

SONG OF THE EARTH

TO-DAY in far-off Kansu Province in China boys from Rewi Alley's Bailie Training School are busy on a rug which incorporates in its design a poem by Li Po; in Auckland this same poet provides the basic inspiration for an hour-long radio programme.

During Li Po's lifetime the T'ang capital of Ch'ang An (now Sian in Shensi Province) was the capital of the world, as Rome had been at an earlier period. Turk, Arab, Persian, Jew and Indian mingled in the streets, bringing their culture and their religions. Great achievements were realised in painting and sculpture; but it is for its poetry rather than any other of the arts that the T'ang culture is most celebrated.

But while Li Po saw T'ang culture in full flower, he also saw the beginnings of its disintegration. In 755 the Emperor's Turkic favourite revolted against his master and a civil war followed in which China lost 30 million men.

Poetry Akin to Music

Naturally the tremendous events of the time had their influence on the poetry of Li Po and his contemporaries, and it is not surprising that, centuries later, Gustav Mahler, in putting into music his own suffering and overwhelming frustration, should have found in the poetry of Li Po, translated into German by Hans Bethge, his inspiration for *The Song of the Earth*. Li Po provides four of the seven poems used in this song cycle, while another is from the pen of his great contemporary, Wang Wei, and it is interesting to recall that both poets not infrequently wrote for music. Arthur Waley, foremost translator of Chinese verse into English, says of Li Po's poem *Szech'uan Road* that "with its wild profusion of long and short lines, its cataract of exotic verbiage, he aimed at something nearer akin to music than to poetry."

Mahler's song cycle, which will be heard from 1YX at 9.0 p.m. on Saturday, April 10, consists of six parts, each of one poem except the last which comprises two poems united. The songs are for tenor and contralto (or baritone) alternately. The first poem is a drinking song—the world is full of woe, the skies are eternal, earth will long endure, but man's life is but a span. The second poem describes nature in the pall of autumnal mists, when the poet's heart is filled with gloom. The third and fourth poems provide a contrast to the preceding two—one is a song of youth and the other describes lovers wandering through an enchanted landscape. But in the fifth poem pessimism returns. The poet compares life to a woeful dream and urges a return to wine so that we shall sleep the sleep of drunkenness. In the two poems which form the final section of the work the poet sees the world in a drunken sleep, longs for his friend that he may say farewell, resolves no more to seek happiness away from home and awaits the end while spring awakens the world anew.

In the recording to be heard from 1YX Charles Kullman sings the tenor solo and Kirstin Thorburg the contralto. The orchestra is the Vienna Philharmonic and is under the baton of Bruno Walter.

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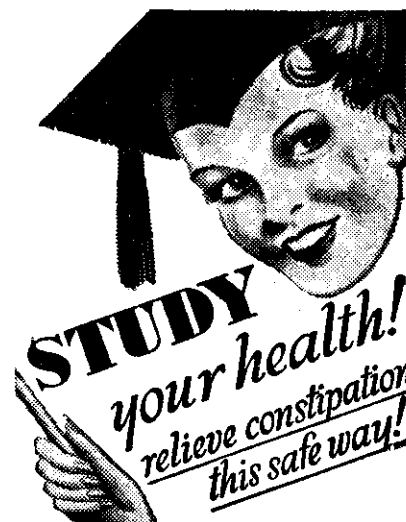
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