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Radio Review

MASTERPIECE

OUT of a week rich in listening, I must pull out the plum: the broadcast version by the National Orchestra and a battery of expert soloists of Tchaikovsky's great opera, *Eugen Onegin*. Those of us who think in national stereotypes perhaps summon up a bear as a symbol for Russia, like lion for England, and kiwi for New Zealand, and there is a whole modern mystique which equates the Russian genius with everything that is murky, dour and treacherous. The women are lumpy and the men as taciturn as Indian chiefs. Arrant nonsense, of course,

like all such superficialities, but how many of us would think of the exquisite Tatiana as a Russian archetype? Yet, in her passion and innocence, she is; you will find her in Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, too, always a victim of the cruelty and insensitiveness of the world. Tchaikovsky has marvellously rendered this grace and fragility into music, and surely *Eugen Onegin* is one of the supreme operatic masterpieces of the world, and in its combination of rapture and a poignant sense of elegy, unique. It was wonderful to hear the whole work, brilliantly directed by James Robertson, and many of the soloists gave remarkable accounts of their roles. The orchestral tone was often wonderfully pure, and in the dance passages, full of spring and élan. Sybil Philipps and Ninian Walden as Tatiana and Onegin had moments of great poignancy, and I am prepared to suggest that in English, at least, you will get few finer performances than Miss Philipps of the great Letter scene. She moved through its lyrical tenderness with the surest judgment. Some of the other singers were slightly insecure in some of the more taxing passage work, but as a whole I have nothing but praise for this highpoint of NZBS radio opera. William Austin's interpolations to the story were exactly right, neither more nor less than one needed, and Ashley Heenan gave a useful and erudite account of Tchaikovsky's achievements and style as an operatic composer. But as warming as anything in a fine evening's listening was Dr Nicolas Danilow's touching tribute to Pushkin. Rich with affection and homage, full of nostalgia for the tongue that he can no longer speak as his own, Dr Danilow vividly and poignantly evoked the ripe genius of his country's greatest poet.

—B.E.G.M.

Good Words

THERE have been some lively talks of late. First, in every respect, was John Pocock's latest *Letter from Cambridge*, which chronicled a visit to Paris and made entertaining news of this most hackneyed of tourist places, what with professors on strike and the dis-

covery that Napoleon is still beyond reproach ("like Eisenhower"). But his chief purpose was to make our flesh creep with a lucid and doom-laden account of the effect of the Algerian war, which he believes to be dividing French opinion as fundamentally as the Dreyfus case did. This was a *Lookout* talk of a distinction we seldom hear from *Lookout*. Dr Pocock is so accomplished a speaker that he has turned even his inability to pronounce his "r's" into an idiosyncratic virtue. It is good that his voice returns though he has deserted us.

Then the superior vocational guidance talks entitled *My Poor Boy*, which managed the lightness of touch the title demanded, yet could penetrate to some reasonably perceptive observations. Of those I heard I admired most the Rev. George Naylor on the ministry, for his was certainly the most difficult task, and he came through with wisdom and aplomb.

And, *The New Zealand Attitude*. This Joseph fan was sad to find M. K. Joseph somewhat laboured and painstaking (though just) on the arts; and pleasantly surprised to find J. H. Robb delivering a full-blooded assault on our conception of equality. He said we are not as equal as we think we are, and where we are, we are perversely so. C. G. Hill on our conformist and adolescent personal relations was mostly second-hand, out of Bill Pearson and Robert Chapman among others. Last year we had *The New Zealand Way*, this year *The New Zealand Attitude*. I suggest that next year's series be entitled *The New Zealand Attitude to the New Zealand Way*, and that it consider, among other phenomena, the compulsion felt by the intellectuals who write such talks to reverse so violently the common or gardening New Zealander's prayer, "Make her praises heard afar."

After all this, it has been instructive to hear from 2YA's Women's Session a BBC talk by John Berger on the difficulty the artist has earning a living and finding an accepted place in the community; and another by Marghanita Laski on the difficulty of giving children individual values in face of the pressure to conform of a mass-production, mass-consumption, mass-communi-

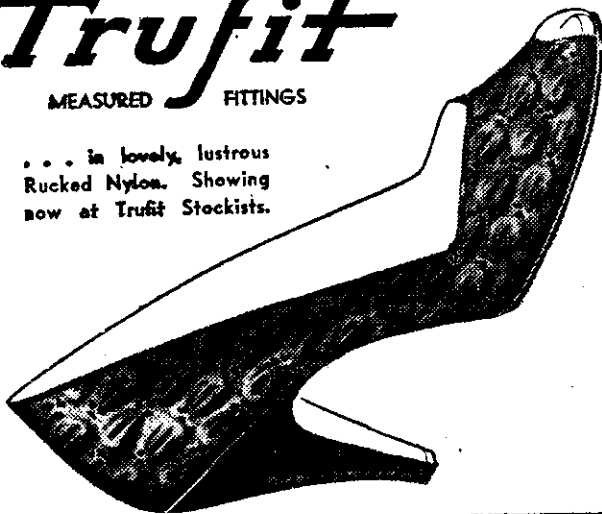
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The Week's Music... by SEBASTIAN

IT is quite the thing to find highbrow circles treating Tchaikovsky and his works with scorn and neglect these days. Too tuneful for modernist tastes, too lush for comparison with today's astringent orchestrations, too sentimental for the present classical palate—it seems, to hear the armchair critics, as if poor Tchaikovsky reached all the wrong answers by all the wrong methods. Yet these opinions could be wrong: on the other side of the coin, this composer still tops popularity polls, is freely arranged, has vast numbers of recordings of his work, and, in brief, presents incontrovertible evidence that his star refuses to wane. Tuneful, lush, sentimental perhaps—rarely tasteless or lacking imagination—these qualities have wide appeal, and the music can be understood by everyone, a feature not seen, for instance, in Berg or Britten.

Apart from isolated scenes, Tchaikovsky's operas are still neglected in favour of orchestral works; but his reputation will not suffer from the performance of *Eugen Onegin* (YC link) as a studio presentation by an NZBS cast with the National Orchestra conducted by James Robertson. Here the composer is at his most lyrical, and the folk element often illumines the music, making it even

more homely and personal. There are many passages of real beauty, and much musical finesse that puts the opera on a higher aesthetic plane than the equally popular Italian operas.

This performance was in English, which met my unqualified approval, and the translation seemed adequate on the whole. Balance was excellent, for there were no disadvantages of staging, and yet there was a full humanity to it, without the padded aridity of many studio productions. The Orchestra was in good form, and apart from some solo lapses in intonation, set mood and scene admirably; while the chorus (Phoenix Choir) sang finely, fulfilling its primary duty of providing contrast to the soloists. The latter were led by Sybil Philipps as Tatiana, around whom the entire opera is written. She excelled herself here, with a feeling for the part and its emotional storms that commanded respect, and her scenes with Onegin were particularly convincing. The other characters, even Onegin himself (Ninian Walden) are more or less subsidiary, but all sang well, and not an erg of dramatic impact was lost. The whole production was a fit successor to the three of last year, a delight from beginning to end; well played, New Zealand!