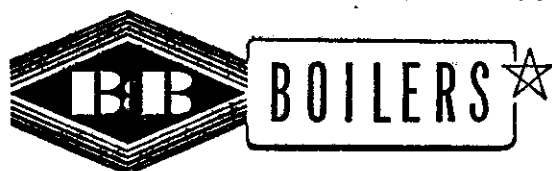




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Radio Review

Opera in Small Doses

I'M afraid my class-conscious hackles rose the other night when I listened to something called *Opera for the People*. Wot people? one asks; and echo answers, the poor illiterates of course, who must have their culture handed out to them in small doses, the prescriptions written in words of one syllable. It seemed all just a bit too condescending.

The series presents an opera in two half-hour broadcasts. A few minutes are taken up with announcements, cast names, etc., so I suppose we are given a whole opera in little over 40 minutes. Quite a feat, you must admit. The method is to dramatise the plot and interrupt the spoken words with music—rather like those party sandwiches which are made up of alternate layers of bread and filling. Quite a good idea for a party, but not entirely satisfactory when it comes to opera. Operatic plots are pretty fearsome things at the best of times, but brought down to the lowest common denominator of banality by trite dialogue, they become plain awful. I heard the last half of *La Traviata*, and my rickety shorthand took down something like this: "I ask

be called inspiration. Plot is negligible, a mere excuse for the presentation. Music is all. So that concentration on plot with a soupçon of music thrown in for luck is surely bringing grand opera down to the level of bouffe or soap.

—Sycorax

Older New Zealand

THE gulf that yawns between the views of different generations was disclosed in a *Let's Talk it Over* discussion on "Has the Pioneer Spirit Disappeared?" The speakers were two men who have published books dealing with the early days in New Zealand, Earle Vaile and W. K. Howitt and Keith Sinclair, a university lecturer in history, who represented the younger generation. As the combined ages of Messrs. Vaile and Howitt exceeded 160 years, and Mr. Sinclair could claim about 1-6th of that, it is not surprising that the session was marked by courteous deference on one side, and on the other by an unyielding emphasis on modern degeneration. The two pioneers exemplified the older view in their distrust of Government assistance and in their cynical references to Social Security. On the other hand, Mr. Sinclair, when permitted to speak, was able to point out that modern conditions had removed the need for certain aptitudes and that robust qualities were exercised by the younger people in different directions. If the session gave somewhat the impression of a youthful hunter sniping gingerly at two proud elephants, the very irrelevancies of the older speakers brought a not unwelcome whiff of old New Zealand on the air.

Favourite's Return

WITH unprecedented lack of fanfare, 12B pulled a surprise out of its sleeve one recent Sunday evening. It was the welcome return after some years' absence of *Lee Fore Brace* (Forbes Eddy), whose earlier stories of sailing ships must have been among the most popular of all radio talks. The interval has not impaired *Lee Fore Brace's* skill, and his neatly balanced sentences delivered in his Scottish accent (an accent I always find irresistible) made *In the Wake of the Convict Ships* an absorbing session. In the *Quest for Corvo* manner, he told, through the following up of clues in the Mitchell Library and elsewhere, the story of Thomas Salisbury Wright, a typical deportee, sent to Australia in 1786, and later moved to Norfolk Island, where he died in 1843 "aged 105 years, a prisoner of the Crown," as *Lee Fore Brace* told us he read on the tombstone in the prison cemetery. Vividly and movingly, the speaker pictured the horrors of transportation; penal settlements, floggings and inhumanity, of "the good old days." This was no rehash of books, but the product of individual research by a connoisseur of the period.

Combined Choirs

ONE of the most interesting features of the Auckland Music Festival was a concert by combined choirs. The programme was a well-chosen one, featuring Vaughan Williams's *Benedicite* and Sir George Dyson's *The Blacksmiths*, but the broadcast could hardly be called a complete success. The *Benedicite* ap-



only one thing, that you tell him the truth." "Very well, I will tell him." "No! No! It is a lie. It is a lie!" "She is holding on to life by the slenderest of threads." "Doctor?" "Yes. It is all over." "Oh Violetta! Violetta—ah!"

In between the words we have snatches of solos or duets, but never enough to more than start our interest. The people who speak are not the people who sing. Words and music are not blended in any way. She is, we feel, literally at her last gasp. Then a robust soprano voice takes up the tale and we are irreverent enough to murmur that there's life in the old girl yet.

Grand opera is so much a matter of sight as well as sound that the problem of how best to present it over the air is a difficult one, but I cannot feel that this series has solved it in any way. True, it does give the story, an impression of the characters, and a hint of the music. If I had not known the story of Alfred and Violetta, my cultural darkness would have been lightened to that extent. Or perhaps the orchestra might have led me to think—oh, is that where *that* comes from—but I doubt if I would have been interested enough to follow it up in any way.

Grand opera seems to me to be the interpretation of most of the human passions and feelings expressed through the medium of voice and music. Through it we can at times (not always!) be transported to that plane of emotional tension, response and sympathy which in the creative artist can