CHAPTER 1
THE FORMATION OF THE PHILHARMONIC
AND ITS EARLY YEARS, 1885-1889

Following the dissolution of the Sydney Musical Union in early 1885, the supporters of amateur choral music in Sydney sought to form a new ensemble that would again provide quality performances of oratorios and cantatas, which had been the speciality of the Musical Union. This new organisation was named the Sydney Philharmonic Society, in the grand tradition of amateur vocal music dating back to 1833. This Society overcame early difficulties to set a high standard for the amateur performance of choral music in Sydney. During its first four years, the Philharmonic Society also established the tradition of an annual Christmas *Messiah* performance and initiated the practice of representing the city at important civic events.

The Founding of the Society

On 30 April 1885, Sir Patrick Jennings, K.C.M.G., a member of the legislative council and a founding member of the all male Sydney Liedertafel, presided over a meeting of approximately sixty people in the Sydney Town Hall.\(^1\) The stated purpose of the meeting was to discuss the formation of a music society that would draw on the best musical talent, specifically vocal talent, in Sydney, in much the same fashion as the Melbourne Philharmonic Society and other choral organisations in Europe. A sub-committee was formed for the purpose of preparing the rules of the society, with

\(^1\) Jennings later served as Premier and Colonial Treasurer from 26 February 1886 to 19 January 1887. State Records of New South Wales, “Concise Guide to the State Archives (S-Y): Treasury,” http://www.records.nsw.gov.au/cguide/sy/teasut17.htm (accessed 2 February 2004); Gill, 5. Although the concert hall in the Town Hall was not finished until 1889, by 1885 the vestibule, which included offices and a small hall, was available for use by the general public. Shirley Fitzgerald, *Sydney: 1842-1992* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1992), 94.
the general aim of the organisation set as the performance of oratorios and cantatas by a choir made up of men and women, effectively picking up where the Sydney Musical Union had left off. At the conclusion of the meeting, following a vote of those present, it was announced “that a musical society, to be called the Sydney Philharmonic Society, be and is hereby formed.”

An executive committee was elected to act as the decision making body for the organisation. Although the membership of this committee was not specified, the annual reports of the Society suggest that the committee included the president, vice-president(s), honorary secretary (and assistant), honorary treasurer, librarian, conductor, and five or six additional people under the heading of “committee.” This executive committee was elected annually and met anywhere from eight to more than twenty times a year, and membership on the committee was open to men and women. This committee was responsible for determining the works performed during the season, selecting and hiring the soloists, and providing general leadership for the organisation.

Max Vogrich, a German pianist, composer, and acting conductor of the Sydney Liedertafel, was engaged as conductor. Vogrich was one of several international musicians who arrived in Australia during the 1860s and 1870s; W. Arundel Orchard suggests that one of the reasons for the formation of the Sydney Philharmonic Society in 1885 was the presence of Vogrich in Sydney at that time.

“In response to a requisition from members of the provisional committee appointed to prepare rules and take the preliminary steps for the formation of the

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2 Barton and Thompson, 3; 1973 history, [4].

3 Gill, 7; F.C. Brewer, The Drama and Music in New South Wales (Sydney: Charles Potter, Government Printer, 1892), 81.

4 Orchard, 123.
Sydney Philharmonic Society,” and following several meetings of the appointed sub-committee, a General Meeting of those interested in the formation of the Society was convened by the Mayor of Sydney on 12 June. Approximately fifty people attended the meeting, including Sir George Verdon, the fifth president of the successful Melbourne Philharmonic Society, who strongly encouraged and actively supported the formation of an amateur choral organisation in Sydney. Both Verdon and Jennings firmly believed that a Philharmonic Society in Sydney could receive civic support as great as that received by the Melbourne Philharmonic.

Interestingly, also present at this General Meeting were two gentlemen by the names of Charles Deane and John Bushelle. Charles Deane was the son of John Deane, the conductor of the Philharmonic Societies of the late 1860s, and grandson of John P. Deane, who was associated with the Philharmonic Society of the 1830s. John Bushelle was the nephew of William V. Wallace, the “Australian Paganini” of the 1840s and probable leader of the Philharmonic Society of 1836. Thus, the 1885 Philharmonic Society was linked by family connections to the previous Sydney Philharmonic Societies.

