

The Vitetta Brothers

The Vitetta Brothers were a well-known professional musical trio who emigrated from Italy and settled in Wellington before coming to Nelson in World War One and supporting patriotic fundraisers.

The oldest brothers, Joseph and Vincent Vitetta arrived from Italy in 1889 and settled in Wellington, where they became popular street musicians. They also accompanied silent movies. In 1903 the brothers were joined in Wellington by their widowed mother Rosa and youngest brother John. Now playing as the Vitetta Brothers, Joseph the violin, Vincent the flute and John the harp or violin, they gave concerts in Wellington and in Nelson, both of which had Italian communities.¹

On 23 May 1915, Italy entered the war as an ally and in July the Vitetta family moved to Nelson and bought a property on lower Trafalgar Street where Hathaway Court now is. They quickly became the darlings of Nelson's music scene and were in demand for patriotic concerts and events. They also accompanied silent movies, appearing at the Nelson School of Music, the Theatre Royal and the Majestic and Empire Theatres.²

In September 1915 Nelson residents showed support for Nelson's Italians who held a patriotic demonstration, followed by a concert and film evening in aid of the widows and orphans of Italian soldiers, which the Vitettas played at.³

On the first anniversary of the Gallipoli landings, 25 April 1916, John Vitetta conducted a concert of the Nelson Concert Orchestra, raising money for the Sick and Wounded Soldiers Fund.⁴

The following year the Vitettas were part of a "grand concert" in aid of sick and wounded soldiers at Nelson Hospital on 29 April 1917.⁵

The Italian Red Cross was again supported by the Vitetta Brothers in August 1918, when they played at a series of events held to raise money for the fund. They were part of a procession in which they played on the back of a truck surrounded by young girls dressed in Italian colours of red, white and green, and at a concert at the Theatre Royal.⁶ Following the armistice in November the brothers played at an open air concert in Trafalgar Street in aid of the Returned Soldiers' Club.⁷ On Anzac Day 1919 the Vitettas played at a patriotic concert at the School of Music.⁸

The advent of "talkies" in the 1920s saw the need for live musical accompaniment to movies decrease and the Vitettas had to find alternative work. Increasingly they turned to the commercial growing of tomatoes on their Trafalgar Street property. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s they become an important part in the Italian chain migration, acting as sponsors and employers of new arrivals to Nelson. However, they were still sought after as musicians. In 1927 they were honoured by the Italian Government with the bronze medal of merit and diploma for their efforts raising funds in excess of £500 for the Italian Red Cross during the war.⁹

While they were the darlings of World War One, the onset in 1939 of World War Two saw the popularity of the Vitetta Brothers drop sharply. In this war Italy took sides with the Axis powers and Italians were viewed as enemy aliens. Along with Nelson's other Italians, the Vitetta brothers were subject to enemy alien regulations. They were targeted by anti-Italian sentiment, including spiteful letters written about them to the authorities.¹⁰

They continued growing tomatoes and making their own brand of tomato sauce and in their later years were looked after by Joseph's daughter Rosa. The oldest Vitetta brother, Joseph,

was the only one to marry, although he divorced in 1904. The youngest, John, died aged 66 on 15 November 1954.¹¹ Vince died aged 74 on 16 June 1956¹² and Joseph followed suit on 17 October 1956 aged 78.¹³

The researched Biography was compiled by Karen Stade, Nelson Provincial Museum, in 2014.

¹ Shirley Tunnickliff, 'Vitetta, John Baptist, Joseph and Vincent', Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, www.dnzb.govt.nz

² 'Mr John Vitetta Dead, Pioneer Theatre Musician', *Nelson Evening Mail*, 15 November, 1954, p.6.

³ Concert and Pictures at School of Music, *Colonist*, 20 September 1915, p.7.

⁴ 'Anzac Concert', *Colonist*, 26 April 1916, p.7.

⁵ 'Amusements – The Nelson Concert Orchestra,' *Colonist*, 26 April 1917, p.7.

⁶ 'First Monday in August, The Procession', *Colonist*, 21 August 1918, p.3.

⁷ 'Returned Soldiers' Club', *Colonist*, 18 November 1918, p.6.

⁸ 'Anzac Night Concert', *Colonist*, 24 April 1919, p.7.

⁹ 'Nelson News', *Evening Post*, 8 August 1927, p.6.

¹⁰ F. Hayhurst, Detective Sergeant, Nelson Police, report regarding allege pro-Italian behaviour of John Vitetta, 25 June, 1940, contained in New Zealand National Archives: Vitetta, John (Italian) AL 13254, AAAC 489 Box 142.

¹¹ 'Mr John Vitetta Dead, Pioneer Theatre Musician', *Nelson Evening Mail*, 15 November, 1954, p.4. Nelson City Council Cemeteries Database, WKRC09012, Vitetta, John Baptist, interred 17 November, 1954, Wakapuaka Cemetery, Nelson.

¹² 'Deaths', Vitetta, Vincent, *Nelson Evening Mail*, 16 June 1956, p.1, and 'Member of Well-Known Italian Family Dies', *Nelson Evening Mail*, 19 June, 1956, p.4. Nelson City Council Cemeteries Database, WKRC09013, Vitetta, Vincent, interred 19 June, 1956, Wakapuaka Cemetery, Nelson.

¹³ 'Vitetta Trio Delighted Wellington and Nelson Theatre Audiences', *Nelson Evening Mail*, 26 October, 1956.