it was in the quiet, courteous voice we had always known.

'I cannot go on today,' he said. 'I cannot go on.'

He left us, drifting aimlessly out into the morning. We sat on in uneasy silence, tense and mindful of the fact that the rules forbade us to leave the room during the examination. We just waited, waited for something to happen. Something big, something momentous, I suppose, maybe retribution.

It didn't. Not really. Soon the minister came over from the Manse to continue our supervision. The four of us looked at each other for long moments, until we could no longer bear it. I picked up my magnolia from the desk, and placed it in the ink bottle, watching as the slow process of osmosis began. The others nodded, following me, then came the release, hands and minds moving, really moving at last, pens racing, breaths fluttering with the effort to regain time; flying, nothing but clear space ahead of us.

We never saw Rad Barclay again, and I have not presumed to judge him, because to do so might be, at once, both more and less than he deserved. As for all of us perhaps.

But as for me, sometimes, in dreams, bad dreams, like last night after Phyllis had been here, I dream that I was the person who was responsible. In waking, I fear that it may be so.

J. M. THOMSON

Michael Balling in Nelson

By the middle 1890s several of the larger New Zealand towns had developed a musical life that it is no exaggeration to describe as vigorous. Wellington, for instance, had a presentable season of Orchestral Society concerts with good classical programmes conducted by Alfred Hill and a group of talented resident professionals such as Maughan Barnett, Tallis Trimnell and above all, Robert Parker.

Nelson's music was on a smaller scale but it engaged German conductors direct from Europe for its Harmonic Society, an unusual tradition that continued almost until the present day. Its School of Music, opened in 1894, was New Zealand's first conservatorium, a miniature of those found throughout Germany, alive in its first years in a way that is difficult to reconcile with my own schoolboy impressions of it in the 1940s when it seemed prosaic and dull. Yet the Nelson School of Music was founded by the most gifted conductor ever to settle in New Zealand, by a musician whom Cosima Wagner befriended and warmly admired, who distinguished himself as a principal Bayreuth conductor in the 1920s and had earlier succeeded Richter in 1912 as conductor of the Hallé. Michael Balling (1866-1925) had a full measure of nineteenth-century *panache*, an insatiable curiosity about the world and its inhabitants, an enviable ability to adapt himself to unlikely or unpromising circumstances and the creative fervour to bring about an artistic transformation.

New Zealand had attracted other notable musicians in the nineteenth century, some of whom, such as John Radcliff, the flute virtuoso and inventor of the key system of the same name, settled for a time. He had taught and performed in Wellington and with his wife Rita gave a celebrated series of lectures 'From Pan to Pinafore--the pipes of all peoples'. One speculates on what brought them so far and what impression of the new land they had received in their own country. Ever since the publication of Cook's *Voyages* the Pacific islands had had a strong appeal for the English reading public, intensified after his death, which had made him a folk hero. Not only did the books go through numerous popular editions but the engravings were copied and reproduced on a massive scale. Costumes worn by the woman dancers of Tahiti were more familiar in London drawing rooms than those of nearby Bohemia. When Covent Garden produced as their Christmas pantomime in 1785, *Omai: or a Trip Round the World* by John O'Keefe (1747-1833) the realism of the spectacular scenery and costume designs by Philip James de Loutherburg (1740-1812), Garrick's stage designer, made theatrical history —they had been carefully copied from the engravings by Cook's artists. Such knowledge and enthusiasm for the Pacific soon spread to Europe through translations of the *Voyages* and publications of their own navigators and explorers. By Balling's time there was even one of the famous red-bound Murray *Handbooks* on New Zealand, packed with carefully

compiled statistics and suggestions for the traveller, with a thoroughness only recently equalled.

