

Trust Waikato Symphony Orchestra History

The Trust Waikato Symphony Orchestra is going from strength to strength. Congratulations. But the history info saying the TWSO had its beginnings back in 1945 is not correct. Yes, there were orchestral & smaller groups playing in Hamilton many years prior, but I have no knowledge of them.

Nor do I know anything about the supposed establishment of a Trust or legal organisation in the mid-1940s which, apparently, was to foster the formation of a symphony orchestra in Hamilton for the Waikato district.

However, I do know for certain that what was formed in 1945 was the Hamilton Civic Orchestra which in its heyday of the late 1940s to about 1954 was a large & very good amateur symphony orchestra. It was conducted by Peter de Rose (then called M de Rose, & who I think was also known as Paul Ehrlich. He had come to NZ in the 1920s I believe, from supposed high-ranking opera conducting positions in Sth America & USA, & Europe before that most likely. He held conducting positions in Dunedin & Wellington prior to moving to Hamilton in the mid-1940s). de Rose was a man of very small stature & authoritarian manner, & was a controversial & polarising figure. Most surely I can vouch for his musical abilities, & there were a large number of leading musicians & musical people throughout NZ who had great confidence in him as a teacher & conductor. He was also a composer of small pieces, amongst which was the City of Hamilton March of Sousa-style which was played by the HCO and published as a piano solo. (This de Rose is not to be confused with the American Peter de Rose, composer of light music, including the very popular Deep Purple).

The HCO immediately became the major classical instrumental performing group & source of pride for the city, and this continued throughout the post-War years, I understand it was large in player numbers & included all the usual array of instruments. It paralleled in amateur terms the establishment of NZ's first professional symphony orch, the National Orchestra which was of course based in Wellington. (The Hamilton Civic Choir was also formed in 1945 and was originally conducted by de Rose).

But by 1954 there was a major disagreement amongst the HCO players. Some wanted a new conductor, namely, KGL Smith of brass band fame in NZ. KGL was the conductor of the Hamilton Citizens Band (& later of the NZ National Band on a World tour), A concert of the HCO in which the city band joined the orch for a performance of Tchaikovsky's 'warhorse' 1812 Overture (the impressive performance conducted by Smith) was the catalyst for a change at the helm of the HCO which some of the players desired. A public meeting was held, chaired by the then Mayor of Hamilton but de Rose was the choice of the majority of players & supporters. Those opposed to him left and formed the Hamilton String Players, conducted by the then ex-HCO leader, Gordon Kerby. The Civic Orch continued on with varying degrees of success, but increasingly depleted in numbers until the end of 1963 when de Rose without warning retired (at 80 or thereabouts!) & went to live in Invercargill. At that point, the Hamilton Civic Orchestra (an incorporated society) went into recess & was wound up.

The Hamilton String Players went on, from strength to strength, with very high musical standards being achieved. In 1966 I led a wind octet which was invited to perform part of the Mozart Wind Serenade in C Minor K388 at a String Players concert in mid-66. This wind group, though short-lived, had brought together wind players from the just-expired HCO & from the former-HCO/String Players camp where they seldom had any playing opportunities except when that group enlarged itself to cater for them.

It was not until about 1968 or later that a new orchestra incorporating the String Players & some ex-HCO players was formed. There was no direct link back to the Civic Orchestra & to say the TWSO was

like Air NZ which began as TEAL & at the amalgamation of TEAL & NZNAC became Air NZ, is incorrect. TEAL was fully functioning when Air NZ was formed. The 1945-63 Hamilton Civic Orchestra went totally out of existence & the players then became independent free-lancing musicians.

I played oboe in the Ham Civic Orch from 1958 to 1963. Oboe players were few & far between, mainly because it was a problematic instrument to play, & expensive to buy, as well as having notorious reed problems to get around. Peter de Rose, frustrated that the HCO had lost its oboe player(s?) after the split in 1954, made sure that the orch owned an oboe, & he put it about that he wanted to teach someone to play it. I left school to join the staff of radio station 1XH in 1958, & while there, I was offered that role, seeing as I had been learning the piano for a number of years & had passed exams. Two members of the HCO, Mike Bettany (bassoon) & Fraser Hope (Percussion, mainly timpani) on 1XH's programme staff persuaded me to take up the offer, which I did. Peter de Rose taught me, which was remarkable considering he was not an oboe player himself. Unfortunately, I had to find out about & manage my reed requirements by myself, which sometimes was not too successful. He recommended to me the little book on oboe playing by the famous English oboist Evelyn Rothwell. You could say she was my co-teacher.

Hamilton Central Library has in its collections the early printed programmes of the HCO concerts & Waikato Times reviews. I still have my programmes for later years up to the end of 1963. Believe me, the Waikato Symphony Orchestra was a NEW, much needed shot in the arm when it was formed in the late 1960s (or was it the early 1970s — I had left Hamilton in 1967 so wasn't on hand to know what happened). The old Civic Orchestra had petered out, lost its heart & many good players, & had simply died of premature old age. I don't even know what happened to the large printed music collection it had, but I suspect most of it belonged to de Rose & went with him to Invercargill. He died about 1966. The splendid TWSO doesn't deserve to be linked with the tired old HCO to which I was loyal & was one of several who worked hard at keeping it going. I attended a wonderful concert of the Waikato SO in 1992 or 1993 in the Clarence Street Hall & was amazed to see there were none of the musicians I had played within the 1960s playing with it. And that concert was now 26 or so years ago!

It will be appreciated if your printed history gives credit to the Hamilton Civic Orchestra — in spite of its old age malaise during its last years — as a forerunner of the TWSO, but not as the same organisation, as that is not correct. Perhaps you know that in 1964 after the HCO died, a centennial orchestra was formed for the centenary of Hamilton, with the Hamilton String Players being the main driving force & pool of players. It would be correct to say that that short-lived temporary orchestra was the real first beginnings of the TWSO.

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