

# Hugo Alpen – Albury’s First Mr Music

*Howard C. Jones, 2021*

## INTRODUCTION

Hugo Alpen was a pioneer musician in Albury from 1865 to 1879. He laid the foundations of classical and light music performances on the Border and for schoolchildren to learn to read and sing music. He rose to become the top music teacher in NSW schools and conducted a mass choir at the official inauguration of Federation in 1901. Hugo was the father of 12 children. Two born in Albury had exciting careers in 20th century Europe (see footnote).

## EARLY DAYS

Hugo was born at Kellinghusen in Holstein, some 30 kilometres from Hamburg, on October 26 1842, son of a singing teacher. The Schleswig and Holstein provinces were then part of Denmark (they were absorbed in Prussia in 1867 after much dispute and two wars). Hugo would have first been a Danish citizen. In Australia he always identified himself as German and was generally referred to as Herr Alpen. His descendants believe he was from “a noble Danish family”, and maybe he was. Whatever his origins, he was undoubtedly a multi-linguist. In 1911 he revisited his home town and found the children there still spoke “Plat Deutsch”, Low German, resembling Dutch and Flemish, which “I spoke as a child but have completely forgotten it”. (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 25, 1911)

Hugo migrated to Melbourne in 1858 when he was 16, seemingly working his way as crew on the Dutch ship *Java*, as it was listed in the Melbourne papers as having “no passengers”. The ship sailed from Hamburg and Gottenberg, Sweden, and arrived on December 14. How long Hugo remained in Melbourne is unclear.

Early newspaper references suggest he sang in Verdi’s opera *Rigoletto* at Sydney’s Royal Lyceum Theatre in November 1861, and in *La Traviata* in the Victoria Theatre in January 1862.

In mid-1862, before he was 20, he was living at Burrangong, a goldmining town north of Young, performing music in the local Diggers Theatre, and getting his name into the *Burrangong Courier*.

At Tumut, a vocal harmonic society had been resuscitated and advertised for a paid conductor. It appointed Hugo in October and he was at Tumut in November, advertising singing classes. Hugo led the society in a concert in November and a similar concert at Adelong on Boxing Day. He composed some of the items but also utilised his favourite composer, Mozart.

Soon he was tuning and repairing pianos for the fertile district’s pioneering families and somehow managed to secure a piano from Sydney. He earned some income as organist of All Saints Church. He was earning enough to give five shillings towards the Daniel O’Connell Monument Fund. He became a naturalised British subject at Tumut in 1864 when he was 22, testifying he had arrived on the *Java* in 1858.

Dan Morgan the bushranger was active in the Riverina in 1863 and 1864. Morgan murdered two police and a station worker and robbed many other men. His presence did not deter Hugo from riding around the countryside.

In January 1865 Hugo visited Albury and gave a concert of “music from many nations” at the Mechanics Institute. He then decided to live in Albury, by teaching music and languages, giving concerts and playing the harmonium or organ for church services. Another concert in March raised his profile locally.

Hugo gave his services free performing for good causes such as the Albury and Adelong hospitals and the Albury Volunteer Band. He returned to Tumut and Gundagai occasionally. There were enough German speakers in Albury district for him to form a German Glee Club, similar to his father’s liedertafel society in Kellinghusen.

Daniel Morgan was shot dead at Peechelba in 1865. When the sensational news was known in Albury, Hugo at once telegraphed the *Tumut & Adelong Times*, relieved he no longer faced the possibility of being bailed up by Morgan. In 1866 his Albury music pupils gave him a gold watch and chain in appreciation for his services.

In May 1868, Hugo took his German Glee Club to sing at the Queen’s Birthday celebration held at James Fallon’s new Murray Valley Vineyard. Hugo composed *Vines Leaves*, a set of waltzes dedicated to James Fallon. They were soon being performed by a military band at the Melbourne Botanic Gardens. Hugo eulogised Fallon and his vineyard in a long article in the *Gundagai Times* on October 16 1869.

On July 11, 1868, Albury people welcomed the NSW Governor, the Earl of Belmore and his wife. Hugo led his club in serenading the vice-regal group. He was also chosen to present the countess and her sister Miss Gladstone with bouquets (“according to the German fashion”). The countess replied in fluent German.

#### A CONVICT’S DAUGHTER

Hugo’s marriage to Sarah May Josephine Brown, aged 18, took place at St Brigid’s Catholic Church in Albury on August 12, 1868. A newly arrived parish priest, Michael McAlroy, officiated. McAlroy was to involve Hugo in many Catholic events over the next 11 years.

Sarah Brown’s father was Thomas Brown, a convict transported for pickpocketing in London. He had built the Wingello Inn near Goulburn but was accidentally shot dead in 1851 when Sarah was a baby. He left a widow, Mary, and six children. Although her mother married again, Sarah became a ward of her childless uncle and aunt, George and Elizabeth Day, of Albury (Mary and Elizabeth were sisters).

