

PILGRIMAGE TO CREMONA

ERIC MEIER, a member of the 2YA Concert Orchestra, but better known as one of the few violin makers and repairers in New Zealand, came back a week or so ago from a visit to England, France, Switzerland and Italy. He had been on a "sort of pilgrimage," he told *The Listener* in an interview. As the Mohammedan makes for Mecca and the Hindu for Benares, he set out for Cremona, where the world's greatest violin makers lived and worked between 1650 and 1750. In three months he saw some famous instruments, met several of today's noted makers and heard some fine music. For some time Mr. Meier has been concerned about the future of violin making in New Zealand. Scores of people write to him for advice—how to get the tools and materials—but few follow it up, so that there are not enough craftsmen coming on to take their places when makers and repairers of this generation die out. While he was away he found that a serious shortage of craftsmen exists all over the world.

"I visited, among other places, the Cremona Museum, which contains all the relics of Stradivari—the drawings, moulds and tools," said Mr. Meier. "And at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, where some of the greatest instruments are kept, I saw the 'Messie,' and that was the climax of the whole trip. According to violin history a noted collector and dealer was Luigi Tarisio, an itinerant carpenter, who became one of the shrewdest of violin connoisseurs, and took many Italian masterpieces to France. When he died in 1854, several hundred valuable violins were found among his possessions—one of them a Stradivari made in 1716. It became known as 'Le Messie,' because though Tarisio frequently promised to show it

to dealers, he never actually did so. Eventually it found its way into the Ashmolean Museum, bequeathed by the Hill family of London."

Asked if he noticed any alterations in violin making Mr. Meier said that there had been no fundamental changes since the earliest days, with the exception of a slightly longer neck and a slightly heavier bass bar, necessitated by the rise in pitch to achieve greater brilliance.

"Did you play any of the famous instruments you saw?"

"While in Rugby I stayed with Alfred de Reyghere, a member of the Boyd Neel Orchestra, and lived in the same house with a fine Giuseppe Guarneri, a Guadagnini, and an Amati viola. These I could play whenever I liked. And when in Berne I met Henry Werro and played his Stradivari 'Blunt.' Werro is one of the finest makers of modern days, and he is another man who is worried about the increasing gaps in the ranks of makers. In Sydney I met A. E. Smith, who had the same complaint. Ernest Llewellyn (of the Llewellyn-Kennedy Trio, which will be heard in New Zealand shortly with the National Orchestra and in recitals), constantly uses one of the three Smith fiddles he owns."

Scarcity of Craftsmen

"What is causing this dearth of young craftsmen?"

"High wages offered for factory workers. Every maker I met had lots of instruments awaiting repairs. The work holds a good future for anybody who will take the trouble to become qualified. No machine can make a violin, or repair one. It can turn out parts, but they must be put together by hand. Any true craftsman will own that he really enjoys his work, which is infinitely more fascinating than merely watching a

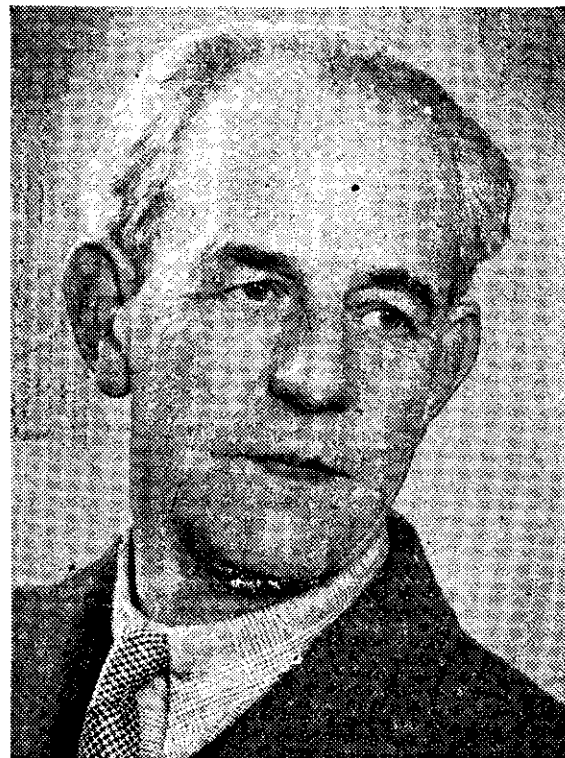
machine. I think also this dearth may have something to do with the fact that in this generation there is so little respect for the craftsman. People are apt to lose sight of the fact, too, that the newly-fashioned article can be just as good as the old."

