

# Musical Extremists Again

A FORTNIGHT ago the possible decadence and ugliness of much contemporary music was discussed in this column. But it behoves any fair-minded person to look for arguments on the other side. The newly-formed New Zealand branch of the International Society for Contemporary Music gave its first concert in Wellington on December 6, and the broadcast items represented modern music from England (Bernard Stevens), New Zealand (Douglas Lilburn), and Russia (Aram Khachaturian). The attendance on that occasion seemed to justify the view that modern experimental (and often astringent or discordant) music has a definite appeal.

Dr. Galway would be the first to point out that the criticisms in his St. Cecilia Day address were not levelled at all modern composers, but merely at certain extremist factions—some perhaps writing with tongue in cheek, some just incomprehensible. Erik Satie was an advanced modernist for his time, and Jean-Aubry has this to say of him: "Satie's smile and his indifference to superannuated dogmas have done music better service than much pedantic assurance. It is hazardous to conclude, from a man's capacity to smile, that what he says is only amusing and has, in truth, no importance." He wrote also quite academic music, "self-imposed tasks, respectfully written to prove to himself and to others that it is possible to write tedious works and yet to write them with a sense of humour."

Has the later Stravinsky this humour? Perhaps not, for he insists on being taken very seriously, and musicians with a sense of tradition and balance may justly criticise his attempts to remove emotion from music.

It is a far cry from the moderns to Liszt, who would be regarded by many now as rather passé, but one may remember that letter to him of July 12, 1856: "Your orchestral works . . . are so new, so incomparable to anything else that criticism will take a long time to find what to make of them." And the writer? Another extremist of his day, Richard Wagner.

What is music? Except that it is a succession of sounds, most of which must have a definite pitch, it is very hard

view. Unquestionably much of today's music is ephemeral, because it does not fulfil the primary requisite—satisfaction of the listener's ear, intellect, and emotion. Much will last because it fulfils these demands, while also offering something fresh.

We cannot allow our personal views to sway us in dictating what music should be heard. The more we may dislike certain music, the more we must insist on giving it a hearing. How, otherwise, can the trends of musical evolution in various countries be followed, and how can the occasional masterpiece be discovered? Since Beethoven, Wagner, and others were incomprehensible to many in their day, we must hesitate to forecast the disapproval or otherwise of the musical public fifty years hence. But we may still regret that so much modern music is austere and cheerless, and does not seem to have the melodic charm, grace, humour, and simplicity of the past.

Radio programmes offer us much modern music. The subtle nuances of dissonance, however, are often lost over the air, and we should hear actual and intimate performances more often. We should enjoy all we can of it, judge it fairly by accepted standards, and remember all the time that while spices and condiments enormously increase the piquancy of many meals, we cannot live on them. But of course the atomic age may alter our constitutions!

—H.J.F.

## Russell and the Individual

IN his splendid Reith Lectures, *Authority and the Individual*, Lord Russell's treatment of the problem of how to combine "that degree of individual initiative which is necessary for progress with that degree of social cohesion which is necessary for survival" was brilliantly lucid, and, despite his somewhat prim voice, quietly reasonable. Realising that social justice involves considerable state control, he did not urge abandonment of all control, but at the same time manifested deep respect for individual liberty. World Government, when it comes, he said, "must leave national governments free in everything not involved in the prevention of war; national governments, in their turn, must leave as much scope

as possible to local authorities." I wondered, however, what philosophical justification Lord Russell would offer for his affirmation of the value of the individual. Without metaphysics of some kind, it seems to me almost impossible to show that every individual has intrinsic value in the sense that he should



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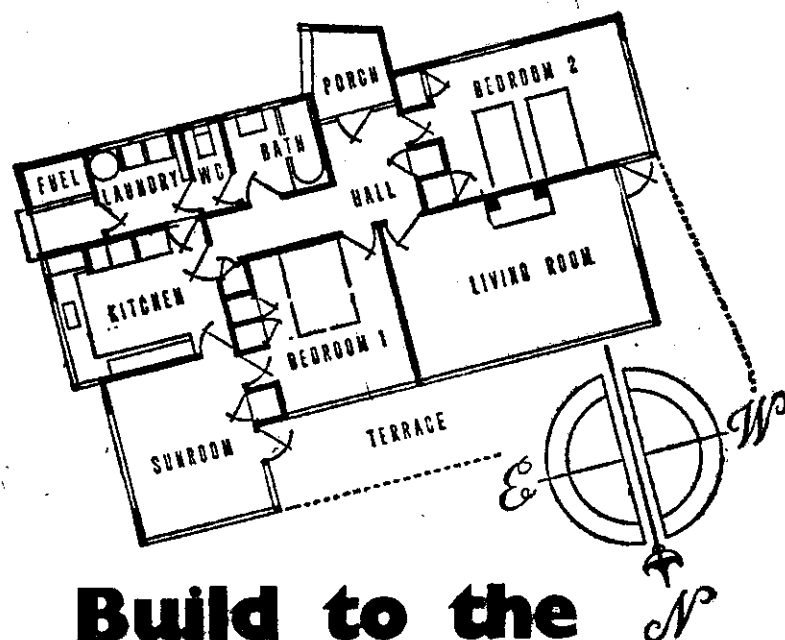
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