

PAYING THE PIPER

AS a kind of codicil to his marathon year of illustrated lectures on music, Owen Jensen left a most stimulating talk behind him, which I heard last week from 2YC, called "Musical Ancestor Worship." It made excellent sense. His view was that of Aaron Copland, who complained in a recent book of essays that serious music had been turned in the last 50 years into a museum, with about 50 works standing like stuffed fowls of well-known contour, while the living birds of music make their new and exciting flights in the airy blue of almost total indifference. Yes, indeed; this needs to be said again and again. Our interest is largely and disastrously antiquarian; "give us something we know!" is the constant cry, which may be better than a kick in the pants, but permanently lames the creative musician. And it is on our shoulders that the responsibility rests; we call the tune and so can pay the piper. And if we want the piper to give us the tunes for our times, then we must ask him to play them. Mr Jensen had hard but admirable things to say about canned music, and he gave three excellent examples; the public address system ersatz to which children march into school after the morning assembly (Mr Jensen recalled the noble simplicity of his march into school to a bugle and drum); the syrupy sound of recorded bells with which many churches woo their congregations, and the bad taste of Beethoven played as a background to mastication in smart restaurants. More concerts then, more bands, more dance music: More made music, in short: more shared music, more listening.

Pied Piper

RATHER rising out of the above, I listened last Sunday afternoon to a programme commemorating the 20th

anniversary of the death of George Gershwin. Unique in modern music in starting from the popular ditty and ending with opera, symphonic poems and piano concertos, Gershwin never lost the common touch, and is becoming more and more respected as a musician who, however light-hearted his intentions, was always a serious craftsman. His songs are still current, his *Rhapsody in Blue* is played here at least once a year; the National Orchestra have given several performances of the Piano Concerto and *An American in Paris*, and his opera, *Porgy and Bess* still holds the stage as the only genuine opera America has produced. A splendid musician and a most lovable man, it seems, and it was surprising, though after a moment's reflection, fitting, that the principal valedictory at his death should have been broadcast to the American nation by Arnold Schoenberg. There was a fascinating recording in the programme made at a rehearsal in 1925 of Fred Astaire singing and dancing a song called "You Don't Know the Half of It, Dearie," with Gershwin playing for him, and an engaging character called Irving Caesar talked of Gershwin and sang his songs in an endearing rasp. No modern musician has had us dancing to his tunes with more willingness, and every year, what Schoenberg called "the directness of a great musician" becomes more apparent.

—B.E.G.M.

The Oracle

IT wasn't necessary to see in Leonard Cottrell's *The Pythoness* an implied comment on modern attitudes towards prophecy and divination to find this BBC programme on the Delphic Oracle a first-class radio piece. As a re-creation of history, it combined authenticity with sympathy, and the economy of its language, sketching scenes, personalities and events in a few poetically packed sentences stimulated the imagination to conjure up the Pythoness on her tripod and the multitudes who came to question her. I had wondered how, without a straight talk of dramatisation, this remarkable story could be told. Leonard Cottrell's skilful use of dialectical method, with a sceptic and a believer in debate, held together description, quotation and the voice of the Sybil herself in a consistently interesting programme, which was neither over-erudite nor over-popularised. Perhaps its most absorbing feature was its creation of a background for such famous stories as that of Croesus and the Persians. At the end, I was left with the impression that the facts about Delphi had been fairly stated, and that, despite this, important problems remained, problems easy to dismiss with astrology, teacup reading and other hokum, yet suggesting that, in the matter of precognition, there is evidence enough to suggest that there is evidence.

(C) Punch

The Week's Music... by SEBASTIAN

TAKEN up with our own country's affairs, we pay surprisingly little attention to those of our big sister Australia, and this can apply to music, too. We hear Australian music seldom, and what there is is confined to a few of the better-known composers. I'm sure plenty of music is written there, but not much reaches our shores, whether from performance troubles or not I can only guess.

At least one programme of their music has been heard lately, anyway; this was from the National Orchestra, who devoted a studio concert to Australian works (YC link). The composers' names were familiar, and the music was not. John Antill's "Outback Overture" bore little family resemblance to his *Corroboree*, but was rather more human and at times humorous. Alfred Hill's symphony *Australia* is for the most part fairly conventional, though in the slow movement it reached considerable heights of orchestral beauty. The *Xanadu* Symphonic Suite by Robert Hughes proved to be of oriental splendour, with discordant dances which were still not offensive to the ear, and a fruity mass of percussion. These were all interesting, and the programme was an ambitious venture which I hope may be repeated.

