

The North Shore Male Choir in Whitianga

By Len Salt

If you had walked into the North Shore Male Choir concert in the Whitianga Town Hall last Sunday halfway through the second half, you could be forgiven for thinking that you had come to the wrong performance. What you would have seen was a stage filled with the members of the choir, all 30 of them, in their black shirts and fluoro coloured ties, dancing a waltz with members of the audience whilst singing an item called The Number Song. Not your ordinary choir.

The concert began with musical director Lynn John singing a powerful solo opening to Ol' Man River, from Showboat, with the choir joining in and lifting the song to a rousing finish. With his rich bass voice, Lynn John has built up a substantial pedigree in the New Zealand music scene over more than 30 years. As a Welshman, he was born and raised in a country that treats its singing almost as a religion.

Calon Lan was introduced as one of the most famous songs in Wales and featured superb solos by Dragan Atanasov and Grant Feasey, followed by a moving version of Pokarekare Ana. This classic Maori spiritual started low and soft and you could almost close your eyes and imagine the voices coming to you across the mist covered waters of Lake Waikeremoana, the volume swelling as they came closer in the morning light. The audience was invited to join in and the last verse was sung again, this time with another 120 voices filling the town hall.

A real treat was the inclusion of mezzo

soprano Mary Newman-Pound as guest soloist. She has performed with Opera New Zealand, both here and in Britain, and presented a mixture of songs from Carmen to Bach/Gounod (Ave Maria) with polished and professional style.

During the course of the two hour show the choir presented songs in Maori, Latin, Zulu, Welsh, English (and American, said Lynn). The American songs included "Nothing Like a Dame" from South Pacific and "Oh What a Beautiful Morning" from Oklahoma. Mark Dunlop and Andre van Rossum were standout soloists in this number, as well as featuring in other pieces. Lynn seemed spoilt for choice for singers to go front and centre.

This group is driven and inspired by

Lynn John and they are anything but average. The audience is caught up in the on-stage fun, energy and enthusiasm from first to last, with Lynn providing introductions to the songs while delivering jokes to keep the pace going.

The choir tried to finish up with two African songs, starting with an a cappella Kumbaya and a traditional Zulu song complete with drums and handclapping. The audience, which included a number of members of Mercury Bay's own excellent choir, were again corralled in to contributing a harmony on the last verse, to their great enjoyment judging by the voices that filled the room.

I say *tried* to finish, because a standing ovation and demands for an encore brought the boys back to give the

audience more.

A couple of weeks ago, in writing about the Auckland Youth Orchestra concert, I mentioned the events in Milan where 300,000 people lined the streets for the state funeral of the great Italian composer Verdi. The song they sang as the coffin was carried through the streets was "Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves" from his opera Nabucco. It is an extraordinarily powerful piece of music and it needs as many strong male voices as you can gather to make it come alive. The choir had already performed it earlier in the show and were forbidden to leave until they did it again, after which the audience went home happy and fulfilled.



The North Shore Male Choir during their performance in Whitianga last Sunday.