

NO EARLY MORNING TEA PLEASE!

A Talk With Simon Barere

THE famous pianist Simon Barere, who is now touring New Zealand, does not grant Press interviews. Instead he meets a reporter, and in a matter of minutes, without use of any of the artifices of geniality often employed in first contacts between strangers, but rather by sheer force of personality, makes him feel a life-long friend, and sits down with him for a lengthy discussion on many subjects—all interesting.

At least this is what a representative of *The Listener* found when he called upon Mr. Barere at his hotel during his first morning in Auckland to spend more than an hour with him.

The pianist called for tea, at the same time expressing amazement that a cup of tea should be brought to guests' bedrooms at seven o'clock in the morning. "They should not give them tea so early," he said sadly, "It makes them whistle and sing and make a noise." Barere explained that no matter what time he went to bed he liked to sleep late. His best sleep he got between 7.30 and 9 o'clock in the morning, and the two previous mornings he had had to rise at 3 o'clock, first to catch a plane which was turned back, and then to board the aircraft which actually brought him here from Australia.

Talk of tea led to talk of food, and Barere said that while most artists disliked eating anything for some hours before a concert, he felt the need of a heavy meal just an hour or so prior to playing—"My nervousness before the concert is a healthy nervousness." On the other hand, while relaxation with most came after their concert and they would then eat lustily, he did not want to eat. "I am so happy after a concert—either because it's over, or because I

feel pleased with it—I am so full of spiritual nourishment that I do not want to eat."

Really, he felt that food should not be talked of—and he felt the same way about money and clothes—but unfortunately they were necessary. He had tried to overcome the need for food but without success. He had found he could not do without sugar or meat, which were needed to supply the tremendous energy required by piano playing. "I tried to do without sugar, but I found I was forgetting my pieces."

He considered—it was not an original idea, but one expressed by a scientist many years ago—that piano playing was second only to boxing in the energy expended. "A pianist must be husky, with broad shoulders and strong arms, to be able to produce the right sound of the piano. There are exceptions, but usually the playing of the thin ones is not rich enough. You have to have power for the most delicate piece. . . . Tone production and control are so important. You can let yourself go emotionally only if you have control, otherwise it becomes merely an exaggeration. So many artists play with emotion, but it is overdone, and then it can be no good. . . . There are many mediocre players who hurry instead of playing fast. . . . It is a question of evenness. . . . Fast playing must be the result of slow practice. As soon as it is forced, then they hurry. . . ."

The pianist compared playing the piano fast, with running. The good athlete achieved speed, but without hurrying to do it. There was evenness of movement.

Barere has caused amazement in musical circles by his playing of Balakireff's Oriental fantasy *Islamey*, which is regarded among pianists as the most difficult piece ever written for the instrument.

There were two interesting things about the piece, the pianist told *The*



Sparrow photograph

Listener. Firstly, though it was written about 80 years ago and was played by Liszt himself, musically it was modern. Secondly, it involved a difficult technique. It almost created its own style of technique. There were other difficult compositions, but they were "comfortable" to play; *Islamey* was "terribly uncomfortable." But while it was difficult to play, audiences, unless they were prepared for it, seldom appreciated it. "You have to work so hard and you are not appreciated, so pianists do not often

play it." However, Barere partly blamed the performers for its not being appreciated. "They make too much noise of the piece," he said.

Barere's name is also closely associated with Schumann's toccata, the pianist performing the astounding feat of compressing this piece, considered the next most difficult, into the playing time of four minutes 45 seconds so that it could be recorded on one side of a disc. Schumann had deliberately set out to compose a difficult piece, Barere said, and he succeeded, but he never played it himself as he hurt the fourth finger of his right hand as a result of overworking.

Barere told two anecdotes of his playing the left hand study composed by Felix Blumenfeld, who was the visiting pianist's teacher. One was of the blind pianist Alec Templeton wanting to hold his right hand while he played it. "But I could not play it with two hands," Barere chuckled, "I would spoil the piece if I did."

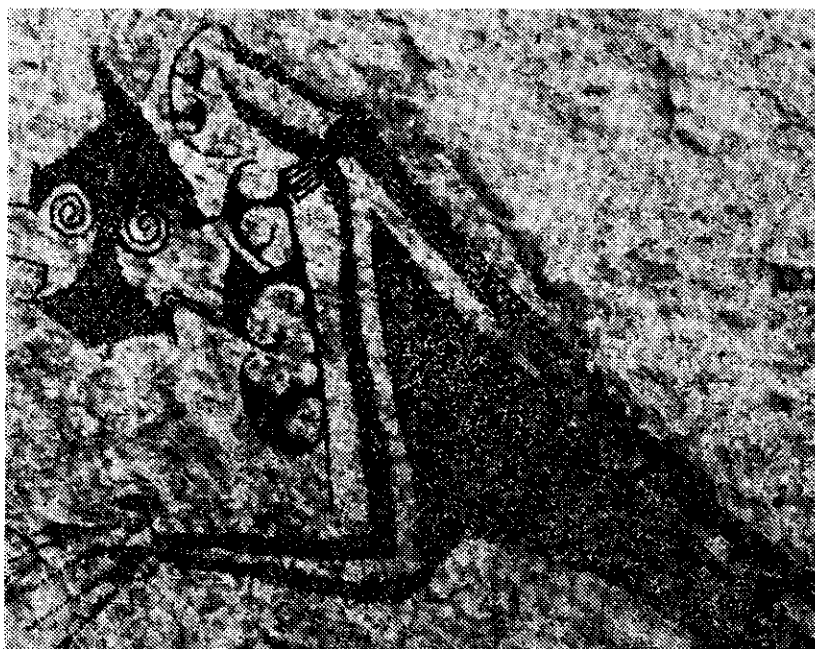
The conversation was interrupted by the arrival of a photographer—an event which caused the pianist considerable and genuine concern. He liked neither photographers nor the result of their work, and the whole business of having his photograph taken was an obvious ordeal. He could scarcely be blamed for disliking photographs. The best photographer could not capture that natural, charming personality, which is Barere.

Simon Barere's itinerary includes concerts at Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, portions of three of them (Auckland, September 4; Christchurch, September 24; and Wellington, September 27) being broadcast. For his tour he is using Rachmaninoff's CD-15 piano. Owing to shipping delays, however, this did not arrive in time for his first Auckland concert.

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Would it be in any way surprising, therefore, if the artist-priest had a positive function in these labyrinths of limestone valleys? Like the priest, the artist was in such communities a link between man and the supernatural world. Modern research among those neolithic people in the world who still practise this form of art has found that it was invariably done for magic-ceremonial purposes. I find no difficulty in believing that this was true of New Zealand as well.

Besides, there is ample evidence in the work itself. No other cause could have been responsible for such a distinct set of generally obeyed conventions in the use of ingredients of design, and with it we encounter that strange parallel in other primitive religious art, where the artist has drawn his very strength from such limitations as to us would spell the death of art. Again and again I have found the most surprising and original creations—major artistic feats—which border on the uncanny: frozen music in which the very soul of the mythopoetic Polynesian has been crystallised.



A LARGE mythic monster (taniwha), a human figure, and some typical Maori designs