Balling was born into a poor Bavarian family in Heidingsfield, near the baroque city of Würzburg, the youngest of six children. His father, who died when he was twelve, was a lithographer for the government with a small grocery shop attended to by his wife. When he left the village school Balling was meant to become a shoemaker but his fine voice won him entry to the Royal School of Music at Würzburg, where he also studied the viola with a noted instrumentalist and scholar, Hermann Ritter (1849-1926) who had revived the older viola-alta. This instrument lay between the violin and 'cello and resembled a large tenor viol, being around eighteen inches in length with a more powerful tone than the viola. Balling won a viola-alta as a prize given by his teacher, but his first response to it was negative as he feared it would spoil his violin playing. Ritter, however, persuaded him to practise long slow notes for six months until eventually he mastered it and came to specialize on it. As a viola player his first professional post was in the Mainz Municipal Orchestra where he met the composer Rubinstein and with him played his viola sonata. Balling was fortunate in his acquaintances. In his next position in the court orchestra at Schwerin he came across the first Alberich to sing at Bayreuth, Karl Hill, who had been discovered at Schwerin by Wagner himself on one of his innumerable trips around German opera houses looking for talent. Hill introduced Balling to Wagner's prose works and from there it was no distance to Nieztsche and philosophy generally. At this time the young musician also met Brahms, often performing chamber works with him. Balling had gained some reduction in the compulsory military service required of all males but he could not avoid serving for one year. His immense physical strength showed itself in a description of a day in his life at that time. Beginning at four in the morning with exercises, he followed this by practising at the bar. At eleven he attended the main orchestral rehearsal and from two until six in the afternoon continued his barrack training. At seven in the evening he appeared in his frock coat for the symphony concert at which he was to play the viola solo in Berlioz' *Harold in Italy*.

His next move was to take him to Bayreuth amongst the violas in the Festival Orchestra. As the youngest member he had to sit at the back in the last desk but he did not remain there long. Felix Mottl, the conductor, soon noticed his

abilities and moved him to the position of first viola so that he could play the solo in *Tristan*. From here his ascent was rapid. Invitations to the exclusive musical evenings at Wahnfried followed where Balling met leading musical personalities of the day such as Ernst von Wolzogen, the Wagner proselytizer, Hans Richter and Humperdinck. At this stage of his career there came the possibility of going to New Zealand.

Nelson had been interested in music since its earliest days; the first recorded concert took place in 1850. The Harmonic Society, founded in 1860, came to possess its own orchestra and in 1890 a new conductor, Herr Zimmerman, had just been appointed. When he left two years later to return to Germany the orchestral and harmonic societies combined to search for a replacement. A Herr Schultz had written that he was prepared to accept the position and while the society were expecting his arrival they learned with some surprise that his place had been taken by another conductor, a Herr Balling, a musician it seemed of greater eminence. At the time Balling was recovering from a nervous breakdown and while visiting Herr Schultz found him regretting his promise to accept the Nelson position. Balling offered to take his place, expecting that the renowned Nelson climate would restore his health.

In John Murray's *Handbook for Travellers in New Zealand* of 1893 he could have read of the 'soft and genial climate' of Nelson, of the Anglican Cathedral, 'a very happy combination of the various native timbers' and the sound of the small set of tubular bells possessed by All Saints Church would have reminded him 'of an English village'. Balling would also have read of the Public Institute and Library, and of the dominating educational institution, the Boys' College, which was visible proof of the educational aspirations of the small town. Before leaving Germany he was invited to visit Bismarck at Friedrichsruhe, a meeting which left an overpowering impression on him. He was held by a gaze he described as 'wild yet piercing'. 'You are going to New Zealand?' asked the aged Chancellor, adding somewhat prosaically, 'I envy you that. Whoever wants to learn can do nothing better than see the world.'[1]

From the time of his arrival in Nelson in October 1893, Balling seemed a remarkable and dynamic individual. Two intelligent and cultivated local residents with a passion for

1. This and other incidents in Balling's life are described in Dr Werner Kulz's obituary tribute to Balling in the *Bayreuther Festpielführer*, 1927.

music became his allies and friends, Frederick Gibbs, headmaster of the Central School, and J. H. Cock, a shipping agent. Balling was immediately drawn into the Musical Evening Society where he would play his favourite instrument, a specially-made viola-alta. Gibbs noted in his diary that only a man of enormous strength and reach could attempt to hold it.[2] At meetings held after the Harmonic Society practices Balling would often play well into the early hours of the morning. If there had been a poor attendance at the rehearsal he would refuse to conduct, entertaining those present with improvisations at the piano, using what must have been unorthodox fingerings as he was no pianist, having only just begun to learn in Nelson, with the Prelude to *Tristan*.

