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RADIO REVIEW

Still Falls the Rain

THE Aldeburgh Festival programme last week included a work that impressed me very deeply, *Canticle No. 2, Still Falls the Rain*, the poem by Edith Sitwell, set to music by Benjamin Britten. What a remarkable young man Britten is! The Aldeburgh Festival crystallises round his splendid series of talents, as pianist, composer, conductor, and *genius loci*, for Aldeburgh, I understand, is where he spent his boyhood. The canticle, for horn, voice and piano, is a memorial to the Australian pianist Noel Mewton-Wood, who died tragically some years ago. I heard Mewton-Wood as a very young man during the war, and could therefore agree with Britten's moving spoken tribute to an artist of genius. Edith Sitwell's poem is subtitled *The Raids, 1940, Night and Dawn*, and it is one of her finest works, equating the sufferings of the world with those of "the Starved Man hung upon the Cross." Horn and voice do not play together until the last verse; the earlier ones consist of voice and piano, with bridge passages for piano and horn. Peter Pears's voice is not golden, but it

has an odd unmistakable sheen at its best, and most compelling it was, tracing the long threads of the slow, involuted melody, with only a few perfect fifths from the piano as accompaniment. Dennis Brain, who must be one of the world's finest players on the French horn, certainly England's best, has a tone of great refinement and eloquence. I find it difficult to do justice in words to this deeply moving threnody; I hope therefore that there will be many chances of hearing it again.

Probing Too Sedulous

HOW fortunate for the illustrious dead that their great talents were not subjected to the kind of teasing scrutiny that radio and television now perform! Consider this: "Now, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, you are perhaps the most famous composer of the Western world. But it seems to me that in your opera *The Magic Flute*, you created a barrier between yourself and your admirers by your explicit references to the masonic movement. Could you, perhaps, enlighten us on what was in your mind?" I hope that W. A. Mozart would have told his interlocutor what to do with his question. But it was in just such a coy, but to me, impertinent manner, that Walter Allen approached Graham Greene in the last of the *We Write Novels* series on the Catholicism of his novel, *The End of the Affair*. Greene was polite, but urbane and evasive. I wrote last week rather strongly against this series. Now that it is over, I will say more strongly that I think the whole series was a mistake, and that Walter Allen should not have been allowed to muck about with the talents of his betters. I don't suggest that any harm will accrue to the novelists as a result of the probings of their talents, which are too firmly grounded for that; I do think it impertinent to ask artists to explain themselves in literal terms on the nature of their work, which is, as it should always be, secret and obscure. By their works, ye shall know them.

—B.E.G.M.

Wolfit in Babylon

I BEGAN by being rather irritated by *Nebuchadnezzar*. Those mincing English voices; those Dorothy L. Sayers modernisations; those coy little character touches, which are really so superficial! Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego sounded more like the members of a London literary society than like Biblical characters, and Nebuchadnezzar himself like a Gauleiter with a soft spot for nature poetry. But, as the play proceeded, and advanced out of that matey English style which seems to be the modern form for Biblical plays, it increased in depth and interest. The episode of the fiery furnace was no anticlimax, and the final scenes of the King's degradation and regeneration were genuinely moving. Donald Wolfit's superb, fruity voice—the most radio-genic I know—made Nebuchadnezzar a truly regal figure, and, as a broken old man, he carried full conviction. Wolfit is never afraid to act, even at the risk of being called a ham, and, at his best, as Volpone, Richard III and Nebuchadnezzar, he carries us to heights the average radio actor never even glimpses.

Lightest Africa

WITH South African racial problems looming so large these days, the BBC programme *Gold Coast Experiment* (1YC) had a particularly topical interest. A documentary, done with all the customary BBC know-how, it dramatised the advent of independence for the Gold Coast within the British Commonwealth. The use of many voices, the careful sketching-in of background and history, the occasional snatches of native music all combined to give a very tangible impression of the Coast and its problems. I was especially struck by the articulateness and common sense of the native spokesman. The stress was on "creative abdication," and there was a certain amount of understandable self-congratulation on the British side. Throughout, I couldn't help contrasting the Gold Coast situation with that in South Africa, something which, from a hint or two in the programme, seemed

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WE'RE getting used to the concerts for schools by the National Orchestra, but it is rarely that they associate in performance with the schools themselves. When they do the result is impressive, and this is due partly to rigorous rehearsal, and partly to the music of Vaughan Williams, whose works always seem to be chosen for such combined concerts. The case in point is in *Folk Songs of the Four Seasons*, some of which were sung (YC link) by the Dunedin Technical College Choir, with telling effect, especially in the ingenious setting of "Summer is Icumen In." Haydn's 49th Symphony (*La Passione*) was played with considerable charm which made light of its serious moments, and inspired some of its tedious ones; and in the same programme—was there some implicit connection in the titles?—Strauss's *Don Juan* received a rousing rendering that made it sound more like a festal overture.

One of the hardest concertos to bring off at a live performance must be Bach's second Brandenburg Concerto. The difficulties bristle cactus-like on all sides; the fantastic technique required of the trumpet, the balancing of it with violin, oboe and flute, the meshing of these with the strings, the co-ordination with

the continuo—all these and more must be perfected before a performance. Yet it has been done, as nearly successfully as one could imagine (4YC) with the aid of Ken Smith as trumpeter and James Robertson conducting from the keyboard in best Bach style. The trumpet never overweighed the other soloists, articulated beautifully, and, in fact, did all the things that a trumpet can hardly ever do; Mr. Smith is a true artist of his instrument. The whole ensemble worked well together, though some minor problems of balance had still to be solved. Altogether this was one of the most invigorating changes heard from the Orchestra for some time.

Maurice Clare and Vivien Dixon played a Theme and Variations for two violins by Alan Rawsthorne (NZBS) with true intonation and considerable virtuosity. The work itself leans heavily towards atonality without being excessively unpleasant: spiky and pungent it is, but not malodorous. Still, it is a long way from being a hit tune, however skilfully played, and it was something of a relief to reach a more frank and obvious Sonata of Leclair, full of real tunes as opposed to slightly academic melody. Two violins are really rather nice: you get much of a quartet's sonority with none of its uncertainties.

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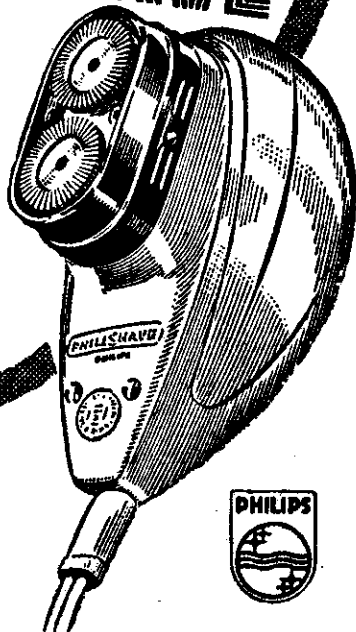
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