

Night Thoughts

THERE is the story of the elderly lady, unused to three-speed gramophones, who, on playing a 33 1/3 record at 45, remarked with astonishment, "How much faster they take things today." Such virtuosity, which most of us cause accidentally at some time or other, has its place in a new series of experiments in music called "musique concrète," which started in French broadcasting studios after the war and is now highly developed in Continental radio. An Italian TV station bases its weekly theme tune on musique concrète, there is a French radio opera, and several LPs have been issued under the sponsorship of the International Music Council (Unesco). Musique concrète has not been fully exploited in Great Britain, but in a work specially commissioned for the Third Programme, a radiophonic poem *Night Thoughts*, by David Gascoyne, listeners can hear some tentative experiments in this medium by the composer Humphrey Searle.

Musique concrète, despite its name, has nothing to do with concrete mixers or mechanical equipment other than the fact that such sounds are likely to form its raw material. It has arisen in the present age because there are possibly more unusual sounds to be heard now than ever before and because they can be recorded accurately and technicians have the equipment to experiment freely with them. Musique concrète takes its sounds from the everyday world, but it alters them. A cough may sound like an avalanche, a whole composition may be based on a single note of the violin, splashes of water, the clatter of teacups or a piano chord may inspire a composition. There is some resemblance to sound effects, especially in the early works, but the musique concrète technician goes beyond this to build up patterns and structures of sound. He has innumerable possibilities. He can reverse sounds so that they increase to a percussive climax, he can

alter their pitch through speed alterations, he can accelerate or brake to give glissandos. By cutting off the moment of impact he can get an organ-like sound which he can then turn into an infinite sustained chord to build other sounds into. Besides all these possibilities he can filter and control the individual tones isolating their partials and fundamentals.

The effects of musique concrète vary greatly. In some pieces there is little more than the atmospheric feeling of good sound effects, in others there is the weird inhumanity of the interstellar music for *Journey Into Space*. It can be comic, restful or frightening. At present it is used mainly in radio and in film. It makes successful sound tracks for films and can give special effects in radio productions. It has attracted a few acknowledged composers such as Oliver Messiaen and Pierre Boulez, but its real founders and protagonists are the technicians Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry. It is often confused with another branch of sound experimentation—its rival electronic music, which originated in Germany and is entirely concerned with the artificial, electronic manufacture of sounds built up from a basic sinus tone.

Night Thoughts, written for a number of voices, is divided into three parts or movements. It opens with the poet sitting in his room at night, meditating

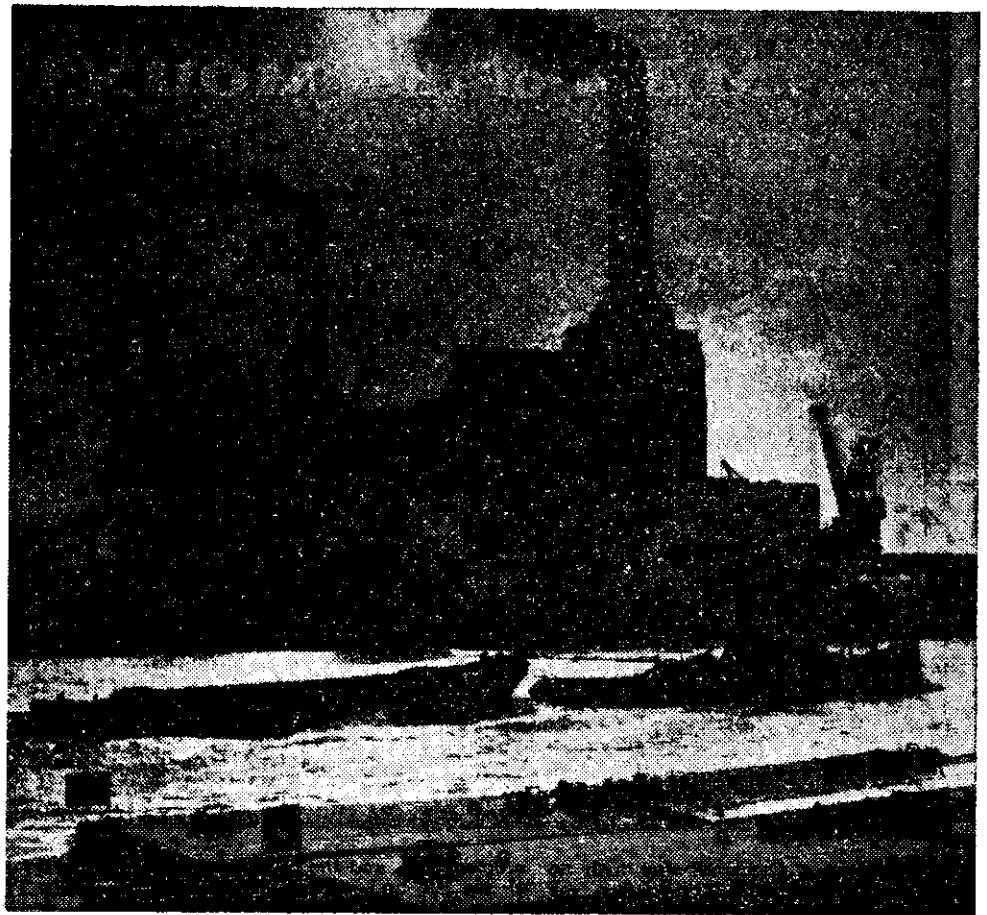
on the loneliness of the individual in the modern world. He walks along the river bank, past the power station whose "brick cliffs dominate the scene," into the city where everything is closed down and scarcely a soul is to be seen. In the second movement clouds of dreams enter, obscuring the moon. These are followed by real clouds and in complete darkness the poet finds that all the signposts now point in one direction only, and he is impelled to

