COMPOSERS AT WORK

by OWEN JENSEN

THE composition of music is become a flourishing pastime in New Zealand. In the broadcasting programmes, incidental music to New Zealand Players' productions and NZBS plays, too, the Christchurch Festival of New Zealand music, in the programmes of the Alex Lindsay Orchestra and one or two other enterprising organisations, one way and another, the man in the next street, and the woman, too, is contributing to our musical delight. And delight it is—very often, anyhow. The performance of music by New Zealanders, and listening to it, is no longer just a cultural obligation. Much of this music has something to say. The time has come to take some stock of the situation. What, indeed, does it say?

Composition is the first and final enjoyment of music. In the beginning, it is the birth of an idea which may become the revelation of a personality. The performers link us with this personal expression and, if we are in the proper frame of mind, we share the enthusiasm, the vision, the inspired feelings of the composer. This should be the ultimate pleasure of music. But it needs the proper frame of mind and the receptive ear, a primary criterion of effective listening. We must approach this new music—our new music—on its own ground. We must listen to it as to an intelligent conversation, not to catch second-hand echoes of the past, not to expect the heart to be strummed with chords of familiarity, nor our ears to be comforted with quotations from conventionality. New music should speak newly. Its originality may be ingenuous and only rarely vividly illuminating, but if the composer has written as he feels, using the precision of speech and a clarity of thinking, then the music should interest and even move us.

But there's the rub when it comes to the composer in New Zealand. He has inherited no tradition of style that is his own. Forge one as he may, he is yet faced with the problem of interpreting his experience. He is still in the process of discovering himself, us and the place we live in. Listening to much of this New Zealand music that has come our way, it would seem that this exploration has not yet gone very far.

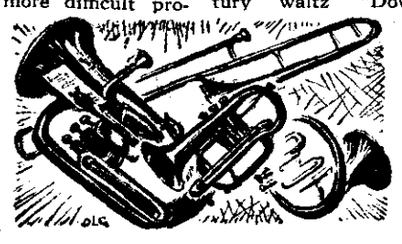
Before we go into this matter of writing indigenous music, music that seems to be characteristic of New Zealand, that would suggest people and places here rather than the background of England, Germany, America or the wilds of Central Africa, it should be said right away that there is far too much clap-trap talked and thought about the mere job of putting feelings and ideas into music. There are still a few romantically inclined enthusiasts who are disappointed if a composer does not turn up with long hair and a flowing tie. There are those, too, who imagine that the divine afflatus can be best invoked by retiring to a prefabricated ivory bungalow or a cellophane chrysalis to contemplate the umbilicus with the serene intensity of a Buddha.

Composition is in no way an esoteric rite. There is little in the way of mystery about it. All it comes to is that some think in words, some in the visual patterns of line or colours and some prefer to think in sound. More than some, as may be noticed, hardly think at all and whatever their skill in pen, brush or in covering manuscript paper, the result rarely makes sense. Composition is a craft before it becomes an art. The art may be artful, but it will not attract much attention if it devolves into artiness. Which means that composition, in the main, has as much of earth as of heaven in it, and maybe a little more.

Said Rossini, who wrote the *Barber of Seville* in some incredibly short time and produced his thirty-two operas at the rate of about two and a half a year: "Nothing excites inspiration as necessity does; the presence of an anxious copyist and a despairing manager tearing out handfuls of his hair is a great help." Mozart, Schubert and Elgar, among others, dashed down much of their work with almost reckless abandon. Bach and Haydn turned out fugues and symphonies respectively as the occasion demanded. And the occasion was as recurrent and as commonplace as a lawyer's brief and probably, on the whole, much less troublesome. "As for the inspiration theory," wrote Sullivan, "although I admit that sometimes a happy phrase will occur to one quite unexpectedly, rather than as a result of any definite reasoning process, musical composition, like everything else, is the outcome of hard work. . . The miner does not sit at the top of the shaft for the coal to come bubbling up to the surface. One must go down, and work out every vein carefully." And if this should seem to discount the spontaneity of Schubert, Mozart and company, you can put their process down, not to open cast mining, but to undisclosed prospecting in the secret fastnesses of the mind.

What it comes to is that an ability to invoke perspiration is much more useful in any creative process than a change of hairshirts. As this ability is a fairly common attribute, it follows that almost anyone can write music providing he knows something of the jargon of note spinning. But a flash in the pan should not be confused with the pervasive aroma of something cooking.

