

JAMES ROBERTSON SUMS UP

NEARING the end of his three-year stint as Conductor of the National Orchestra, James Robertson, M.A., A.R.C.M., looks with pleasant nostalgia at the past and warm anticipation at the future. He has enjoyed New Zealand: the tough round of orchestral work; the kindness and warm hospitality of people; and the beauty of landscape which makes even the conductor's continual travels less arduous than they might be. But as a Briton he now looks forward to Home, to seeing his family and old friends, and to the rich fare of theatre and opera and music which London offers. "Also," he adds jubilantly, "I'll be home by Christmas."

Mr Robertson will depart convinced that the Orchestra is more secure than ever before. "I notice there's a good deal less talking and writing against its existence," he says. "I suppose that's because the Orchestra nowadays gives pleasure to more people. Wellington has always had a good audience, of course, but audiences outside of Wellington have increased. And the youth concerts and the Proms have taken on and seem to be holding people. There are still a few indignant letters at budget time, but over all I think public acceptance has widened."

Conducting one of the most nomadic orchestras on earth has its problems, Mr Robertson admits, but they are not as serious as often thought. "We have to work out our programmes so that most difficult works have their first performance at Wellington," he says, "and can be repeated while on tour when there is less opportunity for rehearsal. But I don't think travel affects the performance much. Not tiredness, anyway. A musician always feels he must try to do his best, and ours do very well. What is more difficult is the shifting from one building to another where the acoustics are different."

"I've been lucky in the people who have joined or re-joined the Orchestra while I've been with it. We've gained some very good and very experienced musicians. The best of the outside soloists I've come across I have tried to use, but I've deliberately channelled most of the work to a few of the best professionals. There seems to me a slight danger from local patriotism in artistic matters here, and sometimes objective standards of worth are not maintained. If there's a concert in Auckland, for instance, and the best soloist lives in Dunedin, then we bring that person up for the one performance. There can be no compromise. I'm not a democrat in artistic matters, and I don't think one can be. Our job is to give people pleasure, and therefore every sound we make has to be as good as we can possibly make it."

Like many another visitor, Mr Robertson admires the thought and energy that have gone into creating great dams and power-stations and networks of roads and railways in New Zealand's "very awkward" topography.

"I doubt if people know how lucky they are," he says, "because this is actually a motorists' paradise, and I think the railways too are unjustly maligned. If cultural matters have sometimes lagged behind, that's because there can't be enough energy for everything at once. Now that things are more settled I think I see the beginnings of a new awareness." He cites as examples the development of the New Zealand

Opera Company (of which he has been Musical Director) and the strong position of amateur theatrical companies and chamber music societies.

There is little that is caustic in the retiring conductor's valediction. Both he and the Orchestra have been well received, he says, and in small places particularly the Mayor and the local M.P. are likely to turn out in welcome. And the New Zealand press has never tried to trip him up or misrepresent him—not exactly a universal experience.

"But one thing I very much dislike," he says, "is anonymous letters in the papers. If people have something to say they should believe in it sufficiently to sign their names instead of using *Pro Bono Publico* or some such silly pseudonym. It is unworthy of a people at this stage of civilisation. Also I think the drink laws are barbarous. Mind you, I don't know that England's are a great deal better, but at least you can have liquor if you wish with meals in restaurants, and I personally find a drink very comforting at the theatre. If a play is bad, a gin after the first act can help a great deal. I'm told the trouble here is that women believe the choice is between having their husbands coming home slightly drunk at six or very drunk at ten."

James Robertson's farewell concert, at Wellington on Saturday, November 16, consists of only two items, Sibelius's Violin Concerto in D Minor (soloist Vincent Aspey), and Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 (Choral). "This programme allows me to get together as many as possible of the people I've worked with," says Mr Robertson. "There's an orchestra, of course, and I know Vincent Aspey has always wanted to do this concerto. There will be some extra players for the Ninth Symphony, and a choir numbering I believe about four hundred. Four of the singers have been frequent soloists with the Orchestra—Sybil Phillips, Mary Pratt, Robin Gordon and Donald Munro. The Ninth is a very difficult work to sing. Orchestral pitch has risen since it was written, and because Beethoven was deaf at the time I think he made the pitch a little too ideal as well. There is a famous long top A which is exhausting for the sopranos of any choir. I always tell those who have no top A to open their mouths wide, but on no account to let anything come out."

Like England, says Mr Robertson, New Zealand lacks singers with really big voices. This is not important for



Spencer Digby photograph

broadcasting as long as the voices are sweet, but it does matter in public performance. The choral movement, however, is quite strong. "At present," he says, "Christchurch is the place for choirs. It has the two best. Wellington's Schola Cantorum, of course, was a virtuoso choir. They could sing for two hours unaccompanied with never a note out of place or an ugly sound."

Broadcasting, the conductor considers, is taken rather too much for granted. "I've been surprised at the enterprise of broadcasts accepted," he says. "If someone wants to do, say, six sonatas for the flute, they may very well be done."

When he leaves these shores, Mr Robertson will travel home by easy stages, conducting the Sydney Symphony Orchestra for five concerts in Australia, and stopping over at Singa-

pore, Bangkok and Istanbul, which he has not seen before. He has yet to reveal his long-term plans, but is conducting some concerts in Canada in February.

When he arrived in New Zealand three and a half years ago, Mr Robertson outlined his intentions as follows: "The bulk of each programme has to be music that one knows is good and great—established music. Nevertheless, in every programme there should be something unfamiliar, of the sort that can be enjoyed. I am not in favour of mere note-spinning. Within that scheme I hope to provide as much variety as possible, to please audiences as much as possible, and perhaps to educate a little too." The Orchestra's third resident conductor has done just that.

NZ. LISTENER, NOVEMBER 8, 1957.