

THE MAN BETWEEN

COMPARATIVELY few people in New Zealand have had a chance of seeing even one performance of the Grand Opera Company. That most of us have had the opportunity of hearing the complete repertoire is largely due (if one may narrow it down to an individual) to John Baxendale, officially liaison officer between the Opera Company and the Broadcasting Service, and incidentally between the Broadcasting Service and the listening public. Mr. Baxendale is touring New Zealand with the Company, and it is he who is directly responsible for all the opera relays.

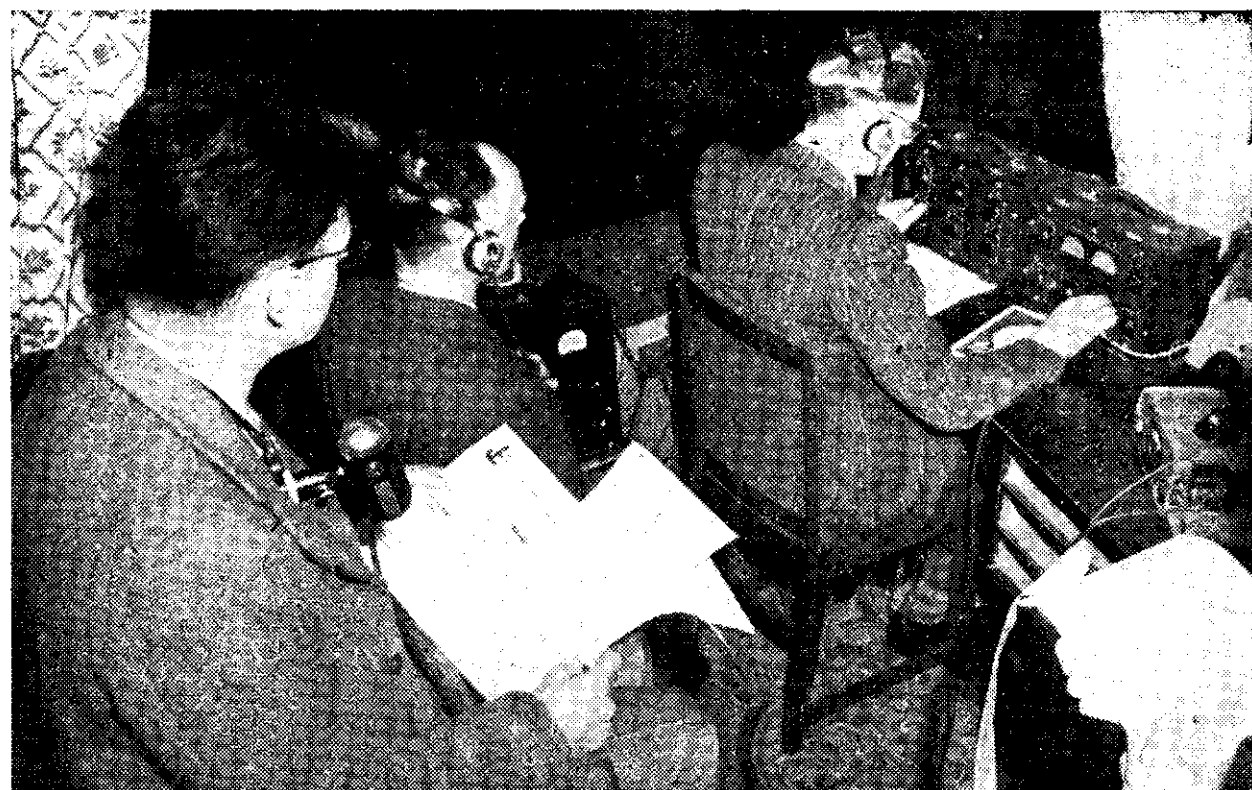
The uninitiated might wonder at the amount of material necessary for the making of a broadcast. An hour before the show starts there is strenuous activity in the box reserved for the NZBS technical unit. If this is not the first relay from this particular theatre most of the equipment will be there already, but there are trunks to be unlocked and batteries, recharged since the last broadcast, to be carried up the stairs and reconnected to the coils of flex that litter the floor. Down below a young man is replacing the microphones, one on each side of the stage and three in the orchestra (the one that hangs just below the gallery is harder to get at, and has been left in position) and is holding a sardonic conversation with his ear-phoned companions in the box above to make sure that each microphone is in working order.

It is now a quarter to two, 15 minutes to curtain-time. The confusion in the box is an ordered confusion. The dials light up. Mr. Baxendale takes his seat at the control panel and adjusts his ear-phones. The announcer clips the straps of the microphone round his neck and clambers on to a chair perched on top of the equipment box, a position from which he can see over the technician's shoulder to the stage. Someone hands him up his script. Watches are synchronised.

