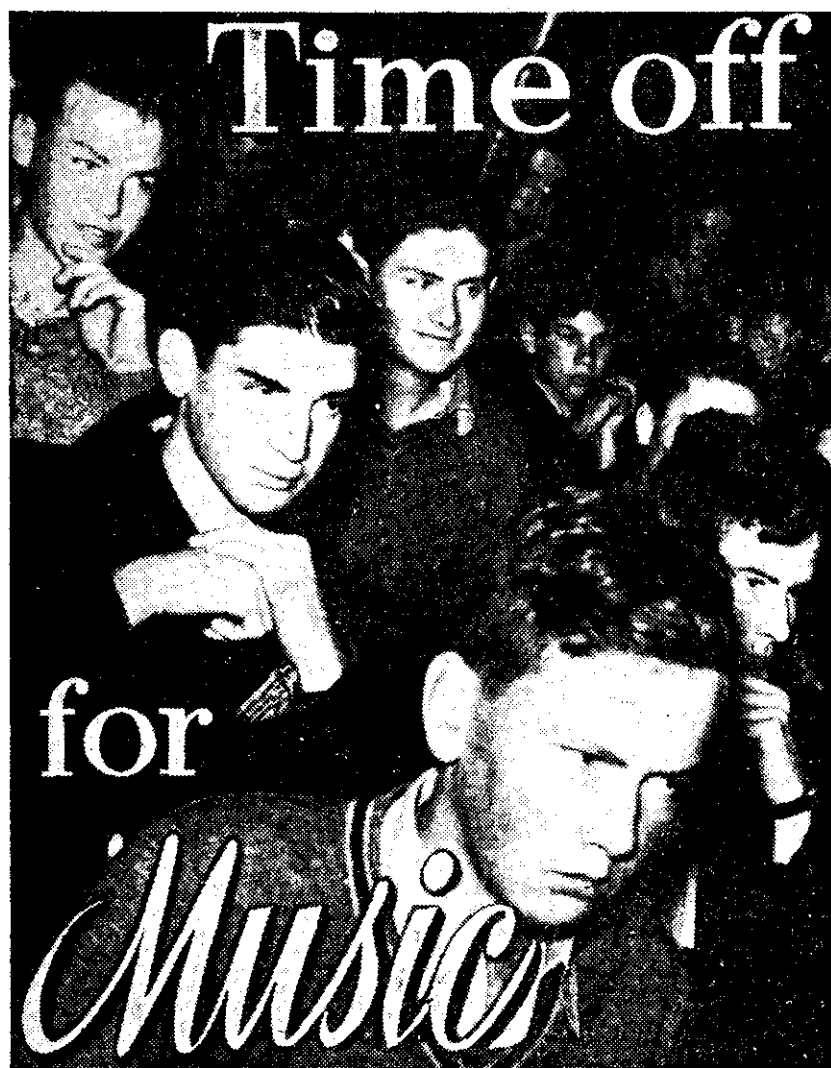




THE magic of music. You can put it down to that if you like. Whatever it may be, it is much more than good discipline or an afternoon off from school that keeps 1200 boys and girls quiet as mice when the National Orchestra plays to them.

Hamilton, New Plymouth, Palmerston North, and then Whangarei, Hastings, Napier and Gisborne. Capacity houses, of course. There were never enough seats to accommodate all the children who would have liked to be at the concerts. As I say, an hour or two away from school might be sufficient to lure these youngsters to the concert hall, but it takes more than this to keep them attentive for over an hour through a programme that, in parts, asked a good deal of their listening. And these youthful audiences were right on the ball, with much less fizzling and coughing than you would get from many adult audiences. For all of us making the music, it was an inspiring experience.

Post-primary school children make the finest of concert audiences. They have heard enough music to respond spontaneously, but they are still a long way off losing the capacity for wonder and for being thrilled by it all. Nor are their ears yet cluttered up by convention or anything in the way of pseudo-intellectualism. Except for an occasional unfortunate, their approach is not warped by snobbishness. The boys have come along—a number of them, anyway—with a suspicion that this music business might still be the “sissy” occupation they had always believed it to be.

Recently the National Orchestra, under the conductorship of Owen Jensen, gave a series of Schools Concerts in seven North Island centres. Here Mr. Jensen reports on the reception given them by their young audiences

But if they came along to shuffle they remained to clap; and most enthusiastically everyone did.

These audiences knew what they liked. What's more, and just as important, they had subtle ways and means of letting you know when they didn't like the music so much.

