

Listening While I Work (29)

By "Materfamilias"

IF you were asked to make a list of the radio programmes of the last 10 weeks that stand out in your memory, I wonder how long your list would be? I ask the question because R. H. S. Crossman, in a recent issue of the *New Statesman*, gives a list of BBC features that remained in his mind after an enforced period of listening brought on by illness.

"Looking back over the last 10 weeks, what stands out in my memory? Tommy Handley. 'Mr. Perrin and Mr. Traill,' 'Alice in Wonderland,' 'The Radio Doctor,' the 'Christmas Round the World' programme (though it was very dull this year), Raymond Gram Swing, Freddy Grisewood's 'The World Goes By' (a sort of radio news magazine), a talk by John Betjemann on second-hand bookshops, the radio version of 'Ladies in Retirement,' David Low being blown back through time to the Napoleonic wars, Priestley illustrating his understanding of Dickens, 'Welsh Rarebit' (an excellent piece of radio variety), and 'Appointment with Fear' (some exciting radio horrors). I have deliberately jotted down that list in no sort of order as it came into my head."

Mr. Crossman also mentions 95 minutes of John Gielgud in *The Pilgrim's Progress* (a reading), and two hours of *The Flying Dutchman*, both of which he criticised as too big a dose even for the highbrows. I confess that I, too, might find 95 minutes of *Pilgrim's Progress* rather long, though I would like to try it, since so few of our programmes (other than musical) last nearly so long. Even the classical programmes of an hour or so are not often works by a single composer or even recitals by a single artist. Not that I think long programmes are a virtue in themselves. But we do, in my opinion, have too many 15-minute programmes, and not enough hour ones. Even plays seldom last for an hour. They are mostly half-an-hour or 40 minutes. One of my criticisms of the BBC *Brains Trust* was that the programme seemed short. If I am to enjoy listening to radio and not hearing it as a background to other things, I like a continuous evening of whatever I am listening to. If it is music to start with, it is annoying to have to find something else at 9.0 p.m. (though I accept an interruption for the News as inevitable). The ZB programmes are the worst in this respect. The whole evening is broken up into programmes of 15 minutes or so. I would like occasionally—perhaps once a week—to have a continuous performance for, say two hours, of a play, or the works of a single composer, or operas, or such long works as Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

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CAN you think of four plays that you have heard that would compare with those that Mr. Crossman mentions? Here are some of the things that I have enjoyed recently: *The Man Born to be King*, the BBC feature "Pictures from Europe," *The Sun Rises Twice* (despite the propaganda), "The Dark Lady of the Sonnets," and "The Canterville Ghost," told by Basil Rathbone in the *Yarns for Yanks* series. I have, of course, enjoyed also a good many of the musical programmes, and have laughed at "Jack's Dive," Fibber McGee, and—not quite so readily—at "The Stage Presents."

MR. CROSSMAN'S chief criticism of BBC programmes is that the vast majority of them are ersatz:

"Substitutes for going to church, substitutes for going to school, substitutes for going to the opera, substitutes for going to concerts, substitutes for going to the theatre, and the music-hall, and worst of all, substitutes for reading books on dull subjects. And this, despite the admitted fact that a genuine radio programme . . . is far more popular than the usual variety programme in which the listener merely overhears a variety show in a music hall. And what is true of variety is true of every other medium." (He does not mention serials, substitutes for reading trash).

This is far less true of New Zealand than of the BBC. We have not the alternatives, so have to depend on our radio for music, theatre, and variety. But I think Mr. Crossman hits the nail on the head in this passage:

"My second major criticism is that the highbrows and the lowbrows get too much and the middlebrows too little. . . . The audience which gets a raw deal is that enormously important section of all classes which, in the world of literature, makes Shaw and Wells and Priestley and Hogben best sellers—in fact, those not particularly aesthetic but mentally alert people who prefer plays to classical music and who go to church when they want religion. This is the group on which democracy depends. What does the BBC provide for it? The answer is precious little, beyond the *Brains Trust*, and a few features, and some topical commentaries."

I have often heard the NBS criticised as being too highbrow and the CBS as being too lowbrow. Perhaps this is a complaint from the great middlebrow public—not so classical, not so modern. For myself I do not really think so. I think rather that in an attempt to cater for the middlebrow (and I think here in New Zealand there is a real attempt) the NBS tend to under-rate his taste and his understanding.

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