

APRIL 11, 1947

## A New Quarterly

EVERYBODY knows where good intentions lead when they remain intentions, but it is not so clear what happens to them when they get into print. The new quarterly that has just come off the Caxton Press (*Landfall*, edited by Charles Brasch) should be a safe enough investment for a year; but it would be flying in the face of experience to suggest that it may last longer. If we suggest that, it is because we so strongly wish it, but we have no historical reason for arguing that the bad old indifferent days are over. We say merely that they ought to be over now that the youngest of our settlements is a hundred years old. How long a country takes to reach cultural maturity depends on some circumstances that it can control and on some others that it can't; but it depends a good deal on the opportunities it has for education. Those opportunities in New Zealand have been consistently good. Our university is now teaching the great grandchildren of its first students, and the working week of far more than half the population is one of the shortest in the world. We can't say that we have no facilities for culture, or no time. We can say that we have no inclination for it, and with many that would still be the simple truth; but the number of subscribers necessary to support a literary quarterly is perhaps 2,000, or less than one in 700 of those over 25. If that would put a bigger strain on our cultural crust than it will at present carry, the fact must be accepted that we still are primitives. But it seems reasonable to make the test again. Because *Landfall* is a literary review its appeal is first of all to those who speak in words. But a literary review soon becomes an expression of life in general, finds itself discussing all the arts, and involved in them all. If it is true, as the editor (quoting Charles Morgan) argues, that "art is news of reality not to be expressed in other terms," *Landfall* is an attempt to find out whether New Zealand has begun yet to be aware of that other language.

# LETTERS FROM LISTENERS

## NATIONAL ORCHESTRA

Sir,—I was unfortunate in hearing only two-thirds of the National Orchestra's first concert, with indifferent radio reception. It would therefore be impossible for me to express an opinion about the standard of playing without indulging in a quite ostentatious display of pretentiousness and irresponsibility. It would be wrong of me even to accept the word of Dr. Beaglehole (whom I suspect of having considerable taste but very little appetite) about the night's doings. There is, however, one point in his review of the concert on which a prima facie case rests, and that is the matter of the programme. At its first appearance the Orchestra would, I agree, have done well to present a solidly classical programme — perhaps Handel, Haydn, and Beethoven. The music that was played was nearly all marginal stuff, with Wagner and Butterworth rubbing shoulders, and altogether too much noise and colour and virtuosity; a sort of Trimalchio's banquet rather than a well-ordered meal of sound virtuais. I am a little apprehensive about this tendency to make the most of the *bigness* of a symphony orchestra, and to substitute virtuosity for meaning. Something of the same attitude appeared to be evident in one of the annotations supplied by the NZBS for Lili Kraus's second Auckland concert last week. We read, with some astonishment, that the "light-weight piano texture" of Mozart was due chiefly to "the composer's outlook on life; he was physically and mentally a light-weight, never given to Beethoven's thunderous introspection, though more sensitive to the very things which troubled Beethoven." We then heard Mozart's Sonata in D Major (K.576)! If the comment I have quoted is not merely self-contradictory, it can only mean something like this, that Mozart was a "mental light-weight" because in his piano compositions he didn't make a lot of noise, and never became murky. This seems to me to be very odd. Are we supposed to rank Liszt and Rachmaninoff as "mental heavy-weights"?

A. R. D. FAIRBURN (Devonport).

Sir,—There is a tendency among would-be critics these days to substitute sophistry for criticism, to indulge their clannish superiority at the expense of their subject and their readers. Latest to reach this stage is your contributor J. C. Beaglehole. In his rush to demonstrate his own aestheticism your contributor has merely revealed his lamentable inadequacy as a critic.

We must, insists Dr. Beaglehole, be spartan in our criticism of the orchestra; stab it to the heart again and again; dissect it; restrain our very natural desire to applaud, and trust that the players will return to work stimulated and encouraged once they have been damned with faint praise. If this is J.C.B.'s philosophy, then I say he is the wrong man for the critic's job. Let us criticise by all means, but let us temper our criticism with an honest appreciation of what is being done for us. J. C. Beaglehole doubts whether a nation has been born, but he is willing to wait and see. Let him implement these sentiments, then, by curbing for the present his precipitate urge to stab and dissect — whether it be occasioned by partisan disapproval of the present conductor or not — until our symphony orchestra is something more than one concert old.

On the other hand, self-assured as he is, our critic leaves us many a loophole through which to attack him. Manifest among these is the absence — apart from an oblique reference to gramophone records — of any standard of comparison. The first-rate recording is one in which all orchestral imbalance has been eliminated by skilled technicians, so that it demonstrates no satisfactory standard of comparison; and our critic saw fit to give us no other indication of the yardstick by which he has judged the orchestra. The solitary fact that does emerge is that having secured seats that were apparently unsuitable, he spent a considerable time cantering about the hall during the performance in an attempt to discover the ideal listening position. An intriguing, if somewhat unsatisfactory, way of enjoying a symphony concert — especially if one has been commissioned to write a review of the performance.