Hugo and George Day co-operated often in participating in musical and other events in Albury, where Day was Mayor in 1869 and later a member of the NSW Parliament.

Sarah and Hugo had five children in Albury and then seven in Sydney. The first son, Hugo, was born on June 11, 1875, a few days after Hugo gave a concert at the Court House, but the child died in infancy. The other Albury children born between 1871 and 1878 were Ida, Aileen, Beatrice and George.

Hugo attended several landmark ceremonies in Albury. He led the choir at the opening of the St Bridget’s Convent school on February 6 1870. He arranged a concert in 1872 for the building fund of a new Catholic church that became St Patrick’s. He sometimes brought a portable organ

or harmonium to functions, such as meetings of the Oddfellows' Lodge, of which he was a member.

On Sunday, November 24 1872 Bishop Lanigan dedicated St Patrick's Church. Hugo conducted the choir in pieces from his own Mass and others by Haydn.

In June 1873, it was announced that Hugo had been appointed music master at the Albury Public Model School from July 1. This was a government post in the Department of Public Instruction. It meant he also taught music to neighbouring district schools. In 1875 he took an extra job teaching music at Wodonga State School.

#### A PHILHARMONIC SOCIETY

In August 1873, Hugo started a singing class at the Mechanics Institute. This was the basis for the Albury Philharmonic Society formed on September 8 1873 with Hugo as conductor and William Edmondson as organist. The society's first concert, held on March 10, 1874, presented the *Hallelujah Chorus* and other parts of Handel's *Messiah*, as well as secular songs. Hugo, who also sang a solo from *Messiah*, stopped the concert until a crying baby was removed.



In January 1875 he played harmonium and sang tenor solo at the laying of the foundation for new Wesley Church in Olive Street. The same year he played the harmonium at the opening of St Augustine's Catholic Church in Wodonga.

On Saturday August 26 1876 Hugo joined temperance supporters at Market Square in supporting "the Yorkshire evangelist", Matthew Burnett, and other speakers condemning "the dangerous drinking customs". Hugo accompanied the singing and sang *The Gambler's Wife*. He supported the Albury branch of the Rechabites, a temperance order.

In October 1876 the NSW Governor, Sir Hercules Robinson, visited Albury and attended a service at St Matthew's. Hugo led the choir in singing the *Hallelujah Chorus* and other sacred songs. He joined the "Germans" in a parade for the governor and led the children in *God Save The Queen*.

In 1876 Hugo supplemented his income from teaching and tuning by becoming an agent for Nicholson and Ascherbert, piano importers.

In August 1879, Albury's first industrial exhibition was held. Hugo had been on the organising committee and at the opening he conducted a cantata he had written, dedicated to George Day, using a choir of 30 voices.

The same year he appeared in a Catholic concert at Corowa and at Beechworth Catholic Church was at the organ for the dedication of its new nave. In the secular field, he played the overture from *La Traviata* at the Mechanics Institute in aid of Albury Cricket Club.

After 15 years he left Albury for Sydney.

In advertising Hugo's last benefit concert in Albury, the *Banner* commented: *To no other individual in Albury has the town been so largely or so frequently indebted for valuable assistance in the arrangement of musical entertainments for religious, charitable, or other public purposes, and in a great majority of instances Mr Alpen's services have been rendered absolutely without any fee or reward, other than that which he would receive from the consciousness of furthering some good cause.*

On December 15, Lewis Solomon, having sold Hugo's house in Wilson Street, conducted an auction of the furniture as well as pianos, organs and sheet music.

Hugo returned to Albury in July 1886 to organise two concerts for the German community, including himself and a Sydney quartette as well as local singers. One such singer was Henry Caspers, a music teacher and father of the famous contralto Ella Caspers, who was born in Albury in 1888.

#### IN SYDNEY

Hugo's career in Sydney from 1880 is well documented. He was first appointed by the newly-established Department of Public Instruction as assistant singing master to James Fisher who was then the singing master for Sydney schools (including the Fort Street Teacher Training College).

He also played organ at Glebe Congregational Church (the family lived first at Derwent Street, Glebe, then Arundel Street). Later he was organist at St Patrick's Catholic Church, Church Hill, for 18 years and at St Benedict's Catholic Church in George Street West for 12.

In 1881 Hugo was appointed departmental music examiner. When Fisher resigned in 1884, Hugo took over from him as singing master at the Fort Street and Hurlstone Training Colleges. He was also appointed to the department's newly-created position of superintendent of music. He was a prolific composer of school songs and cantatas, many presented in Town Hall concerts.

Under Fisher, music in State schools had been taught exclusively by the tonic sol-fa method and its system of music notation.

