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## Radio Review

### BACK TO BACH

OWEN JENSEN, who enlivened 1YC's Friday nights last year as he led us through the Mozart canon, is now well launched on a similar exploration of Bach. He is the liveliest and least consciously learned of cicerones, pausing in full cry to point to some feature of Bach's architecture which has just—so it seems—caught his eye, turning aside from the highway to jog down a little by-path in Bach's work, never rushing from one four-starred structure to another, and always solicitous of the traveller's ignorance, without patronising him. Perhaps it is because Mr Jensen never takes us too far too fast that I enjoy his sessions rather more than the Bach commemorative programmes of a year or so back. And he seems to have a gift for selecting recordings which show Bach at his best, as with the very beautiful Cantata No. 76 last week. Does he, I wonder, use a script, or merely notes? He is one of the few speakers who never lapse momentarily into a "reading tone"; and it is this sense of a spontaneous sharing of enthusiasms which makes his programmes so painlessly didactic.

### Theatre Anatomised

A HALF-HOUR talk on the current London theatre, under the title of *London Letter*, offers such opportunities for a catalogue of names, interspersed with a little newsy gossip, that Dr J. G. Pocock's lively, witty conspectus came as a delightful surprise. His direct comments on plays were informative and provocative, seemingly independent of vogue, save in the discussion of Brecht, and offering a refreshingly new slant on things which last month were *dernier cri*. But the incidental remarks were the real joy of Dr Pocock's talk—his brisk demolition of the "lucky Jim" myth, his reference to the "soft-minded Training College conformist, his New Zealand equivalent," his criticism of the chi-chi,

over-elaborated style of production, fading in London, but, he claimed, in the ascendant here, his interesting discussion of why the French can get away with "style" alone, but not the English. Not that I could agree with all his deductions and judgments. (Surely he was less than just to Claudel's *Christopher Columbus*?) But the vivacious criticism, and admirably high standards implied make this talk ever so much more than the usual emptying-out of theatrical crumbs from the traveller's knapsack.

—J.C.R.

### All Quiet Along the Potomac

THE American Civil War was the last full-scale conflict in which the basic issues of the struggle and the personalities of the principal combatants could seize the public imagination, and form the fructifying basis of myth and legend. I was reminded of this forcibly when listening to the BBC programme *The Blue and the Gray* (2B Sunday Showcase), an evocation through song of this bitterest of internecine wars. The songs were splendidly sung, sparsely and imaginatively orchestrated with melancholy trumpets behind the voices, and the Northern and Southern speakers were accurate in intonation, and eloquent both of the glories and the miseries of this savage dress rehearsal for global war. All the principal events of the war had their fitting memorial in song, and the great generals, Jackson, Lee, Sherman and Grant were appropriately celebrated. Stonewall Jackson's grotesquely ironical end, at the hand of one of his own pickets, was given a most moving elegy. In fact, apart from the ra-ra songs, "Marching Through Georgia," "Glory Hallelujah," and so on, the note of elegy was struck more often than any other, and the haunting cadences of "All Quiet Along the Potomac" had a most persuasive poetry. War has since then become progressively more horrible, and ever less personal, involving whole populations against their will, and the issues have become so vast and overwhelming, that no songs can appropriately express

### ★ The Week's Music . . . by SEBASTIAN ★

IT strikes me that Bach always gets a fair deal from the broadcasting and recording authorities, even more now that there are so many major works available on record. The whole thing has snowballed rapidly; of course, he wrote an immense quantity of music, but at the risk of being accused of sacrilege, I don't think it was all worthy of perpetuation. After all, he was writing for performance, not posterity; and some of the customs of the time demanded prolix works which today might prove tedious to all but the most rabid enthusiasts.

Be that as it may, no one can find fault with the Brandenburg Concertos, written with an art which allows us to admire their technique or to bask in their sunny moods, as we please. They open the series of programmes (NZBS link) of Bach's music, with Owen Jensen mellifluously introducing them. His scripts are good-tempered and almost gossipy, interspersing remarks on the music with titbits about Bach the man, without too much digression from the matter in hand. Perhaps a little more material on the cantatas would have been acceptable, since most of the music hangs so closely on the words, and only the minority of listeners would be able to translate at a hearing.

The Brandenburg Concertos were performed by the National Orchestra with James Robertson conducting, and a great variety of soloists, as these pieces demand; advantage was taken of the presence of Dr Thornton Lofthouse last year to enlist his services as continuo harpsichord player, which aided the effect considerably. Even more authenticity could have been obtained—if this was the object in view—by substituting recorders for the flutes used. Otherwise I can register no academic objections to the performances, apart from a hurried movement here and there, and a marked predilection for the sudden slowing or "hydraulic brake" effect at the end of a movement. Perhaps this is personal bias and is somewhat controversial, but I think the sound is ugly and impairs the vitality of the music that has gone before. Ken Smith's wonderful trumpet playing, which I have mentioned before, did much to make the second Concerto memorable, the others that I have heard being workmanlike but not especially distinguished. In all, I gained the impression that these programmes are designed for those who like Bach already, rather than to gain converts; which being so, we can afford to be critical of performance.

N.Z. LISTENER, APRIL 5, 1957.