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THE ANGRY LISTENER

STATION 3YA recently broadcast two talks by **NGAIO MARSH**, the first entitled "Defending the Hackneyed Classic," and the second on "The Angry Listener." Both were good, but the second touched so effectively on one of our own problems that we could not resist reprinting it. We commend it particularly to our far-flung correspondents

IN my last broadcast I talked about the value of hackneyed masterpieces and, chewing over in my mind that particular subject, I found myself thinking of one that is kindred to it. I found myself thinking about intolerance in art—in our views about books and music and plays. Do you read the letters in *The Listener*? I do, quite often. Does it strike you how positive many of the writers are in their criticisms of the programmes? Don't you think it remarkable that so many of us should be so certain of the importance of our personal taste that we can, with such an air of authority demand the elimination of this, the increase of that, in our listening? "I don't like it," we say, "so let's have no more of it." We loudly denounce this sort of attitude in the persons whose taste differs from our own but often, in the same breath, we imitate their tactics.

On the whole, you may argue, this is a good thing. It keeps the programme selectors on their toes, it shows that listeners are keen. Criticism is always salutary. This is a democratic country. People, you may say, are and should be argumentative, dogmatic and insistent about things that are important to them. They fight, you may point out, for religion, for political ideologies, for certain ways of life and if they raise a hullabaloo about music and plays and talks this is a healthy sign that they are alive to the importance of these things.

Right! I agree. But let's look a bit closer at ourselves. Would you say, for

instance, that the people, with a real, an expert, a wide knowledge and understanding of music or drama incline to be more or less dogmatic and intolerant than the people who use that well-worn hardy perennial, that familiar defence: "I don't know anything about it, but I do know what I like."

This particular remark has been laughed at and derided by the intelligentsia but it survives and it persists. Let me repeat it: "I don't know anything about it but I do know what I like." Now what do we mean by that phrase? If we mean anything at all it is, surely, this. "I am completely ignorant about music or literature or whatever it may be, but my taste is nevertheless of the greatest importance." It is not a phrase



"Crooning is so very like the kind of noises we make in our baths"

we use when we talk to experts in other fields. We don't say, for instance: "I don't know anything about stomach ulcers but I do know the sort of operation I would like." But in the realm of music, books and plays, we feel apparently that however little we may know about the immense complexities of these arts, we are the important ones—the music and books and plays are there, not for the people who happen to know something about the business, but for us.

It is of no matter to us that Bach and Mozart performed miracles to which the people who understand their art listen in amazement and delight; we are bored by these noises and therefore there must be something wrong with them. Now, I will protest with my dying breath that if a great work bores you, you are a dishonest creature if you don't confess as much. But I will also protest that while you are prepared to say (so blithely) that you don't know anything about it you must also admit that from the musical point of view your opinion is utterly without importance. If you really don't know anything about it, whether you like or dislike it is a circumstance that may be of the greatest interest to you but it really couldn't matter less as far



as knowledgeable people are concerned. After all, you'd be a very rum sort of human being if you didn't know what you liked. Why make such a song about it?

Subconscious Grudge

Do you agree that we can be lazy and obstinate where our taste is concerned? Do we, perhaps, resent a sneaking feeling that we are just not quite up to understanding something that other people seem to understand and enjoy? And do we subconsciously grudge them the pleasure we cannot share? I have often wondered whether the immense popularity of crooning is not partly due to the fact that it's so very like the kind of noises we make ourselves in our baths. We can't hit a note fair in the middle but why worry? The crooner slides up and down too. He or she does it more juicily than we do with a louder and more luscious moo, but it's only a difference of degree. Whereas we haven't a hope of singing one single note like Ninon Vallin or Alexander Kipnis.

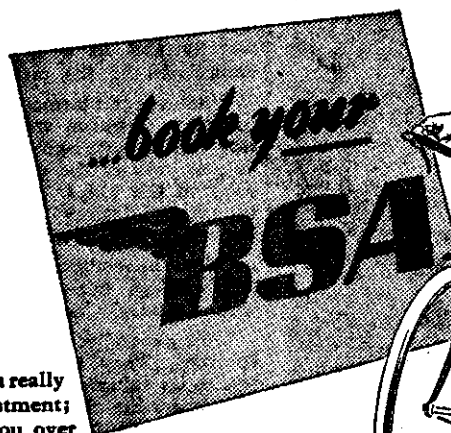
One could, I think, go further and say that a great many people are rum and don't really know what they like. This has been proved over and over again on the stage. The popularity of a play is completely unpredictable. The business gentlemen who buy up theatres and look for box-office successes have been had for mugs as often as they have been rewarded with long runs. In hiring playwrights to turn out imitations of past successes they meet repeatedly with bewildering failures. And yet a playwright like George Bernard Shaw who has never hauled down his flag one inch to pander to box-office is one of the most successful dramatists of the last 50 years. We may imagine and we may protest that we don't want to be asked to think, to use our wits, to exercise our grey-matter, to be made uncomfortable when we go to a show, but the fact remains that the greatest tragedies and the best of the so-called problem plays, have actually drawn and held audiences while expensive box-office concoctions have folded up after 10 disastrous performances.

Keep an Open Mind

So it may be, after all, not conceit but modesty that makes us think we don't want to be given thoughtful plays and music in our theatres, and on the air. We may be under-rating ourselves after all. How do you know, that you wouldn't like plays that asked you to exercise your imagination and your wits? You don't know. Wouldn't you get a kick out of hearing your own ill-expressed, unformed ideas about important matters, made articulate, clear and exciting in a play? Have you never felt

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