A woman wrote to me a few years ago after a broadcast of some music by Bartok which she found particularly objectionable. "My son, aged three, made the same noises on the piano this morning. Is he a genius?" I replied that if this was so, it could be put down as a happy accident of nature, and herself as a music-lover of discernment. If her child repeated himself a second time, it seemed an opportunity for parental discipline. A third perpetration should be regarded as an undesirable habit which should be checked by locking the piano. For such persistent unoriginality should be discouraged, even in the very young. The single striking chord or the one-finger tune comes as easily as birth, and with as Malthusian ubiquity. Turning it into a composition is like bringing up the child, a much more difficult proposition. You can still do it though, with a little basic music study, or you may farm it out to foster parents like a good many of the Tin Pan Alley boys do.



But then technique, skill and hard work are not the whole answer. An elderly acquaintance of mine had written and published some songs for children, as charming as the man himself. A mutual friend, admiring these songs suggested that, if the composer would permit him to give him some lessons in harmony and counterpoint, he might very well write something quite substantial. After a year or so I met my elderly acquaintance again. "How's the harmony and counterpoint going?" I asked him. "Fine. I've been working pretty hard at it," he replied. And then added ruefully, "But, you know, I can't write a note of interesting music now."

Having confused the issue somewhat, I think we may return to our New Zealand composer and, especially the quite remarkable series of broadcasts of New Zealand music which have been going the rounds in the last month or two. Remarkable, in that it seemed inconceivable that there were so many people in the country, both men and women, spending their spare time at this delectable activity; remarkable, because the craftsmanship has shown such a consistently high standard. These programmes have included almost everything from piano pieces and songs to string orchestra music, written in a variety of styles from echoes of Chopin and Debussy to some which sound as if the composer may have consorted with Stravinsky, Hindemith or Bartok. Too little of it, however, has the flavour of New Zealand.

Now you may well ask, what is the flavour of New Zealand; or, how, anyway, will it appear in music? Not so naively as an impression in sound of the building of the Auckland Harbour Bridge, nor of a windy day in Wellington, or of the day's first cablé car picking its way painfully up High Street, Dunedin. Neither is it in the mountains or the plains, or labelling a 19th Century waltz "Down the Beautiful Waikato." Landscapes are as permanent and as passionless as noses, and as little a matter for comment, let alone pride. Put the nose on a face and get something, maybe, to write home about. Surround the face of a landscape with people and their living and you have the makings of a poem, a picture, or—a piece of music. An agricultural show, Ellerslie, Trentham or Riccarton, six o'clock at any pub, ten minutes at any railway refreshment rooms, marching girls, or Moo-Loo. All this is easy enough to put down in painting or poetry. It should be easier in music. But then, you may have noticed, we take our pleasures seriously. New Zealanders rarely burst into song even in the privacy of the bath. They put as secure locks on their hearts as they do on their bathroom doors.

FRANZ SCHUBERT

SIR EDWARD ELGAR

"Hymns for the church round the corner, marches for the town band, songs for singing at school"

The essence of the problem for the composer in New Zealand, if he thinks about the matter, is that he has no evocative reservoir of song and dance from which to draw his ideas. He has inherited no folk material and none is in the making unless it passes unobserved. He has no under-the-greenwood tree, no morris-dance-cum-I-do-like-to-be-by-the-seaside-polka, no lindens to weep by, with or under, no blues of his own to blow on a screaming trumpet. In fact, when he writes his tone-poem, his symphony or string quartet, it's a better than even chance that it will come out like Beethoven, Brahms, Vaughan Williams, Sibelius or, under very perverse circumstances, Shostakovich. In case you should think that what is good enough for Vienna or London is caviare for Christchurch, let me suggest that, while it's a wise child that knows its own father, it's a dull and lazy boy who lives on the patrimony of his ancestors.

With nothing in our reserve bank of music but an overdraft of European romanticism we must, I think, write music *for* people before we can write anything *about* them. That is, let those who feel the urge write symphonies—and if they are as good as Douglas Lilburn's they will have been worth the trouble—chamber music or sonatas. Honestly and well written, they will give pleasure to the listener as they will have given joy in the composing. But those who will reach nearest to the heart of the matter will be dashing off hymns for the church round the corner, marches for the town band, songs for singing at school or the next Ranfurly Shield match, music for Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and the Saturday night dance. "Art is a celebration of life," wrote Herbert Read. Strike up the lyre, brother, and let's celebrate.