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Bandsmen Making Music

LARGE numbers of bandsmen are at present in Christchurch, and on Sunday next they will begin their annual contest. This is the summit of the year for brass bands, a time for display and competition. It is then, with the streets full of uniforms from all parts of the country, that the public discovers again how firmly and broadly the movement is established in New Zealand. Some of us lose our early liking for band music; we turn to other and higher satisfactions which require stringed instruments and the full orchestra. But there must surely be something wrong with us if we have no memory of youthful response to marches and test pieces written for brass, and if the sound of them today does not bring back a little of the old excitement. For how many of us, in the days before radio, did the introduction to music come partly through a piano played in the drawing room for Sunday visitors, and partly through the efforts of bandsmen gathered upon a rotunda in botanical gardens? Many people have wanted to keep and renew the experience. They ask nothing more of music than that it should be straightforward and crisp, and that it should be played with precision by men whose instruments shine in the sun. Who shall say they are less devoted to the art than are listeners who understand the later quartets of Beethoven? The appreciation is at a lower level, but it may be equally intense. Only when the devotee becomes defensive, or is driven to declare that band music should be imposed on people who prefer something else, must his values be questioned. There is, however, no need to decide where bandsmen stand in relation to other musicians. The important fact is that the bands provide opportunities for thousands of men who otherwise would have little chance of playing any sort of instrument. They supply training which, in addition to making good bandsmen, opens the door upon

larger fields. Some of the best players of wind instruments in symphony orchestras have been junior members of brass bands. Nevertheless, the strength of the movement is not in the brilliant few, but in the ordinary men who are bandsmen because they like to play a cornet or euphonium, because they like to meet their fellows twice a week for steady practice, and because they like to put on their uniforms and march through the streets on days when flags are flying. The smallest town must have its band. It is part of the life of the community, and there are times when it takes a symbolism outside music. During the war, many bands were able to survive only with the utmost difficulty. Their members included elderly men and schoolboys, their uniforms became old and shabby, and they were badly in need of new instruments. Yet somehow they kept going. On nights when bad news was coming in of battles and retreats, and disasters at sea, the sound of bandsmen playing in their practice rooms had a reassuring note for those who walked through a quiet town. Here was something that went on while the world was being changed: the making of music by men who could ignore the trouble outside while with obedient rhythm they followed the conductor's baton. And on V Day the bands were ready—a little below their usual standards, perhaps, but triumphantly playing for the crowds who tasted the first hours of peace. Things are different today: the bands are back to normal strength, and new players are repeating the achievements of great figures in the past. Whatever may be done at the contest, however, it is back home in the city suburb and the country town that the bandsmen have most to give. Something good would go out of our lives if men who work in many different occupations no longer wanted to make music for their own enjoyment and for the people's pleasure.

N.Z. LISTENER, FEBRUARY 17, 1950]