Balling was shocked at the lack of music in the city and its haphazard nature and it was not long before he had protested publicly and suggested that a school of music be set up. He wrote:

> As a foreigner I am singularly struck by the prominence given to 'sport' of all kinds, even to the extent of legal protection and encouragement within certain bounds, and while Colonial youths go home and take prizes in athletics against all comers our musical students must at great cost proceed to Europe to learn even piano playing efficiently. With so much time and money for sport, we may resolve to reserve a little for higher things such as music. In order to have a growth of musical acquirements and talent, it is absolutely necessary that the young people be completely trained, and even with a city of 7,000 inhabitants surely 3,000 could find 1s. 0d. each for a year, which would yield a sum of £150, sufficient to maintain and provide instruments and music, a modest 'school of music' of which I am prepared to undertake the direction and upon which I would expend great pains. The difficulty of such a scheme is only apparent and would disappear if serious attention were given to this subject! For me, a lengthened residence here is only possible if there is some hopeful growth of musical life such as I have indicated and I do not write this letter like a gust of a south-easter from the Cook strait, merely to raise dust in our midst, but in the hope of finding those who will cooperate earnestly with me in the direction indicated, and I shall indeed be glad to find on my return from a month's holiday, that a determination has been arrived at to give life forthwith to the project.[3]

Apart from being possibly one of the first protests against the hold of sport on New Zealand life, we see in this disarming letter the genuine dedication, the self-absorption and the gift of delegation of the born leader, aspects of his personality that were to be fully engaged in Nelson and even more so later when he tackled the larger city of Manchester.

During his holidays Balling travelled through the country giving concerts, usually with the viola-alta. On one memorable occasion he ventured into the heavily-forested Urewera country, still a Maori stronghold and particularly difficult for a European to penetrate.[4] Contrary to the expectations of his friends who felt he would be rebuffed or worse, Balling succeeded in charming his way into Maori hearts through the force of his personality. Not only did they entertain him as a royal visitor but they showered him with valuable presents. Balling later was to speak highly of their music, especially the earlier monodic chants. He had witnessed Maori funeral rites, hakas and on a ceremonial occasion had played viola solos for a chieftain who had presented him with a carved stick.

The most important of these expeditions took place shortly after the publication of the letter. Balling joined Mr Cock, the shipping agent, on a trip to Mount Cook. While weatherbound in their mountain hut Balling elaborated on his idea of starting a smaller version of a German conservatorium in Nelson. This so appealed to his companion that on their return he immediately arranged a public meeting at which he and the mayor spoke to an enthusiastic audience. If such a school were to be established Herr Balling promised to stay in Nelson a further two years. This was used as an argument for starting a conservatorium immediately, with a temporary home in the Harmonic Hall until their own premises could be built. About £300 was raised at the meeting most of which was spent on buying instruments, some of which aroused keen interest in the project when displayed in local shop windows. Balling's other friend Gibbs, who was also deeply involved

2. For the details of Gibbs's relationship with Balling and the early history of the Nelson School of Music I am indebted to Shonadh Mann's excellent thesis 'Frederick Giles Gibbs—His Influence on the Social History of Nelson 1890-1950', Victoria University of Wellington.

3. Quoted by Shonadh Mann, p. 144. The letter probably appeared in the *Nelson Evening Mail*, January 1894.

4. In his obituary tribute Dr Kulz describes it as an 'excursion into the jungle'.

with the Nelson Institute and Philosophical Society, helped in canvassing for subscriptions and determining the constitution and scale of fees. On 9 June 1894 the Nelson School of Music was declared open.

