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Beatrice Hofer our own Julie Andrews



I recently had the pleasure of interviewing Beatrice Hofer for the *Helvetia* and the wealth of qualifications and undertakings of this talented humble quiet woman took my breath away.

Beatrice told me that in 1965 she became the third and final addition to the Nigg family. Her father was a mechanic and mother a homemaker and they lived in Balsthal, in Canton Solothurn. As children all three learnt an instrument with Beatrice and her sister learning the piano while brother played cello.



At a young age Beatrice felt drawn to teaching and while studying for her teaching diploma she also started taking singing lessons and discovered she had a voice. During her practical teachers training she began to realise that perhaps normal school teaching was not for her and that her real passion was in the Arts. And so it proved to be.

Beatrice graduated from Teacher's Training College in 1986 and was accepted to Bern Conservatoire, where she studied singing for seven years, first with Niklaus Tueller and then with Elisabeth Gläuser; studying for both a teaching degree (achieving with

excellence), and an advanced study performance degree which included courses in speech and drama, chamber music, Lieder and Ensemble work. These studies helped her in building an extended repertoire ranging from early to modern classical music.

At the age of 20, she met Ueli Hofer at a 'Landjugendfest', a young farmer who was completing his agricultural studies. A friendship blossomed between the townie and the man from the land - and they introduced each other to their different worlds. Ueli enjoyed the new world of Opera, recitals, trips to Vienna etc and welcomed the diversion from farming and as for Beatrice a new world opened up for her as well. They married in 1996.

It was at an agricultural studies field day that the topic of overseas farming systems arose and Ueli asked his teacher where he would go if he was a young man starting out: New Zealand was the reply. Somehow this struck a chord and they decided to look into it further. Being an only son, he knew that this would not be good news for his parents as they hoped that Ueli would take over the family farm. But Ueli had a need to experience life in a place perhaps less regulated where he could continue farming in a less pressured environment.

Beatrice stated that one of the advantages of growing up in Switzerland is being exposed to several languages from a very early age and this was an advantage for her as she was fluent in Swiss German, proper German, French and English. This was of enormous help when Ueli and Beatrice decided to visit New Zealand and see for themselves. They spent months travelling around and gathering information before they decided they would like to move to New Zealand. Soon after the trip they applied for their visas: Visas run under points system and Beatrice had not enough points but could speak English, Ueli had enough points but could not speak English, which was a requirement at the time!! And so several years of "toing and froing" of information began. A sometimes frustrating experience.

During this time Beatrice was involved in planning and performing in many musical projects. She created diverse programs with various instrumental combinations, as well as being engaged as a soloist with choirs and orchestras throughout Switzerland. Concert highlights while still living in Switzerland included singing with Edith Mathys in Kodaly's *Te Deum* and Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's*



Auf nach Neuseeland

Bea und Ueli Hofer, Bettfach werden in Neuseeland eine neue Existenz aufzubauen. Grund für die Auswanderung sei ein grosser Pachtlandverlust und die einengenden Gesetze in der Schweiz. Letzte Woche ist sämtliches Hab und Gut verladen und verschifft worden. Im Container auf unserem Bild mit einem Volumen von 60m³ werden die Maschinen verfrachtet. Laut Ueli Hofer ist es rentabler, die eigenen Maschinen mitzunehmen.

Dream, conducted by Franz Welser-Möst and getting rave reviews for both. She also sang in several Operas during that time, both as a member of the Chœur d'opéra in Lausanne and as a soloist. She attended workshops with Antal Donati and master classes with Laura Sardi, Brigitte Fassbaender and Elisabeth Schwarzkopf.

Whilst building her experience and reputation as a singer she discovered her love for teaching singing. Her teaching work started with a 100 head auditioned choir in Basel, giving group as well as individual lessons to all of its members. As if that was not enough, she went on to work at the Conservatoire and Music School in Winterthur from 1993 until 1997, teaching secondary school students (aged 15 to 20), adult amateurs, some of whom went on to become professional singers. Bea's remaining time was taken up by her involvement in adult education: doing workshops in breathing and body consciousness and voice development, as well as voice therapy. As a voice teacher she is grateful for her Breathing and Kinesiology studies as well as her love of yoga.

