

# SONGS OUT OF SEASON

by "SUNDOWNER"

ONE of my consolations these dark mornings is to lie listening to my own and my neighbours' roosters letting the valley know that they are awake. It would still be pleasant if they were all of the same breed and had the same shrill or mellow voices. But I can recognise heavy breeds and light breeds, black heavies and red heavies, light whites and light gold,

**JUNE 17** and no two strike the same note. Nor do they all wake up at the same hour. On moonlight nights they are likely to crow at any hour after midnight; but even when there is no moon they sometimes greet the stars. At this time of year, however, the first call may be as late as five o'clock, and may, for a quarter of an hour, come from one bird only. Then the answering calls begin, one close at hand, one so far away that I can just hear it, though it is no doubt heard very clearly on every perch within half a mile or more. Oddly enough, the calling of the cocks does not always wake the hens, or have any effect on them. I have visited my fowlhouse with a torch many minutes after the rooster has crowed, and even flapped his wings, but the hens are not awake. I don't know whether fowls have changed since Chaucer's day, or whether the Nun's Priest's Tale was deliberately falsified, but no Pertelote in this valley would have been disturbed however Chanticleer groaned and lurched in his dreams. If my rooster dreams, and is a coward in his dreams, none of his wives wake up to reprimand him, or sneer at him, or offer him herbs to cure his vapours.

It always seems strange to me that our birds break into song at the approach of winter. Six weeks ago, when the weather was still warm, they were silent, with the exception of an early moulting starling and our magpies, which ignore all rules. Today, with snow down to 1700 feet,

**JUNE 18** they are bursting with gladness; if singing means gladness. There are, in fact, notes I have not heard all season, calls that are not coming from thrushes or starlings or blackbirds or kingfishers or fantails or bellbirds or goldfinches, not coming from the hedges or the high trees, but from secret places close at hand used by a bird ventriloquist. However, when our ears begin to fail the first sign is loss of our sense of direction. I often do not know whether a call is on my right or my left, until I listen for a moment and turn both ways. So the sound I am trying to place could perhaps be fixed very quickly by a listener a few years younger than I am; but it would still be a strange sound in this garden. Jim suggests a chaffinch, and since I have been deceived by chaffinches before he may be right. But it is a big sound for a small bird, and if it does come from a chaffinch I suspect that it is imitative and accidental.

The question is, however, why birds sing so freely at the least exciting season of the year. Is it from a feeling of well-being now that moulting is over? Are they competing for mates?

Do they sing because they have been a long time silent—like henpecked husbands who start whistling as soon as they leave home? Is singing by birds the same thing as playing by young animals—an outpouring of surplus energy? If so, why is there a surplus so near the shortest day? Are they only now feeling the benefit of autumn's "mellow fruitfulness"?

I don't know the answers, and I suspect that each family has its own answer: starlings one, thrushes another, goldfinches something different again, and so on. The only experience they all share at about the same time is loss and renewal of feathers, and even this is not the same experience from species to species. In some birds the feathers fall out. In some they wear out, but all, as far as I know, feel when it is all over as exhilarated as we feel when we emerge from a shower-bath. But our madness begins with spring; theirs seems to have a rehearsal now, and then a period of waiting. I suspect that feathers are a better protection against the cold than fur or fine clothes.

In general emotions that are not expressed cease to be felt. It was one of the lessons I learnt when I was very young, and my passions were turbulent, and I went from day to day in fear of disaster. It is one of the reasons why repressed people end as cold and stern people, and why puritanism so

often destroys our souls while it is saving our reputations and our integrity. It is the chief reason why sheep and cattle farmers so often become brutal, and why those who preserve their sensitiveness so often remain poor. Farming would be intolerable if the bleat of a lamb affected us like the cry of a child, and if we lay awake by night brooding over all the unspeakable things we have been compelled to do by day.

It is an old story and will never end. As long as man has been on the earth he has lived, as all his fellow creatures live, by murder. As long as he remains the slaughter will go on, since it is impossible to exist without killing. Even vegetarians, though they shed less blood than the rest of us, are murderers following one life away from their victims. Meat-eaters kill and eat on the spot. Grain-eaters kill the killers and then eat. That is to say, they eat what the killers have left. They do not, and dare not, leave the field to the locusts; to the grubs and worms; to the caterpillars, beetles, and bugs; or even to the birds.

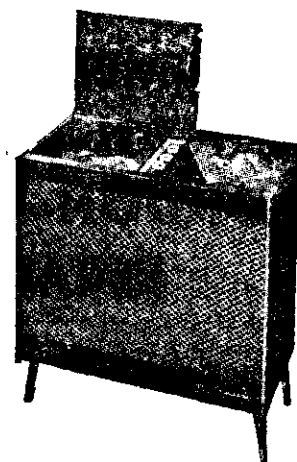
There is no escape for the Buddhist and none for the Christian. There is none for the thug and none for the meek and gentle. And there is none for the owner of Elsie. He may sell her and he may murder her, mutilate her or biologically starve her; but as long as he owns her and feeds her and allows her to mate and bear he will spend sleepless nights, as he did last night, listening to her calls for the calf she will never see again because he has sold it down the river.

(To be continued)



★  
"With snow down to 1700 feet, our birds are bursting with gladness"  
★

This—and nothing less—is authentic  
**HIGH FIDELITY**



Designed in America and made in Britain by RCA, the recognised world leaders in electronic engineering, the new "President" phonograph is, in every respect, a superlative piece of equipment. You'll recognise that the moment you hear its thrilling dynamic range, its clarity, its vivid realism. The "President" is not designed for radio reception—any straightforward radio receiver is quite adequate for that. But when it's a matter of enjoying high fidelity record reproduction more breathtaking than you've ever heard before, the "President" is most definitely the only thing for you.

The "PRESIDENT"  
High Fidelity PHONOGRAPH

Panoramic Multiple Speaker System. Treble Bass and Loudness Controls. Four speed manual / automatic changer. 10 watt Amplifier (15 watt peak). Frequency range 25-20,000 c.p.s.

Ask to hear this superlative phonograph now at leading record and radio dealers.

Unique value at £119



"Buy RCA and you own the best"

N.Z. Distributors:  
AMALGAMATED WIRELESS (A'SIA) LTD.  
P.O. Box 830 - WELLINGTON.  
P.O. Box 1363 - AUCKLAND.  
P.O. Box 2084 - CHRISTCHURCH

P4