After much discussion, it was determined that the Philharmonic would produce “first-class” oratorios and cantatas, in the manner of the defunct Sydney Musical Union, and would strive to “engage the very best talent…amongst professional singers to take the most important parts in solo singing” with the

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6 Carne, 285.


8 Orchard, 123.
organisation. The tradition of relying upon professional talent for success, explicitly stated here by the founding members of the organisation, begs the question, why could the Philharmonic Society not rely on its own amateur vocalists as soloists? Most likely, the committee recognised that the promise of professional talent would increase membership, subscriber, and audience numbers, thus generating a significant profit. Unfortunately, as the Philharmonic would learn in the years to come, this reliance on professional musicians could be a very risky venture.

The rules and resolutions as recommended by the Philharmonic sub-committee were approved by those attending the meeting and provisionally adopted by the Society, with the condition that the executive committee would meet again in one year’s time to determine if the rules were still appropriate. Additionally, as the Philharmonic was to be a tool for the instruction of music for its members and the general public, prior arrangements had been made with the Minister for Public Instruction for the use of a rehearsal hall free of cost. Consequently rehearsals began immediately.

Since both men and women were invited to join the Society as members, as had been the provision in the Philharmonic Societies of the 1830s, this ensemble would be fundamentally as well as musically different from the very popular Sydney Liedertafel, which specialised in the performance of madrigals, glee, and other works appropriate for an all male chorus. Membership in the Society was divided into two categories: performing members and subscribers (or non-performing members), and

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by the end of the first season, the membership registry included 714 names. In an effort to raise funds needed to purchase music and facilitate an immediate start of rehearsals and concerts, a “lifetime membership” scheme was also adopted. The title of “Life Governor” would be bestowed upon any member who made a sizable donation to the Society. Although this was a risky proposition, as the success of the Society was not guaranteed, some of the members, including Jennings, donated the money needed to ensure a solid financial beginning for the Society. According to the Philharmonic’s first annual report, the conclusion of the first season, twenty individuals possessed the title “Life Governor.”

The First Concert

The premiere concert of the Sydney Philharmonic Society was scheduled for 1 October 1885, at the Exhibition Building, and included a performance of Robert Schumann’s cantata, Paradise and the Peri. The concert was highly anticipated; many in Sydney’s music community apparently felt there had not been a concert of high quality in Sydney featuring a choir of men and women since the Sydney Musical Union was dissolved, and they were eager for the performances of oratorios and cantatas to resume. Beginning more than a week before the performance, the Society placed advertisements in the Sydney Morning Herald, in a very public display of the members’ excitement. On the day of the concert, for example, the

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12 1885 report.
13 1885 report.
14 The Exhibition Building in Railway Park was the largest performance space available in Sydney during this time. However, performances in this hall were “[liable] to interruption from locomotive whistles [and] was a little off the central line of traffic.” Barton and Thompson, 5. Schumann’s cantata, Die Paradies und die Peri (1843) was sung in English translation.
15 Barton and Thompson, 3; Gill, 8.
Philharmonic Society took out two large advertisements in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The first advertisement read:

**SYDNEY PHILHARMONIC SOCIETY**

Schumann’s celebrated Cantata,
PARADISE AND THE PERI
will be rendered at the First Performance of this Society,
at the
EXHIBITION BUILDING
THIS EVENING, the 1ST OCTOBER.

Writing of this work, Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians says it was first performed at Leipsic, when “the enthusiasm created by this work at its first performance (Dec. 4th, 1843), conducted by the composer himself, was so great that it had to be repeated a week afterwards, on December 11th; and on the 23rd of the same month it was performed in the Opera House, Dresden.”

**SOLOISTS:**
Sopranos – Miss Alice Rees (Madame Vogrich); Mrs. F. Brewer.
Contraltos – Miss Violette, Mrs. Atkinson.
Tenor – Mr. F. Brewer
Baritone – Mr. Friedmann.

