

OFFSTAGE WITH SOLOMON

TALENT of a high order is what economists, lacking a more abstruse term, describe as a "permanently scarce commodity." Increased production is out of the question. And, like all things scarce, it is greatly prized. It was somewhat gingerly, therefore, that *The Listener* returned the handshake of Solomon, famed British pianist now touring New Zealand. The hand, Solomon admitted, was insured for something like £25,000. "That isn't much after all," he said, "if one should lose the use of it. I've seen it described as 'Like backing a horse at an outside price which you don't want to win.'"

Before leaving subjects physical, Solomon mentioned, too, that he found no difficulty in adapting himself to the cold spell which greeted him in Wellington. "Air travel means that in the United States alone one can move in a few hours from temperatures of below zero to 60 or 70 degrees. Fortunately, I don't suffer from cold hands. Neither, in hot climates, do my hands get sticky. That could be very unpleasant: one's hands slip on the keys."

Friendly and natural of bearing, Solomon talked easily about the busy life led by a concert artist. Behind the polished virtuoso who appears before his audience for perhaps an hour or two, lies a programme of travel and work that would test any man. He likes to practise at least three or four hours daily. "On a normal day—which doesn't often happen—it may be as much as seven or eight hours." For the rest, there were interviews, receptions, and a surprising amount of time spent packing and unpacking bags and worrying about whether the laundry would be back in time to provide a dress shirt for the next performance. "You may smile," said Solomon, "but that can be quite a problem. It was especially during the war, when laundries had a six-week service. And if you've ever tried packing a wet towel so that it won't damage your shirts . . . !"

Solomon travels widely. Last year he had only five weeks at his London home. Recently he has performed in

such diverse countries as Canada and Malaya, South Africa and Japan. In Malaya he was the guest of Communist-hunting General Sir Gerald Templar and Lady Templar, whom he describes as "charming," and in Japan he gave a performance at the Imperial Palace for the Empress of Japan.

Asked about musical experiences of recent years, Solomon turned immediately to other people. "My most outstanding musical experience," he said, "was listening to Toscanini's concerts. He is to me the greatest personage in music. He has conducted lately in both London and New York, and it was thrilling to hear."

And did he ever listen to other pianists? "Oh, of course I do," he said, "with great interest, and sometimes with great enjoyment." He named five pianists—not all of them dead—whose playing had given pleasure. "Generally," he said, "I manage to hear everybody of any repute. Certainly I hear all the great orchestras of the world. I'm happy to have played with many—the Boston and the Philadelphia are really great—not forgetting our own Philharmonia, which is second to none."

Time, which appears to be Solomon's hardest master, has in recent years prevented him from teaching, a task he enjoys. "I gave it up about eight years ago," he told *The Listener*. "I was never in any one place for long enough. Perhaps when I'm 150 and retire from the concert platform I may take it up again."

Questioned about his tastes in contemporary music, Solomon professed an interest in it as such. "But you will notice I play very little," he said. "The enormous repertoire of classical music interests me more, and I feel that I can be of more service in playing it than I could be to music in the purely modern mood." He did, however, name Walton as a modern he considered great. He had also given the first world performance of Arthur Bliss's piano concerto in 1939. This had been in New York, under the baton of Sir Adrian Boult.

One of the greatest festivals of Europe was how Solomon described the Edinburgh Festival, at which he has recently performed. "It is so much more comprehensive than the rest, embracing not only music but drama, opera, ballet, film, poetry—in fact, just about all the arts." Vast numbers of people from all over the world attended, he said—his secretary Gwendoline Byrne interjecting to point out with professional interest that the sale of

tickets over the whole was a phenomenal 98 per cent. Apart from providing plenty of good music for regular concertgoers, Solomon thought the festival attracted many with little previous interest. "There are tourists who will 'take in' the festival. You get a lot of people there because it is the done thing. But many of them will stay to listen and enjoy, and when they go back home they continue the habit."

Solomon was not unaware of the commercial advantages bestowed by the festival. "In the town they sell literally miles of tartan," he said. "You can get them for almost any name at all." Even Solomon? "Yes, I believe they'd even produce one for clan Solomon."

The single name used by the pianist is, in fact, his first name. He was born Solomon Cutner, but when he made his debut at the age of eight the impresarios billed him as "Solomon, The Boy Pianist." His success was such that when he resumed his career as an adult he decided to retain the name. "It is, of course, a gift for journalists," he said. "They can really let themselves go. They've said about me: Solomon had 1000 wives; this one hasn't even one."

As relaxation from his work, Solomon likes to visit the opera and the theatre. To keep fit he likes to walk, but seldom has time to do much. An annual three-weeks' vacation in Switzerland provides the only opportunity. "Then I walk 10 or 12 miles a day," he said, "but so far I haven't climbed any mountains."

Solomon's brief tour of New Zealand is now almost completed. He is still to be heard, however, in solo recitals at Auckland on Tuesday, April 13, and Christchurch on Thursday, April 15.



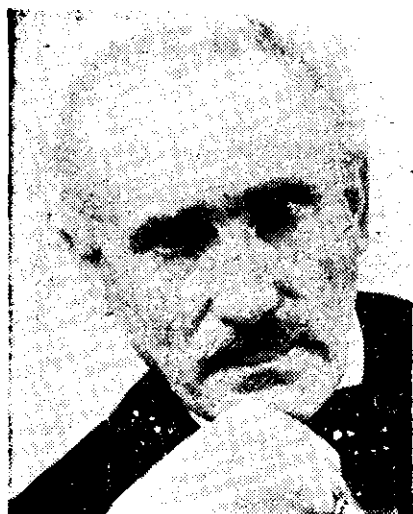
N.P.S. photograph

"Magic Flute" on YC Link

MOZART'S opera *The Magic Flute* will be broadcast over a link of the four YC stations at 7.0 p.m. on Sunday, April 25, in an LP recording by the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and Chorus conducted by Herbert von Karajan. The performance will occupy a total playing time of two hours 21 minutes. The parts of *Tamino* and *Pamina* are sung by Anton Dermota (tenor) and Irmgard Seefried (soprano) respectively. Sarastro is played by Ludwig Weber (bass), Papageno by Erich Kunz (baritone), and the Queen of the Night by Wilma Lipp (soprano), and Peter Klein (tenor) is the Moor Monostatos. In the interval between the two acts, listeners will be able to hear a talk on Mozart's operas by W. Thomson, of Dunedin.

The Magic Flute was Mozart's last opera, and it is in some ways one of his most extraordinary achievements. It is a fascinating and curious combination of child-like naiveté and high sublimity, a simple and sometimes ridiculous fairy tale as well as a work of the most genuine idealism. Instead of being all of a piece musically, as *Don Giovanni* and *The Marriage of Figaro* are, it brings together florid coloratura passages, arias of folk-like simplicity, and some of the most noble music for the voice that Mozart ever wrote. Some critics believe that beneath its ancient Egyptian setting, *The Magic Flute* symbolises the rise and ideals of Free-

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TOSCANINI

"The greatest personage in music"