

JANUARY 18, 1946

Message from Iceland

WE hope our readers will be as much interested as we ourselves have been in the report from Iceland printed on Page 6 of this issue. Although Iceland is not as far away from New Zealand as it used to be before the war, it is still so remote from the minds of most of us that this report is almost like a message from another planet. Yet we no sooner read it than we feel completely at home with the author of it and extraordinarily familiar with his subject matter. For in Iceland as everywhere else in the world now, only very much more so, broadcasting has done in a few years what the discovery of printing did in as many generations: put mind in contact with mind and carried culture to the remotest settlement. However, it was not broadcasting in general that we asked Iceland's Director to discuss with us but the broadcasting of politics. We wanted to know what use the oldest Parliament in the world was making of the microphone, what difficulties it was encountering, and what changes, if any, it had under consideration; and we are very grateful indeed for Mr. Thorbergsson's frank, full, and friendly reply. It is most interesting to know that there are apparently no complaints when parliament displaces all other programmes. The explanation is no doubt complex—partly social, partly cultural, partly climatic; life has always been harder in Iceland than it has ever been in New Zealand, and although we are remoter than the Icelanders are from what may be called the distractions of civilisation, we are probably more influenced by them. But whether we are less serious in New Zealand than the people of Iceland are, or just are less inclined to value privileges that we do not remember paying for, the fact remains that the oldest (and traditionally the best-read) democracy in the world began to broadcast its parliamentary proceedings as soon as it began to broadcast anything, and has no thought of bringing that practice to an end.

LETTERS FROM LISTENERS

SCANDINAVIAN SONGS

Sir,—In answer to your correspondent H. Laskowitz I would refer him to the *Oxford Companion to Music*, where Percy Scholes, in an article on Scandinavia, includes Finland in this group of countries. When Finland gained her independence after the last war she joined the Scandinavian bloc. I would like to point out that a large proportion of the cultured Finns are of Swedish descent. I took my programme of songs from a volume published by a distinguished firm under the title, "Modern Scandinavian Songs."

IRENE RICH (Auckland).

SILENT PRAYER

Sir,—It would be interesting to know how the Silent Prayer at 9.0 p.m. is now observed after the cessation of hostilities. If this was only a wartime measure, why continue? To many people, prayer may be only formal, or even not done; some have no need to wait for 9.0 p.m.—these have their own times. I suggest an epilogue would be more fitting, when stations close down.

"LISTENER" (Wellington).

"WORDS"

Sir,—“Anti-Humbug” appears to be guilty of over-simplification when he asserts that Democracy is something absolute and incapable of qualification. Democracy was born (we are told) in Athens — in a slave State! Is the Democracy of Britain based on a slave-State? Of course, Athenian democracy was “democracy for the few with slavery for the many.” We may well ask ourselves whether the Churchillian conception of democracy lines up with that of Mr. Attlee, seeing that Mr. Churchill regards the Labour Government of England as a “major disaster.”

A certain man (dead these 50 odd years) discovered that there were different kinds of democracy and spoke of that obtaining in Britain as being a system in which “the oppressed were allowed, once every few years, to decide which particular representatives of the ruling class should be in Parliament to represent and repress them.” Again, F. Engels stated that when classes have disappeared (i.e., when there is no difference between the members of society in their relation to the social means of production) — “only then a really full democracy, a democracy without any exceptions, will be possible and be realised.”

“Anti-Humbug” writes of “free discussion under Communism. . . .” Communism does not exist in Russia. There, the Communists have achieved the socialisation of the social means of production, which is only the first step on the road to Communism. Unfortunately, Communism in Russia is still a long way off. Then he mentions the “great Joseph Stalin” as saying that “the worker must be rewarded according to skill and output—not according to need.” This is quite correct, and it is difficult to find fault with it. The slogan “from each according to his ability and each according to his needs” can be realised only with the advent of Communism.

“Anti-Humbug” is not alone in regarding “democracy” and “socialism” as “fixed things.” Neither is fixed. No social

state or phase can be fixed or there could be no social changes. Surely “Anti-Humbug” can see that it is possible to have “only POLITICAL democracy with empty tummies” and “only ECONOMIC democracy with full tummies” existing side by side.

STUDENT (Christchurch).

THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Sir,—I support your correspondent R. I. F. Pattison with regard to the lowering of the standard in Latin under the new curriculum. However, speaking generally, I think that there are some admirable things about the new curriculum—for example, the increased importance placed on social studies and musical appreciation. But it is possible to teach these subjects without lowering the standard in, and discouraging the teaching of, the subjects that require the most thorough study—the languages and mathematics, and some sciences. Unfortunately the new curriculum is out to do just that. Languages are reduced to the status of options, and there is a marked lowering of the standard in all hard subjects. On the other hand, a pupil is taught to use his hands—a very excellent thing. But we seem to be in danger, while we make a pupil learn to use his hands, of NOT teaching him to use his head and of making him mentally lazy. And that is a far worse thing than lack of manual training. The late Lord Tweedsmuir in his inaugural address as Chancellor of Edinburgh University in 1938 acknowledged the failure of giving students too wide a choice in the contents of a curriculum. “Under that practice a young man was permitted to make his own selection from a huge variety of subjects; the result was that his training tended to be in snippets which collectively did not represent a true intellectual discipline.” That is applicable to a secondary school curriculum also. Similarly, J. M. Barrie told the students of St. Andrew's University, “I am far from taking a side against the classics. I should as soon argue against your having tops to your heads; that way lie the best tops.”

Social studies and musical appreciation are excellent things. But we must not allow pupils to avoid the subjects that most of all demand severe mental discipline, nor should we lower our standard in any subjects at all.

F.M.B. (Auckland).

MUSIC BAN

Sir,—I was very intrigued by the recent statement by the U.S.A. Society of Musicians concerning the banning of “foreign” music in America, as it was probably America which was responsible for the Cartel arrangement between the various gramophone recording companies by which New Zealand is prevented from getting most of the first-class recorded music which is available. It consists of a set of monopolies by which Europe, the British Empire, and North and South America are “zoned” with an arrangement to prevent overlapping of each other's territory. Thus a record which was popular in England would not be available in the U.S.A. although the same tune played by a similar American orchestra would, and in Europe still another orchestra would be used, though

both might be inferior to the first. This is why we never hear a real tango or rumba broadcast in New Zealand but have to listen to cheap imitations by third-rate American bands who have not the slightest appreciation of the rhythms and have not the instruments with which to play a rumba. Similarly, while there are superb recordings of high-class Italian and Middle European opera and popular performers available, we are flooded with trashy outpourings of America's tin-pan alley. It is time the Government which believes that “nothing is too good for the people of New Zealand” got cracking.

STARVED (Wellington).

U.S.A. NEWS COMMENTARY

Sir,—Now that the war is over, the Japs gone, and the Americans have left our shores, I suggest that we dispense with “The News and Commentary from the U.S.A.” I have asked numbers of listeners, and all declare they “switch off” as soon as it is mentioned. So every night we lose fifteen minutes which could be devoted to something else we want to hear.

“HERE'S HOPING” (Napier).

“THE SHAKE”

Sir,—I would like to congratulate your commentator in “Radio Viewsreel” on his paragraph entitled “The Shake,” and would also like as an ordinary listener to ask local singers not to indulge in this bad habit when singing over the air. His remarks about the destruction of pitch, tone and sense are only too true, and I recently heard a woman singer who had developed a tremolo to such a degree that her voice ranged over a whole semitone, so that it was difficult to know which note she was meant to be singing round, and the melody and harmony of the song were completely lost. But bad though the effect can be in a solo item, it is twice as bad when used in part singing, especially when each voice vibrates at a different frequency. Even boy sopranos are not immune these days, and there can be absolutely no excuse in their case, as a boy's natural voice is perfectly straight and true.

The trouble about singing is that, like so many arts, it is subject to the whims of fashion. People seem always to notice and strive after affectations and miss true artistry. In addition, there is the usual British weakness, in such matters, for apeing the foreigner, a good example being the slavish imitation of the Irish-American tenor. It would appear that the tremolo originated in the Italian opera, with its excessive emotionalism, and, though singers have long given up the latter, the tremolo remains.

E. D. FORESTER (Kumeu).

NOT GUILTY

Sir,—May I deny the mild impeachment in *The Listener* of January 4 (p. 4)? The nearest I have been to New Caledonia is talks I did on Chinese literature (post-revolutionary).

JUDITH TERRY (Auckland).

ANSWERS TO CORRESPONDENTS

R.O.D. (Oamaru): Useful, but for internal reasons, difficult. Later perhaps

Yorkshirewoman (Lower Hutt): No more space at present for letters on English place names.