

PROGRAMMES FROM THE BBC

Behind the Scenes in the Transcription Service

IN what was once a Roman Catholic orphanage in Maida Vale, a north-west suburb of London, along tiled corridors and among 19th Century imitation Gothic motifs, lives the BBC Transcription Service, where all the records are made that go on the air in New Zealand as "A BBC Programme."

The Transcription Service has been a very virile limb of the BBC and no one can say that it has stopped growing even yet. The more it does the more there seems to be done. It puts out about 40 hours a month of English language programmes (including programmes for British forces), and another 20 or 30 hours in other languages (including a great deal in Spanish and Portuguese for Latin America). Of the English language output, New Zealand

Special to "The Listener" from London.

Some stations there are operated by Universities, and these have been making special requests for transcriptions, in some cases for Third Programme features.

THE Transcription Service can even claim to have brought about changes in broadcasting in certain countries by introducing listeners there to things which have not been done for them before. In certain parts of Latin America, for instance, school broadcasting as such did not exist until the BBC started supplying recorded programmes that could be played at times to fit in with the local curricula. And Palestine, Southern Rhodesia, and Jamaica have all started extra broadcasting periods to correspond in some measure with the Third Programme — taking BBC transcriptions for it.

The cost of all this comes out of the BBC's grant-in-aid. The despatch of recorded programmes is regarded as part of the overseas broadcasting work of the BBC, with the difference that it provides better listening results, and enables programmes that lose nothing by being held up to be broadcast

under local conditions at the times that are best. About 80 per cent. of the output is taken from transmission—that is to say, it is recorded at the moment it is heard by British listeners. But most musical programmes are specially recorded under "closed circuit conditions" for a better technical result. And a few experiments have been made latterly with advance recordings—for instance, the *Battle of Britain* documentary was done ahead of time so that the five Dominions had the opportunity (if they wished) to broadcast it on the same day as it was heard in England.

SOME talks are edited to fit them into a 14-minute maximum, which has been adopted (together with a 28½-minute and 58-minute pattern) as the standard most likely to suit all the different users of BBC discs. But in general the programmes go out just as they were heard here—and of course the rigid limits are waived over musical recordings such as John Antill's *Corroboree* ballet music.

As for policy, a question about that leads nowhere in the BBC. As Tommy Handley said not long ago when "the insurance man" was walking into Broadcasting House during *ITMA*, "He'll never sell them a policy."

EXAMINING a new disc which has just been taken from the recording machine

Gale told me that the BBC Transcription Service is not aiming at anything consciously "British," but only at turning out the very best of what is good broadcasting. It's just incidental that that happens to be British," he added. "We might have a Dutch quartet in a programme of British chamber music—that's no matter. The only yardstick is 'good broadcasting.'"

Leaving the Director's room I saw how things are done among those once-chilly halls. For instance, there's the small studio in the former chapel. The control-room men look through glassed-in Gothic windows, with their grey panels and black knobs and white dials around them. There is room there for a smallish orchestra to record, or for singers.

There is the remarkable switchboard, where an operator, after first "booking a channel" can plug into any programme being broadcast from anywhere in Britain and take a recording of it as it goes.

There is also the system of wall-charts, at first glance very similar to the chart in the head office of the NZBS in Wellington, which shows by means of coloured drawing-pins exactly how church broadcasts are distributed throughout the year. Only these charts represent countries vertically, and programmes horizontally, and a complete set of them shows the Transcription Service's plans for six months at a time. And between the list of programmes at the left and the numerical indicators under the names of countries (showing, for instance, that three sets go to New Zealand, seven to Australia) are sets of "traffic lights," which have to be removed before a programme has the All Clear. These show in a graphic way how complicated the work of the Service is. Starting from the left, one reads (e.g.) *ITMA*, *Men of God*, or *Corroboree*, and then a figure indicating how many programmes (if it is a series) and the time taken. Then come little

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THROUGH this control panel the Transcription Service can link up with programmes in any part of Britain

gets between 5 and 10 per cent.—three sets (of each programme) from a total of around 40. The Service uses one ton of packing material a week to send these programmes out all over the world in a form intended to be foolproof in any hands.

Thomas Gale, Director of the Service, told me something about its workings before I was shown over the place. He said that its latest achievement had been to create a stir in the United States with the *World Theatre* series (which are being heard also in the Dominion)*. The plays were given from New York's municipal station WNYC, and listeners and the Press were lavish with praise of what some of them regarded as the very ideal of broadcasting. Since then there has been a steady flow of BBC recordings to the U.S.

*WORLD THEATRE will be heard from 2YH and 3ZR, beginning on April 18, and from 4YZ, beginning on May 30.



A PRODUCER (foreground) follows a programme from the script while music and sound effects are "mixed in" from the records on the turntables

BBC photographs