



OPERATIC SOPRANOS

Sir,—Your correspondent "Pill Box," commenting on various sopranos of today, makes a grave mistake in comparing Mado Robin, a true leggiero soprano, with Maria Callas, a dramatic-coloratura, and Renata Tebaldi, a dramatic-lyric soprano. Anyone who has made even the merest study of opera will realise that comparing a dramatic soprano with a leggiero is almost as pointless as comparing a tenor with a bass.

Your correspondent also throws in a reference to Sylvia Fisher, and prefers Robin to her without apparently ever having heard her! There is some slight comparison between Callas and Robin in that these two have sung the same coloratura arias—for example the "Bell Song" from *Lakmé*, but even here it is unsafe, as Callas ranges from such ultra-light roles as *Lakmé* and *Elvira* to the very heaviest of Italian dramatic roles: *Turandot* and *Aida*. In other words Callas is basically a dramatic soprano, or a lyric soprano with exceptional gifts who can lighten her tone and extend her range above top C. In fact, Callas's versatility is that of a vocal phenomenon, which neither Robin nor Tebaldi is.

To alter the argument a little, I find it hard to see how anyone could greatly admire Robin in any case. Her most objectionable faults, in my opinion, are her wide, fluttering tremolo, indistinguishable from a trill (a fault which many contemporary leggieros suffer from), which reminds one of Bernard Shaw's soprano: "When she sang a shake, she shook because she wanted to, and when she sang a held note, she shook because she couldn't help it!"; and her inability to recreate a dramatic situation in terms of voice alone. Her technique is just adequate, though it would not have got by in the days of Tetrassini, and her lower register is weak and thin. Admittedly she can sing a few semitones higher than any other soprano practising today, but is this any real virtue?

I desire to make no comparative claims for either Tebaldi or Callas, considering their relative abilities. In other words, Callas's wider range and greater variety permit one to overlook, to a certain extent, such technical faults as her wide, slow vibrato and uneven scale, more quickly condemned in a less versatile singer. This letter was written to object to ignorant comparison between utterly different types of soprano to none of whom can any such comparison do justice.

A. D. HAMMOND
(Auckland).

TALKING ABOUT BOOKS

Sir,—Mr O. E. Middleton's letter in *The Listener* (February 22), makes some of us wonder if the time has not arrived for a new approach to the subject of book reviews and book criticism, both over the air and in *The Listener*. The former, book reviewing, appears so often to be carried out by incompetents,

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or by writers, not caring much what they say, for the understandable reason that they are not allowed the space in which to say it. The latter, book criticism, is indeed rare in New Zealand.

Competence, of course, may be sometimes a matter of opinion. In a recent edition of *Book Shop*, to take a case in point, Mr Bruce Mason reviewed three New Zealand novels by James Courage, Dan Davin and Guthrie Wilson. Having written off Courage and Davin with a few words, Mr Mason proceeded to lavish his praise on Wilson's book, *Sweet White Wine*. His conclusion was that here, at last, we would find a mature New Zealand novel. Mr Arnold Wall agreed. Almost, we were led to believe, the great New Zealand novel.

Now it would have been useful if this singularly immature judgment could have been balanced by the views of other, more competent critics. They might have said that a view of life which is a peculiar mixture of Hollywood (Clark Gable days) and the general outlook of the more reactionary members of the R.S.A. could hardly be called mature. They might have said that, apart from a few competently written war action scenes, the book has no merit, literary or otherwise.

The point is that the opinions of book critics should be balanced by those of others. Even amongst the more competent critics, this balance is required. No doubt, many readers and listeners would like to take things about books straight from the horse's mouth; but when the horse happens to be Mr James Bertram, who can chew, with apparently equal relish, Maurice Duggan's *Immanuel's Land* and Antony Alper's *Katherine Mansfield*, who could be blamed for looking in its mouth, or even for asking if there are any other horses?

The suggestion is, then, a new approach to "talking about books," both in *The Listener* and over the air. Book reviews could be even more limited than they are, and turned over to anyone who wants to make a free book and to tell us what it's about. Three of the more competent critics could be chosen for the year, and, say eleven books, books that belong somewhere in the realm of creative art. The first month, these three critics could be asked to give us something of their views on life and literature; and, in each ensuing month, we would have one book reviewed by three different individuals. Not a discussion—we have seen the dangers of this—but three separate opinions.

Some such method would at least stimulate a creative criticism, if it is there to be stimulated. Indeed, on occasions there was an approach to this technique when Miss Sarah Campion owned *Book Shop*. It seems a pity that she relinquished the ownership.

IAN HAMILTON (Auckland).

(Mr. Bertram's reviews of *Immanuel's Land* and *Katherine Mansfield* were separated by two and a half years, a fact which suggests that they had some impact on at least one reader. We would have a low opinion of a New Zealand critic who could not handle these two books with equal relish.—Ed.)