Balling dominated the musical scene. The people of Nelson reached heights of enthusiasm for the serious study of music which perhaps have never been equalled. Soon he was giving lectures to packed audiences on high musical theories though very few of his audience understood him thoroughly as they scarce knew a quaver from a crotchet. The numbers in the Harmonic Society rose and when a concert was given it had to be held in the theatre to accommodate all who wanted to attend instead of the Provincial Hall as previously. Gibbs however, found Balling embarrassing as a conductor for during practices he persisted in playing the accompaniment as well as conducting. Sometimes this proved disastrous to the choruses, when on concert nights, he wielded the baton instead. This resulted in mortifying breakdowns. But Balling was never concerned . . .'.[5]

The first accounts of his students to reach England had an appropriately quaint tone:

A New Zealander, Miss Dogtail, taught the pianoforte, and played well; Mr Balling taught all the orchestral instruments and musical history. In his first harmony class there were twenty-three pupils, including a Colonel Bramfield, who had been through the Indian Mutiny and was now over seventy years of age, and a little girl of nine years, daughter of Mrs Houlker, the teacher of singing.[6]

Balling's lectures on Wagner were held in a reverential atmosphere and it was not surprising that on the anniversary of Wagner's death in 1895 Balling seized the opportunity to hold the first meeting of the Wagner Society. It was a strange occasion. A party of ten left Gibbs's home at five-thirty in the evening for the nearby settlement at Stoke, where the meeting was to be held at the home of a Mr Crump. Tea was served under the trees after which Balling opened the meeting by speaking on Wagner's death. A translation of an unpublished letter of Wagner's was read, which set forth his

5. Shonadh Mann, p. 145.
6. J. Cuthbert Hadden, *Modern Musicians*, London, 1913, p. 259.

theories on opera; Balling and Miss Crump then played pieces from *Parsifal* and *Tristan and Isolde* and Gibbs read part of Wagner's autobiography. The meeting ended with a Mr Kidson singing arias from *Tannhauser* and the *Flying Dutchman.* The society had an unexpectedly short life. One of those present described the meeting to a friend who not knowing of the intensity of Balling's feelings for Wagner, gently mocked it later in his presence. Balling was deeply offended and not another meeting was held.

By the end of 1895 Balling was anxious to leave. His two years were not yet up, but he felt he had been away from Europe long enough. He reported to the Trustees of the School of Music on the standards that had been reached and on the improvements he felt should take place. Under him the school gave a three-year course, granting certificates at the end of the first and second years and a diploma at the end of the third. (After his departure the courses were affiliated with the English Associated Board.) Before leaving New Zealand Balling made a farewell tour with an English musician and composer Maughan Barnett, playing his viola-alta in remote towns as well as the cities. Their programme usually included Rubinstein's sonata for piano and viola (played on the viola-alta) which in Wanganui was hailed as a work of 'nobility and grandeur' whose opening theme 'aroused the enthusiasm of the audience'.[7] 'Herr Balling goes to Europe and we are sure that his career there will be one that is well justified by his capacity as a musician and as an artist and by the nobility of his instrument.'

Nelson felt it was losing its resident genius. Balling was presented with a silver inkstand: 'I have been asked by the pupils of the Nelson School of Music to present you with this piece of silver, which emblematic of their good wishes and your own music, is solid, sterling and good . . .' said a Mr Pitt.[8] 'May pleasure and prosperity be your future lot.' In reply Balling urged his audience to try to make the new School of Music a success. 'Nelson is not a large place,' he said, 'and some say it is a sleepy hollow, but I find it can recognize the good . . . . I feel somewhat ashamed at leaving, for my intention had been to remain three years, but circumstances have occurred to alter my plans . . . . I am really sorry to leave Nelson (applause).'

7. *Wanganui Chronicle*, 29 October 1895.
8. *Nelson Colonist*, 4 February 1896.

