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Listening While I Work (18)

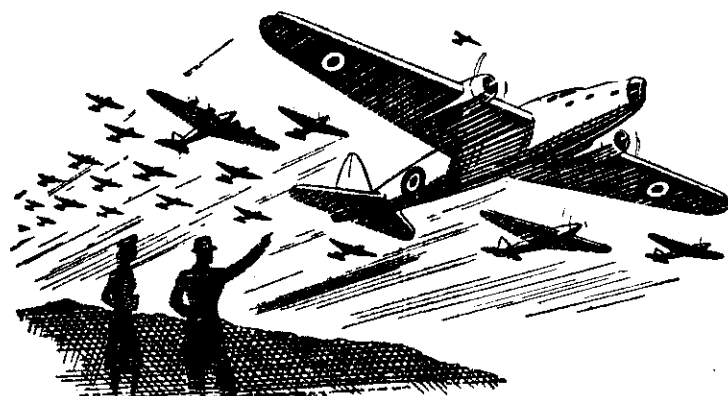
By "Materfamilias"

A FRIEND confessed to me that his most ardent novel reading was done standing up—while he postponed an inevitable necessity, such as washing the dishes or writing to his landlord. I fancy that listening to radio is in the same sort of way an excellent aid to procrastination. It is 9.0 a.m.—time for the housewife to get busy on a thousand jobs? Does she? Not if Aunt Daisy or some other regular offers a chair and a cup of tea and a half-hour reprieve. The schoolboy sits up with serials which he neither particularly likes nor understands, because they represent the postponement of bedtime. You and I let ourselves be caught by this and that feature that we don't really want to hear, to avoid an impending tussle with accounts, or correspondence, or the sewing machine. In this frame of mind we are prepared to accept what we hear more uncritically than if we have sat ourselves down to listen seriously.

* * *

ALL the same, discrimination in the use of radio is growing. Fewer people have the radio on all day, just as fewer people go indiscriminately "to the pictures" without reference to what is on.

If we do not listen critically enough it is perhaps because there is no medium except the press and the letterbox through which we can hope to express our opinions. The recent article in this journal, "How Does the BBC Know?" described how a Listener Research Department finds out what listeners like and whether BBC programmes are successful. Something of the same thing has, I think, been tried here, but I don't remember hearing what the results have been. If a listener knew that his opinion on a new programme was wanted, it would force him to listen more carefully and critically than if he were merely filling up time, and careful and critical listening is surely one step toward a demand for better programmes. But the greatest profit would be to the programme organisers and performers. It is depressing work, I am sure, giving talks week by week when you have no response: no one, except an over-kind neighbour to tell you that you hurried, that your voice sounded strained, that you dropped your voice when you came to the point of the story. It is surely far better to know what people are thinking than to go on in the same old way with the often-misleading assumption that all is well. Besides, criticism means praise too. Commercial stations have a rough and ready way of testing the popularity of their programmes—at least the sponsors can sometimes tell by the response to their advertisements whether a programme is popular.



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* * *

YET after all, is popularity the criterion? If it is, should it be so? I think only to a limited extent. The Commercial function as a large-scale popular chain store might function, giving efficient service at the cheapest possible rate. This service is useful and necessary; but there is also room for the type of shop that caters for the discriminating taste. Yet in order to keep alive, these shops must supply what is wanted, rather than what ought to be wanted. That is the difference between almost any business and a radio service. A business can tell by its sales whether it is doing its job properly. Radio cannot—at least not without some machinery for finding out. This could not be done either with ease or absolute accuracy, but it would help to keep listeners and performers and producers all on the alert. I hope we shall hear more about the research activities of the NBS than most of us know now.

* * *

THESE were some of the thoughts that ran through my head as I listened to this morning's talk. It was read with just the tones and inflections that I have learnt to expect from such listening to talks. I would not say it was uninteresting; it was full of facts and bits of poetry that I had not previously heard; but it was, like so many others, quite inconsequential. Two or three times a week I find myself listening to talks with titles such as "Old Jottings," "Here and There," or "Just This and That." I have been trying for weeks to size up my thoughts on this endless flow of carefully-prepared material and I feel quite powerless to do so. I would like to know what other people think. I would like the speakers to have the reward of honest criticism for their energy and enterprise in preparing their material. For myself, try as I may, I find that I am entirely indifferent to this spate of words. Occasionally I smile, more often

(continued on next page)