**Conductor:**
Herr MAX VOGRICH

**TICKETS** – Front Seats, 3s; Second Seats, 2s.
May be had of all the principal music sellers.

Carriages may be ordered for 10 o’clock.
Special train and tram accommodation provided.
Vehicles enter by Cleveland-street gate, and leave by gate nearest Devonshire-street.
Holders of front seat tickets will enter at the north-western door, and second seat tickets at the southern door.

JOHN LIGGINS.
Hon. Secretary.16

Directly below this advertisement, a second one appeared, containing identical information:

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16 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 October 1885. Most likely, Mr. F. Brewer, the tenor soloist for this concert, was not F.C. Brewer, music critic and author of *The Drama and Music in New South Wales*. Rather, this Mr. F. Brewer was almost certainly the amateur vocalist F.P. Brewer, who was referred to in F.C. Brewer’s book.
SYDNEY PHILHARMONIC SOCIETY.
SCHUMANN’S PARADISE AND THE PERI.
MISS ALICE REES, AS THE PERI.
MRS. ATKINSON, CONTRALTO.
MR. FRIEDEMANN, BARITONE.
MR. FRANK BREWER, TENOR.
MISS BESSIE HARRISON, MEZZO-SOPRANO.
CHORUS AND ORCHESTRA OF 200 PERFORMERS.
HERR MAX VOGRICH, CONDUCTOR.
EXHIBITION BUILDING TO-NIGHT.
PRICES OF ADMISSION, 5S AND 3S.
PARADISE AND THE PERI, FIRST TIME IN SYDNEY.17

Both advertisements were eye catching and were intended to create a sense of heightened excitement among members of Sydney’s music community. These advertisements also demonstrate that strong promotion was thought necessary to attract audiences in Sydney.

The ticket prices, premium seats at 5s and the rest of the hall at 3s, were considered slightly expensive for the day; however, the prices were not unreasonable. Advertisements for other concerts printed on the same page of the Sydney Morning Herald, included the ticket prices of performances at two other venues: Academy of Music concert – Reserved Orchestra seats 4s, Stalls 3s, Body of Hall 2s, and Gallery 1s; Theatre Royal – Dress Circle 5s, Stalls 3s, Family Circle 2s.18 The fact that all of these tickets were considered somewhat expensive was probably intentional and would have discouraged the members of the lower social classes from attending. Thus, these events, including the performance by the Sydney Philharmonic Society,

17 Sydney Morning Herald, 1 October 1885.
18 Gill, 8; Sydney Morning Herald, 1 October 1885.
were intended for Sydney’s upper social class, as in the 1830s, and further defined the characteristics of the city’s social elite.  

The performance was sung in English, and the women of the choir wore white dresses with pink sashes tied on the left for the sopranos and blue sashes tied on the right for the altos, this concert dress would become a trademark of the Society. An audience of respectable size, “nearly equalled [to] that of a Sydney Liedertafel social evening,” attended the concert. At the time, the Sydney Liedertafel was one of the leading choral organisations in Sydney, and their concerts often attracted very large audiences. As Max Vogrich was also the conductor of the Sydney Liedertafel, his presence as the conductor of the Sydney Philharmonic Society would have attracted many of the regular members of the Liedertafel audience.

The critical reviews surrounding the first concert of the Sydney Philharmonic Society were encouraging. The critic for the *Sydney Morning Herald* expressed his surprised at the standard at which the Philharmonic performed.

It is customary to expect critics and auditors to ‘make every allowance’ for the ordeal to which a first appearance subjects every vocalist; and in this spirit very many who went to the Exhibition Building last evening were doubtless prepared to receive the first performance of the Sydney Philharmonic. To the credit of the performers and promoters, and above all to Herr Max Vogrich, no call was made on the indulgence of any…. [This performance] at once places the society on a most creditable musical basis.

