

Gershwin in Wellington

WHAT makes a piece of music popular? George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, for instance, which the National Orchestra is to play in the Wellington Proms with Maurice Till as solo pianist (YA link, 3YZ and 4YZ, March 7). The Orchestra has played it, too, in Dunedin, Christchurch and Auckland, and although I haven't yet heard any comments about these performances, I'd hazard a guess that *Rhapsody in Blue* hit the jackpot with these audiences as it has done ever since that first memorable performance by Paul Whiteman and his band at Aeolian Hall on February 12, 1924.

Gershwin's first storming of the serious concert hall scaled the ramparts of criticism and hit the headlines. Recorded, published and performed again and again, *Rhapsody in Blue* brought in its composer over a million dollars. It has been played on pretty well everything from a Wurlitzer to a harmonica. Toscanini has put it in a programme and it has been arranged to accompany a tap dance. For 30 years *Rhapsody in Blue* has continued to win friends and maybe to influence people, too, just as its composer did in his all too short life.

That is half the secret of the music's success. The *Rhapsody* is Gershwin's personal rhapsody. Into it he put some of the tunes and the rhythms that he himself enjoyed playing, singing or dancing. And because Gershwin was a very likeable young man, a real regular guy, his music comes out that way. These are the tunes and the rhythms that every young American in 1924 would have liked to have written, played

and sung. And, with a little flavour of nostalgia, that goes for the young American today, too; and, as the young in most parts are inclined to sentimentality. *Rhapsody in Blue* has its many fans in other countries, not the least New Zealand. But don't forget, nevertheless, that this music is written with a flare. The other half of its popularity is the competency of the writing, even although Gershwin had to get someone else to do the orchestration for him.

Although poles apart from the *Rhapsody*, Sibelius's *Finlandia* (2YC, March 5) owes some of its popularity to much the same reasons. First, it was written by a master craftsman of the orchestra; and then again, it struck a chord in the hearts of Sibelius's compatriots and in those of many others with a spark of the patriotic spirit waiting to be fanned. Written in 1899, when Finland was shaking its mane as Russia pulled its tail, *Finlandia* was the finale of a suite which Sibelius called *Finland Awakes*. It wasn't just the loud and stirring brass that awoke the Finns to such fervour that the Russians were moved to ban performances. In the themes—which, incidentally, Sibelius states are not folk tunes but his own—the composer found the voice of the Finnish people.

In the same programme by the Orchestra, Donald Munro will sing *Three Traditional Sea Songs*, by Ashley Heenan, of Wellington (2YC, March 5). These songs, which have been published by Chester, were written two years ago for Donald Munro. Based on and arising from the original traditional airs, they have an engaging quality which should win them popularity too.

—Owen Jensen

AMONG THE MUTTON BIRDS

THE mutton birds flew down there in their thousands from Alaska and Labrador and Greenland, with the sole purpose of breeding. Ken Green went down there from Dunedin, where he is announcer-in-charge, with the aim of recording his observations of the bird life of the islands. The sardines and shrimps went there for reasons best known to themselves.

The results of all this travelling to the Titi group of islands, south-west of Stewart Island, will be more mutton-birds, fewer sardines and shrimps, and a programme by Ken Green describing the meeting of bird, sardine and himself. The programme will be broadcast from 4YA at 7.30 p.m. on Wednesday, March 2, and will be in addition to those now being presented from 4YA on Wednesdays at 9.15 p.m.

All talks were recorded when Mr. Green travelled to the Titi group on the M.V. Alert with a scientific expedition led by Dr. R. A. Falla, Director of the Dominion Museum.

It may take the mutton bird (also known, to get progressively more dignified, as the Sooty Shearwater, or as *Puffinus griseus*) six months to make



that flight from the arctic north down to the islands south of New Zealand. "The birds nest in burrows which they make in the peaty soil," Mr. Green wrote to *The Listener*. "From 7 o'clock in the evenings we watched them coming in after a day's feeding at sea (they must eat thousands of tons of sardines and shrimps daily), at first looking like a cloud of soot on the horizon. By dusk they were circling and zig-zagging overhead, not gracefully, but apparently dashing off in all directions at once. In fact, they were orienting themselves as they came down lower and lower till they reached the top of the bush (tall olearia trees). Then quite suddenly they stopped flying and plummeted straight down through the vegetation. They take terrific punishment as

they drop vertically, smashing into trees and landing with a good, loud thump. Imagine about two pounds dead weight dropped from about 30 feet and you'll get the idea. Then you see a miracle. They get up and waddle along a track to the appropriate burrow which invariably will be only a few feet away. Their navigation is quite deadly."



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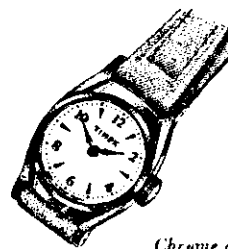
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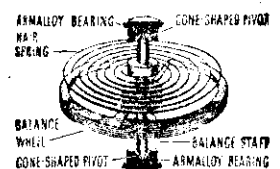


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