The programme played by the National Orchestra in these school concerts opened with the overture to Mozart's Opera *Il Seraglio*. Then came the first movement of Dvorak's “New World” symphony, with some introductory commentary about the main themes and the instruments playing them. There were five variations from Elgar's *Enigma* Variations, with brief sketches of Elgar's friends portrayed in the music. The concert ended with a bright march from Britten's *Soirées Musicales*. In the first series of concerts, Vincent Aspey played the last movement of the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto. This was replaced in the second series by a movement from a Mozart Violin Concerto, with Francis Rosner as soloist.

The music was chosen, in the first instance, to give pleasure to the child-

ren which, after all, should be the basic aim of any programme. But it was music, too, worth remembering, music which they were likely to hear again and would want to hear again.

An audience of school children has a wider diversity of approach than most adult audiences. It is a variation, not of taste which is still only in the process of being discovered, but of response. And individual response may be coloured by a number of factors—personal reaction to music generally, background of experience, the prestige given music at school, and in the home. It would be impossible to please everyone, even less than the whole of any ordinary concert audience. Our programme was presented for the more alive among the children, those whose ears would be all agog, and for those who came from schools where music plays a significant part in the curriculum. It was hoped that these would carry the others along with them. And that's the way it seemed to work out.

You can probably guess which was the most popular piece in the programme. It was the foot-tapping brightness of the Britten March, which always received an extra hand and which we had to repeat at every concert. After all, it was, too, the last item in the programme, which must have been a relief to some at least. Second choice was divided between the Mozart overture and the Elgar variations. Each had plenty of orchestral colour, and if listening went astray among the complications of the variations, there was always the story to put it back on the rails again. The Mendelssohn concerto was preferred to the Mozart. (Hastings and Napier, incidentally, missed out on the concerto through a misunderstanding about the requisitioning of orchestral parts.) Dvorak and his symphony came a by no means unhappy last, possibly because the introductory comments this time were no story but a talk about the themes, and an invitation for a little more concentrated thinking.

And then there was the double-bassoon which mysteriously appeared in the last Elgar variation, had to take its own especial bow, to be received with great joy as it gave a light-hearted solo. This was part of the informality of these school concerts. The music was presented, not as some esoteric rite, but as the best of entertainments.

For instance, when it was discovered at Gisborne that the first flute was

having a birthday, the orchestra cheerfully played “Happy Birthday” in a variety of keys that must have astonished as much as its performance delighted the children. The introductory comments were given not only as throwing a little light on the music, but to hold the attention when all else might fail. For this reason, I had no qualms, things being what they are round the countryside these days, of giving Elgar's “Troyte” variation a football twist.

In all these goings-on, the Orchestra joined with a right good will. In fact, the whole-hearted co-operation of all the players, their going-out, as it were, to the audiences, contributed more than half the success of the concerts. They gave the impression of having come especially to play for the children—which they had, of course. And the children, I am sure, appreciated this.

Now, what does all this amount to? Too much should not be made of the enthusiasm, nor of the order of preference. Children have an innate politeness which, unless they are particularly bored with a situation, will come out. They know what they like best and probably what they like least, but they haven't had time yet to sort out the in-betweens. One boy solved this problem by putting his hand up for everything when the audience was asked to show its order of preference! And there are many, I'm sure, who thrilled to what is without a doubt the loudest musical noise they had ever heard.

These audiences were still learning the ins and outs of music. Even those who had been prepared at school for the music they were to hear, would probably be more than somewhat hazy about what their elders call “good” music. The music that gripped them was that which had easily felt rhythm, or colour, or something on which the imagination could be pin-pointed. If it turned out to be “good” music, so much the better.

One impression above all others remains about these concerts. These are the audiences of the future. They will be the best of audiences. With these concerts, the National Orchestra is bringing in more than money, something much more permanent. It is the goodwill, the happiness, and something significant towards the character building of up-and-coming citizens. It is a civilising influence. And that's something we need as much as anything in New Zealand.

ADULTS will be able to eavesdrop on a programme originally intended for younger listeners when “Children Meet a String Quartet” is broadcast from 2YC at 7.0 p.m. on Tuesday, July 17. A group of ten to twelve year olds have an entertaining time in the studio with the American La Salle Quartet. As it is the first time the children have seen a string quartet, Walter Levin, the leader, introduces the instruments and the music. The quartet play short pieces by Haydn and Mozart and enjoy themselves with Bartok's “Day in the Life of a Fly” and the Pacific Island drums in Ernest Bloch's “Tongatabu.” Next week at the same time the Quartet will be heard in a programme for 13-14 year olds.

