



ANNA RUSSELL (above, left to right), international concert comedienne, parodist, satirist, chanteuse, and expert at piracy in the high C's—who laid audiences helpless in the aisles during her first visit to New Zealand in 1954—is to make a second tour for the NZBS next year. In three weeks from the beginning of July she will give 12 concerts, making appearances in Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, Dunedin, Hamilton, New Plymouth, Invercargill, Palmerston North and Hawke's Bay

FIVE MODERN ENGLISH OPERAS

DURING the month of October YC listeners will have the opportunity to hear five operas by contemporary English composers, three of which—Alan Bush's *Wat Tyler*, Lennox Berkeley's *Ruth*, and Vaughan Williams's *Sir John in Love*—have not been broadcast in New Zealand before. The remaining two are Benjamin Britten's *The Little Sweep*, from *Let's Make an Opera*, and Walton's *Troilus and Cressida*.

"The history of English opera has been for the most part the record of three centuries of failure," wrote Edward Dent in 1928. "From the first attempt to introduce opera to English audiences down to the present day there has never been any period at which serious musical drama in the language of the country has been as firmly established among ourselves as it has been in Italy and France since the middle of the 17th century, or in Germany during the last 100 years."

The year after these words were written, 1929, saw the first performance at the Royal College of Music of Vaughan Williams's *Sir John in Love*, the text of which is based almost entirely on *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. In the preface to his score the composer touched on the consideration of nationalism, on whether an English theme could be approached with more success by an Englishman, when he wrote: "I hope that it may be possible to consider that even Verdi's masterpiece does not exhaust all the possibilities of Shakespeare's genius."

Possibly because of the Verdi precedent *Sir John* was not as successful as the composer's earlier opera *Hugh the Drover* (which was taken on tour under Malcolm Sargent not long after the first publication in 1924). For *Sir John*, though it had a number of amateur performances, had to wait until 1946 for its first professional performance. The wait might have been even longer but for the fact that in June of the preceding year the Sadler's Wells Theatre reopened after five years of war with the first performance of Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes*, and the English operatic renaissance was under way.

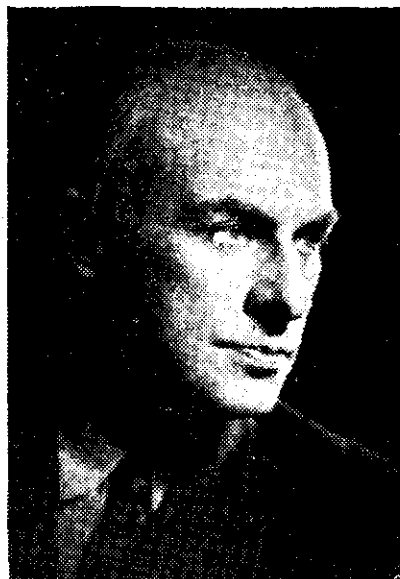
No other first opera by any other 20th century composer, it has been said, enjoyed such a triumph as *Peter Grimes*, for in the next few years it became (and has remained) a major box-office attraction in the repertoire of theatres throughout the world. This success, wrote Eric Walter White, went far "to break down the inferiority com-

plex under which English opera had laboured for so many years." And in 1946, when the English Opera Group was formed, the prospectus read: "We believe the time has come when England, which has never had a tradition of native opera, but has always depended on a repertory of foreign works, can create its own operas."

Four of the five operas to be heard this month have been composed since 1948; one, Lennox Berkeley's *Ruth*, within the last two years. *Wat Tyler*, which is the first of the five to be broadcast, was one of the prize-winning operas in the 1951 Festival of Britain competition sponsored by the Arts Council.

Alan Bush's opera, the first English opera to use an English historical theme, was the most fortunate of the four 1951 prize-winners. It was broadcast in 1953 on the Berlin Radio, and, as a result, was taken into the repertory of the Leipzig Opera, where it was played for two seasons with great success. Moreover, the Leipzig production won Bush three further commissions for operas—from Berlin, Rostock and Weimar. In England, though excerpts were broadcast, no complete performance of *Wat Tyler* was undertaken until the BBC production of last December, the transcription of which will be heard next week.

With a libretto written by the composer's wife, the opera deals, as might be expected, with the Peasants' Revolt



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against feudal authority in the year 1381. It begins with a Prologue, in which an escaping serf is told of "great things stirring in Kent" that may soon bring serfdom to an end. In the three scenes of the first act *Wat* leads a demonstration at Maidstone, rouses the people of Kent, then leads the march

to London to petition the King for freedom after John Ball, the people's priest, is released from Maidstone gaol. In the second act (also three scenes) Richard II and his courtiers decide on a meeting at which they will agree to the peasants' demands, though they do not intend to keep their promises. The meeting takes place at Smithfield, and on leaving the King, *Wat Tyler* is stabbed to death by Walworth, Lord Mayor of London. The final scene set outside Westminster Abbey shows the King disavowing his promises: "Serfs you have been and serfs you shall remain." The people think differently and in the final chorus affirm their faith in eventual victory.

The Prologue and each of the acts of *Wat Tyler* is composed as a continuous piece of music, and each approximates to the general outline of a symphony, with the scenes as symphonic movements. "The orchestra is not, however, the battleground," Alan Bush has written, "The persons on the stage bear both the dramatic and the musical burden, the orchestra being designed as a support or, if you like, an accompaniment to their singing and acting."

Wat Tyler will be broadcast from all YCs at 8.0 p.m., Thursday, October 3. In this BBC production the groups taking part, under the direction of Stanford Robinson, are the BBC Chorus and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. Immediately before the opera is broadcast there will be a talk on modern British opera by Donald Munro.

The Story of Mary Bryant

IN the enlightened days of Gibbon and Dr Johnson a Cornish girl was tried at Exeter for stealing a cloak. The sentence was seven years' transportation. The terrifying adventures which subsequently befell Mary Bryant of Fowey have been reconstructed in dramatic form by Aileen Mills for the BBC. Her play, *Escape from Port Jackson*, will be heard from 1KN on Wednesday, October 2, and later from other stations.

After her sentence Mary was held with a cargo of other women convicts in a ship which lay at anchor off the English coast for 10 months. For a further eight months the ship was at sea on its way to what is now Sydney, Australia.

Then for four years she and her fellow felons, 600 men and 200 women, under a guard of marines, struggled to make the fever-ridden shacks of Port Jackson into a habitable home. There she met and married William Bryant, a fellow Cornishman. She bore him two

children, and then in March, 1791, she, her husband and children and seven other men escaped in the camp fishing boat to Dutch Timor. But the ship from whose wreck they pretended to have escaped was actually wrecked near by, and its master and survivors landed at the same Dutch settlement. The escapees were recognised and shipped back to England to stand trial once again. Mary's husband and children died on the way home, with three of the convicts. Mary and the four remaining convicts were sentenced again to transportation, but this time for life. By chance James Boswell read her story in a newspaper, but it took him almost a year to obtain a pardon. Finally she was released and able to return to her home in Fowey.

The part of Mary Bryant is taken by Aileen Mills, William Bryant by Hedley Goodall, and Captain Arthur Phillip, the Governor, by Dudley Rolph.



BBC photograph

AILEEN MILLS