

## SOME RECENT MUSIC

No. 6: By MARSYAS

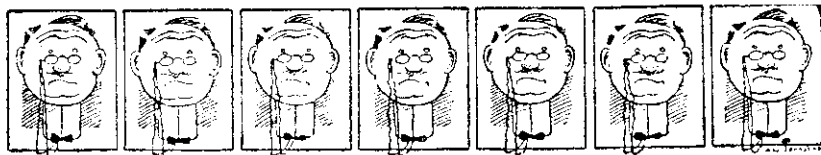
AUCKLAND and Wellington have their railway stations and they are proud of them; but Christchurch has its Bach Passion — every year, on Good Friday, the *St. Matthew Passion* in the Cathedral. And just as the northern cities share their proudest buildings with travellers from the south, so Christchurch shares its proudest musical achievement with radio listeners in the north.

A sense of gratitude is the first thing that makes itself felt when Good Friday comes again and Bach's Passion music comes with it, and I am not readily inclined to let that gratitude give place to a critical frame of mind, so I think everyone should forget about such things as the difficulties the singers couldn't overcome, and, instead, record new reactions to the music.

However, you must remind yourself that whatever you think after hearing Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* on the air is this year conditioned by the fact that, of a work originally lasting about five hours, consisting of 24 scenes written

for double chorus, double orchestra, soloists and organ, you heard a portion lasting about an hour and a-half, performed by a choir, an organ, soloists, and a piano. This is all we can afford ourselves in New Zealand, but it is surprising how a competent presentation with these means can give us a sense of the immense wealth of the music; a less competent performance would bring us instead to a realisation of our musical poverty.

For as Bach himself walked 50 miles to hear Buxtehude so I would travel a very long way to be able to hear the choir which performed the unaccompanied chorales on Good Friday. And when you consider that the soloists were probably doing as well as Bach's own singers in Leipzig (a town of 30,000 people) then you don't complain when they fail to fulfil all the very strenuous demands made on them in recitatives and arias. (Has anyone discovered why Bach, normally a practical-minded man, wrote so many high B's and A's for the tenor?)



**STUDIES IN CRITICAL EXPRESSION:** According to an American cartoonist, this is how the Critic is affected by Beethoven, Wagner, Palestrina, Stravinsky, Bach, Schonberg, Mozart

ANNUAL repeats of such a masterpiece as the *St. Matthew Passion* enable you to adjust it within your new horizons (for the music you hear within 12 months must—or should—give you new horizons). On this occasion I found all the evidence I wanted to confound an anti-romantic with whom I had argued in the last year.

This man regarded the death of Bach as the last hour of pure music, and lamented that not many years afterwards, composers were filling their music with all their "private poetry," their personal emotions. This, Bach never did, he told me.

But what could be more personal and emotional than certain recitatives in the *St. Matthew Passion*? And the fact that they are as universal as the air we breathe does not mean that the emotions expressed in the chorales were not per-

sonal with Bach (though this is dangerously near a failure to distinguish "what is general from what is personal"). The point is, no one can say Bach was never emotional or personal in his composing; why, he was even pictorial, as witness the cock-crow!

No, "romanticism" and "programme-music" were old even in Bach's time. Monteverdi died in 1643, and he had written pictorial music for the stage. And when he wrote "Tears of a Lover at the Tomb of the Beloved" shortly after his wife's death, he certainly found an expression for his personal grief in these most moving madrigals, as also in the famous "Lament of Arianna."

I HEARD Prokofiev's violin concerto in D Major this week, played by Szigeti, and the London Philharmonic.

(Continued on next page)

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