

# HAVE WE AN ORCHESTRA?

## A Reply to Dr. Beaglehole



DR. H. J. FINLAY

THE article on the National Symphony Orchestra in *The Listener* by Dr. Beaglehole was doubtless read by music lovers with much interest. It was one of the few attempts I have so far seen to appraise the real merit of this latest flowering of New Zealand culture—the Press reports have been perfunctory and not of an analytical nature.

Dr. Beaglehole's article, after a preamble on criticism in general, really boils down to an opinion that it is time we took the blinkers off, and that the orchestra is not so good after all. His criticisms are directed at (1) the actual playing, (2) the choice of programme, and (3) the choice of encores. If he had written stating that his personal preference was for a particular kind of playing and music, and that he personally did not like encores, no one could cavil, for he is entitled to his opinion; but by adopting a tone of informed criticism and saying outright that so many things were bad, he invites an answer from the large number of listeners who doubt whether his criticisms are valid.

Since Dr. Beaglehole took up so much of his article with a general preamble, I may digress for a moment also before considering his charges. I would like to feel that I am voicing the thoughts of very many hearers of the National Orchestra, who may have all sorts of different views, expectations, and academic knowledge about music, but who are united in one thing—a deep love of it, or rather of that part of it regarded by common consent as "good music." Most of us who are in this band are not experts; we have not had the opportunity of hearing the London and New York Philharmonic under Beecham or Toscanini at first hand; we are not star performers on any orchestral instrument; and we cannot pick up a new score and immediately hear what it sounds like. But we are accustomed to listening (and I don't mean while reading or chatting at the same time, but really *intently* listening) to the best records of the best orchestras and conductors, both over the air and on our own gramophones—often surprisingly faithful—and we can't help developing a strongly critical faculty in

so doing. We are accustomed to following whatever works we can with miniature scores over and over again, and to comparing different versions of the same work to learn something of interpretation—not only the conductor's intention, but the composer's also. We are accustomed to practical and theoretical knowledge of at least one musical instrument; we know something of composition for it, and perhaps of orchestration as well. We are accustomed to reading all be can about anything that pertains to the orchestra and those who wrote for it, and to discussing our impressions, both visual and aural, with our fellow devotees. These are our qualifications. I maintain that because of them there are in New Zealand many more surprisingly acute and informed critics than Dr. Beaglehole would have us believe, and that we are capable of coming to some justifiable conclusions differing from his own.

### By What Standard?

Criticism, to be informed or valuable, must have a standard. By what standard are we to judge the National Symphony Orchestra? The standard of the normal performance given by the London Philharmonic, or the standard of the previous performances heard in New Zealand? Obviously the former is unfair and irrational; neither Mr. Tyrer nor any member of the orchestra would be so uncritical as to think we can be classed with the world's really great orchestras after but a few performances. But it can be reasonably maintained that even now the quality of tone and precision of playing compare more than favourably with that of many recordings of named orchestras not quite in the front rank. Listen to most of the records of the Boston Proms., the Chicago orchestra, the average French orchestra, and I guarantee a critical ear will often prefer the local playing. True, we haven't got that individualised woodwind tone that a Stokowski orchestra gets, but there are many like myself who regard a normal fine tone as preferable—the sort of sound that Brahms and Schubert expected and heard.

In view of what has been inflicted on us in the past in New Zealand, can anyone reasonably criticise the oboe, horn, and bassoon tone that we have heard in the orchestra, and that must have given so many like myself a feeling of deep content. I ask Dr. Beaglehole to think back to almost any recording he can remember, and recall the beautiful playing here of the horn meditation (not only the tone, but the phrasing also) at the end of the Brahms first movement, which can make or mar the whole climax, the exactly right tone of the oboes in the third movement, some of the woodwind passages and chords at the beginning of *Tristan*, and many other wonderful moments—to think back, and in justice say that this was first rate indeed.