Finally in 1998 Bea and Ueli got their visas and immigrated to New Zealand. They settled on a dairy farm in Kio Kio, Otorohanga where they began milking 150 cows. Their first daughter, Shannon





was born in 2000 and the eventual arrival of second daughter Leanne completed their family. For a few years Bea's music and singing were put aside while they settled into their new home and homeland. During this time she developed a passion for gardening and to this day enjoys her time on the farm with her 2 girls and husband. As with all families there is always compromise needed to be able to pursue one's hobbies, passions and meet the needs of a family. These responsibilities have started to ease as Ueli employs casual workers, daughter Shannon is studying chemical engineering and lives away from home while Leanne too is nearing the end of her schooling.

There were other challenges as well. Beatrice with her huge musical talents and experiences gained in a land well versed in the Arts knew that it would probably be difficult to pursue her singing in the same way as in Switzerland, especially living in the countryside and being needed on the farm as well! Also little things like sheet music and recordings were hard to come by. However as time passed internet came and opened up a whole new world for her and the rest of New Zealanders too: Mr Google became her go to "person"!! And as her and Ueli slowly became accustomed to their new homeland they discovered talent was alive and well in their local community. A small cottage was built on the farm to accommodate not only visiting friends and family but also for Beatrice to house her music and give lessons and further her musical ambitions and when the time was right she pursued singing again, winning Hamilton Competition in 2005.

Beatrice assured me that had she been told as a young adult that all her three defining twists in her life would be to become a singer, voice teacher, move to another country and to be involved in farming she would not have believed them on all three accords. But here she was.

There was also the excitement in 2013 of building their own new house; removing their old one, moving into the cottage while the new one was being built and accomplishing all this in between calving seasons. The family eventually found a harmonious balance between farm, family and musical life. Beatrice currently has a thriving private studio where she teaches adult students of all skill levels from beginners to Diploma holders/conductors and she is a member of NEWSATZ, the New Zealand Singing Teachers Association.

Her students come from many walks of life and are united in their passion for singing. For many of them lessons have signaled a return to past musical training. With Beatrice these previously trained singers are furthering their vocal and performance skills. Others in the group have sung all their lives but have never had the opportunity for lessons until Beatrice arrived.

She has been heavily involved with the Waitomo Caves Choir for a time as a voice coach, program planning, ensemble work, workshops etc, as well as contributing to their concerts as a soloist.

She is co-convener for the Te Awamutu Vocal Competition which is held annually and is a three day competition including around 60-70 competitors ranging from young children to adults and University students.

Her newest project is 'Encore', putting on quality concerts with her adult students and herself, with a repertoire of opera, musical theatre, folk- and funny songs, creating mixed programs with solos, duets and ensembles. The group also sings for functions, rest homes and so on. And they started to provide workshops, some in the form of masterclasses throughout the Waikato.

The essence of Encore is expressed in the words of Paul Bowers-Mason, President of the South Waikato Music Society, in response to his attending an Encore concert in June 2015:

"Encore is a group with whom it is a pleasure to spend time relaxing with good music. Beatrice Hofer is an accomplished soloist herself, and there are others in the group besides her in that category too. However it is in her role as a trainer and encourager of

other singers that she excels. She has a wonderful knack for finding a wide variety of music to suit the different voice styles of her group, sometimes romantic, sometimes humorous, and always pleasing to the ear. Solo and ensemble singing is interwoven to provide a pleasing breadth of entertainment, and a satisfying concert experience. The singers find a natural balance between presenting themselves in a professional yet accessible manner, and obviously enjoy every moment of what they are doing. I thoroughly enjoyed my afternoon listening to them."

Encore is very fortunate to call an accompanist their own. Ann Plowright, a pianist trained at the Royal Academy of Music in London, emigrated from the UK to Otorohanga in the 1990s. She is an essential part of Encore and of the wider musical landscape of the area.

Beatrice also has found time for continuing her career as a soloist learning and honing her craft with the help of people like Rosemary Barnes and Megan Quatermass, both extremely talented pianists and accompanists. They have performed together at various venues throughout Waikato as well as further afield.

As our interview came to an end I somehow felt I had met our own Swiss Julie Andrews and the rolling hills of Otorohanga and the surrounding communities would have many more years of hearing her wonderful voice, participating in Encore presentations and that Beatrice herself would continue to hone her skills and as her family responsibilities continue to lighten we may see her in recitals further afield... just keep your eyes and ears open.

Compiled by Heidi Wehrle in collaboration with Beatrice Hofer.