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to have introduced beneficial changes in farm practice. Their nature can be judged from one which has received a good deal of publicity—the saving of potato seed by cutting it into small pieces—to New Zealand home gardeners scarcely a novel idea. If given the chance, he promised to effect marvellous improvements within a year or two. The Vavilov school, on the other hand, was criticised as being “theoretical,” engaged in long-range fundamental work without due consideration for the urgent needs of the nation. Russia is in a hurry.

A few months ago, three “Western” geneticists who visited Russia in 1933, 1934 and 1935 respectively, compared notes on the nature of the work of Vavilov's Institute; they were Dr. S. C. Harland, Dr. C. D. Darlington, and myself. We were agreed that in addition to the very distinguished work of a fundamental nature—mainly in connection with the famous plant collections—there



BROADCASTING “*Madame Butterfly*”: From left, P. L. Earnshaw (announcer), J. Baxendale (in charge of the overall balance control unit), and A. Lewis (operating the “stage mixer” control unit)

Five to two, and the announcer begins his brief synopsis of the play that will take him comfortably to the entrance of the conductor. Moving fingers scamper on the dials as the technician, intent as an organist, twists now on this knob, now on that. *Madame Butterfly* is on the air.

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ON Saturday mornings Mr. Baxendale is usually to be found in the local studio, playing over recordings made from the broadcasts, usually with an interested audience of two or three members of the cast or orchestra. All ears are cocked for imperfections—that final fiddle-note half a semitone sharp that positively shrieks at you from the recording, but which almost certainly passed unnoticed by the audience, that

was a great deal of practical plant breeding, indeed on a scale scarcely equalled anywhere in the world. There was no doubt in our minds that this work was sound, and that, if allowed to go ahead, it would have made a great and lasting contribution to the productivity of Russian agriculture.

For the West, however, this is not the major interest in the conflict. Geneticists have watched the suppression of their science, the persecution of their colleagues, the destruction of one of the most fruitful and promising research organisations. Their protests have been joined by those of scientists in other fields. Even those who are supporters of the Soviet system, like J. B. S. Haldane, who defend and deny the indefensible and undeniable, cannot for ever avoid the issue. What arouses widespread public interest, however, is the realisation that events such as these are possible, and that indeed they are a logical outcome of the system.

passage with a suspicion of too much brass, that opening duet when the tenor's final note was just the merest fraction behind the soprano's. The performers are intent only upon their own performance, but Mr. Baxendale feels a responsibility for the whole cumulative effect. It is unlikely that these recordings will be heard outside the privacy of an off-the-air studio, since their purpose is primarily to enable Mr. Baxendale to hear the performance as the listener heard it. Should he perhaps have brought up the soprano a little more? Can you hear enough of the violins in the quartet? Could the thunder in the last act of *Rigoletto* have been a little more restrained? There are plenty more broadcasts to come and still time to achieve better results.

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MR. BAXENDALE feels that his hardest problem as a broadcaster is to get across to the radio audience the drama that is such an integral part of opera. Since there is no opportunity in the middle of the scene for *sotto voce* explanations by the announcer it is important that audiences should tune in in time to hear the synopsis that precedes each broadcast, and to listen for the comments in the interval. Apart from this, the most the technician can do is to ensure that faulty technique does not rob the audience of the drama conveyed by the emotional intensity of the singers. Broadcasting a symphony concert is a comparatively simple matter since the technician is concerned only with voice and music, not with drama or action.

Moreover, in opera the business of placing the microphones is a more complicated one. It would be a crime of the first magnitude to “shadow-cast” a singer, which means that microphones

must be kept low. And since the middle of the stage, obviously the best place for a microphone, is already occupied by the prompter's box the technician has to do the best he can with a microphone on either side of the stage. The overall balance of stage and orchestra is covered by the microphone hung in front of the gallery, but more detailed effects are obtained by the bringing into play, singly or in conjunction, of the microphones nearer the stage. One interesting result is that sometimes listeners at home can hear more than the audience itself. In the last act of *Rigoletto*, for example, the dying sobs of Gilda, inaudible to most of the house, came clearly over the air, and in moments of strong dramatic tension, when the house audience has almost ceased to breathe, the undiluted notes of the singer are picked up clearly by the microphone even though she may by this time be off-stage.

The listener at home, therefore, may sometimes hear more than the theatre audience. But unless he knows what he is hearing the technician's finest effects are likely to be wasted on him. When it comes to opera, mere listening is not enough, unless the listener is content with the aural satisfaction to be derived from melodious successions of well-produced sound. The greater the knowledge of the opera the more possible it is to feel its emotional and dramatic impact, thinks Mr. Baxendale, and listeners who felt a glad sense of relief at reaching the Anvil Chorus of *Il Trovatore* or the march from *Aida* will realise how much more they would have got from the broadcast had the surrounding territory been as familiar to them. Mr. Baxendale recommends a certain amount of self-education as a pre-requisite to the complete enjoyment of broadcast opera.

(For an artist's impressions of “*Madame Butterfly*,” turn to pages 24-25)