Balling returned to England safely where he gave recitals in the small hall of Queen's Hall on 28 October, 4 November and 11 November 1896, receiving on the whole a respectful, appreciative press with an occasional outburst against the new instrument such as that of the *Manchester Guardian* of 29 October 1896: 'It is merely obsolete and useless that is all.' The *Orchestral Association Gazette* of January 1897 thought the new instrument might help towards the replacement of bad violas, describing them as 'the wretched broken-backed, broken-ribbed, soft-bellied, toneless things which are called violas by so many people who ought to know better'. Balling himself they described as 'an enthusiastic viola-alta-ite, who has come like a latter-day John the Baptist to preach the gospel according to Ritter in the musical desert of London'. The object of all this praise replied that bad viola players were usually clarinet players who had lost their teeth or violinists who had lost the use of their fingers. The viola was still a cinderella-instrument in these pre-Lionel Tertis days. Despite a sympathetic reception in England which culminated in his reading a paper on the viola-alta reprinted in the *Monthly Journal* of 1 July 1897, and despite his own obvious accomplishments, he was fighting a losing battle, far beyond the capabilities of one man, an impoverished one at that. For Balling had to earn a living in between recitals by leading the orchestra of Benson's Theatrical Company.

By 1896 he was back home in Germany, his arrival coinciding with the first production of the *Ring* at Bayreuth since it had opened the Festpielhaus. His old friend Felix Mottl was still there conducting, along with Hans Richter and Siegfried Wagner. Cosima Wagner noted his presence in her diary, mentioning 'one of our most gifted outlaws, Balling . . . returning home penniless'.[9] Balling took up his European career once more, starting as 'solo repititeur' at Bayreuth and soon becoming a conductor at Hamburg, where he became the first to do an unabridged *Ring* and a notable interpreter of Mozart, giving thirty-four performances of the *Magic Flute* in one season to full houses. In 1906 he succeeded Mottl at Karlsruhe, another influential position—the Grand Duke of Baden invited him for champagne.

Cosima Wagner went to Karlsruhe to hear him conduct Siegfried's opera *Kobold* and shortly afterwards she invited him to Bayreuth. In 1904 it was *Parsifal* and two years later he alternated with Felix Mottl in *Tristan*. ('I am also going through *Tristan* with Balling and we find his presence stimulating and diverting,' she wrote.[10]) There was no festival in 1907 but Balling spent some time with the Wagners. 'Balling is now with us,' wrote Cosima,[11] 'and is an agreeable addition to our life. The striking impression he retains of people as well as of books and nature are stimulating and the unreservedness and simplicity with which he gives of himself does one good and enlivens daily existence. With a clear delivery he declaims the most varied roles . . . . With him, as with Seidl [another Bayreuth conductor] I feel as if nature had given him the disposition of a genius whilst it had endowed Mottl with a perfect and brilliant talent.' And she summed up her feelings: '. . . if anyone like Balling makes such a sympathetic impression on me it is mostly because he symbolises for me the combination of simplicity and genius.'[12]

In 1912, after a series of concerts with guests, Balling was invited to succeed Richter as conductor of the Hallé Orchestra in Manchester, which was not then the established assembly it is today. Manchester was making a bid to rival London in the quality and intensity of its musical life but orchestras were expected to pay and the Manchester Corporation was relatively uncommitted to the fine instrument the city was nurturing. In such a situation Balling went into battle. He criticized the corporation for not giving proper financial support to the Hallé concerts, describing the conditions under which they worked as 'abominable'. He advocated the engagement of the orchestra for six months with a weekly salary for players instead of the casual system then in use. He achieved the impossible in that he produced a scheme by which a sum of £2,000 was available from guarantors *before* a deficit had been declared. He proposed an opera house for Manchester to be the centre of an English school of opera. His programmes were enterprising with new works by English and European composers.

> He was a strong personality in every way and at his first concert had given the impression of a masterful musician. He believed in extending the range of the appeal of music; he had the highest standards; he did not believe that great

9. Richard Graf du Moulin Eckart, *Cosima Wagner*, Vol. II, *Die Herrin von Bayreuth*, Munich, 1931, p. 569.

10. Moulin Eckart, p. 797.

11. ibid.

