

# Progress Report for 1949

IT is three years since the National Symphony Orchestra gave its first concert; and in view of the very rapid development and progress made it is perhaps fitting that some opinions be expressed in summing up its past and pondering its future. At the outset it must be said that this season has been marked by the highest standard of playing so far achieved. Men of goodwill and knowledge willingly concede this. The improvement is more perceptible to those who hear the orchestra after periods of some months than it is, probably, to the musicians themselves. They looked almost overcome, even humble, when the Christchurch audience wildly applauded their playing at recent concerts.

Such enthusiasm shows that New Zealanders have been starving for this type of music-making and intellectual stimulus. The avidity is more apparent in younger men and women whose gramophone collections are swelling and whose knowledge of the classical repertoire is increasing. This is as it should be. But it brings to mind another aspect of the man-in-the-street's reaction to this renaissance of orchestral playing.

A new sense of values has been given to listeners. The growth of a large school

of amateur critics is evidence of this. Earnest people, young and old, invest their pronouncements upon technique, performances and, of course, conductors, with the imperiousness of an embankment crowd at a Rugby match. A healthy sign, surely! But it must be understood that their source of comparative standards is in most cases the gramophone record. Ask them outright, and reluctantly they will admit it.

The gramophone gives a false impression, and for two broad reasons. First,

no orchestra is as accurate as the records would have us believe. The eight discs comprising a symphony are not the one performance given by an orchestra. Up to half-a-dozen attempts are made for each "side," so that the final result becomes a selection of the average best of some forty-eight performances. Obviously, it is an unfair basis for comparison. One need only hear overseas orchestras in the flesh to realise this. For instance, the first horn seldom gets his opening flourish in "Till" absolutely accurately.

Secondly, the disc cannot accommodate the wide dynamic range which is one of the characteristics of the orchestra. Listening to a record or a broadcast of an orchestra after hearing a living performance is not unlike drinking a glass of water after one of port. We must abandon the record as a means of

comparison. Otherwise we shall remain in the pitiable state of having to say "too loud" every time a brass climax comes our way. Sir Henry Wood said to his brass players once, "Gentlemen, in this passage you are asked to make the old ladies jump in their seats." Let us not be old women in another sense. If we must make comparisons, let them be with something human, not a dead piece of scratched wax and celluloid.

## CLEAR-CUT STAGES

In retrospect the last three years show clear-cut stages of development. The inaugural season was presented by an orchestra containing a remarkably fine woodwind section—no guest conductor failed to remark on it. The brass, too, showed qualities hardly expected so early. The strings by comparison were weaker. This probably will remain a symptom of early growth in every new orchestra. It is not apparent now. One of the revelations of the Brahms and Beethoven symphonies in September and October was the fine cohesion evinced by these players together with, and as a result of, the uniformity and unanimity of bowing.

Then followed the middle period in which few tangible improvements were noticeable—a time of consolidation.

Considerable enlargement of the repertoire took place. There were occasional bad patches—a performance of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in Christchurch comes to mind.

With 1949 came the season of Italian Opera. The resulting break in normal routine is not to be recommended as a general practice, particularly with newly-established orchestras, but facing the *fait accompli*, even this scheme's most hostile critics observe no evil effects. Furthermore, without the opera, and many consider this work to be the most important function fulfilled by the players so far. Whether the present high standard reflects experience gained during the opera season cannot be known. The fact is that we now possess an orchestra in which the strings take their rightful place as the foundation. They are a team of consistent quality from basses to violins. The woodwind have suffered two severe losses—oboe and clarinet—but these have been replaced by capable, though less experienced, players. At the moment it is this group which should concentrate on sectional practice to get unanimous attack in ensemble. Tonally their work is good.

## PIONEER WORK IS HARD WORK

As a whole, the orchestra has advanced spectacularly. One very important reason for this is easy to find. The initial selection, from a very narrow field, was a good one. The orchestral tradition had not flourished in New Zealand since the advent of the talking films. Standards of playing had become in most places notoriously low—and public and players alike remained unperturbed about it. Proof of the possibilities, nevertheless, had been given by the Centennial Orchestra in 1940. This organisation and other war-time activities were to be a valuable pointer to any potential strength surviving the indolent '30's. Andersen Tyrer made his choice and work began.

