

LIVELY QUARTET

IT is a mystery to us in this office how the French photographer captured the grave expressions the Parrenin Quartet showed in their official photo. Their arrival at the Wellington Town Hall Concert Chamber recently for a balance test was more like that of a sports team than a string quartet and from the French phrases which flew around as they began rehearsing it was clear that their interpretation of this particular quartet had by no means become fixed. Their leader Jacques Parrenin, a short fair-headed man, later told us in animated English something of the process which has made the Parrenin Quartet, despite its youth, one of the leading European ensembles.

"We were all students at the Paris Conservatoire during the war and were very fortunate to meet together," said M. Parrenin. "I chose these men because I thought them gifted for chamber music. I did not know how things would work out but today we are all very good friends, which I think is rather an exception for a quartet. We wrangle amongst ourselves all the time, which is a good thing, and of course we cannot all have the same opinions on music."

The quartet's first Paris concert was in 1943. The late Director of the Conservatoire, Claude Delvincourt, had helped them establish themselves and they owed a great deal to the string teacher Joseph Calvet. First they set about mastering the classical repertoire and for six years played no modern works at all, moving forward only as far as Debussy and Ravel.

"It's very important for a young quartet to start with the classical works as it can be dangerous to start too soon with the modern style," said Jacques Parrenin. Gradually they added modern works and their present reputation as interpreters of modern music began in 1952 when the German Broadcasting authorities in Baden-Baden asked them if they would play a certain extremely difficult quartet by the German composer Hans Werber Henze. "Other quartets had turned it down—it was a very hard work to realise—and we too refused the first time. But we needed the money and so were obliged to accept the conditions."

Then after a single performance of this work we found ourselves asked by other broadcasting authorities to play modern works and we had the reputation of being specialists—I don't know why."

Jacques Parrenin thinks it also essential for all young quartets to play modern works. ("It needs plenty of time, however, as we've spent thousands of hours rehearsing them and on top of this you may only play a new work once.") Last year the quartet added 27 new works to its repertoire. The members keep up a strong rehearsal schedule



MEMBERS of the Parrenin Quartet meet the Mayor of Wellington: From left, Pierre Penasson, Marcel Charpentier, the Mayor (Mr F. J. Kitts), Jacques Parrenin, and Serge Collot

and have practised together every day for the last 14 years, even on tour. This leaves them little time for recreation but they are very careful to keep musically fresh.

"We are not sick of music," said Jacques Parrenin. "There is always the danger with musicians that giving concerts becomes just like going to business. We try to avoid getting stale, for it is very dangerous, when we have so many concerts to give, to risk making it just routine."

In New Zealand they have found a deep interest in chamber music. "We have never met it before," said M. Parrenin. Their audiences were knowledgeable (due to LPs?) and as in other new countries did not come to the concerts with preconceived ideas. "It is all music," he went on, "and we do not find that we have to overthrow the conventions that we are accustomed to in Europe." The Quartet itself seems free from musical prejudices for, admitted M. Parrenin, "We also like jazz."

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