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Auckland Children Sing To A Guest Aged One Hundred



this very old lady who made the trip to be their guest of honour. As I watched and listened I was most strongly reminded of the two strange lines from the poem by Dylan Thomas about an old man aged one hundred:

The morning is flying on
the wings of his age
And a hundred storks
perch on the sun's right
hand.

I do not say I am any clearer now about the meaning of the lines; but I do say I felt clearer at that moment in the Auckland Town Hall, standing up to watch all those clapping children and a very old lady.

* * *

FORTY years on, when some of the children who took part in the Auckland Primary Schools' Musical Festival in the Town Hall on November 5 are grandfathers and grandmothers, perhaps one of them will say to a sceptical grandchild on another fifth of November:

"Well, young man, there was one fifth of November when I sang to an old lady aged one hundred years."

And the grandchild will perhaps say whatever is the equivalent in that era of "Aw, no kiddin' Pop!" And the grandfather will be able, if he is of a saving disposition, to go to the bookshelf and bring forth an old copy of *The Listener* and turn to this page and show to the unbelieving a picture of the old lady who was the guest of 2,500 singing children in Auckland in 1946, a fortnight or so after she had celebrated her hundredth birthday.

For this is the picture (above), taken in the Town Hall by flashlight on Tuesday afternoon, November 5, 1946, just before Mrs. O. E. Nielsen, of Ponsonby, rose in a slight curve from her seat in the circle to bow to the children and wave a gloved hand in acknowledgment of their prolonged clapping of hands in her direction from all parts of the auditorium. *The Listener* had been invited to attend this fifth annual festival and I was near enough to see Mrs. Nielsen plainly but not near enough to hear if she said anything. But she certainly clearly indicated a cheery greeting to all the upturned faces in the stalls and then to all the children in the choir seats and all round the circle; and as she took her seat again the children renewed their clapping of hands towards her. If anything could be more arresting than the sound of the 2,500 children singing together it could only be the sound of their spontaneous applause for

AS usual the Primary Schools Musical Festival (held under the auspices of the Auckland Headmasters' Association) was not open to parents or visitors except a few officials; but the whole concert was broadcast (in part by 12M and in part by 1YA). Also as usual it consisted of singing by massed choirs (48 schools were represented) conducted by Professor H. Hollinrake, Professor of Music at Auckland University College; singing by grouped choirs conducted by H. C. Luscombe, director of music at the Auckland Teachers' Training College, and individual choirs; and rhythmic movement by various groups. As in former years the singing was a revelation of the effect produced by continued hard work by music teachers in the schools and careful organisation for the festival. There was excellent balance of the groups in the different parts of the hall and an admirable precision, especially considering the great number taking part and the obvious impossibility of having combined rehearsals.

Before the singers were called to order there was a sustained but undulating small roar from the children who were of course speaking to each other in their quietest voices; to describe the combined sound I can only say that it was a little like the sound of a huge



PROFESSOR HOLLINRAKE

waterfall heard in dense bush from a few hundred yards off. But perhaps the truth is much as sound effects men have found it to be—that often there is nothing else exactly like a certain sound and that the sound of 2,500 children speaking quietly and not in unison in a large building is like that and nothing else.

The Mayor Spoke to Them

A visible eddy of enthusiasm stirred the sea of white and navy blue figures when the Mayor of Auckland (Mr. J. A. C. Allum) entered in his red robes of office. He was introduced by the president of the Headmasters' Association (R. A. Watson), who told us that this festival was a centennial celebration of the first concert ever held in Auckland—in 1846 when the whole population of Auckland numbered fewer people than there were children in the festival.

Mr. Allum said that he had had the great pleasure of hearing four of the five festivals that had been held and that he never failed to be delighted at the sound of so many children letting themselves go in song.

"That's a funny thing about the Anglo-Saxon people, that they so seldom let themselves go and really enjoy something," he said. "I hope that you children go on singing all your lives and never lose this wonderful gift of enjoying things wholeheartedly. It is a great gift for happiness for yourselves and for others."

"And now I want to say good-bye on your behalf to your friend and conductor, Professor Hollinrake, who has done so much good work with you. He is off to England for a holiday after an absence of twenty years—at least I believe it is not to be a holiday at all, but at least he is going home. Last year I myself went home after an absence of seventeen years and I can only hope that Professor Hollinrake will have the wonderful feeling that I had—I can't describe it—as I came within sight of England. And then I hope he will come back to work with us again—we all do, don't we?" The "Yes" that ran round the building sounded as if they all, all 2,500 of them, had said it.

When the festival was over I asked Professor Hollinrake if he intended to take a holiday or to work during his year's leave of absence and he said that he would be busy most of the time visiting and observing methods in various universities and schools of music and attending as many music festivals and summer schools as he could. Then he hoped to settle for a time at Cambridge where he began and make use of the resources in the music library to do some research.

"Are you as happy as you look when you are conducting this massed singing?" I asked him.

"Yes, I love it. Those children are really wonderful to work with, they are so joyous and spontaneous. And that, on top of a solid preparation, gives you something very worthwhile in a festival of this kind. And then these festivals are so valuable in any case that you feel impelled to put your heart into them to make them a success. I think it's very important indeed that they should continue."

—J.