

MUSIC FOR COUNTRY CHILDREN

Teachers Tackle Problems of Isolation

THE Music Teachers' Registration Board, which met in Wellington recently, has been gathering information from country districts about the problem of giving country children a chance to take music lessons, and it has decided, after a preliminary survey to approach branches of the Women's Division of the Farmers' Union and Women's Institutes in remote districts to seek local co-operation. There are at present three main obstacles to the provision of music tuition in districts that cannot support a teacher in the ordinary way: the cost of travelling (whether for pupil or teacher); the difficulty of getting permission for children to have time off from school; and, in some cases, the absence of places and pianos suitable for teaching.

A Press Association message was published after the last meeting of the Board, and we have since asked its chairman, Stanley Oliver, of Wellington, to tell us more about the conditions that have led to the present inequality between the opportunities for music study of country children and town children.

Subsidy Wanted

"We think these country children have just as much right to subsidised help as

the men in the Armed Services had," he said. "There was a subsidy system operated through AEWS, which must be 75 per cent. reduced by now, because 75 per cent. of the men are out. A teacher was able to claim 2s 6d subsidy for each lesson given to men or women in uniform. I don't see anything unpatriotic in saying that children in country districts have just as much right to be assisted to get music lessons, when the present difficulty arises mainly out of the fact that a teacher can't make a living by visiting scattered places. We'd like to see a similar subsidy operated in favour of country children in such a way as to make it a paying proposition for a teacher to go out and give the lessons. We're not advocating making it cheaper for the country children — there's no reason why they should pay less than town children. But on the other hand there's no reason why they should pay more, as they do at present; still less any reason why they should go without altogether simply because its uneconomical.

Appeal to Country Women

"But it isn't just a matter of making a subsidy available—the Board realises that we've got to get some tangible sort of proposal ready before we can ask for that, and so we're going to get in touch,



Spencer Digby photograph

STANLEY OLIVER

"Country children have a right to subsidised help"

with the Women's Institutes and the WDFU branches, and see if they want to help. The local people themselves will have to see that there's a place for the lessons to be given in, with a suitable piano, and they may have to put a teacher up for a night or two, and then we'll have to see if we can't get something done about this business of school-children being refused permission to go to music lessons in school hours. Some teachers and headmasters are sensible, and they encourage it, but it is too bad for children in a place where the teacher or the education board persists in refusing permission, and in effect denies a child the right altogether (because in some cases it means no music lessons at all)."

Mr. Oliver showed us some of the letters in the board's file. One woman told of her own difficulties in getting music lessons in 1916 in a district where improved transport has made life easier by now—but her story may still be an example of the desperate longing for music in some country homes, and the will to endure difficulties for the sake of getting lessons.

Per Ardua

"In those days," she wrote, "there were no roads to speak of, and no bridges over creeks and streams. In 1916 my parents decided that I was to be taught music if I could be placed with a teacher. A teacher was found for me at the Convent, Huntly. To get to Huntly in those days entailed a journey over creeks, along muddy tracks and over hills that were still covered with dense bush, in order to get to the nearest railway station. Part of this journey was accomplished on horseback, part on foot. I had to be at the station at 7.0 a.m. to be in time for the train. When I arrived at the station I made off to the waiting room, and there exchanged my muddy shoes, stockings, dress and coat for more presentable clothing. How well I remember a pair of very dainty glaze kid boots

I used to wear! My dirty clothing was packed in a bag and carried with me. I arrived for my lesson at 9.0 a.m. By special arrangement with the Mother Superior at the Convent, I was given a long lesson, then lunch. Afterwards a sister used to see me safely to the train at twelve noon, when the aforementioned journey began in reverse. I generally arrived home about 6.30 p.m. The journey was no small undertaking for a child of eight years, especially in winter and spring, with the rain, frost and fogs, but we thought nothing of it. I never missed a single lesson in ten years. I succeeded in gaining my F.T.C.L. at the age of 18. My father would have sent me to England, but he was a struggling coalminer and could not afford to do so. Later he spent all his savings on a piano for me—I still have it."

Expensive Children

Some idea of what pupils have to pay to get to teachers in town is contained in another letter, from Sister Mary Anthony in Greymouth:

"I have one child of 11 who leaves her home at 8.30 on Saturdays, pays 2/- bus fare to the Ikamatua station, railway fare to Greymouth, and one or two shillings for food. She has passed three theory exams, two practical exams in violin playing and all grades of Royal Schools exams up to elementary and Trinity College up to advanced preparatory in pianoforte. As I see her only once a week, you can call that good going. . . . Another 10-year-old has to use the bus on Saturdays. On this she gets no concession, and has to pay 2/6 each time, plus one or two shillings for food, and our reduced fee for tuition. Examination fees, books and manuscript paper make this child an expensive one, too."

Another writer described the arrival of a piano in the district of Tangaihi, a farming settlement on the Northern Wairoa River, as "quite an event." Children of 12 years there had never seen one before. After two years, during which she and her son had given music lessons on this piano in the schoolhouse, there were three other pianos in the district.

Kawhia, according to a Te Awamutu teacher, is "in the worst predicament. Parents there guarantee at least ten pupils, and repeat their pleas year after year. What can we do to help them? The youngsters are growing up and one by one missing the opportunities for a musical education they should be afforded."

At Apiti, a little township in the hills at the back of Feilding, where permission has been refused by the Wanganui Education Board for children to have music lessons in school hours, a few pupils are taught by a teacher who cycles ten miles on Friday, takes two pupils in the lunch-hour, some more after 3.0 p.m. (who wait their turn and then ride home) spends the night at a pupil's home, and then cycles ten miles back to her own home on Saturday morning.

Enthusiasm Needed

T. J. Young, who is the Government nominee on the Registration Board, first

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Is he to have music or is he not?