Hugo thought children should also be taught to read music from the more universally-accepted staff system of notation in the upper levels of primary schools. As superintendent, Hugo was able to introduce what he termed the "movable doh" method of teaching children to sing from staff notation into most Sydney schools by 1887 and to have it adopted in the new primary school Standards of Proficiency brought into operation in 1890.

Hugo loved conducting large choirs of school children. During the 1890s he presented many public concerts and musical demonstrations by children. He composed an *Arbor Day Cantata* which was presented on Arbor Day 1891 at school concerts throughout New South Wales. In 1897, he led 5000 children in a musical performance marking Queen Victoria's Jubilee.

The same year, he had a choir of 1000 children entertain delegations to the Federation Convention at the Sydney Town Hall, singing items such as *The Song of Australia* (composed by another German, Carl Linger!).

Two years later as part of the Fort Street School's Jubilee in 1899, a performance was given by the pupils of a *Commemoration Ode*, written by Frank Hutchins and set to music by Hugo, and in May 1900 a large children's choir, assembled at the Sydney Cricket Ground, presented Hugo's *Patriotic Cantata*.

Hugo wrote two school songbooks that were widely used across the state.

#### A COMMONWEALTH TRIUMPH

Hugo's supreme musical triumph was his direction of a chorus of 10,000 children, the largest chorus ever gathered in Australia. The children, drawn from Sydney state schools, assembled for the inauguration ceremony for the Commonwealth of Australia on January 1 1901 at the Sydney Domain. Hugo conducted the three-part choir in his own composition *Federated Australia*, as well as *Rule Britannia* and *Advance Australia Fair*. To complete the concert, he took the baton as an estimated 50,000 crowd joined the choirs in *God Save The Queen*.

Queen Victoria died on January 22. Hugo and Aileen happened to be visiting Adelong and Tumut that week to give concerts with contralto Kate Rooney, who later achieved fame in Europe. In tribute to the Queen, Hugo played the *Dead March from Saul* for his Tumut audience. Back in Sydney, he assembled 3000 children at Queen's Square to sing a *Requiem* he composed.

Another sombre ceremony for which Hugo played the St Benedict's organ was the re-internment of Archbishop Bede Polding and other pioneer priests in March 1901, at



A Photograph from the *Sydney Mail* January 19, 1901 captioned "Hugo Alpen who conducted 10,000 voices on the Centennial Park, Commonwealth Day."

which Cardinal Moran presided (the coffins were transferred from St Benedict's to St Mary's Cathedral).

On June 3, Hugo conducted 4000 children singing for the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall (later King George V and Queen Mary) at the Sydney Showground.

#### ALPEN FAMILY MATTERS

The following children were born when the family lived in Glebe: Amy, Hugo Thomas (known as Tom), Gladys, Bertha, Dagmar and twins Marie and Elfreda, born in 1894. Amy died an infant in 1881 and Beatrice in 1907, aged 30.

About 1898, the Alpens and their children moved from Glebe to The Avenue, Strathfield, and to a house Hugo named 'Mozart.'

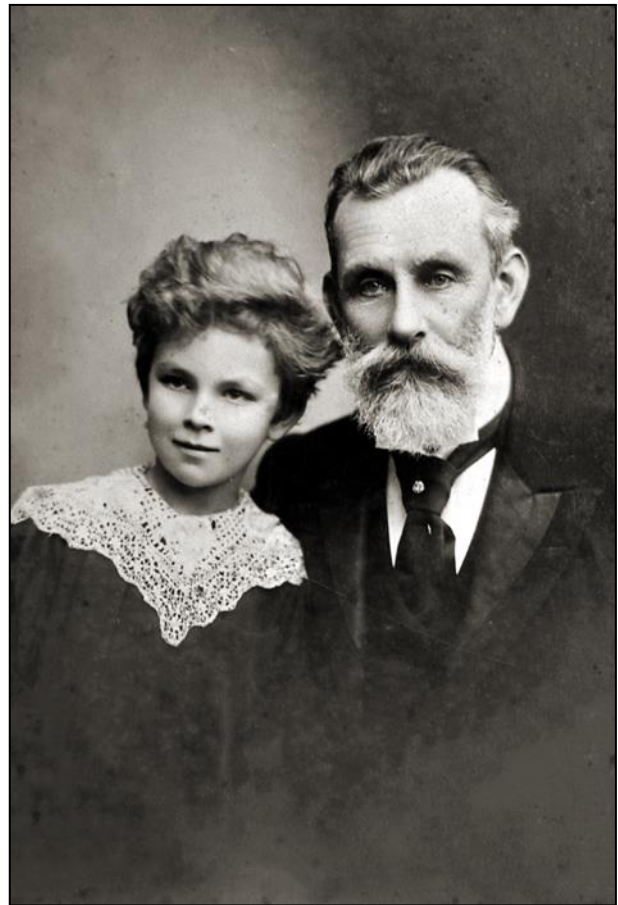
Seven Alpen children married. The eldest daughter, Ida, married George Crisp in 1895, while Bertha married Willie Humphreys in 1910 and Tommy married Ellen Lewis in 1913. Gladys married Thomas Dunn in 1915. Marie married William Hunt in June 1917, a few days after her father died (they had been engaged since February). George married Simone in 1919. Dagmar married John Black in 1926. Aileen and Elfreda remained single.