the heart of the city. Here, at a place representing Piccadilly Circus in London, he descends into Megalopolis. People hurry in all directions, the undergrounds rush by, escalators move at high speeds—it is the height of the rush hour. Advertisements on the walls come to life and shriek at him, and he is rushed on until he becomes completely lost. Then there is the sound of trumpets, the scene dissolves and he is at home again with his sleeping wife and children. In the third movement the poet moves into the open air, "in the gardens of the night," and soliloquises on his experience.

Inevitably this work brings memories of other poems about the city—of James Thomson's "City of Dreadful Night," of the pictures of the city, crowds streaming across the bridge on their way to work, of the blank faces in the underground, in the poems of T. S. Eliot. For in *Night Thoughts* it is the modern city which symbolises deprivation, loss and inhumanity and which has sundered man's natural sense of community with himself, with other people and with things outside himself. The themes treated so imaginatively in this play have occupied David Gascoyne for many years. In a recent book of verse, in the title poem, "A Vagrant," he pictures the outcast lying outside listening to the sounds of the surrounding city.

The city's lack and mine are much the same. What, oh what can
A vagrant hope to find to take the place
Of what was once
Our expectation of the Human City, in
which each man might,
Morning and evening, every day, lead
his own life, and Man's?

In the epilogue of the play, the poet attempts to answer this question. *Night Thoughts* has been praised as one of the finest compositions specially written for radio. (1YC, 3YC, 4YC, Tuesday, May 14; 2YC, Thursday, May 16.)



"The poet walks along the river bank past the power station whose 'brick cliffs dominate the scene'"

The Story of Colonisation

FOR a single notion the English language usually has at least two names, one neutral, the other naughty. In the field of colonisation the naughty word these days is colonialism. A BBC series starting from 1YC this Saturday, May 11, touches both, but deals mainly with the older, less derogatory term.

Colonisation, as Bertrand Russell indicates in his introduction, dates back to around 3000 B.C., when settlers began spreading along the river valleys of Mesopotamia, Egypt, India and China.

In the second talk, the scholar and essayist Sir Harold Nicolson deals with the first true colonies of the West. These were the Phoenician trading centres along the east and south Mediterranean coasts, isolated from the mother city but without the independence enjoyed by many later Greek colonies. With these last, and with the invasions of Persia and Macedon, colonisation (or perhaps colonialism) by the sword enters Western history.

The Roman Empire, of which the archaeologist Sir Mortimer Wheeler speaks, was built largely by force. Yet its outstanding qualities, he says, were law, peace and tolerance. Peaceful, too,

was the Indian "drive" to the East outlined by C. H. Philips, of London University's School of African and Oriental Studies, in the fourth talk.

Talks five and six, by European historians Bernard Lewis and R. R. Betts respectively, reintroduce the martial note by dealing in turn with the expansion of Islam, which reduced

Christendom to an enclave, and with the "hammering hordes" which invaded and colonised Europe intermittently during the Middle Ages. The Indian historian Sirdar K. M. Panikkar concludes the series with a reassuring outline of the way in which civilised communities have throughout absorbed and assimilated their conquerors.

(1YC, Saturday, May 11, 7.43 p.m.; Saturday, May 18, 7.44 p.m., and on subsequent Saturdays.)



Bertrand Russell



Harold Nicolson



BBC photographs
Mortimer Wheeler

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