

# TRAIL-BLAZING PIANIST



JAN SMETERLIN

N.P.S. photograph

*"If he were not a musician he would prefer to be an explorer"*

ONE of Jan Smeterlin's regrets on arriving in New Zealand was that he wouldn't be able to get down to Stewart Island to see some wild penguins. However, Maurice Glubb, acting concert manager for the NZBS (who are handling Smeterlin's tour in conjunction with the Auckland Festival Society) assured him that arrangements would be made for him at least to see the Antarctic penguins at the Auckland Zoo.

The life of a concert pianist would not be expected to have much in common with that of an explorer, yet Smeterlin has made a specialty of visiting out-of-the-way places whenever he can on his world tours, and it has been said of him that "if he were not a musician, he would prefer to be an explorer." He has toured the jungles of Sumatra and Java, where his lorry was once held up by a wild bear, and has visited a remote mining town 150 kilometres inside the Arctic Circle.

"That was Kiruna, in Sweden," he said when he was interviewed by *The Listener* in Wellington the other day. "I didn't know it was a mining town until I got there, and I also found it was dark 24 hours a day up there in winter. That was in 1928, I

think. I remember I was followed everywhere on that tour by a Steinway concert grand piano on a railway truck or a lorry. Then I remember going to Malton on the island of Minorca. We set out from Barcelona with our piano by boat, and when we got there it was the first time the people on the island had seen a concert grand. The farmers from all over the island came over to

the Bielsko Orchestra when he was eight. Despite his parents' opposition he secretly continued his studies with Leopold Godowsky while ostensibly reading for a law degree at Vienna University. During the First World War he joined the Polish cavalry, in 1916. "I was just ripe for military service," he said. Because of his ability in languages—he could even then speak

see it. But just the same they were a highly critical audience, as most European audiences are.

"In Sumatra I can remember playing on the dead bodies of thousands of insects that fell on to the keyboard. They were open-air concerts and there would be only one light, suspended directly over the piano. The insects which were attracted to it were continually falling down, and there was nothing I could do about it, so I just kept on playing."

Jan Smeterlin has no explanation to offer for these musical expeditions to wild and inhospitable regions of the earth, and his trail-blazing capacity as a concert pianist has never struck him as unusual. He bears more than a little resemblance in his behaviour to that other great Polish artist, Joseph Conrad, who also had a wanderlust which attracted him to such places as the East Indies and Spain, and who also, like Smeterlin, became a naturalised British subject and married a British wife.

Smeterlin was born in Bielsko, Poland, in 1892, and was a precocious musician, playing a Beethoven concerto with the Bielsko Orchestra when he was eight. Despite his parents' opposition he secretly continued his studies with Leopold Godowsky while ostensibly reading for a law degree at Vienna University. During the First World War he joined the Polish cavalry, in 1916. "I was just ripe for military service," he said. Because of his ability in languages—he could even then speak

seven fluently—he was later attached to Polish Intelligence. His artistic career didn't really begin until after the war, when he soon became known as one of the few top pianists consistently to play the works of contemporary composers. Ravel, Dukas, Albeniz and Szymanowski owe a certain amount of their European fame to Smeterlin's widespread performances of their works.

He spoke about his close friendship with Karol Szymanowski, the great Polish composer who died in 1937, and who dedicated to him his volume of 20 mazurkas, Op. 20. "I did all I could to help Szymanowski, and he helped me, too," he said. "I gave a number of first performances of his works—of his Third Piano Sonata, in Paris, Vienna, Berlin, London and New York, and of his Piano Concerto, in London with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra."

He is equally devoted to the works of Chopin, and echoes the words of Szymanowski on Chopin: "For us Polish musicians, Chopin is an everlasting reality, an active power which exercises direct and spontaneous influence on the evolution of Polish music . . . it is the work of Chopin which has the incontestable Polish style in the deepest and noblest meaning of the word." He said that after his New Zealand tour, in which he has already played Chopin's Concerto No. 2 with the National Orchestra and an all-Chopin concert in Wellington, he is going to play at the Chopin Festival in Singapore during the last week in August. He added that he thought the chromatic in Chopin's Op. 10 No. 2 is "the most difficult study in the world—there is no more difficult problem for piano."

The second half of Jan Smeterlin's public concert in the Civic Theatre, Christchurch, will be broadcast from all the YC stations on Tuesday, June 15, beginning at 9.0 p.m.

## Master Oboist ★

THE noted oboist Leon Goossens, whose New Zealand tour starts next week, will be heard only once with the National Orchestra—at Wellington on June 26—when he will play concertos by Malcolm Arnold and Marcello; but parts of his concerts for the New Zealand Federation of Chamber Music Societies will be broadcast. In these he will be appearing with the pianist Jessie Hall and the Ruth Pearl String Trio.

All YC stations will broadcast from Auckland at 9.0 p.m. on Monday, June 14, half of the first concert, including works for oboe and piano by Bach, Fiocco and Field and Britten's *Phantasy* for oboe quartet. Two fantasies for string trio by Purcell will also be heard. Next evening (Tuesday) at 8 o'clock the second half of a concert at Hamilton will be broadcast by 1XH only.

All YC stations will link again at 8.0 p.m. on Saturday, June 19, for the first half of the Wellington concert. The programme will include Quartet for Oboe and Strings, by Stamitz, works for oboe and piano, by Senaillé, Purcell, Fauré and Kelly, one movement of a Schubert String Trio, and Bach-Mozart preludes and fugues.

Parts of Goossens concerts at Christchurch on June 22 and Dunedin on June 24 will also be broadcast from YC stations.

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UNDER the master's eye—Leon Goossens with junior pupils of the Coventry School of Music