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19 In the years to come, particularly under the direction of Roberto Hazon (see Chapter 2), the performances of the Philharmonic Society became more available to the average citizen of Sydney, mostly through the institution of tickets at popular, or lower, prices. Nonetheless, until the rise and eventual domination of professional orchestras and opera companies in the twentieth century, the Society maintained a high level of social importance which continued to attract Sydney’s elite.


However, at the time of the performance, it was publicly known that Vogrich was going to quit as conductor soon thereafter. He left Sydney “for reasons of his own”\(^{23}\) to pursue a career in New York. According to W. Arundel Orchard, “Vogrich’s ability seems to have been too good for Australia to hold him, hence his departure [to America].”\(^{24}\) Thus, despite the success of its first concert, the newly formed Sydney Philharmonic Society was left without a conductor.

**Henri Kowalski, 1885-1889**

Hastily, the Philharmonic began searching for a new conductor and enlisted the services of Henri Kowalski. Kowalski, a French pianist and composer of Irish and Polish descent, was well travelled and had visited Australia on a concert tour to Melbourne in 1880-82, before deciding to settle in Sydney in 1885.\(^{25}\) Elizabeth Wood enumerates Kowalski’s qualifications in detail in an article in the second edition of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, as well as an entry in the *Oxford Companion to Australian Music*. According to Wood, Kowalski was a student of piano and composition at the Paris Conservatoire and by 1870 had composed over one hundred piano compositions as well as songs and sacred works; in later years he also wrote three operas. Prior to international concert tours to continental Europe, England, America, and Canada in the 1860s and 1870s, Kowalski served as piano soloist for Napoleon III and was a chorister in the French Court’s Imperial Chapel. Although members of the Sydney Philharmonic Society later described him as having

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\(^{23}\) Barton and Thompson, 3.

\(^{24}\) Orchard, 39. While in New York, Vogrich composed a violin concerto that was judged by many critics to be one of the best since the Brahms violin concerto.

\(^{25}\) In his autobiography, Ernest Wunderlich states he arrived in Sydney in July 1885 on the same ship from Europe as Kowalski. Wunderlich, 23.
a short temper and an explosive personality, and despite the fact that he had no
previous conducting experience of significance, Kowalski remained with the Society
for four years.\textsuperscript{26}

Thus, it was Henri Kowalski who led the Philharmonic in the organisation’s
second concert, a performance of Handel’s \textit{Messiah} at Christmas. It was the first
performance of what was to become a Christmas tradition for the Society. The
concert featured Mrs. Nellie Armstrong, the \textit{prima donna} soprano from Melbourne,
who had recently made her Sydney debut with the Sydney Liedertafel. It would only
be a short time until the international music community would come to know this
twenty-four year old Mrs. Armstrong as Dame Nellie Melba.

As with the Society’s first concert, this concert was again held at the
Exhibition Building. However, the building and its grounds were also occupied by
the “Soudan Encampment,” a charitable fair featuring sports, side-shows, and
informal concerts to benefit St. Vincent’s Hospital. As a result, the Philharmonic was
not able to hold a dress rehearsal at the venue. Since the Soudan Encampment still
occupied portions of the Exhibition Building on the night of the concert, special
arrangements had to be made to accommodate the choir, which was augmented by
members of the Sydney Liedertafel and a chorus of thirty boys, the orchestra, and the
audience.\textsuperscript{27}

\textit{Wood NGD}); “Kowalski, Henri,” in \textit{The Oxford Companion to Australian Music}; Kerry Murphy,
“Henri Kowalski: Prince of the Pianoforte,” \textit{Centre for Studies in Australian Music Review} 13 (July
Gill, 8; 1973 history, [4]. It is interesting to note that Kowalski is the only conductor of the Sydney
Philharmonic Society to be included in the \textit{New Grove Dictionary}.

