



Spencer Digby photograph

JOHN HOPKINS (at left) listens as James Robertson takes the National Orchestra at rehearsal in St. Paul's Schoolroom, Wellington

New Conductor Meets the Orchestra

ST. PAUL'S schoolroom at the start of the National Orchestra's working day is no place for starch and formalism. It is filled with the inglorious discord of 70 instruments being simultaneously tuned, with a haze of smoke from hasty last cigarettes, and a buzz of talk about things musical and otherwise. The rehearsal chamber fell silent as the conductors stepped forward, but James Robertson suited his introduction to the casual, workaday atmosphere. "Mr Hopkins and I are both from the same place, so he must be all right," he declared amid laughter. "Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like you to meet my successor." He conceded the stage to his fellow Lancastrian with a graceful gesture.

John Hopkins, 29, newly appointed resident conductor, spoke with all the assurance a conductor should. Leon Goossens and Alfredo Campoli, he said, had told him the National Orchestra of the NZBS was a delightful and enthusiastic group. Possibly the Orchestra had also heard of him. One of its members was a former player in the BBC Northern Orchestra, from which he had come.

"The Northern Orchestra prides itself on breaking in conductors," he concluded, "so they're largely responsible for what you're going to get. I hope we shall have some very happy music making."

Thus briefly, players and conductor made the first, slightly self-conscious,

contact of a musical interdependence which is to last three years. Thereafter the Orchestra turned to its rehearsal—under James Robertson's baton—and the newcomer shortly afterwards left to meet Various Important Persons. En route he talked willingly of first impressions. He was pleasantly impressed by the size if not the acoustics of the rehearsal room, he said. Nine-tenths of his work in Manchester had been done in a "pokey little affair" called the Milton Hall. The National Orchestra he had not previously heard. A recorded programme by it had been listed in *Radio Times*, he recalled, but he had not had the chance to listen in. He expected, however, that the bigger orchestra would give him more scope than the 57-piece BBC Northern. After eight years as a radio conductor his name had become familiar to British listeners, but with increasing BBC emphasis on lighter music this had not helped to open up the field of symphony conducting outside. He had found it easier to obtain engagements on the Continent than in Britain, a situation not wholly satisfactory to an Englishman.

For the New Zealand scene, Mr Hopkins was full of praise. He had lived at Knutsford, 15 miles from Manchester, to escape the drizzle and smog and dirt of that great industrial city. Here, he hoped to live closer to his work. Wellington, with sunny weather and gusts of no more than a moderate

47 knots the day he arrived, amply fulfilled his requirement of clean air.

In English musical circles, says Mr Hopkins, he has acquired a reputation for doing a lot of modern music and for being infallible in its interpretation. The truth, however, was that, as a radio conductor, much of the music had been given him to do, without his having a choice in the matter. And as for being infallible! A conductor! He let the statement speak for itself. He remembered finding the Stravinsky 75th Anniversary Programme—one and a half hours of that composer's music—an extremely tall order.

Mr Hopkins professes to no outstanding preferences or prejudices in orchestral music. He is interested in the whole repertoire. "But I am keen to play music which is genuinely popular," he says. "I hope to have the chance to cater for those persons who really love a melody or a tune, and like to hear them played by a big orchestra." Such concerts would be even lighter than the present Proms or Youth Concerts. He had in mind works like the Savoy operas, and lesser works of composers like Elgar.

Youth Concerts he has always considered important, particularly since his experience of them in Birmingham, where the BBC Northern Orchestra spends one day each week visiting schools in small groups. "The children get to know the players individually," he says, "and later on this maintains their interest in the orchestra."

The impact of the new conductor will not be fully apparent till next year. He makes his first public appearance with the Orchestra in the first of the Proms series at Dunedin on January 30. In the meantime, he will conduct the Orchestra in four studio concerts, the first of which is scheduled for all YC stations at 9.15 p.m. on Thursday, November 28. The works are Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis*, and Brahms's *Symphony No. 2 in D*.

"I am not beginning with the normal flourish," says Mr Hopkins, "but these two works make a good opening concert and will help to give me an understanding of the Orchestra."

As Arthur Jacobs remarked in these columns some months ago, the new conductor may disappoint those ladies who love to seek a dashing, romantic hero on the rostrum. He is slightly built, with finely-cut features and a quietness of dress and speech which is essentially English. Beneath the accents of higher education there remains in his voice a pleasant North Country burr. But he has a reputation for thoroughness and versatility, together with a radio conductor's workmanlike approach to heavy schedules which should serve him well in the round of subscription, Promenade, youth, school and broadcast concerts which the National Orchestra undertakes.