

# "THIS IS LONDON CALLING..."

## A Visit To Broadcasting House

Written for "The Listener" by K. C. GRANGE

THE chimes of Big Ben and "This is London calling!" have always had the power to thrill me, so as I was in London in Coronation Year I determined to visit Broadcasting House, if that was possible. Accordingly I wrote asking for permission to see over the building, giving references to vouch for my respectability and justifying my interest in broadcasting. Even in 1937 one could not just push open the doors and take a look round; I was given an appointment three weeks ahead, a carefully filled-in card of admission, and a printed list of instructions as to what a visitor might or might not do. Here are some of them:

"In order that the work of the Corporation may not be unduly disturbed, parties arriving more than five minutes late cannot be admitted. Visitors are requested on no account to lean against or touch any piece of the apparatus.

"The taking of photographs inside the building cannot be permitted. Photographs can, however, be obtained at the bookshop.

"Visitors are asked not to address any questions to, or enter into conversation with, any officials on duty other than their guide."

When the day arrived I presented myself in the reception hall where a number of other visitors sat about uneasily. Our cards were scanned several times, our names checked, and at last, a party of 16, we were shepherded by a guide into a lift which took us three storeys down. Here we saw, through glass panels, where London air was washed three or four times before being circulated through the building by a complicated ventilating system. No open windows in the BBC, for the noises of London must not be let in—unless, of course, for effect. And an opaque window with pale sunlight streaming through to light a stairway was a trick effect too, for no outside windows let in either sound or air or sun from the city without. Even the clocks are tickless.

### Producing Plays

We spent some time in one studio where plays were produced. A large microphone hung from the ceiling, and beneath it was a circular carpet marked in numbered circles, so that players knew from the numbers on their script at what distance they were to speak. Two opposite segments of the circle were coloured red, to warn players that when standing there they would be facing the dead side of the "mike." We remarked on the smallness of the room, and our guide explained that only the speaking parts were performed there; all noises, on or off, were effected in another room; musical accompaniments, introductions, or dance bands were all produced elsewhere.

We were then escorted to another little room where a man was seated at a desk with a script in front of him, and

beside him an instrument like a large radio cabinet with many knobs. It was his business to "mix" all the component parts of a play, coming from different rooms:

### Talks Studio

A studio like a miniature study, quiet and restfully dignified, was the home of broadcast talks. From there we tiptoed to the great control room where many men were at work in what seemed like a telephone exchange. We were warned not to speak or ask any ques-

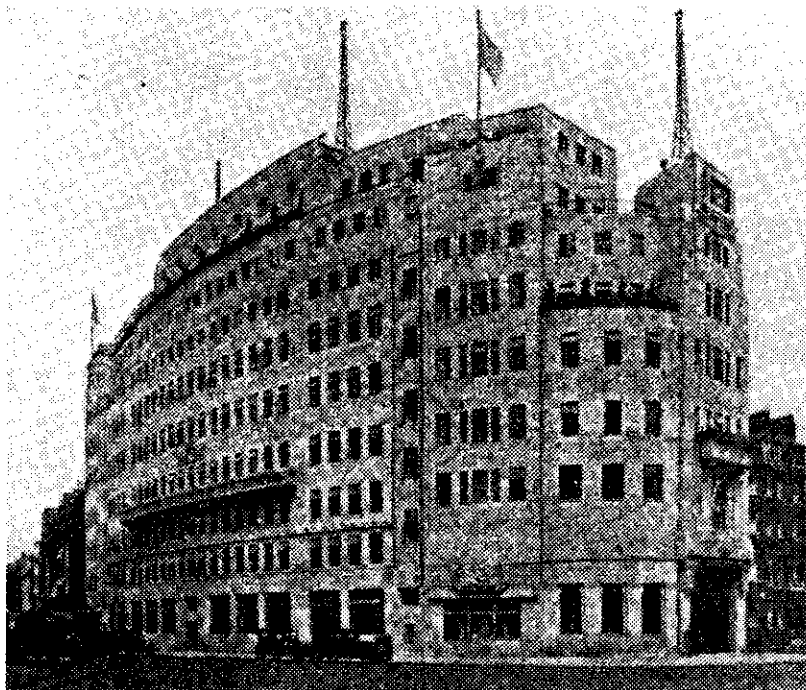
"Well, what about letting us see it?" the man turned to the guide.

"No, sir, I'm afraid not."

"Oh, but we do so want to see it," I urged. "I've come all the way from New Zealand and I want to tell people about it when I go back."

"I'm from South Africa," said the woman.

"And here's me from Western Australia," the man added, "all the corners of the earth urging you to show us a blattnerphone!"



BROADCASTING HOUSE, impressive home of the British Broadcasting Corporation, which was extensively damaged in air attacks last week

tions of the operators, and soon shuffled out as wise as we went in.

The concert hall next drew our attention. It is a pleasing building with seating for a fair-sized privileged audience, but the acoustics are not in the least affected if the hall is empty, as the seats are covered with some specially prepared material under their formal tapestry, which has the same effect on sound as a room full of people, with the advantage that it does not rustle, sneeze or fidget!

### One More Mystery

As we neared the end of our tour I turned to the guide and said, "There is just one more thing I would be specially interested to see, and that is a blattnerphone."

"And so would I," put in a lady beside me.

"What's that?" asked a man.

"Oh, the kind of ribbon thing they record great events and speeches on so that we in the colonies can hear them re-broadcast after they are over," I replied vaguely. "I read about it in a detective story!"

### "It Can't Be Done"

"Sorry, ladies and gentlemen, it can't be done," replied the guide, who had the usual characteristics of guides; he had said his "piece" and none of our entreaties could move him to say more; perhaps he didn't know any more! He yawned behind a polite hand. So we went a little regretfully out into the warm sunny afternoon, leaving behind us that strange world that lives in deadened sound, artificial light, and much-washed ventilation, but where

"They have awakened the timeless things, they have killed their Father Time."

And I thought again of the dedication — "This Temple of the Arts and Muses is dedicated to Almighty God by the first Governors of Broadcasting House in the year 1931, Sir John Reith being Director-General. It is their prayer that good seed sown may bring forth a good harvest, that all things hostile to peace or purity may be banished from this house, and that the people, inclining their ear to whatsoever things are beautiful and honest and of good report, may tread the path of wisdom and uprightness."

## THEY'D SOONER HAVE SYMPHONIES

TIRED business men, it seems, do not crave for musical shows and night clubs in order to relax. They prefer symphony orchestras, operas and recitals.

This was established in a recent poll conducted in the United States by Concert programme magazines, which queried 2000 industrialists, business executives, and advertising men on their musical tastes.

Twenty per cent replied that they liked all music, 75 per cent preferred classical music, and only 5 per cent put popular music at the top of their lists.

Eighty per cent of those who responded said they were regular concert



KIRSTEN FLAGSTAD  
Business men like her

patrons, and a third said that they either sang or played an instrument themselves.

All the singers were baritones, while pianists predominated among the instrumentalists, but there were enough players of other instruments to make up a symphony orchestra.

The business men's favourite singers, in order of popularity, were Kirsten Flagstad, Lawrence Tibbett, Marion Anderson, John Charles Thomas and Kate Smith.

Their favourite instrumentalists were Heifetz, Josef Hofmann, Yehudi Menuhin, Walter Gieseking, Fritz Kreisler and Sergei Rachmaninoff. "Tristan and Isolde," proved more popular than "Carmen," "Madame Butterfly" or "Aida" and the operettas of Victor Herbert and Gilbert and Sullivan more popular than musical comedies.