\textsuperscript{27} “Arrangements for Christmas Day,” \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 25 December 1885; Gill, 9.
Overall, according to most reports, “the performance…was one of the best ever given in Sydney.”\textsuperscript{28} Despite this praise, one critic declared the performance of the “Hallelujah” chorus, usually the strongest chorus in the oratorio, very weak. The critic determined the tempo of that chorus to be too quick, a fault attributed to Kowalski’s unfamiliarity with English oratorio as he was educated as a pianist in France.\textsuperscript{29} Gerald Marr Thompson, the music critic at that time for the \textit{Sydney Daily Telegraph}, added his criticism of Mrs. Armstrong’s performance, which was recorded in the history of the Society from 1903. He stated that although “her rendering as a whole was the best we have heard here for many years,” she had performed all of her recitatives “wrong,” singing them as she found them printed in her score, not as they were traditionally sung.\textsuperscript{30} It is likely that given Mrs. Armstrong’s vocal talent, this oversight either went unnoticed or was ignored by most of the members of the audience. Although no comment concerning Mrs. Armstrong’s performance was made in the review of the concert in the \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, her performance was recalled several years later in an article in that newspaper.

Many people have a lively recollection of the “Messiah” under M. Kowalski’s direction in 1885, when the limpid charm of Mrs. Armstrong’s fluent voice was conspicuous. The future Mme. Melba was then in her green young salad days, very slim and very pretty, and quite unversed in oratorio, so that her recitatives were given without the alternative notes, whilst ‘all the world wondered.’\textsuperscript{31}


\textsuperscript{30} Barton and Thompson, 4.

\textsuperscript{31} “The Oratorio Festival,” \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 18 April 1898.
Two more concerts were performed before the end of the season on 31 March 1886. The first season was considered by the committee to be an artistic success, although poor ticket sales were recorded at three of the four concerts reportedly due to inclement weather. In its annual report from the first season, the committee suggested planning more concerts in future seasons, provided the list of subscribers increased. Additionally, the committee announced the orchestra had been “established on a firm basis,” but called attention to the need of additional members of the choir. The first annual report also included a balance sheet, as submitted by the Honorary Treasurer. Although the organisation was debt free at the end of the first season, it is interesting to note how the Society spent their funds. The following is a list of the organisation’s expenses, entitled “disbursements” on the balance sheet: “Preliminary Expenses” - £106 4s; “Music, Chairs, Stands, &c.” - £36 13s 10d; “Expenses of Concerts and Rehearsals” – £645 3s 4d; “Conductor’s Salary” - £150.32

The Beginning of Civic Duties

Despite a somewhat rocky start, Sydney’s public officials recognised that the Philharmonic would be an appropriate musical organisation to represent the city and state on important occasions. Perhaps this was because members of the Philharmonic Society included some of the top amateur vocal talent in the city, the performances had been very well received, and the Society was the only secular organisation of its kind in Sydney to include female members.33

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32 1885 report. The first season of the Philharmonic included concerts on the following dates: 1 October 1885, 25 December, 1885, 27 January 1886, and 25 March 1886. Later seasons followed the calendar year. This annual report is also cited in Frank Crowley’s *A Documentary History of Australia*, vol. 3, *Colonial Australia, 1875-1900* (West Melbourne, Victoria: Thomas Nelson Australia Pty Ltd, 1980), 192-193.

No matter what the reason, the first of these civic responsibilities occurred on the occasion of the Philharmonic’s third concert. On 27 January 1886, the Society premiered the cantata Welcome, composed by Kowalski, in honour of the visit of Lord and Lady Carrington, who were further honoured at the concert by being named the patrons of the Society. Thirteen months later, the ensemble was invited to perform in a state concert to commemorate the Jubilee of Queen Victoria in the Great Hall on the campus of the University of Sydney. The chorus and orchestra included 250 members, and the performance of Mendelssohn’s Elijah marked the first rendering of the oratorio by this organisation. The performance received positive reviews, including a statement of congratulations on the success of the concert from the critic of the Sydney Morning Herald. However, as a result of the large amount of preparation and rehearsals required to produce Elijah for this concert, the Philharmonic did not close their 1886 season with the Christmas Messiah performance. This was one of the rare occasions when the Society did not perform the Messiah at Christmas.

