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The Audience Applauding

A CORRESPONDENT in *The Times*, London, suggested recently that the clapping of hands could be replaced by some less strenuous form of applause. People who went often to concerts, he said, found the exercise fatiguing; and he thought a tribute to a good performance could be paid more gracefully if handkerchiefs were waved in the general direction of the stage. A second correspondent said that an even better practice was for the audience to rise and bow to the performers. Some objections were made to both proposals, and presently the discussion lapsed.

It seems unlikely that innovations would be favoured in New Zealand. There is no nonsense about clapping; anyone can do it, and nobody becomes conspicuous—except, perhaps, the person who claps on stolidly when everyone else is ready to go home, and drags the applause up to the volume necessary for another curtain call. With the waving of handkerchiefs, however, all would be changed. Half the audience would be under a handicap. It is not reliably known what use can be made of handkerchiefs sold to women, presumably on the assumption that the female nose is exclusively an ornament; but they are obviously unfitted for large-scale demonstrations. Men are better equipped, if they can be relied on not to disgrace their wives by bringing handkerchiefs unsuitable for the occasion; but the practice would cause uneasiness in the Health Department, whose officers must already have noticed the amount of coughing that goes on in any New Zealand theatre at any time of the year.

Even less could be said for the polite, approving bow. In some countries it might be a spontaneous tribute; but the thought of middle-aged New Zealanders revealing unexpected graces of deportment, and making themselves red-faced with the effort, puts us all out of character. Further, the competitive spirit would creep in.

Some people would bend lower than necessary; others would seem to be perfunctory simply because their waistlines could allow nothing better. But New Zealanders have a long way to go before they need to consider new ways of applauding. Although they have been less inhibited in recent years, perhaps because concerts have been more numerous, they have not yet exhausted the possibilities of clapping. True, there are signs here and there of an eager spirit under constraint. At the first appearance in Wellington of Victoria de los Angeles the sound of "Ole" was heard (we are credibly informed) from one seat in the dress circle. It was tentative, and soon subsided; but we cannot know how swiftly the Spanish mood might have prevailed if the solitary voice had persisted. Such things are portents.

New Zealanders are phlegmatic. Yet beneath their reticence is a capacity for enthusiasm which can become explosive. A high incidence of apoplexy would undoubtedly have been reported from Eden Park if, when Peter Jones scored his try in the fourth Test match against the Springboks, silence had been mandatory. It is natural, of course, that crowds should cheer at football matches, which provide the people with their deepest emotional experience. The response to music, which even in a concerto does not—or should not—involve the will to win, is understandably quieter. Yet many people are moved by good music. The end of a performance brings relief from tension; applause completes the experience and allows an audience to clap its way back to tranquillity. And what of the artist who has passed through the crisis of performance? Can the passionate mood and the strain of nerves be eased away by a fluttering of handkerchiefs or any other ghostly applause? Far better, for artist and audience, is the outbreak of clapping, growing in volume until it rolls on like the sea, tumultuously.

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