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Fifty Years in Music

IF one agrees with the writer who said that the most completely lost of all days is that on which one has not laughed, it must be admitted that a good professional comedian is worth every penny of his salary and an amateur his place in any part of community life. In his 50 years as a professional musician and his long association with vaudeville, Frank Crowther, of Wellington, has seen the fashions in comedy change many times. He has seen the humour that was robust to the point of vulgarity and the type so near to pathos that the dividing line was as unobtrusive as the Forty-Ninth Parallel. In an interview with *The Listener* he recalled the days when stage comedy was more boisterous, more conscious of itself, more enthusiastic than that modern variety in which the artists demand the co-operation of the audience as though insisting that we join in the fun or risk insulting them if we don't.

At the turn of the century, when Mr. Crowther, pianist and violinist, first linked up with vaudeville, the minstrel show was enjoying tremendous popularity. "The first half of a programme was in the hands of the four black-faced corner-men, with an interlocutor in the centre, and ballad singers and a sou-brette or two in support," he said. "The second part was presented by singers and people in individual acts, finishing off with a farce in which the comedians chased each other round the stage with inflated sheep's bladders. The audiences rocked in their seats. They just loved it. A bare-leg show was utterly unknown. The mere suggestion of such a thing would cause a shudder. But I wonder how a minstrel show would go to-day?"

Frank Crowther was born in Dunedin, and as a boy studied the violin and piano with his uncle, Edwin James King, whose shop in Manners Street, Wellington, became a meeting-place for musical people. In 1898, when he was 17 years of age, he played accompaniments for well-known vocalists of the day, including E. J. Hill (tenor), and Jeannie Ramsay (soprano). Often he played in orchestras at the old Opera House (now the Regent Theatre) for touring companies, and eventually secured an engagement for a tour of the South Island with a dramatic company. A member of this orchestra was Fred Fox, whom old soldiers will remember as Sergeant-Major in charge of the Trentham Band in the first World War.

Piano, Viola, or Violin

For two years he was with the Tom Pollard Opera Company, playing the piano, viola and violin as required, and he took part in 38 different productions, including the

first performances in New Zealand of *The Belle of New York* and *The Geisha*. From light opera he went into vaudeville in 1901, joining up with P. R. Dix and his Gaiety Company, which was one of the first of the shows to appear in what theatrical historians call the "Golden Era." While on this circuit he worked with many world-famous variety artists, including the Dartos (dancing duo), Dainty Irene Franklyn, Ferry the Frog, and the Cragg Family of acrobats. He took an engagement with Fullers in 1903 and eventually became their musical director at His Majesty's Theatre (now the St. James) in Courtenay Place, Wellington. Then came the talkies, ending in 1930 his almost unbroken run at this theatre. A feature of this long association was a tour with the Elsie Prince—Jimmy Godden Musical Comedy Company in 1928.

Though his job in the orchestral well meant concentrating on the hit tunes of the day Mr. Crowther always kept himself in practice with serious music. For many years he was a member of the Wellington Professional Orchestra, of which he was elected conductor in 1922. Later he took a long trip abroad.

How Broadcasting Helped

The arrival and almost instantaneous popularity of the talkies made the outlook for professional musicians a gloomy one—"But we saw some hope for the future in the slow but sure development of radio broadcasting," said Mr. Crowther. His first experience on the air was as viola player in the George Ellwood String Quartet with the late Ava Symons as first violin, and he became accompanist at the Sunday concerts held by the Port Nicholson Band under J. J. Drew. Professional artists who appeared at those concerts included Gladys Moncrieff and Marie Burke.

(continued on next page)



FRANK CROWTHER
Tin-whistlers, monologuists and The Erl King

N.Z. LISTENER, JULY 22, 1949.