

COMPOSING FOR A LIVING WAS NEVER EASY

A WEEK or two ago the NBS broadcast through the main stations a programme consisting for the most part of major orchestral and choral works by New Zealand composers.

But the public at large knows little or nothing of the disabilities under which all composers of serious music work. The actual performance of musical works is the only way by which they can be known, and yet a hundred obstacles stand in the way of the production of new music.

One great difficulty is the ease with which the old familiar music can be presented, for printed copies are at hand and can be procured cheaply, and plays are familiar with the idiom.

Talking and writing about new compositions can never produce the effect of actual performance. And when actual performance has been accomplished, how is the composer rewarded for his months and months of work? Winners of musical competitions draw prize money, it is true, but only a fraction of composers who are writing the world's serious music to-day can participate in the relatively few competitions that are organised.

Pot-Boilers to Live

The only other source of revenue to be tapped consists of performing rights. The number of major works written to the order of societies or publishers is insignificant. Therefore in order to live composers must write pot-boilers—that is light music. And even this is not easy, so that any serious-minded composer has to cultivate a Spartan fortitude and continue working for a long period for little or no reward.

The problem is almost as ancient as music itself. Just think of Schubert. During his whole lifetime he received something like five hundred pounds in all for about a thousand compositions. Beethoven, because he was a good business man, fared much better. Mozart, on the other hand, died in poverty. It is true that Puccini and Verdi died millionaires, and that Rossini retired before he was forty, but these three made their fortunes out of the performing rights of their operas.

"A Religious Society"

St. John Ervine once described the Performing Right Society as a religious society. It was, he said, a society founded for the conversion of the heathen—those heathen who think that artists of all kinds can live without food and are under no obligation to pay rents, rates or taxes.

The difference, he pointed out, between artists and other people is not that they can live without food but that no one can do their job but themselves. If they fall ill, they cannot, as captains of industry can, employ a manager to do their work. Nobody is going to pension them; nobody is going to pay them when they are ill or when they pass out of fashion; and the time that is left for them to earn a living is a very brief one.

They spend many years getting themselves in the position to earn money at all, and then very quickly

old age comes upon them, fashion passes them, and they are no longer able to earn their keep.

"The Horse is Starving"

But if the creation of serious music is to continue more than Performing Right Societies will have to be forthcoming. There is a saying that "while the grass is growing, the horse is starving." There is usually a considerable interval between the arrival of any musical inspiration and the stage where the Performing Right Society's work of watching the composer's interest in the result of that inspiration begins.

Once a work is written the composer has to set about cajoling conductors into considering it for performance—generally in manuscript form. Even when a conductor becomes enthusiastic about a work, rehearsal and concert costs confront the orchestra. The fiddlers, flautists, brass players, etc., etc., have to be paid for their rehearsal time.

How the composer exists meanwhile being nobody's business but his own, he is left to fend for himself. If he

cannot afford to print his score and parts, he has to pay to have his done; or, as Elgar and others did for years, do them himself, with domestic assistance.

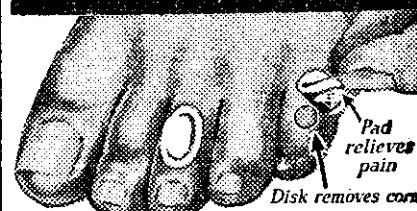
At the moment no one can live on composition, except by some rare and lucky stroke; consequently the vast majority of composers are teachers or performers, or both.

Some of the best music ever composed was created by provincial organists like Bach, or professional conductors like Haydn, Berlioz and Wagner, and by music teachers like Cesar Franck and Elgar. What man has done, man can do. But the road is rough and hard.

Bicycle Built for Two

Owing to the rationing of petrol in England, cycling is becoming increasingly popular. Two New Zealand girls were recently guests at a home where Mrs. Doulton, wife of the famous china creator, was also to be one of the house party. The two girls were awaiting with interest the arrival of Mrs. Doulton. Instead of the luxurious limousine they had expected to see the lady came modestly pedalling a bicycle up the ancestral drive. They learnt later that it is her favourite means of locomotion.

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