

we urgently need, and capable of playing it well. Its existence is an unqualified Good Thing. But as I sat behind the conductor's back during a rehearsal of Wagner's *Magic Fire Music*, I found myself thinking of the violinists slashing away, bar after bar (so it seemed to me), at something which they could only suppose to have some meaning within the whole.

Mass and Boss

Well, Wagner wrote a lot of great music. I don't like it, but a lot of people do. And it conveyed vast and necessary truths at the time it was written. It may do still. But I think that Wagner, and a lot of the other music that members of a symphony orchestra anywhere in the world have to play nowadays, makes nonsense of some good honest musical instincts. That business in the *Magic Fire Music* asks for, and often gets, mass mentality to serve it and a boss mentality to run it. Where would the individual human mentality end up if there was practically no place for it but in chamber music (which is not a popular kind of music and therefore provides no living except for the very few top-rank players who can exist for it and by it)?

I advocate nothing—no abolitions, no Save Our Music funds, no Anti-Wagner Leagues. I only urge that people should expose themselves to the knowledge of what may be had from the kind of music Boyd Neel has brought to us at this moment.

Looking at the Boyd Neel players in action (or better still, at work) you see that an orchestra of that kind is a human problem. The Wagnerian Orchestra is an inhuman problem. (Imagine flying it round the world, booking it in at hotels . . .) I'm all for human problems in the arts these days. There are enough of the others in the rest of life.

The air about these 18 young musicians (nine men and nine women) resembles nothing as much as the atmosphere of a class of very eager students at a tutorial under a good lecturer. They have that particular kind of good sense that enables them to laugh best at the things that mean most to them. When they are taking their work really seriously (that is, making headway) they get great fun out of it. Rehearsal-time is punctuated with plenty of laughter.

And they share in the music to the same degree that chamber-music players do. The leader, the first 'cello, and the first viola all seem to have a natural right to stop the music at any point if they don't like it and start an argument. The result, when you hear it, relieves you of any doubts as to whether this is the proper way to go about things; the result is unity to perfection, the most lively and invigorating—and sensitive—playing you have ever heard. That seems to me to establish that there is a field in music where this particular brand of democracy which is said to be typical of the crazy English, does work. And that's worth knowing, when it was forgotten for so long.



Sparrow Industrial photograph
CHARLES GRAY (right) and JULIAN HEMINGWAY, the orchestra's two double-bass players. Gray also sometimes smokes during rehearsal, but smokes a pipe, not cigarettes

The secret of course is all in the personality of Boyd Neel himself. But it's no use asking him how he does it. I myself think some of his remarks about music and musicians are misleading. He insists, for instance, that musicians are ordinary people. You never saw a less ordinary group of people than his own remarkable selection. How they can dash round the world as they do and tense themselves up to the pitch of vitality that Auckland saw and heard the other night, I just don't know.

Boyd Neel is not a string player himself. That makes nonsense of all the trite sayings about conductors who are string players, "bringing to their task that understanding which only . . ." etc., etc. In one full rehearsal I didn't once hear him refer to bowing or even talk as if the players used instruments to make their sounds. And there's very little talk of "those semi-quavers" or "that pair of triplets." There's plenty of "pa-yum-pum-pum" and "tiddle-iddle-iddle," etc. (Boyd Neel has a very good conductor's voice, all ranges stocked). The section leaders do it too, freely.

I even heard this happen at one point: Neel tiddled a piece of Mozart, which he wanted to go over; Grinke played it, and Neel said, with all the "amateurishness" you can imagine, "Yes, that part." Sometimes he is unable to express

precisely what he wants from them. Then, they have to come forward and help him find it. And that is just one part of the secret.

Fun and Grins

Neel's memory is prodigious. He conducts without score, and with only a space of air in front of him, which he sometimes seems to be cutting or shaping, as if the music itself were a mass, having dimensions. At rehearsal, he will say (without reference to the score) "The last five bars again, please," knowing exactly where that will make them begin. At performance, his movements have a beauty that I wouldn't attempt to describe. But you see hardly anything from behind. It is all devoted to the players—including the grins, at places like the fruity waltz-tune in Tchaikovsky's *Serenade*. And there is no monkey-business with the fingers. Often the left hand hangs quite limp, because there is nothing for it to do.

Sometimes his baton flies out of his hand. If it does, there will be another one in it before you realise what has happened. And where does he keep it, if he has no music stand? Well, there's a nice little game to play when you go to see the orchestra. Hint: batons have a cork knob for a handle. Forfeit two points if you have to use opera glasses to find that spare one.

—Nemo.



Sparrow Industrial photograph
The conductor discusses a point of rhythm with some of the players while the leader (Frederick Grinke) reads a letter



MURAL COMPETITION: This is the design (by Rona Dyer, of Dunedin), which gained first place in the open class of the recent mural art competition. Intended for the waiting-room of a new St. Helen's hospital, the three panels represent (from left) Healthy Living, Research, and Knowledge of Health. Results of the competition were announced in "The Listener" of June 13.