Let us be fair then, and judge this orchestra, for the present, not by the best possible results of the world's best orchestras, but very largely with the memory in our minds of what the previous best has been in New Zealand. And, taking that view, do not by any means let us say that our National Symphony Orchestra is quite perfect, that

the conductor, soloists, and ensemble are equal to anything to be heard anywhere: that kind of praise destroys itself, and I do not think is given by the mass of intelligent listeners. But do let us be honest and admit that the results we have heard from this orchestra, even in two performances, are so far ahead of anything previously heard here, and so much more precise, delicate, robust, and balanced than anything we had come to expect from New Zealand musicians, that we must say "Here is something quite new and fine in our musical

*While we do not usually print articles in reply to articles, we do not often have such an occasion as the National Orchestra's first public concert. We therefore break our rule in order to print this interesting comment by DR. H. J. FINLAY*

world." That is not going into irrational transports, nor can it lead to smug self-satisfaction and consequent deterioration in the orchestra itself. A sensible body of men and women, drawn from all over New Zealand as this orchestra is, cannot be adversely affected by the outspoken reaction "This is very much better than we had expected." They do not believe that this means it is the best that can be expected, nor, since they are individually artists, is it likely to slacken their efforts to improve. An artist must satisfy not only the public and the conductor, but also himself or herself, and the careful and exhaustive selection of this orchestra makes it reasonably certain that its members are all artists in this respect. Such people should, as Dr. Beaglehole states, "fear nothing so much as admiration without discrimination." But let us not, when it is due, withhold from them admiration with discrimination.

### The Fairest Test

About the fairest test and means of comparison we have is simply to ask, "Does the orchestra sound like what we are accustomed to hearing from the best records and reproducers?" Yes, this orchestra does—and no other New Zealand orchestra I have ever heard sounded remotely like it. I suggest that, in the absence of comparison with other orchestras in the flesh, this is the only common-sense yardstick to measure the National Symphony Orchestra's present merit and subsequent improvement.

Let us consider some of Dr. Beaglehole's specific indictments as regards the playing. The statement that "some of these people have never heard an orchestra before, let alone played in one," is unjustly belittling. Dr. Beaglehole apparently spent much time peregrinating for the perfect acoustic spot, doubtless an interesting experiment, but somewhat distracting to those who wished to listen. It is difficult to see just how the horns could have "rather exploded at the beginning of the Brahms," seeing that the opening bars are scored for only two horns and marked "p"; as a matter of fact there was a slight faulty intonation on the first chord, but that was all. To

go on to say, "It looks as if they will work up a good tone" is another remark that will be dismissed as cheap by those who actually heard the many beautiful horn effects—chords, solos, soft holding notes, stopped notes, etc.—that were plentiful in both programmes.

Dr. Beaglehole's praise of the woodwind section "when left to itself" does not enhance one's opinion of his critical faculty, for it was in the woodwind section that one of the few lapses in balance occurred; throughout the first concert the bassoons were far too weak, inaudible in chordal passages, and faint even in important solos. The contrapuntal solo at the beginning of the Brahms second movement, though marked *poco f*, and its repetition later on, were almost inaudible, as also were important parts in *Tristan*, etc. This defect was not a matter of my imagination; it was confirmed to me, and the difference at the second concert was noticeable, where the bassoons were in perfect perspective in *Carnival Romaine*, the *London*, etc. To say after hearing the performance of *Shropshire Lad* that the strings had worked up "little delicacy" is at least ungrateful—I could think of much stronger terms. That Dr. Beaglehole did not notice a *piano* in the strings until they "managed to show promise of this in the first bars of the last movement of the Brahms" again does not inspire confidence in the carefulness of his listening—but perhaps he was preoccupied with finding another acoustic position. The passage referred to is not intended to be excessively soft, being marked only *p sotto voce*—and it was correctly played that way; much earlier in the symphony were real pianissimo passages, played as such, but perhaps harder to realise since mostly in conjunction with wood or brass. Notable was the accompaniment to the horn solo near the close of the first movement marked *pp*, and especially the five bars closing the third movement, which were most tenderly and softly played. If Dr. Beaglehole did not enjoy this, and longs for "really angelic syllabbling"—whatever that means—I, for one, would bear with him as a fellow-listener entitled to his personal whims, but not as critic and guide.

### Some Imperfections

Actually, if one were to insist on some criticism, it would of course be quite easy to point out a number of things that were not perfect. The *Flying Dutchman* was rough in places (yet it is a storm scene); the trombones not sufficiently solemn or pregnant with doom, the Redemption motive, especially the second half, unevenly played, with occasional rough tone, and the climax of the storm not sufficiently prepared or overwhelming. The impression I got from hearing this item played not only at the concert but also at rehearsal was one of insufficient familiarity with it. The *Tristan* excerpts were probably the poorest played of any to date; that is, of course, judged by good recordings of them. The tone and balance were often uneven and, while many of the woodwind chords were near perfect, others left much to be desired. In general, the poorest effects occurred where the fullest orchestra was necessary; this