

# "THE MASTERSINGERS"—from the 1956 Bayreuth Festival

WITH a flourish of trumpets, listeners to 2YC and 4YC at 6.30 p.m. on Sunday, November 25, will be taken inside the Festival Theatre at Bayreuth in Bavaria for a complete performance of Wagner's *Mastersingers* from the 1956 Festival. This is a new production by Wieland Wagner, for when it was performed in 1951 the pre-war sets and costumes were used. It is conducted by André Cluytens, and the cast includes Gustav Neidlinger, Josef Greindl, Wolfgang Windgassen, Gerhard Stolze, Lore Wissmann and Georgine von Milinkovic. It will be heard from 1YC and 3YC at 6.30 p.m. on Sunday, December 2.

The Bayreuth Festival under Wolfgang and Wieland Wagner has now set out on new and illustrious paths. It was in 1876 that the Festival began with a performance of *The Ring of the Nibelung*. Since then it has fought its way through numerous difficulties until during the last war it was forced to close down. Even before the war it had become somewhat discredited in the eyes of the rest of the world, as the Nazis found Wagner a convenient symbol for their reign and when Hitler began to attend performances many eminent conductors such as Toscanini refused to take part. After the outbreak of war the performances continued until 1941, when with the Russian offensive the struggle became grimmer and all luxuries disappeared. Much of the scenery from Bayreuth was sent to Berlin for performances of opera, and there most of it was lost in air-raids. At Bayreuth, Wagner's villa was partly demolished, and the end of the war



GUSTAV NEIDLINGER (baritone), who has the role of Hans Sachs in the 1956 Bayreuth presentation of "The Mastersingers"

found the theatre about to be turned into a movie house for American troops.

During the occupation years it was used for a wide variety of shows—from *Madam Butterfly* to Bing Crosby. As order was restored plans began to emerge for the reopening of the theatre. The authorities were willing to grant permission on one condition, however—that Winifred Wagner, who had run the Festivals during the difficult years after her husband's and Cosima's death, should relinquish control and let her

sons Wieland and Wolfgang take over. This she gladly agreed to do.

Wieland Wagner, Wagner's grandson, who has produced most of the first operas, reopened the theatre with a performance of Beethoven's 9th Symphony conducted by Furtwangler. He chose it because it was a favourite of Wagner's, and one which Wagner himself had conducted in Bayreuth on his 60th birthday, the day he laid the foundation stone of the theatre. On the following day Wieland Wagner's new production of *Parsifal* was performed, and when this was succeeded by *The Ring* the Festival was truly in motion again.

Audiences who knew the pre-war performances saw a completely different style of production. Gone were the detailed, sumptuous sets and all the trappings of what had become known as "realism." Instead, Wieland Wagner, a gifted and courageous man of the Theatre, had gone back to the beginning, and, using all the modern devices he could, including a complex light organ, staged these music dramas with simple settings, imaginative lighting and new stage technique.

Gradually the other operas were added and he managed to secure many of the best artists in Europe and overseas. Last year, for instance, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau made his Bayreuth debut. Visitors noticed an improvement in the productions each year, but sometimes Wieland and Wolfgang did not find it altogether easy to abandon the old ideas completely. Some of them lingered on and in last year's *Tannhauser* there was an unhappy combination of two

styles of production, the pre-war and the post-war. Even the lighting displayed uncertainties. At the end of the 1954 *Tannhauser* a visitor described how Elisabeth's bier was represented by a pyramid of angels that, dimly lit, "gave a dramatic poignant touch." Last year it was so brightly lit "that one inevitably began to count the angels, or to examine their carved features."

How Wieland would stage *The Mastersingers* was a question that was eagerly discussed by followers of the Festival, for this opera has a larger proportion of everyday scenes in it than the others, and would fit less easily into Wieland's new style of production.

