

The Nelson School of Music

When Nelson's European settlers wanted to hear a tune – they had to play it themselves. Within a few years of arrival the settlers had built a Harmonic Hall and in 1893 imported a full time conductor. Michael Balling, came from Germany, then the hub of the musical world, and impressed Nelson with his viola and his personality.

On holiday at Mount Cook, Balling was snowed in with a wealthy shipping agent JH Cock and convinced him that Nelson needed a school of music. At first the Nelson School of Music was housed in the Harmonic Hall (where the Rutherford Hotel is today), but it soon outgrew this building. Cock donated the land and Wellington architects Clere and Fitzgerald drew up the plans for the brick hall that is still in use.

The Nelson School of Music was opened in September 1901 by the Countess of Ranfurly, wife of the Governor of New Zealand. At the final rehearsals for the opening concert the organisers panicked when they found the acoustics were too resonant. But when the hall is full its wonderful acoustics make it a favourite of many famous artists.

In 1911 another Nelson benefactor, Thomas Cawthron, donated an organ imported from England. It was water powered and ground to a whisper when there was a drought – until electricity was laid on in 1926.

Right up until the 1950s the school delivered the music curriculum for Nelson high schools and was an emergency classroom when the boys' college burnt down in 1905. The hall also became a cinema for several years, with silent movies accompanied by piano, and sometimes by the excited barking of dogs brought along to see the show.

By 1994 when the school celebrated its centennial it had become a community based performing arts and music education centre with a strong New Zealand identity. It hosts an annual winter festival that often includes its two patrons, soprano Dame Malvina Major and pianist Michael Houston. The Nelson School of Music is the centre of the musical arts in Nelson, it has over 80,000 people through its doors every year and now offers a full-time contemporary music course with an emphasis on pop and rock - shaking the foundations with music very different from anything the founders could have imagined!