Then we have an embittered protest about the programme. I don't pretend to be satisfied with it all, not for one minute, but I don't feel that my personal preference ought to have been imposed on everyone else. I hope and expect that in due course the orchestra will play Beethoven and Haydn and Mozart; but I feel that there must have been few people who left the hall without hearing at least one work that they honestly enjoyed.

It would also be rather interesting to know who is to select the "first-rate" programme on which Dr. Beaglehole waxes so eloquent. Every work after all has the potential capacity to arouse intense dislike and profound admiration, which means that a programme selected by Dr. Beaglehole could: send other critics from the hall to compose impassioned essays of condemnation. Even granting the possibility of the nebulous "first-rate" performances of first-rate programmes is both irrelevant and presumptuous. J. C. Beaglehole was, in short, being just what he assured us he wasn't — all highbrow and ivory tower.

In conclusion, sir, I am surprised that *The Listener*, which purports to be New Zealand's official broadcasting journal, and which studiously avoids criticising all other departments of radio, should open its columns to an inimical critic when it should at the present time be doing all in its power to foster this splendid new cultural asset.

L. D. CONSTABLE (Lyal Bay).

(We don't quite know what our correspondent means by "all other departments of radio." If he means plays, talks, singing, variety, and so on, he has only to read *The Listener* to know that they are criticised in our columns every week.—Ed.)

## JUDGING OF BAND CONTESTS

Sir,—In view of the very interesting interviews in a recent *Listener* with three band conductors, I should like to elaborate a little on my previous article concerning recordings and their value to an adjudicator at a brass band contest. It was not my intention to imply that contests should be judged *entirely* on recorded performances; but, in my opinion, the standard of playing at contests by New Zealand bands to-day is so high, especially in the A Grade, that the advantages to an adjudicator of hearing a band "played back" are obvious.

I do not suggest for one moment that tonal quality or balance should necessarily be considered on the recorded performance — points for these important

factors should be awarded on the public performance. However, such matters as, interpretation, notation accuracy, phrasing, and intonation would be checked back by hearing the recording, and, if necessary, amplifying the volume so that a great deal of detail possibly lost to the human ear, owing to the acoustic conditions prevalent at the time of performance, might be heard. This should only be done in the case of what may be termed a "photo" finish. It is not always easy for any individual to separate the first three bands when the standard is high, especially in view of the fact that to-day such large entries are received. The system employed could be quite simple.

After all the competing bands had concluded a test selection, but only when two or three bands are almost inseparable, an adjudicator should have the privilege of hearing the recordings of the leading bands immediately the final band had played. Now that the NZBS has a Mobile Recording Unit available something like this should not be difficult to arrange.

A major point which would have to be considered under the present rules is that a judge would need to be kept in ignorance of the sequence of the draw for order of playing until a final decision had been made.

The present system is working very well, but I predict that sooner or later a revised system of judging will have to be introduced and it is good to plan ahead.

T. J. KIRK-BURNAND  
(Wellington).

## "PRISON WITHOUT BARS"

Sir,—Caroline Webb's talk (reported in Vol. 16, No. 405 of *The Listener*) made me wonder where her ideas came from. All the things therein advocated, home cleaning companies, home helps and child centres, sounded like parts of a Comintern-inspired campaign to break up the basis of the Christian civilisations, the home. Do we want women coal-miners and train-drivers? Or do we want women who are feminine and loyal to husband, family, and home? It is sweet for a man at work to think of his wife at home too busily engaged in her little circle of domestic duties to bother her head with ideas which make her dissatisfied and unhappy.

PRO TRUMAN AND BEVIN  
(Onehunga).

## ORGAN MUSIC

Sir,—May I register a belated protest at the action of the broadcasting authorities in discontinuing the half-hour programme of grand organ music broadcast from 12M on Sunday evenings? The lover of organ music is probably the least catered for in the week's programmes.

One can look through *The Listener* week after week and find no mention of any organ work. It is to be hoped that the programme arrangers will reinstate these all too short organ selections in the near future, and so give some pleasure to a group of people, who although perhaps in the minority should be catered for as well as other sections of the listening public. I don't think that one half-hour a week is too much to ask for out of the week's broadcasting time.

"ORGANIST" (Auckland).

## ANSWERS TO CORRESPONDENTS

"Working Farmer" (Wanaka): Not possible at present, but your request has been passed on to programme organisers.