UN INTERVENTIONS

Sir,—Mr de la Mare says that the basis of United Nations intervention must be "abstract justice." What is abstract has no relation to material things. The United Nations has to deal with material things—rights and wrongs between nations. It is therefore bound to intervene on a more mundane plane than that of abstract justice. And it should be in a position to enforce immediately obedience to its decrees. We

live in a world where force is still the final arbiter.

Whatever amendments may be made to the text of the Charter there should be a vital amendment to the spirit in which UN affairs are conducted. At present they amount to a scrimmage amongst blocs for power or the advantage of "interests." The criterion for decisions should be more in the nature of "Is this in the interest of the welfare of all nations?" When genuine welfare is the objective peaceful co-operation is possible. When power or interests are objectives, strife is inevitable.

As a body the United Nations lacks courage to come to grips with realities such as that genuine universal welfare implies a radical re-organisation of international relationships, industrial and commercial affairs; that Russian military might is the obstacle preventing the non-Communist world from planning and implementing universal disarmament, the abandonment of national armies and of arms manufacture; that the non-Communist world possesses resources which, pooled if need be, are adequate to remove that obstacle; that developing, through the international arms traffic, more and more armed groups is folly; that permitting the nuclear weapons race is lunacy that may destroy the whole world; and that in truth there can be no "domestic political factors outside its jurisdiction, because the nations are now so interdependent that no matter what of political importance happens inside them it is bound to have international repercussions.

So long as the veto exists, so long as delegates must give priority to the "interests" of the nations they represent, so long shall we fail to see in United Nations interventions any closer approach to the ideal we envisage when thinking of abstract justice.

J. MALTON MURRAY (Oamaru).

TE KAO SCHOOL

Sir,—The history is now being written of Te Kao Maori District High School (New Zealand's most northerly high school), which celebrates its 75th Jubilee this year, and of the development of the district. A booklet is being produced by Mr. J. H. Henderson, author and war historian, under the auspices of the Apouiri Trust Board. Any material such as memories of life in the district, gumdigging there, curious or amusing incidents, legends of the Apouiri tribe, photographs, stories of personalities of the district, etc., are urgently required. All material forwarded will be returned within two months, and acknowledgment of receipt will be made.

G. A. SIMPSON,
Headmaster, Te Kao M.D.H.S.,
Kaitia.

"FACADE"

Sir,—Most enjoyable was the NZBS production of *Facade*, a work which is unfortunately too often separated into performances of either words or music. I thought that the musical production tended to become a mere background to the narration at times—a little too timid? Not that the voice was too much in the ascendant: Keith Faulkner's narration was perfect. But neither should be in ascendancy over the other. As Osbert Sitwell said of the work, "Its primary objects were to exalt the speaking voice to the level of the instruments supporting it, to obtain an absolute balance between the volume of music . . . and the

sound of the words—neither music nor words were to be treated or taken as a separate entity."

In the original productions the words were spoken through a sengerphone, not the usual megaphone that your article indicated. It is a type of megaphone; but the Sitwells went to some trouble to acquire it from its inventor, a Swiss opera singer named Senger. Made from a fibre derived from compressed grasses, it was supposed to preserve the purity of the tonal quality it magnified and remove the metallic timbre associated with a megaphone. Also the mouthpiece covered not only the mouth, but lips and nostrils of the speaker, thereby retaining the resonance caused by the nasal cavities.

JOSETTE BRYAN (Upper Hutt).

STANDARD ENGLISH

Sir,—I was interested to read Ruby Clift's letter on standard English in reply to A. R. D. Fairburn's article. While I fully agree that all people applying for a teaching position should have as an essential qualification a good speaking voice, I do not agree that all teachers in England have it. I have lived many years both in England and New Zealand, and some of the most unpleasant voices I have ever heard have come from England; and definitely some of the worst enunciation.

Although I know there is tremendous room for improvement in speech here, I have been to many private gatherings where one and all spoke just as well as an equivalent gathering in London. I feel it is time the English people, and many New Zealanders, alas, ceased being so smug about English speech and critical about New Zealand accents and tried to improve bad or indistinct speech wherever they may hear it.

EILEEN KIMBELL (Auckland).

WELLINGTON DIOCESE

Sir,—In connection with the centenary of Wellington Diocese in 1958, a history is in course of preparation. So far we have been unable to obtain a photograph of Riwai Te Ahu, the second Maori ordained in New Zealand and the first Maori ordained in the Wellington Diocese. If any of your readers can help us in the quest for this photograph, we shall be most grateful. Information should be sent direct to the undersigned.

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Wellington.

ANSWERS TO CORRESPONDENTS

M. A. Dinham (Cambridge): Sorry; the discussion has lapsed.

Maurice E. McGreal (Auckland): Exceedingly careful auditors have found nothing to cut or query. If you will be so good as to give an example or two of the unseemliness you condemn, the necessary checks will be made at once. The feature is played by more than 20 Australian stations.

J. Hartley (Christchurch): Much too long in its present form.

R.P.K. (Auckland): Would like to, but space is a difficulty.

A. Davies (Auckland): Letters should be confined to broadcasting or to topics already raised in *The Listener*.

