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RADIO REVIEW

Attitudes Towards Opera

“OPERA has to an egregious degree the power to make people jump to one or the other side of the fence,” says George R. Marek.* “People, if they are responsive to music at all, either love opera or hate it. Few can take it or leave it alone.” This is as true in New Zealand as in New York, where Mr. Marek is programme annotator for the Metropolitan Opera House. Among our native-born musical intelligentsia there is a quite positive dislike of opera. Lieder are music; arias are not, unless they be by Mozart to whom all things are forgiven.

Why do these divisions exist? Mr. Marek believes that it is “Because the attitude towards opera which leads to enjoyment needs at the outset a certain amount of—not tolerance, for that is too condescending a word—but of loving imagination.” And more things can go wrong than in other arts. “The wholly satisfying performance of an opera is a rarer thing than a wholly satisfying violin recital.”

I have known people who seemed born with a faith in opera, with a complete acceptance of its conventions—its “absurdities” as the others call them. And I have known many who were wholly converted the moment the curtain rose on their first visit to the opera house. But I have not known radio make converts by its attempts to supply the dimensions of sight and action which it lacks by nature. Indeed, sometimes it has only hardened the unbelievers, and irritated the rest.

In presenting operas whole, though, without an interrupting commentary, radio gives us a chance to dream ourselves into the illusion.

If the opera audience, in the theatre or at the radio set, is a small one in British countries, it is nevertheless the most faithful and passionate of all musical coteries. People do not go indefinitely to symphony concerts or piano recitals, or even to chamber music unless they are practitioners. But opera holds non-performers to the end, probably because of the extra demands it makes on their loving imagination.

The demands its radio version makes are a challenge we enjoy meeting in our own ways. Mr. Marek's book will live close to my radio set, because it has more smell of the opera houses than any other I have read, and a few pages in it anywhere put me in a hungry listening mood. Referring us to others for complete coverage, he gives 45 short chapters of anecdote and reflection from odd angles. He is scholarly and moving; and he is also very funny, as people can be when they are not on the defensive about what they love.

*A Front Seat at the Opera, by George R. Marek; Harrop. English price, 10/6.

It may be 50 years before we can raise commentators in New Zealand who can speak in these tones of voice. We need first an opera house people may go into from childhood. By making this world seem real, Mr. Marek makes it seem not hopelessly beyond our reach.

—Nanook

Period Piece

THE song “Bless You” fades away, and the voice of the old man, the narrator takes up the words, “Bless you, bless me,” he says with a rueful chuckle, “Bless me, with all my sentimental memories.” It is the end of the first programme in a new series from 4YA—

Music Round the Fireside. The narrator is Selwyn Toogood, who acts the part of the old man recalling happy memories of the music of his youth, with a delicacy of touch that avoids both sentimentality and condescension. (So convincing is Mr. Toogood's every intonation, that it is almost impossible for the listener to believe that he is

also the breezy commentator in the *Grin and Share It* series.) *Music at the Fireside* promises to bring us a fine collection of sentimental ballads, and Mr. Toogood's deft handling of a well-written script moulds them into a programme that is a period piece of some charm.

Music for Eating

STATION 4YC solves the problem of the attention divided between eating a meal and listening to the radio very nicely with its *Early Evening Concert*. These programmes are made up of familiar and attractive music that can be listened to with one eye on one's plate. It has been recognised at last that the items need not be brief, and with this recognition we have got away from the rather scrappy music that used to accompany our meals, and the session has greatly improved. One recent Sunday evening concert, for instance, contained a Bach Concerto, Beethoven's 'Cello Sonata, *The Shepherd on the Rock*, and the *Unfinished Symphony*. It is no disparagement of these works, I hope, to suggest that they make the ideal accompaniment to food.

Patch-work

STATION 4YC is at present running a series of programmes made up of letters grouped under such headings as: From the field of battle, from exiles, or from America. Each letter is, individually, a work of art, beautifully written and sympathetically read. Collectively, the letters prove that a chance association is not enough to give a programme

N.Z. LISTENER, AUGUST 3, 1951.