The answer was fairly unanimous—and definitely in favour of radio audiences rather than those who were in the theatre. "Musically it was one of the finest performances I have heard—being much better than in 1951," wrote Gerard Bourke in *Musical Opinion*, but he complained that the staging was an unfortunate mixture. "The finale, which the producer's grandfather set by the fragrant banks of the Pegnitz River, took place in what amounted to a lecture theatre. Pale yellow and light grey costumes were worn by all, and with the Mastersingers wearing academic gowns seated around a yellow dais, the effect of a conversazione, or of an operating theatre was complete. . . . The visual effect of this extraordinary setting left me unable to concentrate on the music for several minutes. . . . Undistracted, radio listeners may well feel that for once it was better not have been there in person."

## THE HIGHLY-ESTEEMED "GOON SHOW"

TAKE cover! The Goons are here again. Their latest lunacy will assail the ears of New Zealand listeners next week, when a new series of *The Goon Show* will begin. Peter Sellers, the man of many voices, that ebullient coloratura Harry Secombe, and Spike Milligan, the true, living Goon, bring a whole galaxy of brilliant absurdities to

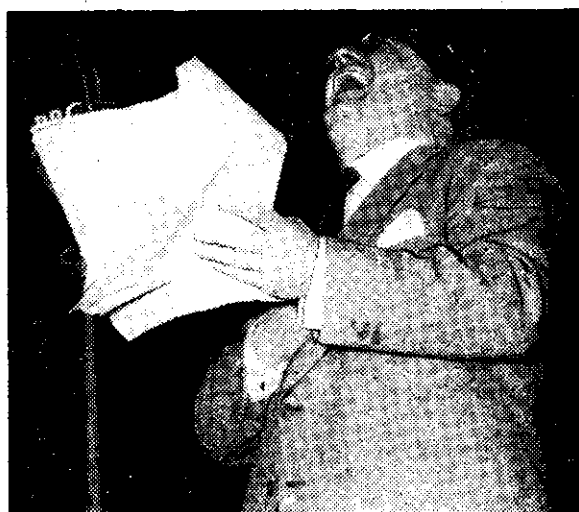
their thousands of certified 'listeners (they ought to be certified, anyway). The Goonery is just as crazy as ever. Ned Seagoon's laughter echoes just as madly through this series, and Eccles's brain power has not increased by the slightest fraction of a microvolt.

It has been said that *The Goon Show* is an acquired taste, but after the first

series had been heard in Britain, judging from the size of the show's fan mail, a large number of people managed to acquire it. Letters of congratulation and approval have been received from bishops, dons, charladies, school teachers and children from eight or nine years upwards.

Fantastic as the Goon Show plots are, there is always a reason for everything that happens. Each Goon story is a struggle between the forces of evil and those of good. "What we do," says Peter Eton, the producer, "is to take some story-line which threatens the welfare of Britain and the Commonwealth itself. It must, at the very least, be a story strong enough to endanger the Government—the tale of the Phantom Head Shaver, for instance, in which Brighton became a city of terror, and had to be cordoned off by the military. Or, again, there was the story of the Batter Pudding Hurler. There'll never be another show like it, for the simple reason that everyone concerned is an individualist."

When "The Critics" (A BBC panel of mainly serious, well-known writers and critics) discussed *The Goon Show*, it emerged that most of them were surprisingly fond of it. Michael Ayrton



BBC photograph

SECOMBE at the mike



BBC photograph

DAVID ALLEN, sound effects expert of "The Goon Show," and one of the hardest-working members of that enterprise

(artist and author) described it as "the wittiest, most irrational of those weekly diversions which derive from the golden age of *ITMA* . . . it has tremendous pace and flawless timing which is the making of such programmes." He admitted that he never missed a show if he could help it.

Once again, the Goons are supported by the Ray Ellington Quartet, Max Geldray, and Wally Stott conducting the orchestra. *The Goon Show* will be heard from 2YZ at 8.30 p.m. on Friday, from 1YZ at 8.30 on Saturday, and from all YC stations and 4YZ at 9.30 on Saturday.