

FESTIVAL WITH A DIFFERENCE

AMONG the many music festivals which are now held all over the world it is unusual to find a competition where in rotation prizes are offered for the makers of instruments as well as for composers and performers. Such a competition is held annually at Liège in Belgium and already it has won itself high international prestige. The Competition is concerned with the string quartet and was started in 1951 by the Quartet Ensemble of the city of Liège. They wanted to encourage all aspects of string playing and the contest seeks to emphasise the close harmony that must exist among composers, performers and craftsmen.

Craftsmen from all over Europe have been attracted by the instrument making

competition, first held in 1954 when it was won by a Frenchman, Jean Bauer, and to be staged again this year. Instead of submitting single instruments, entrants have to submit a complete quartet—two violins, a viola and a cello. They are asked to respect the classical canons generally accepted today for the making and designing of instruments but entries must not be imitations of old models. The wood must not have been artificially seasoned by any chemical process to produce premature maturity of tone and on the technical side they ask that the scroll be of simple shell pattern, the peg of rosewood, and that no additional ornament, purfling or decoration be added. When the instruments arrive at Liège they are unpacked and put on dis-

play in the city museum to await their trial. A panel of experts, which includes master craftsmen and an acoustics expert then examines the instruments for their craftsmanship and listens to their quality of tone. The Quartet of the City of Liège plays the same programme of classical, romantic and modern chamber music on each set and after this the jury is ready to make its decisions. The first prize is worth £1000 and the winning instruments are bought by the City of Liège which keeps them for the use of the most talented violinists of its violin school. A special label is put inside the prize-winning instruments, which thus carry the distinction all their lives.

There have been three competitions for composers and last year nearly a

hundred specially written works poured in from 22 different countries. The Liège Quartet used to play all the works submitted but as they were in manuscript this proved too arduous. Now an international committee spends three months reading all the works and last year they selected thirteen to be played by the quartet.

The tapes of five of the prizewinners have been made available to the NZBS through the courtesy of the Belgian Legation and these will be played in a series of programmes from all YCs starting on Friday, February 22 at 8.0 when quartets by the first prize winner, Manfred Kelkel of Germany, and by Amédée Borsari, of France, third prize, will be played.

Two competitions for performers have been held. In 1952 the winner was the Parrenin Quartet (see photograph) which will be coming to New Zealand in April and May of this year for the N.Z. Federation of Chamber Music Societies. Many of their performances will be broadcast.

Liège is an industrial town, over 200,000 strong, specialising in making steel and firearms and in coal mining. It has over the years developed a reputation for producing good string players. Its conservatorium is celebrated and it has also been the birthplace of several composers such as Grétry and César Franck, and the home of violin virtuosos such as Vieuxtemps and Eugène Ysaye. Surprisingly enough, despite its record of having players in many orchestras all over Europe the violin in Liège is not a "popular" instrument in the sense that it is in some regions of Hungary and Bohemia. Between them, however, Brussels and Liège have produced some extremely fine violinists and teachers of violin and given Belgium an enviable reputation for fine string playing.



THE PARRENIN QUARTET, of Paris, winners of the Liège competition for performers in 1952. This quartet will visit New Zealand in April and May. The members are Jacques Parrenin (first violin), Serge Collot (viola), Marcel Charpentier (second violin), and Pierre Penassou (cello).

Willowy, Ash-blond—and Wild

IF you haven't heard of Maria Callas the first thing to say is that she is one of the great dramatic sopranos of the world with a gift for taking a swing at people who get in her way. One of her most celebrated victims—who soon picked herself up—was the equally famous soprano Renata Tebaldi. Their quarrel became public through the pages of *Time* when Maria said of Tebaldi "I sing and act like someone possessed . . . She's got no backbone. She's not like Callas." The two prima donnas had been making alternate appearances at La Scala, Milan. Year by year Tebaldi was reported to have reduced her appearances until in 1955 she didn't appear at all. Tebaldi refuted this charge of being driven away:

"I am truly astonished by the statements made by my colleague Signora Maria Callas regarding me. The signora admits to being a woman of character and says that I have no backbone. I reply: I have one great thing that she has not—a heart. That I actually trembled when I knew she was present at a performance of mine is utterly ridiculous. It was not Signora Callas who caused me to stay away from La Scala; I sang there before she did, and consider myself a *creatura della Scala*. I stayed away of my own free will because an atmosphere not at all pleasant had been created there."

After the Callas write-up letters for and against poured in. "Here is a terrible-tempered conceited character. . .

Who does she think she is? The Elvis Presley of the longhairs?" And from another detractor, "Callas has better acting ability, stage presence and general all-round zonk than Tebaldi. All that Tebaldi can do is sing better than Callas."

Reminded of all this fierce division of opinion by the news that 2YC was putting on a Callas recorded programme at the end of next week, *The Listener* heard some of the material assembled for the broadcast and listened to Callas in situations of violence, affection, ruthless and stark tragedy, and afterwards by way of contrast heard some discs of her rival Tebaldi. (Tebaldi on LPs usually has a better orchestra than Callas—who probably hires the cheapest available and relies on her own cover photo to sell the discs.) Finally we played some of Victoria de los Angeles. There were, indeed, three different styles of grand opera singing. We will not reveal our favourite, but no harsh words need be said about Maria Callas this time. She had a power and a quality that are probably increased a thousandfold if one is within range of her. Let the critics point out her innumerable faults and theirs be the trial of deciding whether in certain roles she is the greatest soprano there has ever been—all we know is that a powerful personality has been let loose. Is she an artist? Yes indeed, but at the moment, still a very wild one.

(2YC, 7.0 Saturday, February 23)

MARIA CALLAS—an artist with zonk.

