the revival of the Viola Alta

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Many strange and curious instruments appeared in nineteenth century New Zealand, none more so than the 'Turkophone' and its 'new and wonderful version the Turkophonini' introduced to Wellington by Ali-Ben-Sou Alle in 1855. The century proved to be one of hyperactivity: musical experiments abounded. Some instruments established themselves such as the Boehm flute and the saxophone and some had a brief efflorescence such as the eighteenth century glass harmonica in new guises as the 'glassophone', or the 'fairy glasses' as it was known to the Maori who heard it played in Salvation Army ensembles.

Amongst those that seemed set fair to succeed was an improved viola, known as the viola alta, which looked like an outsize viola or large tenor viol, with a body around eighteen inches in length but which had a more powerful tone than its familiar relative and seemed to require more than usual strength to play. The brain child of a viola player Hermann Ritter (1849-1926), it was introduced to New Zealand by one of his most gifted pupils, Michael Balling, best known as the founder of the Nelson School of Music. Ritter felt that this new version of an older instrument gave the viola improved resonance and a more brilliant tone. He took as his model an instrument described in Antonio Bagatella's *Regale peria Construzione di Violini*, published in Padua in 1786, and he believed his own version of it had clarity and increased power coupled with a striking delicacy and richness. He went to great lengths to have this instrument adopted by orchestras and soloists and gained the interest of Wagner, who asked him to take part in the Bayreuth Festival. By 1889 five of Ritter's pupils were playing the viola alta in the Bayreuth orchestra and the originator of the instrument had toured Europe, and as well had composed and arranged a good deal of music for it.

Michael Balling (1866-1925) came from Heidingsfeld, near the baroque city of Würzburg, and had won a viola alta as a prize given by his teacher. At first he responded negatively to this gift as he feared it would spoil his violin playing. Ritter eventually persuaded Balling to practise long slow notes for six months until he had mastered the new instrument, at which point he too became a decided advocate.¹

Balling joined the Bayreuth orchestra and as its youngest member sat in the last desk at the back. Felix Mottl, the conductor, soon noticed his abilities and moved him into the firsts. From this point on his ascent