12. ibid.

art should be judged by its success or failure at the box-office; and he expressed his views in uncompromising terms'

wrote the Hallé historian C. B. Rees.[13] Another observer has described him: 'As a conductor he knows what he wants and knows how to get it. In Beethoven's *Choral* Symphony I have seen him shake his fist at the sopranos, demanding more tone from them when they were already singing their loudest. And he got it!'[14]

Economic problems were still preoccupying him when the first world war broke out and as usual in August he was conducting the *Ring* in Bayreuth. Reluctantly, he wrote to the Hallé, resigning his conductorship, and as Bayreuth performances were thereafter suspended, he spent the war years virtually in retreat.

In 1919 at Darmstadt he found the kind of centre he required as musical director in a community which supported him with the same warmth he had experienced in Nelson. But his energies and vitality had been consumed by his unremitting devotion to music and gradually he seemed to lose heart for the artistic feuds which occur as a matter of course in the German operatic world and his pace slackened. In his 59th year, while preparing the *Ring* in the 1925 Bayreuth season he appeared drawn and ill. Photographs show a gaunt face of a man without reserves. Through willpower and endurance he persevered, but after the last performance of *Götterdämmerung* on 17 August 1925 he collapsed. As he left Bayreuth on that August day he stopped the car to take a last look at its neat streets, its festival flags still flying and the wide tree-lined avenue that led up to the Festpielhaus. In early September he died, being buried in the woodland cemetery of Darmstadt on 4 September, mourned by a throng of Darmstadt citizens and by the Bayreuth community.

In distant Nelson he was still remembered. His friend Gibbs wrote in the *Nelson Evening Mail* of 25 November 1925:

> . . . he was a big man in every sense of the word. No-one could come into contact with him without being impressed by his forceful personality—as well as by his great musical genius . . . the great stimulus which he gave to the study of music in Nelson persisted down to the present day. His brief visit to this city was undoubtedly a memorable event and made a deep impression on the artistic life of the community which will long endure.

13. C. B. Rees, *One Hundred Years of the Hallé*, London, 1957, p. 52.
14. J. Cuthbert Hadden, p. 261.

The new Nelson School of Music had been opened on 4 September 1901 by the Countess of Ranfurly with the customary Grand Concert including an opening Ode, with music by the new principal, Herr Lemmer. It was a utilitarian brick building standing on a steep slope, able to accommodate an audience of over 500 with an orchestra and chorus of 150. But it was unbeautiful and in the absence of a personality such as Balling, comparatively unloved.

Outside Germany, Balling as a conductor is not widely known. Yet he was amongst music's outstanding interpreters. 'There was something of the musically baroque in him,' wrote Dr Werner Kulz in his Bayreuth tribute, 'with his naturally human modesty and noble simplicity. There was a compulsive way in which he extracted the finest expression from a chorus, which for him came before everything, even before the rectitude of all details . . . . He always embraced all great music with his whole personality.' Another memorial was his work as editor of the important Breitkopf and Härtel edition of Wagner, almost completed by his death, and including the first publication of the early operas *Die Hochzeit, Die Feen* and *Liebesverbot.*

Five years after his death Gibbs and his sisters left Nelson for Europe, the climax of their visit being the performances at Bayreuth. Nineteen hundred and thirty was an historic year in the history of the Festpielhaus productions—the last of a notable era. The remaining members of the team with whom Balling had made such a memorable trio were to disperse. Before the festival was over the humanistic Siegfried Wagner had died, and at the end of the performances Karl Muck, who as the conductor of *Parsifal* enjoyed an esteem similar to that of Knappertsbusch in our own day, decided to retire, probably sensing a different spirit in the air. For indeed there was. Under Winifred Wagner's direction Wagner was precipitated into the arena of racial and political conflict which culminated with Hitler appropriating the trappings and reversing the morality. In it, Balling, as one of the first wave of lofty Wagner enthusiasts, would have had no place.