

# CLOSE-UP OF RICHARD LEWIS

"If I were starting on a career again and were not sure I would be a success as a singer I would try to be a film-maker," Richard Lewis told *The Listener* when we called on him a few days before the end of his New Zealand tour. "I admire the film very much as an art," he said. "It's very complete—it embraces so many things in life, as singing does, but probably in a broader way."

Those who hear a faint note of frustration in these remarks would find if they met Mr Lewis that he is making the best of things as they are. There's no doubt about his success as a singer, and if he can't be a professional film-maker he is certainly an enthusiastic amateur: everywhere he goes his ciné-camera goes with him. While in the south he visited Queenstown "in lovely weather," and hiring a taxi so that he could stop wherever he liked he went on a filming tour through the surrounding countryside. Later he took shots of Cromwell Gorge.

"But I'm sorry I was not here in autumn or summer," he said. "I work in colour, and in those seasons the colour would have come out much better. Still, I got what colour there was."

In Wellington Mr Lewis was hoping to shoot enough material to take away an impression of a typical New Zealand city. Yes, he agreed, people were important in a medium that was, after all, invented to capture movement, and even in his scenic shots he tried to include animals.

Besides being an amateur film-maker, Mr Lewis is also a keen filmgoer, who likes to relax in a theatre between a morning rehearsal and an evening performance. Even then, however, he chooses his film entertainment with care, for he believes the cinematographer learns best by trying to understand what is behind the film he sees. Mr Lewis himself has a special liking for the approach of the director John Huston, and he also spoke enthusiastically of the use of colour—"colour used as a painter would use it"—in *Lust for Life*, the film biography of Van Gogh recently made by Vincente Minelli.

Only an enthusiast could find the time Mr Lewis finds for films and filming, for his crowded timetable illustrates a comparison he made between a concert singer's life now and 60 or 70 years ago. He explained for a start the qualities a successful concert singer must have today—50 per cent voice and 50 per cent general musicianship and integrity. It was no use having 90 per cent voice and the rest musicianship and integrity—or the other way about. "I'm not speaking disparagingly," he said, "but 60 or 70 years ago a concert singer could exist, and probably make a fortune, on a small repertoire such as half a dozen oratorios and 25 or 30 ballads. Today with travel so much easier so much more is expected of the singer. He might do an opera—like

*Carmen*—from the ordinary repertoire one night, travel in the morning and rehearse in the afternoon for a performance of, say, *The Dream of Gerontius*; then, at midnight, perhaps, leave for London and next day rehearse a difficult modern work by, say, Stravinsky or Schoenberg for performance that night. After that there might be a day's rest before he's off to Brussels or Germany for a recital."

Opera in English remains a somewhat controversial topic, and Mr Lewis prefaced his answer to our question about it with the remark that "English is not such a bad language to sing in as some people think." The important thing, he said, was that the librettist must be thoughtful about vowel formations. In *Troilus and Cressida*, for example, Christo-

pher Hassall spent a lot of time on the libretto, which turned out "very singable"—and there was no reason why English could not be singable. A good translation of an opera could attract an audience that would not be interested if it were in the original language. However, operas were still done in the original language at international festivals to which people came from many other countries. Mr Lewis added that he personally always preferred to sing an opera in the original language—it was far more interesting and more of an artistic achievement.

Briefly discussing his New Zealand tour, Mr Lewis mentioned particularly *Les Illuminations* at the Auckland Festival and the Verdi *Requiem* in Wellington and Christchurch. "The Orchestra played *Les Illuminations* extremely well—it was comparable with many string sections of orchestras I have done it with in England and on the Continent," he said. "And the choir for the Verdi *Requiem* compared with the better choirs in England." The National Orchestra had also played this extremely well, no doubt because James Robertson was experienced in opera and realised it had to be approached in an operatic manner. Audiences, he thought, had been pleasantly surprised by both the work and the standard of performance.

Asked to comment generally on music on the air in New Zealand, Mr Lewis suggested that for such a small country there were too many radio stations. It was very nice to have such a variety of programmes, but with so much music on the air people tended to be spoilt for choice—they were likely to develop the habit of switching on at any time and not listening properly. With less to choose from they would cultivate the art of listening. New Zealanders might be better off, he thought, if they had three main programmes to choose from—one light, one general and one high-brow—as English listeners had. He compared things as they are in this country with the London musical scene

"where there are too many concerts and the real music lover feels he must go out two or three times a week." Where there was far too much there was a deterioration in quality, and there were lots of concerts in England that could be done without. Illustrating his argument from the broadcasts of his own New Zealand performances, Mr Lewis said it was very nice to be on the air six nights out of seven, but if he saw that sort of thing in England he would begin to wonder.

Richard Lewis brought his wife and five-year-old son to New Zealand with him, but they stayed in Auckland while he was touring south. It is his son's first trip, but he was "very happy all the

way"—by sea across the Atlantic and the Pacific, with a flight across America in between. For mother and son it will be a journey to remember—a trip around the world—because from Australia they will go home by way of Suez. Mr Lewis will return the way he came, staying over in the United States for his third visit with the San Francisco Opera and a short concert tour. He expects to be home on December 8 after seven months' absence—his longest yet.

How does his wife like the frequent separations? "She doesn't like them, but like a sailor's wife she has to put up with them," he said. There was a difference, though, he added, for while a sailor carried on for many years, a singer's life reached a climax and was followed by deterioration. "I'm not at that point yet, I hope," said Mr Lewis.



RICHARD LEWIS

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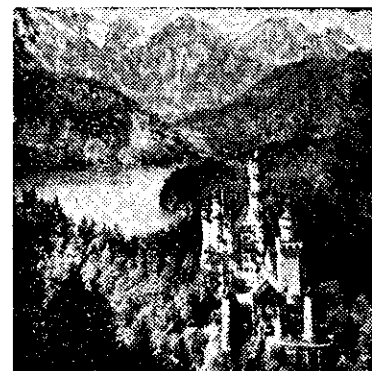
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