

Quest for a N.Z. Quartet

WHEN he hears the word culture, a New Zealander nowadays is as likely to reach for his purse as his pistol butt. Indeed, there are small but encouraging signs that the backing he gives the best racehorse or halfback or heifer or marching girl may in future be matched by more sophisticated pursuits. The newest such sign of the changing times is a forthcoming quest by the N.Z. Federation of Chamber Music Societies for the country's best string quartet. The winning quartet will take all of £500 and probably more.

Planned to take place at Wellington next March, the Judith Bagnall Quartet Contest offers £100 for the first prizewinner and £50 for the second. The first quartet also gets a Federation contract to give 10 public recitals for chamber music societies, at a fee of £400. The NZBS is likely to chip in with broadcast engagements. By guaranteeing the cash prize-money for the first three years, Mrs Judith Bagnall, a Lower Hutt chamber music enthusiast, has at once provided a challenge for resident musicians and a lead to private patrons.

"She has given us the specific job of finding the best quartet in the country," says the Federation's President, Fred Turnovsky. "There has been a feeling among New Zealand artists that we were doing good work in bringing overseas artists of a high standard to this country, but that we had not matched this effort with local talent. Now we have a prize worth trying for—one that will carry considerable prestige along with its tangible benefits. It could help to create a permanent string quartet. And for younger players a place among the prizewinners might be the beginning of a very promising career."

"It has been proved abroad that private patronage can be immensely valuable in fields where government aid is limited. New Zealand has private

endowments like the Kelliher Prize in the visual arts, but music has lagged behind. Mrs. Bagnall's public-spirited offer makes an excellent beginning, and perhaps in future government may help, as they do in other countries, by allowing tax remissions on money devoted to fostering the arts."

Now in its eighth year, the N.Z. Federation of Chamber Music Societies represents a surprisingly strong current in this country's musical life. Of all forms of music, says Mr Turnovsky, chamber music is "the most concentrated, abstract, sophisticated, and in many ways the least accessible." Yet the movement has grown, particularly since the war, till it rivals its counterparts in the chamber music "strongholds" of northern and central Europe.

"Even in London or New York," he says, "string quartet audiences of 400 to 500 are considered good—audiences which we have come to expect in places like Nelson and Hastings."

The biggest, though by no means the oldest, of the regional societies affiliated to the Federation is that of Wellington, with 1000 members. The smallest are Whangarei and Otorohanga. Some have been helped into being by the Federation, assisted in recent years by a Government grant, but many were functioning long before the Federation was founded. The national body was created in 1950 to fulfil the demand for a representative committee to speak for the societies with one voice, and to negotiate with artists on their behalf. With only one paid official, it has proved its value in negotiating visits by chamber music groups of uniformly high calibre. Among them have been the Griller, Smetana and Pascal Quartets.

The Federation has been able to employ such highly-paid artists only by collaborating closely with similar organisations in Australia and Indonesia. Within New Zealand likewise the Federation and the NZBS share artists, and expenses, with results that have been wonderfully fruitful for both the listen-

ing and the concert-going publics. A chamber music group at Suva, Fiji, also benefits occasionally from the combined effort. It is conveniently situated on the air route to America and Europe, and home-going ensembles are pleased to stop over there for a performance or two and a holiday in the tropics.

Contrary to belief, European migration has not been of major importance to New Zealand's chamber music development, says Mr Turnovsky. He estimates that 20 per cent of the audience in Auckland and Wellington consists of new settlers, but that in other centres the proportion is negligible. His own theory is that the movement owes its healthy growth to the fact that chamber music groups are small, mobile and relatively inexpensive. About 5000 subscribers can support tours by top-flight performers, whereas tours by good symphony orchestras or opera companies would be beyond their means. The societies will continue to thrive, he considers, for so long as they continue to provide music-making of the highest order.

Standards set by foreign artists are undoubtedly high, but Mr Turnovsky considers them by no means unattainable for local musicians. Players as well as audiences, he thinks, will welcome the judgment of local talent by those standards. It is, in fact, a condition of the Judith Bagnall award that no first prize shall be awarded except for a high standard of performance, irrespective of whether a particular group is better than all other contestants.

"I think it would be insulting," says Mr Turnovsky, "to judge local artists by lower standards than we would apply to those from overseas."

Federation plans for next year are for the Judith Bagnall contest to be held in March, followed in May by a first visit of the renowned Amadeus Quartet, and in June by the Alma Trio, which made a previous successful tour three years ago. In August it is hoped that the prize-winning New Zealand quartet will make its 10-concert tour, and the season will be rounded off the following month with recitals by an American duo, Alan Grishman (violin) and Joel Ryce (piano). Members of both the Alma Trio and the American duo will appear also as soloists with the National Orchestra of the NZBS.

At present England's premier string quartet,



FRED TURNOVSKY N.P.S. photograph

the Amadeus ensemble consists of one Englishman, two Austrians and a German. They are Norbert Brainin and Siegmund Nissel (violins), Peter Schidlöf (viola) and Martin Lovett (cello). They gave their first recital as a quartet in the Wigmore Hall in 1948. Soon afterwards they were invited to play abroad, and now perform frequently in most European countries and at the principal festivals, including Edinburgh, Salzburg, Holland and Menton. They have recently completed their third successful tour of the United States and Canada.

The Alma Trio takes its name from the California estate of Yehudi Menuhin, where the group was first formed in 1944. Its members, Maurice Wilk (violin), Gabor Rejto (cello) and Adolf Baller (piano), each had an independent reputation as a concert artist before joining the trio. The esteem in which they are held here is matched by their own regard for New Zealand. Mr Baller, for instance, has been telling Americans: "We found marvellous audiences not only in cities like Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin, but also in small places we had never heard of. In Otorohanga, for example, a village of about only 3000 population, we were greeted by an enthusiastic audience of nearly 700, many of whom had come in from the farms in the surrounding country." Mr Baller's estimates of both population and audience are a little on the radical side. He may perhaps have taken his cue from the name of the town. According to Dollimore's *New Zealand Guide*, Otorohanga means "A very little food stretched out by supernatural means to last for a long journey."

The violinist Alan Grishman has lived for two years at Prades, in the Pyrenees, in order to study under Pablo Casals, and has performed at the Casals Festivals at Prades and at Perpignan. Joel Ryce, the pianist of the duo, studied in New York under William Kapell, has toured extensively in the United States and has performed for the past three years at the Marlboro Festival concerts.

(Prospective entrants in the Judith Bagnall Quartet Contest may obtain conditions of entry from the N.Z. Federation of Chamber Music Societies, P.O. Box 1617, Wellington.)



LEFT: The Amadeus Quartet—left to right, Norbert Brainin, Siegmund Nissel (violins), Peter Schidlöf (viola), Martin Lovett (cello)