Mrs Alpen died at Lewisham Hospital on August 4 1902 aged 52.

In December that year Hugo arranged and conducted a choral concert by 1000 children at Sydney Town Hall in aid of the Martinique disaster fund (a volcano destroyed a city, killing 13,000 people). His daughter Beatrice accompanied the singers. At the final rehearsal, Nellie Melba was present as a guest and Marie and Elfreda Alpen presented her with flowers. Hugo adjudicated at the Charters Towers Eisteddfod in 1903 and 1904.

Mary Day died in Sydney in 1905 and her husband George in 1906, with Hugo playing Handel's Dead March at both funeral services.

He retired as superintendent of music in December 1908, having enjoyed a salary of £400 a year for several years. In his final year he conducted several children's concerts to welcome the American fleet to Sydney.



Alpen with one of his daughters

Hugo visited Germany, Sweden, England, Belgium and Switzerland in the northern winter of 1910-11. He reunited with his son George in Belgium and daughter Aileen in Switzerland. He visited several European opera houses.

In London, Hugo persuaded the Australian High Commissioner, Sir George Reid, to introduce him to senior education officials that led to him inspecting singing in London schools, as he had done in Germany. He wrote about his experiences in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (March 31 1911).

Back in Australia, Hugo was busy in retirement adjudicating competitions, conducting concerts or being an accompanist from Grafton and Gympie to Wollongong, but he suffered from rheumatism. In 1912, he was riding in a railway carriage when he put his feet on the seat. Management took him to court. He told the magistrate at Newtown Court he had first placed a newspaper on the seat. Hugo escaped with a one penny fine, the bench allowing him to pay it whenever he felt inclined (a typical fine of this "crime" was five shillings).

In 1913, Hugo was living at Strathfield, with his unmarried daughters, Gladys and Dagmar, a governess, and the twins Marie and Bertha.

In November that year he attended a vice-regal reception in Sydney for Sir George Reid, rubbing shoulders with Australian leaders including Justice Sir Edmund Barton, the NSW Premier William Holman and numerous lords and knights and their ladies.

Aileen returned to Strathfield in January 1914 after three years in Europe. Hugo encouraged Gladys, a music teacher and soprano who often sang one of his compositions in concerts. However, by February 1915 he was too unwell to attend Gladys's wedding in Mosman. Aileen went to London in 1915 to seek news of his brother George, missing in Belgium. Hugo's health recovered sufficiently for him to conduct a choir at the golden jubilee of the Sisters of Mercy at Mont Sant Angelo Convent, North Sydney, in November 1915. In May 1917, Hugo was reported seriously ill with acute neuritis. He died in a hospice on June 20, aged 74, and was buried at Rookwood Cemetery beside his wife and daughter.

Hugo's will, dated 1914, left the house 'Mozart' on trust to his twin daughters Marie and Elfreda, with their sister Ida Crisp their guardian, the twins to inherit the property when they were 21. Ida inherited Hugo's music manuscripts, Aileen received £100 and a diamond ring; Thomas received a diamond pin and £30, Dagmar £100, George the score of his opera *Eldorado* and some pictures. Gladys was not mentioned.

FOOTNOTE: George Alpen helped save countless lives in two world wars during the German occupations of Belgium, where he had been in business. His sister Aileen Alpen was a language teacher and newspaper correspondent in Italy and Poland between 1914 and 1939. She reputedly met Mussolini, helped teach the future Pope John Paul II to speak English and witnessed the horror of Nazi Germany forcibly dumping 6000 starving Jews into Poland months before World War II started.

SOURCES:

*Hugo Alpen: NSW Superintendent of Music 1884-1908*, by Dr Robin S. Stevens, published in Unicorn: The Journal of the Australia College of Education, Vol. 19, No. 3, September 1993.

*Amateurs and professionals: A Snapshot of Musical Life in a Country Town (Tumut) 1860-1865*, by Deborah Crisp, Published in Australasian Music Research, no 1, 1996.

Papers of the Alpen family 1864-1971) at National Library of Australia. MS 5710.

Correspondence from Betty McAlister (Hugo's granddaughter) to Frank Higgins, dated August 12, 1985 (courtesy of Albury & District Historical Society).

Contemporary newspaper reports, accessed through Trove, in the *Albury Banner*, *Tumut & Adelong Times*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Daily Telegraph*, *the Catholic Press* and several others.