Speaking of ambition, the highest peak of the N.Z. Opera Company to

date was reached recently (YC link). Having gained plenty of experience in Menotti with short works like *The Medium* and *The Telephone*, they were now well equipped to essay the three-act tragedy *The Consul*. This is the composer's most famous opera, and certainly one of his most poignant, in its triumph of petty tyranny; the style is pure Menotti, dealing in rather poetic conversation rather than recitative, with impassioned song in place of mere aria, and demands intensely dramatic treatment. This it received from the cast and James Robertson, and the broadcast was notable for its even quality, though it was from a staged performance.

The "star parts," Magda and John, were sung by Vincente Major and Donald Munro respectively, but I felt that much of the best work was heard in the other roles, notably the stone-walling Secretary in the person of Mona Ross, not to mention Terence Finnegan's Magician. All the cast sounded at home in the work, and most of the singing carried conviction. With a successful performance of an opera like this behind them, the way should be open for our company to tackle other large and impressive works. I, for one, will be listening.

History or Not

I'VE heard only two of Sarah Champion's Good Reading talks in *Feminine Viewpoint's The Admirable Critic* series, but I have enjoyed their calculatedly provocative character. Miss Champion's brisk, commonsensical manner, her neat turn of phrase, and her high standards all appeal to me. Her talks have clearly been directed not so much at the selective reader, as at the reader-for-leisure, the library-borrower, the "something decent for the weekend" type; and in such a context (YA rather than YC) this seems appropriate. In her last talk, she dealt trenchantly with period fiction, the hip-high-bosom school of fake-historical novels, written with one eye on Hollywood and the other on readers waiting to be titillated with sex and sadism in fancy dress. This was admirable, but, by contrasting this school with only Victorian novelists, she left, I felt, the unfortunate impression that there are no good historical novels being written today, and that readers should go back to Thackeray and George Eliot for the dinkum stuff. In the face of Alfred Duggan, Hope Munz, H. F. M. Prescott, the early Robert Graves, Marguerite Yourcenar (whose *Hadrian* I'd back against *Romola* any day) and Zoe Oldenbourg, to name a few, this was unfortunate. But, at least, this talk must have pricked many consciences.

—J.C.R.

Sam Pollock

A NEW ZEALANDER is something of a gate-crasher when he listens to Sam Pollock's *News from Home* on Sunday mornings, since it is directed specifically to settlers from Britain. How his reputation stands with that audience I don't know, but I like to listen. I like the oddities of the man-bites-dog sort with which he fills the spare corners of his talk, but I mostly like the longer consideration he gives nearly every week to some aspect of the way life goes on in Britain. I sus-

pect him to be both informed and balanced. Local listeners may be surprised at the time he gives to trade union matters. His attitude to unions is neither that they are, or ought to be, the Nursery of Progress, nor that they are Not Quite Nice. He regards them as a power in the land whose policies are for that reason worth knowing about and understanding. He may have some personal reason for this interest, but it does seem more widespread in Britain than here. The influence of trade unions is exerted rather differently in New Zealand, but it is surely not less significant; yet they are seldom mentioned on our radio unless there is a spectacular strike and the notice given their affairs in the newspapers is elementary.

Necrophilia

THE popularity of recordings from the period known as *The Golden Age of Opera* strikes me as decidedly odd. It certainly is a wonderful thing to have these voices from the past on record, even so sketchily, and I can imagine how valuable they must be to students and historians of singing. But I should have thought the value to be almost archaeological, an interpreting of past greatness from the most residual of remains. I do quite enjoy the series now being heard from the YCs, in much this antiquarian spirit. Although I don't particularly admire the florid style used by many of the singers, I can admire their vocal dexterity, which is what mostly comes through, and imagine what the quality of their voices must have been, and even feel a kind of third-hand nostalgia. But these ghosts only seldom give me an inkling of the delight with which I listen to a modern recording of, say, Ljuba Welitsch singing Arias from *Eugen Oregin*. Yet if these old records are as popular as we're told they are, one must presume they often give such delight to many people. I find it again, most odd. I must not omit to say that the series is admirably presented.

—R.D.McE.

