

MUSIC IN NEW ZEALAND - 1947

Random Recollections of an Exciting Year

Written for "The Listener"
by DOROTHEA TURNER

THERE were wild times in the past. One year Kreisler gave concerts one week and Galli-Curci the next. Later, in the depression, Szigeti coincided with a season of Italian opera. Those who had jobs rushed from the lovely tunes of Verdi to the austerity of unaccompanied Bach, and back again to the lovely tunes of Puccini. Such little skirmishes were poor training for the season of 1947, as we now know. Radio had not come to widen our experience or complicate our choice. We went to concerts or we missed them. When Kreisler moved to another centre he was gone. Next week's decision was simple and local: "Shall we now hear Galli-Curci?"

After the Centennial music there were five years when few came from overseas. Local professionals and amateurs worked hard. Some fine chamber music was played by the NZBS String Quartet and by other groups. Music seemed very much needed, but as things were it flourished best among small numbers. Many turned to recorded music and worked hard there in their quiet way. Broadcast programmes improved, and when overseas artists began to come again they didn't all understand how audiences had changed.

In 1945 we began to have new pianists from abroad and we enjoyed these concerts wholeheartedly. The Town Halls were full again to the rafters and the piano was well under control. We were in no mood to be critical of the first few. The NZBS seemed to think we should be taken a stage further. In 1946 it became a major entrepreneur, and arranged that two pianists well known through their recordings should visit New Zealand within a few weeks of each other—Lili Kraus and Solomon. Here we had two artists of comparable age and status, playing some of the same major works, using the same instruments, and showing an unusual regard for the written intentions of the composers. In spite of this they didn't sound a bit alike. The discussions that followed had to leave the ground and concern themselves in the stratosphere with a search for the composers' unwritten intentions. The heat and vigour of this search amazed those who were still only too thankful to sit back and hear the right notes delivered in pleasing fashion; for the more adventurous it was a fine affair. People did not always think very

clearly before they spoke, and often less clearly while they were speaking, but some of them found in the end that they knew what they thought when they heard what they said. As an exercise in criticism it was good preparation for 1947. And the concerts themselves were excellent, of course, though some of the pianos were not.

In March, 1947, the National Orchestra of the NZBS gave its first concerts in Wellington and then went on tour. Crowds were great and so was the excitement. Comment poured in from all quarters, and from all points of view. Critics have had to find their feet too, not knowing what is a fair standard to expect of our new orchestra. In the long run it must be nothing short of the best, and as long as it travels steadily in that direction all is well. I think it is more complimentary to such a good team not to make too many allowances. Once you begin making allowances in music you may end up in the admirably humane position of Lady Catharine de Bourgh, who was convinced that her daughter "would have been a delightful performer had her health allowed her to learn."

Pressure Dangers

As the national possession of a small country the orchestra may be exposed to many kinds of pressure. New Zealand has never been very good at choosing experts and leaving them to go about things in their own way. This may be a healthy democratic sign, but I doubt whether music responds to such treatment. I was disturbed when so many people openly suggested that a national orchestra should play the kind of music that everybody understood. Argued from expediency alone the matter surely stands the other way—there will be a national orchestra only as long as enough people try to understand the kind of music it enjoys playing. We allow soloists to play what they like because we know they are not worth listening to otherwise, and the same holds for an orchestra, though it's a more complicated affair. An amateur violinist once told me that he always judged the composers by the amount of fun they gave the second fiddles, and by this rule of thumb he had them in the same order of merit as the most learned critic. If the truth is not so simple, it lies somewhere in that direction. People who work at music all the time are kept alive by what is difficult and adventurous. If our best players cannot find it here they will look

for it elsewhere. The orchestra must be protected from boredom and from the staleness of too much routine playing, because if it begins to lose interest in itself nobody will find it worth listening to. But of 1947—so far so good.

