

A MAN LIKE THE SUN

I RANG the hotel at which Signor Ghione was staying, and he wasn't in. So I went down to His Majesty's Theatre, having been told that the Maestro might perhaps be there. He certainly was.

The first thing I saw, after slipping through the swing doors like an eel and sliding into a seat in the stalls, was a man in a football jersey leaning over a music stand, his hands moving like cloud-shadows over water. Apart from the striped football jersey and the baton, his three-quarter back view made me think vaguely of Dr. G. M. Smith of Hokianga. Around him, packed into the pit were about 40 members of the National Orchestra of the NZBS. They were playing pianissimo. The pit gave the impression of a crowded tram-car. Even the lower box on the opposite side was occupied, as by overflow passengers standing on the platform. They were all completely absorbed. The footballer seemed to be weaving a spell over them.

There were only about half-a-dozen non-combatants in the theatre besides myself. I had been told outside that the Maestro likes strangers at rehearsals about as well as kerosene in his risotto. Hence the cautious style of my entry. I thought the Maestro might be fierce. He might turn suddenly and curse me in Italian, denouncing me as an interloper. But the rehearsal went on, intensely. Signor Ghione sang, or intoned, the vocal themes, keeping the continuity. He inveigled the music from the air, he coaxed it into being, speaking softly and quickly to the players from time to time, fumbling a little for the English words, but making himself perfectly, and subtly, understood. His rig looked quite unoperatic: one thinks of diamond tiaras and starched fronts, not striped football jerseys. But it somehow suggested a serious intent, and complete single-mindedness.

The rehearsal ended quite suddenly. A friend in the orchestra spoke to me as he went out. His eyes shone. "What a conductor! He knows it all, he's got it all in his head and his hands. And the response he gets from them!"

Five minutes later I was introduced to the Maestro and Signora Ghione in their small dressing-room, and talked to them for half-an-hour. What was said was not particularly important—just the usual substance of an interview. Franco Ghione is in the front rank of European musicians, and his career, for a New Zealand reader, sounds much like that of any other first-class conductor. So I won't bother to give you a detailed recital of the engagements, the triumphs, the stepping-stones-to-success. It is not that they are unimportant. It is just that the whole thing would read rather like a rather elaborate notice in *Who's Who*. Let me try to sort out a few points of particular interest.

It pleased me to learn that the day was the 28th wedding anniversary of the Ghiones. They were married in 1921, soon after Arturo Toscanini had chosen Ghione to conduct at La Scala Opera

House in Milan. That was the first "break" and the story since, musically and otherwise, has been one of devotion and good fortune.

Ghione is a life-long friend of Toscanini, who is now 82, adored by his players and worshipped as devotedly as ever by the public.

When war broke out the Ghiones were in Buenos Aires. For the previous four years Franco Ghione had been principal conductor of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, and now he was enjoying South America. The war put a stop to that.

They went to Rio, and then back to Italy by plane, and spent the war years in retirement at a country house in Piedmont. There was no musical "collaboration." Ghione lived quietly, studying and composing. Just before his engagement for this Australian and New Zealand season he was back in Rome conducting opera.

The Australian season went like a bush-fire. Apart from the opera, Ghione conducted the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in four concerts for the Australian Broadcasting Commission.

I asked him the most invidious question, and he gave me the frankest of answers. When he was told in Australia that the New Zealand orchestra he was to conduct had not been long in existence, and had had no operatic experience apart from the *Carmen* production, he felt very apprehensive. But after arriving in Auckland and working with the National Orchestra his fears quickly fled. He is clearly impressed with the orchestra—and he wasn't just being polite. He said, among other things, that it was a pleasure to work with players from whom he got such a magnificent response.

I asked him about the quality of the company he has brought to New Zealand. It is, he said, "homogeneous." That seemed to explain the thing perfectly.

I found all this, and the rest that Signor Ghione told me, interesting enough. But it was the man himself that really took hold of my mind. It isn't very often that one meets such a person. He isn't flamboyant, as one expects an Italian maestro to be. And he isn't in the least domineering. I should say, almost for certain, that he has never read Dale Carnegie. Trying to find words to describe him, I find myself dropping back on the clichés of the correspondence course in self-development—"radiant personality" and the like. Discarding these, I can only say, in simple language, that the sun seems to shine out of him. And when I say that, I am not for one moment forgetting Signora Ghione.

They are both Piedmontese, from northern Italy. And they seem to make tangible all that warmth and happiness one associates with traditional Italian life. I am not being sentimental. I am certainly not forgetting the Borgias, or Mussolini, or the slums of Naples. But from Italy came that great positive affirmation of life to which we still cling in these dreary days as to a raft. And in a compelling personality such as that of



FRANCO GHIONE
"The footballer weaved a spell"

Franco Ghione this is in some sense incarnate.

Ghione will undoubtedly dominate the opera season. That was obvious to me after the first few minutes of conversation. He will dominate it benevolently and completely. Like a planetary system, the opera company and its audiences will move about this sun. The experience of working with him should have a tremendous effect on the orchestra.

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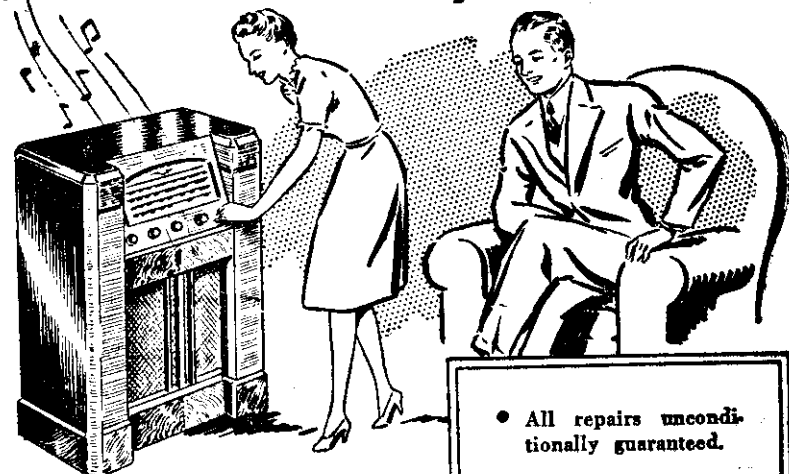
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