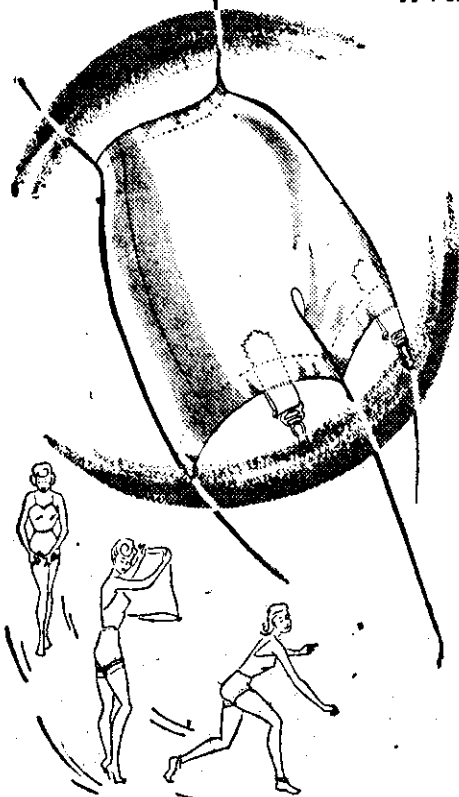


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## Radio Review

# BIRD SONG IN MUSIC

A FEW weeks ago I listened to a Wellington studio presentation by Shirley Carter which included the well-known *Lover and the Nightingale* by Granados. A few days later came Stravinsky's *Song of the Nightingale* from 3YA, while a week later, again from 3YA, we heard Respighi's *Pines of Rome*, in which an actual nightingale song is introduced.

One is left meditating about the use or imitation of bird song in music, and this apparent preference for the nightingale. Actually in spite of its name, this bird sings as much by day as by night, but stands out then because most other birds become silent. It occurs widely in southern Europe; in England it is heard for a relatively short time in the year, mostly in May. It prefers to hide in fairly dense cover, but, being highly strung, will often give to a clumsy disturber remarkable bursts of song, whereas a carefully approaching bird-lover may get no reward.

An early attempt to capture the actual song on wax was made by Beatrice Harrison, playing the 'cello in her garden, but the recording is old, and little of the bird's song is heard amidst the medley of other noises. Much more scientific and successful attempts have been made by Ludwig Koch, who has recorded the actual songs or calls of 15 birds on two Parlophone discs. The nightingale comes first, with 2½ minutes, because of its variety and elaboration. A book by Nicholson and Koch appeared simultaneously, and the writers state that "although no two phrases are exactly alike, certain patterns keep on recurring, while the regularity of the timing is remarkable." The frequency range is from about 620-4,500 (top A on a piano of seven octaves is a little over 3,500, but we can hear upper harmonics of from 10-15,000 cycles per second). The word "song" is more deserved than in the case of many other birds, because of the intervals, which seem natural to a human ear accustomed to an equal tempered scale. Centring approximately around c, with descents of a fourth to g and ascents of a third to e, the song occasionally falls to the dominant b flat and rises to the augmented fourth f sharp; many trills and phrases add a characteristic variety and note of plainness.

Most "nightingale music" does not, of course, attempt imitation of the actual sounds, though in the third movement of the *Pines of Rome* the real bird song is directed to be used, accompanied by very soft violin tremolos and harp harmonics. For this, of course, a gramophone record must be woven into the music, though there used to be an old instrument called the "nightingale" used in the orchestration of Scarlatti and various toy symphonies. One of the earliest writers of "programme music," Francois Couperin, wrote *Le Rossignol en amour* for flute and harpsichord, but it lies mostly in the quite inappropriate low register of the flute. Stravinsky's *Rossignol* is an orchestral suite adapted

from an earlier opera based on the Andersen fairy tale of a clockwork and a real nightingale; Napravnik also has an orchestral "Song of the Nightingale" from his *Don Juan*, and stresses almost entirely the plaintive aspect with a clarinet solo. Granados does not attempt to do more than give an impression of the bird with trills and passage-work. In vocal music, Brahms's "Nachtigall" is well known, also Rimsky-Korsakov's "The Rose Enslaves the Nightingale," and the final ecstatic burst in Gretchaninoff's "The Dreary Steppe." Even in much lighter vein the bird is not unknown in Berkeley Square.

Perhaps the most familiar instance is the almost direct imitation (even labelled on the score) of the nightingale, quail and cuckoo by the flute, oboe and clarinet respectively in Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony. To the orthodox of that day it caused as big a storm as the sheep and windmill imitations in Strauss's *Don Quixote* in the late 1890's. Nowadays we enjoy it without qualms, but it does raise the question how far it is permissible to imitate sounds of nature without loss of musical artistry. One may have doubts about Liszt's "St. Francis and the Birds," yet admit the appropriateness of subtle suggestion in Vaughan Williams's "Lark Ascending." Incidentally, in view of the popularity of the nightingale and cuckoo in music, do not the bell-bird, morepork, and others of our New Zealand avifauna deserve some musical recognition?

—H.J.F.

## Art Unfound

THE art of radio interviewing is yet to be discovered and perfected. The radio talk can be fascinating, the radio discussion can be exciting; but it is a rare radio interview that rises above flatness and inanity—one that did, though lop-sidedly, was heard a few weeks ago from 2YA, a recording of John Davenport's BBC interview with Aldous Huxley on his book *Ape and Essence*. Huxley was most frightening and John Davenport suitably pale and wan. And more recently there was a rare local product—an entertaining 2YA interview with Peter Dawson; but as in the Huxley case I think the success of this was largely thanks to the nature of the subject, to the geniality and exuberance of Mr. Dawson. Radio interviewers seem to me to have a rigid schedule of questions, perhaps, written on their cuffs, strictly and methodically asked in order. Thus we continually have those sudden changes of subject with the embarrassing and inadequate cushion remarks—o-really, well-that's-really-most-interesting, now-can-you-tell-us-Sir X—remarks which sound at their best impatient and at their worst supercilious. It would perhaps be better if interviewers gave their subjects (and, of course, their listeners) an idea of the main questions they wanted answered and then allowed more elasticity and freedom to wander; this would perhaps do

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