About the time the orchestral tour was beginning, Robert Pikler, the Hungarian violinist, arrived to give broadcasts with Lili Kraus. This was chamber music in the true spirit; and if violinists who had become openly restive during the piano solo talk that had held the floor for the past 18 months, now found that there was more in the piano parts of the Mozart and Beethoven "violin" sonatas than any of their own "accompanists" had brought to their notice, they bore it pretty well. Later Robert Pikler gave a fine performance of the Mendelssohn Concerto in Christchurch with the National Symphony Orchestra, and was the first solo violinist to play with them.

Christchurch Crisis

About the middle of June I quite lost any grip I might have had on the general trends of music in New Zealand. I imagine that each of the centres had a period similar to the one Auckland had then. Christchurch seems to have had a crisis in July when its own week-long festival fell in a month of concerts by visitors. In the third week of June the National Symphony Orchestra opened its Auckland season, the Kraus-Pikler duo began the Beethoven cycle, and the Polish pianist Mierowski played in the Town Hall. The next week Colin Horsley played with the orchestra, Ninon Vallin sang in the Town Hall, and Eugene Goossens arrived at short notice to conduct the orchestra. He conducted again the next week, by which time the Boyd Neel Orchestra had arrived and attended this concert in a body. They gave their own opening concert the next night, and whether or not it was the healthy competition I don't know, but this first concert was the best of the six they gave in Auckland. Warwick Braithwaite had come in the meantime and was listening to the National Symphony Orchestra while he waited to take over the baton for their final concert. Four conductors were present at one rehearsal that week: Andersen Tyrer, Eugene Goossens, Warwick Braithwaite and Boyd Neel. And a member of the Boyd Neel Orchestra was noticed wringing her hands and moaning as she watched the big four in conference. She

had left her camera at the hotel and missed a photo she might have sold for £50 in London.

The hall was not so full for the first Boyd Neel concert as for later ones. The orchestra captured the town by its playing rather than by its reputation. And it was a very diverse audience that capitulated. At the first concert I heard one of our best woodwind players announce that he was taking up the 'cello to-morrow, and various competent pianists stated that they had Wasted their Lives. A number of people who said they didn't "know anything about music" went several times. And many gramophiles became finally established as concertgoers. They had begun to creep out warily when Lili Kraus and Solomon came, and again for the National Symphony Orchestra. One saw them bewildered and irritated by the crowds around them, adjusting themselves to the acoustical differences of live performance, and training eye to work with ear. It needed such concerts as we have had in the past 12 months to bring them back to the halls. I hope they will stay there—without throwing any records in the fire—because the double life can be richer than either of the single ones, and because every concert audience needs more of these knowledgeable enthusiasts.

Centrifugal Forces

This is one of many good things that have happened for the first time in 1947. Some powerful force seems to have been working to break down the watertight compartments of musical life. Children who have worked with their teachers to form school orchestras have been shown what a symphony orchestra is like, and know that the day they leave school is not necessarily the end of it all. Groups have hived off at times from the National Symphony Orchestra, as they did from the Boyd Neel, to play chamber music in which unusual combinations of instruments are needed. The loss to the chamber music world from the concentration of players in our orchestra may not be so grave as we feared, and the players themselves say that it does them good to work in these smaller groups sometimes where they can hear all that is going on. Musicians who have been brought on contract to New Zealand have been able to stay longer to teach, talk or play with local musicians. And apart from the lively way the NZBS has made use of new opportunities, even when they came at short notice, music has suddenly become more accessible in other ways to country districts. The Boyd Neel Orchestra went off the beaten track, as did Clement Q. Williams and others concerned with serious music. Warwick Braithwaite conducted the Hamilton Civic Orchestra. And in a village hall you might or might not notice halfway on the journey between Hamilton and Rotorua, the Kraus-Pikler duo played the 10 sonatas of Beethoven to packed houses on three consecutive nights under very much better acoustical conditions than Auckland could provide

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Spencer Digby photograph
TYRER

BRAITHWAITE
For want of a camera a £50 news-photograph was lost

GOOSSENS

Sparrow Pictures
NEEL