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WIDELY referred to as the first "iron curtain" musicians to visit New Zealand, the genial members of Czechoslovakia's Smetana Quartet in fact symbolise the refusal of music to be contained. Moving nomadically to and fro through the "curtain," they have performed in all Communist coun-

tries except Albania and Bulgaria, and all West European ones except Spain, Portugal and Luxembourg. Their welcome in the U.S. is as warm as in the U.S.S.R.

Lubomir Kostecky, violinist, the only member fluent in English, debunks reports that the quartet's tour is partly financed by the Czech Government. As

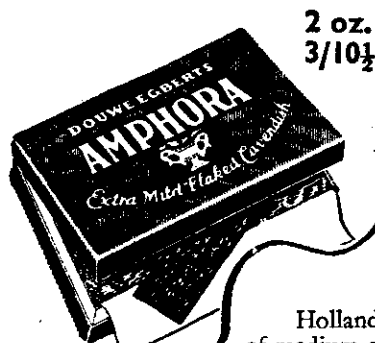
N.P.S. photograph
★ THE QUARTET: Left to right, Antonin Kohout (cello), Jiri Novak (first violin), Milan Skampa (viola), Lubomir Kostecky (second violin) ★

one of three chamber-music groups of the Czech Philharmonia — which includes also a symphony orchestra, a choir and four soloists — the quartet gives 18 highly-paid concerts annually in Czechoslovakia. But for the remainder of each year the players are on tour abroad, and that, declares Mr Kostecky, is private business. He finds it slightly insulting, one gathers, that anyone should think the Smetana Quartet in need of State support.

Apart from supporting the Philharmonia, Mr Kostecky indicated, the State's main musical aim was to give talented youngsters the chance to study at the Conservatory or at the (higher) Academy of Music. The quartet was itself formed among students of Prague Conservatory soon after it reopened at the end of the war. Nine months before the Germans had closed it, in common with all Czech schools, and turned the building into a factory. Kostecky himself had toiled therein, using his skilful fingers to gum together thin shavings of wood. The resultant flexible material was used in the manufacture of women's handbags and hats.

"Closing the schools was part of the process of turning Slavs into slaves," says Kostecky. "Earlier — after Heydrich — every twentieth Czech man had been killed."

The quartet has found New Zealand gratifyingly receptive to chamber music, and the organisation of concerts through the New Zealand Federation of Chamber Music Societies comparable only with Austria, Germany and Czechoslovakia itself. Here, as elsewhere, modern works are not widely acceptable, and the quartet sticks largely to the classical European repertoire, with some emphasis on native Czech composers such as Dvorak and Smetana, for whom the group is named.



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