

RARE GOFF HARPSICHORD FOR THE NZBS

ONE of the most unusual acquisitions of the NZBS for many years will arrive in New Zealand some time this month. At the moment it lies in its tin-lined case in the hold of a ship, somewhere off the coast. When it has been unpacked and re-assembled it will make its first public appearance in the Wellington Town Hall on October 3 in a performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. It is a double keyboard harpsichord made by one of the most celebrated harpsichord makers of the present day—Thomas Goff, of London. At this performance it will be played by Dr. Thornton Lofthouse, a well-known London continuo player, at present examining in New Zealand for the Royal Schools of Music.

Its maker, Thomas Goff, born in 1898, lives in a studio at the top of a house in Pont Street, London. Some years ago he retired from his original profession of law, and since then has devoted his life to the making of keyboard instruments. His clavichords and harpsichords are world famous. It takes him about a year to build a harpsichord, and the instrument to arrive here is known as harpsichord No. 6. In London it is already a celebrity, and has been played at the Wigmore Hall, in a concert with four harpsichords at the Royal Festival Hall, and it has been used for recordings for gramophone companies. In a letter to James Robertson, Thomas Goff wrote: "I believe that it is the best harpsichord we have made. . . I planned with some reluctance to sell it." Mr. Goff likes to sell his instruments to people he knows and in this instance James Robertson provided the link.

For a long time the National Orchestra has needed such an instrument. "All baroque music needs the harpsichord," said Mr. Robertson; "the National Orchestra's programmes have been a bit thin on Bach and Handel due to the difficulty of finding a suitable harpsichord. Now that this instrument will soon be here I hope it can be used in all concerts of baroque music in Wellington and Lower Hutt."

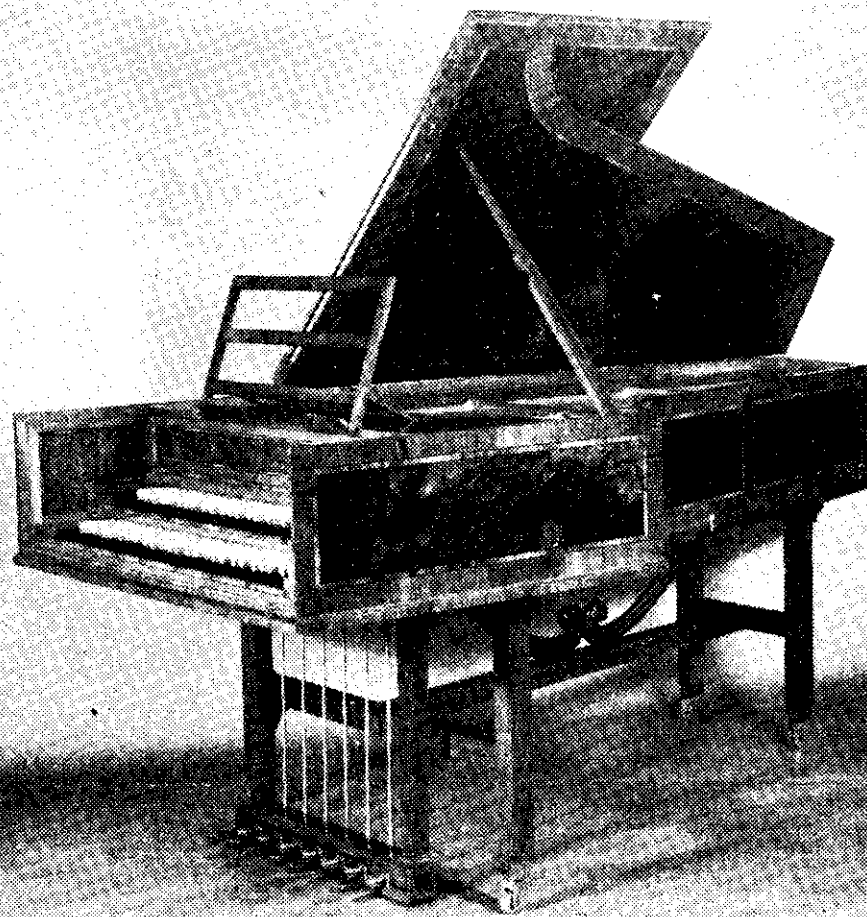
Our photo shows an instrument of striking beauty, its case veneered in burr walnut, and inlaid with tulip wood and

ebony. It has two keyboards, seven pedals and five jack-racks. It can produce over 150 variants of sound and its mechanism can be easily regulated. Harpsichords quickly go out of tune if moved, so this instrument, designed to be carried around London, has been built on an aluminium frame. Thomas Goff is especially proud of his cases, and all his instruments are fine examples of the craftsman's art. He has found that the beauty of the case helps to preserve the instrument as people tend naturally to look after beautiful things. Six pages of detailed notes on the tuning and care of the instrument have already arrived, and Mr. Robertson hopes that a member of the orchestra who is good at tuning and maintenance can be found to look after it. "It is so delightful to tune," writes Mr. Goff, "and the beauty of the instrument depends on the time given to it."

Harpsichords had a proud place amongst other orchestral instruments from about 1600 to 1800, and were indispensable in nearly all kinds of music making. In the orchestra they usually took the continuo part, holding the bass line and keeping the ensemble together, when they were not being used as solo instruments. When the early pianos lost their uncouthness and began to sound musical the harpsichord was thrust to one side and all over Europe the new instrument reigned supreme. Harpsichords were converted into pianos and merchants would offer to trade them in against the new instrument. Some found their way into private museums, others found new uses in private homes. Recently a harpsichord was found in a French farmhouse being used as a sideboard. At the Paris Conservatoire the professor of harpsichord was exchanged for a professor of piano in 1798, and 100 harpsichords were put in storage in the academy attic. Here they remained until in the severe winter of 1816 they were taken down and burnt as firewood.

Harpsichord music can be played on the piano, but often the original instrument gives a better effect. This is especially so in continuo playing with an orchestra. The harpsichord, with its strings plucked by quills on mechanical fingers sounds more like a stringed instrument, and blends better with an orchestra than the percussive piano. It is at its best in fast passages when it makes a sparkling, joyous sound of great power.

To get the best out of the instrument players learn a technique with



★ THE GOFF harpsichord in all its splendour of burr walnut and tulip wood. RIGHT: Dr. Thornton Lofthouse, who will introduce it to concertgoers at Wellington in October ★

a special kind of touch in which the key is gripped in a claw-like manner. One authority says "a catlike approach will avert the explosive clash characteristic of the dive-bombing attack," and he gives detailed instructions on how to achieve a good follow through. Foremost among present-day harpsichord players is Wanda Landowska, who early this century began giving harpsichord concerts on an instrument specially built for her. A school of players has now grown up, and at the same time some modern composers have written works for the restored instrument—Falla's harpsichord concerto, for example, Poulenc's *Concert Champêtre*, both written for Wanda Landowska. Recently the harpsichord has even found its way into jazz.

The harpsichord's main limitation is that with plucked strings the sound can not be sustained. Instrument makers used to turn themselves inside out trying to find ways of solving this prob-



lem, but it was not overcome until strings struck by hammers were used in the piano. Slow passages show the different capabilities of the instrument very clearly. The harpsichord, however, has its own qualities, and these are nowhere more evident than when it is setting the pace for the orchestra with an exhilarating freedom.



WANDA LANDOWSKA, foremost among today's harpsichord players