



SIDNEY WOLF, 1859-1922

Sidney Ignatius Joseph Wolf was born in Islington, London, on 27 November 1859 to a Hungarian father and a Russian mother. His father, Edward Albert Wolf, was a Bohemian Jew who came to England as a political refugee after the 1848 revolution. He was a pipe manufacturer and trader in Austrian goods. Sidney took piano lessons from the age of six. At the age of thirteen or fourteen he became 'unsettled' and travelled around the south of England, playing at music halls or wherever he could find employment. He afterwards worked for his father in London before travelling to South Africa in 1877. He spent most of the following two years working on an ostrich farm before he lost an eye in a shooting accident.

In 1879 Wolf returned to London where he took a short course at the Royal Academy of Music, finding money for fees by taking pupils. Around this time he broke one of his legs attempting to jump over a flower bed. He was left with a slight rolling gait for the rest of his life. After completing his studies Wolf found work as chorus master (and occasionally conductor) to an opera company touring the English provinces. He was inspired to travel

to New Zealand after hearing a conversation between his father and Mr Young of the Colonial Bank. He did not have the money for a fare and worked his passage as second cook aboard the sailing vessel *Pareora*, arriving at Wellington in early 1880.

In Wellington Wolf found work training the chorus and principals for an amateur production of *H.M.S. Pinafore* and shortly afterwards accepted the conductorship of the Wellington Choral Society. In 1881 he was appointed conductor to Cary's Opera Company. This troupe toured the colony and Wolf conducted the New Zealand premieres of several works, including Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance*. That year he married Mabel Bell, a former barmaid and a member of the company's chorus. The couple briefly settled in Christchurch, where Wolf conducted local opera productions. By 1884 they were living in Ashburton, where Wolf was conductor of the local choral and orchestral society. While there Mabel gave birth to a child who died shortly after birth. The following year Mabel began an affair with a local doctor, and she left her husband in 1886. Wolf moved to Timaru not long afterwards, and following his divorce in 1888 he married Florence Jones.

Wolf conducted the Timaru Choral Society and Timaru Liedertafel and served as bandmaster of the Garrison and Navals bands. He was choirmaster at the Church of the Sacred Heart (Roman Catholic), and master and assistant organist at St Mary's Church (Anglican). He taught singing and piano, both privately and at local schools and worked as an examiner for the London College of Music and the South Canterbury Education Board. By the turn of the century he was in demand as a judge at music competitions around New Zealand.

Wolf's wife Florence died in December 1902 and Wolf moved to Dunedin early in 1903. Shortly after his arrival he established 'Sidney Wolf's Choir and Orchestra' which found early success with its production of *Hiawatha*. This helped Wolf to become one of Dunedin's most prominent singing coaches. He eventually published an instruction method based around 'Wolf's Music Time Blocks' which he attempted (unsuccessfully) to market on a commercial basis. Wolf was also organist at St Matthew's Church (1910-1920), a writer for the *Triad* magazine, and musical director of the Queen Carnival. In 1909 he married his third wife, Ethel Maud Bentham. The daughter of a Mornington outfitter, she was 23 years his junior. As with his previous marriage, the service was conducted in an Anglican church (St Mary's). Wolf is not known to have practiced the Jewish faith in New Zealand, although his older brother Lucien became a prominent journalist and advocate of Jewish rights in England.

As conductor of the Dunedin Choral Society (from 1914 to 1922) Wolf was credited with reinvigorating the choir and freshening its style. His productions with the Dunedin Operatic Society were also highly acclaimed. Sidney Wolf was admired for his vitality, magnetism, generosity, and skill as an interpretative conductor and vocal coach.

He died from abdominal cancer at his home, 36 Canongate, on 15 July 1922. He was 62. His death was announced to a stunned audience at the conclusion of the second of two concerts organised for his benefit. He was described as 'just a cheery and likeable "kid"'

to the day of his death'. He is buried in Dunedin's Andersons bay Cemetery (Block 40, plot 97)

DAVID MURRAY

2007-8

SOURCES:

Copies of birth and death registrations

Probate file, Archives New Zealand, Dunedin Regional Office, DAAC 9075 D239 397 8391

Company file, Archives New Zealand, Dunedin Regional Office, DAAB 9055 D93 104b 2162 1910/3

Evening Post, 13 Jan 1888, p.2. (divorce proceedings)

Otago Witness, 20 Jan 1888, p.14 (divorce proceedings)

Cyclopedia of New Zealand, (Canterbury), pp.143, 988

'Mr Sidney Wolf' in *Triad*, vol. x no. 1 (Feb 1903), pp. 34, 36

Triad, vol. x no.6 (Jul 1903), p.4. (portrait)

Obit., *Otago Daily Times*, 17 Jul 1922

Obit., *Evening Star*, 17 Jul 1922