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Radio Review

The Songs That Singers Sing

I AM very fond of songs with piano accompaniment, lieder in the very widest sense of the word, and I listen whenever I can to the groups broadcast by local singers from our stations. Over a long period of time they have tended to crystallise in my mind some attitudes toward such performances particularly by New Zealand singers. The first is the vexed question of translation of songs originally in a foreign language. I think there are two things involved which are frequently confused: the first, are translations desirable? the second, is the actual translation adequate? No to the second question is held sometimes to involve a No to the first. I do not think this is so. There are some songs, of course, where the melody is of a form and power which renders any understanding of the words unnecessary, songs of which I suppose Schubert's *Ave Maria* is the apotheosis. Most songs, however, are only partly heard if the words and their meaning do not sink into the mind of the listener with the music. If a song is broadcast in French or German this presupposes that the listener, to enjoy the song to the full, must either be able to follow the language easily at first hearing, or to have previously followed the words of the song enough to know it. I think the proportion of listeners capable of doing either of these things is extremely small. For the others the song is frequently translated before it is sung. This is inadequate to say the least. I remember a broadcast of Dorothy Helmrich where this was done for Brahms's "Gipsy Songs." The entire set of songs was first translated, then the songs sung in German, leaving the listener floundering in trying to match the once-heard words against the songs. We will of course expect a Lotte Lehmann to sing in the original language of the songs; and we will, of course, buy our records almost invariably in the original, for we will have the leisure to study them. We should, I think, expect our local singers to sing to us in English, and I suspect even Todd Duncan's broadcasts of Schubert would have been received more rapturously had we all understood them.

Now I must hasten to add that to this opinion I can see a host of exceptions. Some songs, like "The Two Grenadiers" and Wolf's "Ratcatcher," are almost untranslatable because the stresses of the words cannot be matched in English. I suspect that the celebrated difficulty of translating Wolf is more imaginary than real, and that had Steuart Wilson bent his attention to it he might have done for Wolf what he has done for Schubert.

This brings up the second question: the poverty of many of the translations used. I don't refer to the really celebrated bloomers, like the line in *Faust*,

"when to her in the air I bended the knee" or to that song I once saw printed (and translated) in Prague "The Blood-red Rose," the last line of which went "Maiden take this bloody flower." Some translations limp because the original limped too. Schubert was a particularly bad offender in his occasional choice of doggerel. The original poem of Schubert's "Shepherd on the Rock" is not very good, but the translation says "My voice the more it penetrates, the more it does resound to me." What language is this? Excellent translations of songs are so often available that it makes one writhe to hear shocking versions sung on the air because the singer was too lazy to find a good one.

And, ladies and gentlemen, once you have found a good translation please let us hear it. Edythe Roberts's very pleasant singing from 2YA, in a well-chosen series of songs lately, was not improved by the inaudible words. The poem is half the song; if the listeners can't hear it then the song is losing much of its effect. The singer who thinks the audibility of the words doesn't matter frequently extends this to mean that the words don't matter either, and is in the happy position of the tenor I heard who in Quilter's setting of "To Julia" in the lines

So Julia looks when she doth dress
Her either cheek with bashfulness.

caused sensitive listeners to blush by taking a breath after the word "dress."

Those singers on the air who sing audibly in good English songs the words of which they understand must be thanked; their many sins of performance (except that of interrupted rhythm) may be forgiven. When they also go to the trouble of choosing unusual songs by composers old and new they will be assured of at least one appreciative listener.

—D.M.

Not Made in N.Z.

THERE were Shirley and Doug; Shirley singing and Doug playing piano with string bass and drums to back him up. That was from 3YA, but it might have been from KNX California for the first quarter minute's listening, then the small departures from tradition became noticeable. Jazz comes from America. It is made by confident young people who wear startling clothes and from earliest youth call their parents by their Christian names. There is no such thing as New Zealand jazz. So any New Zealander wanting to make good jazz, or, if you don't like the word "good" there, wanting to make what is said in America to be good jazz, must make it as it is made in America, down to the last inflection. That is a pretty tall order, and

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