1889: The Spectre’s Bride and Kowalski’s Finale

Although 1888 marked the centenary of the first settlement at Sydney, the year was a relatively quiet one for the Philharmonic with only three concerts performed, despite the goal set by the committee at the end of the first season to produce a greater

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34 Many of the Philharmonic’s concerts took place at the Great Hall, as well as the Exhibition building, until the concert hall in the Sydney Town Hall was completed in 1889. The acoustics at the smaller Great Hall were more favourable to those at the larger Exhibition Building. However, the Society did continue to perform at the Exhibition Building, specifically when a large audience was expected to attend a performance.

number of concerts. However, the following year would prove to be one of the most significant seasons attempted by the Philharmonic Society.

The Philharmonic’s first concert of 1889, a matinee performance on 23 February, signified a major event in the organisation’s history. The concert in the Great Hall at the University of Sydney featured a performance of Antonín Dvořák’s *The Spectre’s Bride*. Dvořák composed the cantata for the Birmingham Festival in England in 1885, and the performance of the work in Sydney was one of the first in Australia. More significantly, however, this was the first contemporary work performed by the Philharmonic. Nonetheless, the performance apparently went well, despite a relatively small audience, with the critic from the *Sydney Morning Herald* stating,

> the performance was, on the whole, particularly good – by no means really perfect, for that could not reasonably be expected, but it was adequate to the effective expression of the salient points with which the composer intended his audience to be impressed.

After leading the Sydney Philharmonic Society through its first few seasons, Kowalski tendered his resignation at the annual meeting of the Society at the end of the 1888-89 season. No reason for his resignation was given in either the 1889 report or the *Sydney Morning Herald*. However, unlike his predecessor, Max Vogrich,

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36 Mr. J.C.W. Nicholson, a member of the Society and the founder and owner of the music publisher/retailer Nicholson & Co., had purchased the score and had presented it to the Society at the end of the organisation’s first season. 1885 report; Suzanne Robinson, “Nicholson, J(ames) C(harles) W(ison),” in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Music*. Although the head office of Nicholson & Co. was in Sydney, by 1893 other branches were opened in Brisbane and Perth. Nicholson & Co. merged with Allans Music in 1936 and later became a holding company for Palings Music.

37 “Philharmonic Society’s Concert,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 February 1889. At the time, this performance of *The Spectre’s Bride* was advertised as the Australian premiere, with additional claims that this performance preceded any performance of the work in London. My thanks to Janice Stockigt for providing information that revealed the first performance of *The Spectre’s Bride* in London was on 2 February 1886 and that the Melbourne Philharmonic Society performed the Australian premiere of the cantata on 25 October 1886.

38 *Sydney Philharmonic Society; Report 1889-1890* (Sydney: privately printed, [1890]); (hereafter cited as 1889 report).
Kowalski did not leave Sydney after resigning as conductor of the Philharmonic Society. Instead, he remained in Sydney for some years, composing, lecturing, and giving concerts, often for the benefit of Australian musicians. Although he had no further association with the Philharmonic, Kowalski continued his involvement with the Orpheus Club, a chamber music organisation that he had helped to establish in 1887, and his oratorio *The Future Life* was premiered in Sydney in 1895. Kowalski left Sydney the next year and died in Bordeaux, France on 8 July 1916.

Despite being abandoned by Max Vogrich after only one concert, the Sydney Philharmonic Society earned the respect of both the Sydney music community and members of the local and state governments. Under the direction of Henri Kowalski, the Philharmonic produced some of the best oratorio and cantata performances heard in Sydney since the demise of the Sydney Musical Union, and the organisation showed willingness to perform new repertoire. The audiences that attended the concerts had come to expect a high level of quality in the performances by the Society. However, the man that was to follow Kowalski as conductor of the Sydney Philharmonic Society would raise the bar even higher.

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39 On 25 September 1889, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reviewed a lecture/concert by Kowalski entitled, “On music, musicians, critics, and managers of Sydney.”

40 Orchard, 92; Wood *NGD*; “Kowalski, Henri,” in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Music*. 