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IS THE CONDUCTOR REALLY NECESSARY?

THE report that Boyd Neel occasionally leaves the conductor's desk during rehearsals while the orchestra is still playing, and listens from the back of the hall may have reminded some of our readers of an article on conducting published a year or so ago and called, "You Can't Fool the Orchestra All the Time." It was from the *Saturday Review of Literature* and its author, was Paul Henry Lang, editor of the *American Musical Quarterly* and professor of musicology at Columbia University. Lang attacked the "showmanship" with which, he said, the performances of so many conductors was overlaid: he deplored their resorting to such tricks as conducting without score or baton—purely because it had become fashionable to do so—and using exag-



Spencer Digby photograph
ANDERSEN TYRER
"The conductor is still the keystone"

gerated gestures which meant (he asserted) nothing to the orchestra, and were employed simply to impress the public.

The other day, Boyd Neel himself was in Wellington, at the same time as Warwick Braithwaite, who is here as guest conductor of the National Orchestra, and Andersen Tyrer. So, equipped with a copy of Lang's article, *The Listener* sought each of them out and obtained their opinions on what a conductor really means to the orchestra during the actual public performance (his function at rehearsals goes without doubting), and to what extent he should take his audience into consideration as he conducts.

An experienced orchestral player (Lang said) can tell after a few measures whether the conductor is attending to his business or is indulging in hocus-pocus for effect and will govern his playing accordingly. Because—and this is not sufficiently appreciated by the public—he can play without paying much attention to the conductor.

"It has often been suggested," said Warwick Braithwaite, "that a good orchestra can play without a conductor. This has been tried several times, but after a short while either the orchestra has gone out of business or it has found a conductor who has rescued it from oblivion. There's a wide difference between an orchestra playing quite well without a conductor and a finished and artistic performance."

When we put this point to Boyd Neel, he admitted that although his orchestra can play by itself this would not be possible in the case of works of a complex nature.

"But," he was asked, "few of the players in most orchestra ever seem to look at the conductor at all—how do you account for that?"

"Believe me, they do," he replied. He turned aside in his seat and held up his hand a foot or so in front of his eyes and fixed his gaze upon it.

"I'm looking at my hand," he said, "but I can still see you. If you wave your arm I shall see you do it, even though I am not looking directly at you. That is the way in which a musician watches the conductor. He can be intent upon his music but he does not miss one move the conductor makes."

Andersen Tyrer, who was approached next, was in agreement with Boyd Neel on this point. He commented:

"Those who have studied music realise that every movement of a conductor who knows his job is full of purpose and significance. The orchestra instinctively reacts to a conductor's gestures as he draws individual players into the conception of the work which is being performed. The players may be brilliant and experienced, yet the conductor is still the keystone and the one to whom everyone else must look for inspiration and guidance."

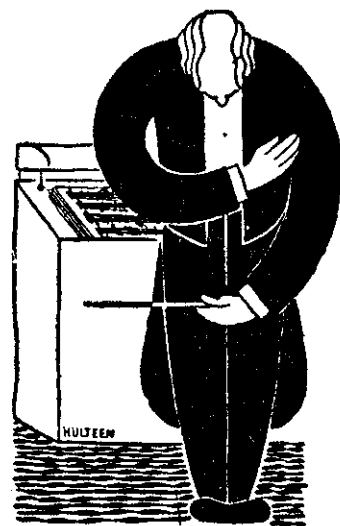
If the players saw a conductor gesticulating wildly throughout a work they would be unable to discriminate between the important and unimportant gestures and would soon be impervious to any subtleties of direction.

ANOTHER aspect of the same subject on which opinions were sought was whether a conductor pays any regard to his audience while he is actually conducting. The history of conducting records instances of conductors who have faced their audience while they conducted, or have stood sideways between audience and orchestra, and have resorted to many other devices calculated to draw attention to themselves.

We asked Boyd Neel what he thought about it.

"I don't think I really remember that there's an audience there," he said. "If a conductor is concentrating properly upon his work he will soon forget about the audience."

The other two conductors gave us the same answer and in doing so bore out Sir Adrian Boult's shrewd words: "His (the conductor's) work must be directed



towards the eyes of his orchestra, but only towards the ears of his audience," and the late Sir Henry J. Wood's suggestion to aspiring conductors—that by all means they should keep their batons freshly painted with white paint so that those members of the audience who chose to do so could watch and learn, but that the actual movements of the baton should be made for the benefit of the orchestra, never for the audience.

IN his article, Lang stated that conducting without a score was purely a convention which started when Toscanini found his eyesight becoming too weak to permit him to distinguish the markings without very close scrutiny of the pages. Conductors seized upon this, he asserted, as a means of impressing the public with their own virtuosity and prodigious powers of memory and nowadays "consider it their duty to avoid being seen in public with a score."

"Those conductors who find it easy to conduct without a score," commented Braithwaite, "still have to think in terms of artistic performance, and using a score or not has nothing to do with artistry. It is recorded by Wagner, that great admirer of Beethoven's works, that the only good performance he heard of the latter's *Choral* symphony was when he went to Paris and heard

(continued on next page)



Sparrow photograph
BOYD NEEL
No move is missed