To anyone who has started a musical team from scratch, it is clear that the beginning has its pros and cons. The novelty of a new experience plus a very human enthusiasm combine to overthrow many difficulties. But against these there is pitted the ever-present dictum of "the chain being as strong as its weakest link." To offset this, appropriate choice of music can exploit the stronger links. At the level being discussed this is not as easy as might at first appear. In fact, it is a most limited device. More to the point is the concentration of attention on the less malleable sections in an endeavour to equalise the competence of

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Written for "The Listener" by  
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Department made a start with this film, by microfilming for the Turnbull Library the Canterbury Association Papers, consisting of official correspondence of the Canterbury Association, minutes of early Council meetings, and passenger lists, instructions to the surgeons and masters and supply lists of the First Four Ships.

Other early works microfilmed include the Journal of the Rev. Henry Williams (1782-1867), and extracts from the Journal of the Rev. Joseph Orton, another early missionary, obtained from the Mitchell Library in Australia. Also from the Mitchell Library is a copy of Governor Gipps's address to the New South Wales Legislative Council, concerning New Zealand, and messages between Gipps, Hobson and Bunbury in 1840. The latest microfilm in the Library is a copy of a manuscript register of the sheep brands of the Wairarapa between 1867-73, belonging to the Department of Agriculture and recently rediscovered in Masterton. But before becoming interested in sheep, our ancestors were intent on stamping out evil. The Turnbull Library now has a microfilm copy of the first English book printed in New Zealand, the Report of the Formation and Establishment of the New Zealand Temperance Society, printed by Colenso on the Church Missionary Society press landed at Paibia on December 30, 1834.

It is hard to see a limit to the use of microfilm. The New Zealand Library Association has been given a "microfile" camera by the Carnegie Corporation for the specific purpose of making a catalogue of all non-fiction books in New Zealand libraries. The equipment was

received this year and work has started with microfilming the reference catalogue of the Wellington Public Library.

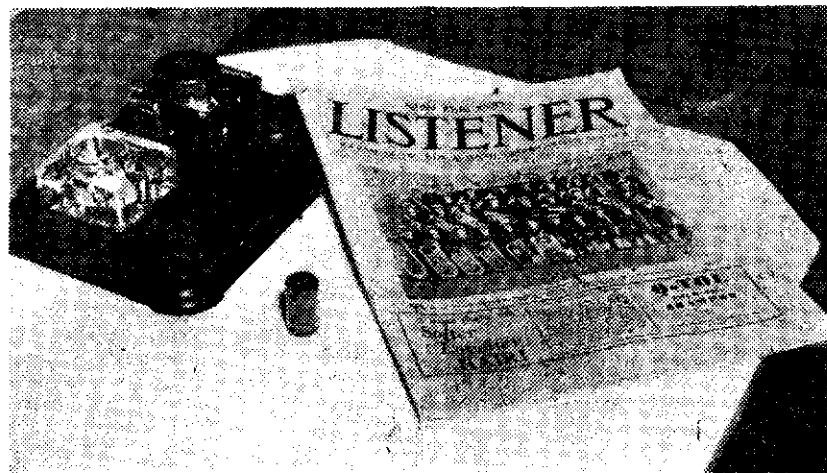
## "Hot Photography"

SO the librarian microfilms books and catalogues; then he goes one stage further and puts the catalogue and the book on one card, the "microcard," so far the ultimate development in saving storage space. It is now possible to microfilm 100 pages of print on a card 7.5 centimetres by 12.5 centimetres, and further technical refinements are taking place.

The backroom boys, chuckling sadistically, have now roped in television and produced a monster called Ultrafax. In New York, say, a television "eye" scans printed material at the rate of 30 leaves a second. The electrical impulses are re-

layed at the speed of light, say, to Los Angeles, where they impinge on sensitized paper which can be developed ready for viewing in 45 seconds. This process is known as "hot photography." As a consequence, says an authority, it is conceivable that a ton of letters, telegrams, pictures, charts, maps—a whole archive—could be transferred in facsimile from New York to Los Angeles in a matter of minutes, and simultaneously its bulk could be reduced to a spool of 16 or 35-millimetre film.

These staggering developments do not necessarily make life easier for the conscientious reader, whom we left in the first paragraph, doggedly pounding through book after book. However, he has left to him his free will, and even an Ultrafax viewer must have an "off" switch.



"A WHOLE issue of 'The Listener' can be put on a strip of film 30 inches in length"