"What about supply of materials?"

"Most of the wood comes from the Middle European countries, and today stocks are in a critical state. What was in hand before the war is now exhausted. In the last few years no cutting has been done with an eye to the future; timber workers have migrated, leaving nobody to work the forests. We need timber seasoned for at least twenty years. True, I saw stocks in Switzerland, but hardly any of the wood was equal to the cheapest you could buy before the war, and none of it was more than five years out of the forest. I found that I could spend justifiably only a few pounds on the wood I saw in Switzerland, whereas I had gone prepared to buy quite a quantity. The wood has a lot to do with tone."

"Has anyone discovered the secret of the varnish used by the Cremonese?"

"No, and yet varnish varies a great deal. It is seen at its best in the well-preserved instruments of Stradivari and Guarneri. The 'Messie' I mentioned



National Publicity Studios photograph
ERIC MEIER

This generation has little respect for the craftsman.

before glows like a jewel. Many famous makers have copied it but they all miss getting the faintest resemblance to the original."

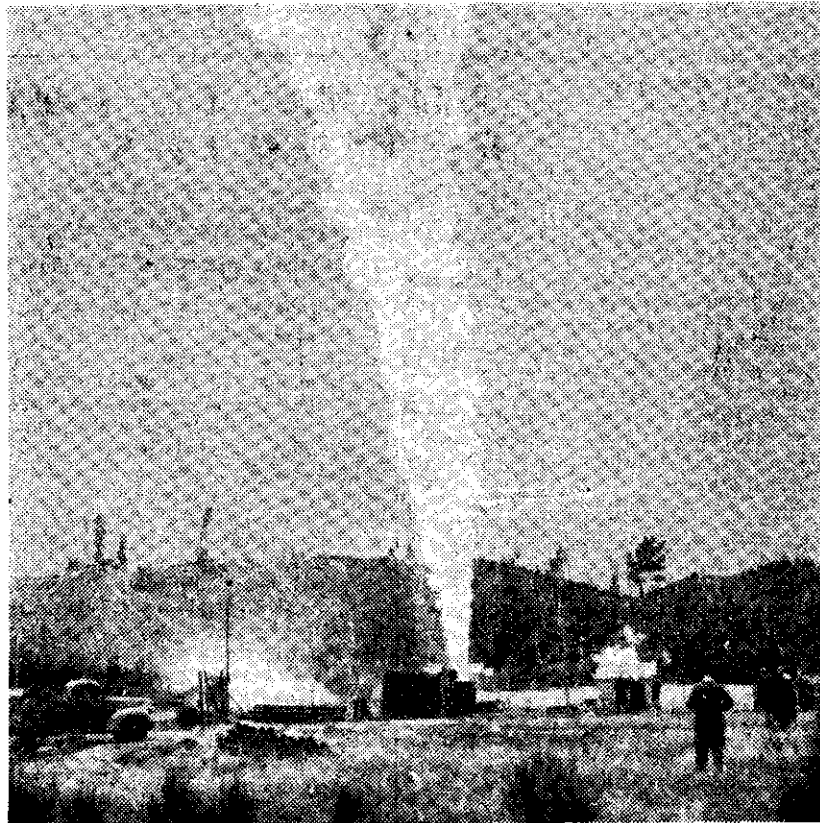
"What is the function of varnish?"

"There are three—to preserve the violin from perspiration, improve the tone, and make the instrument a thing of great beauty. Makers of all generations have been searching for the old masters' secret, and all have failed."

Many violinists today were using a steel E string instead of gut, said Mr. Meier, and some liked steel for all their strings—Campoli for example. That was just a matter of personal preference. There had been a good deal of controversy and it had been suggested that steel would produce a harmful tension on the fiddle, but steel and gut strings obeyed the same physical law, for the rate of vibrations per second must balance.

There had been a lot of argument about the acoustics in London's new Royal Festival Hall on the South Bank, said Mr. Meier. Complaints were that the individual instruments of the orchestra came out too strongly. "But," he asked, "is that a disadvantage? I went to a performance of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* and I enjoyed hearing each instrument so clearly."

"Perhaps I have given a melancholy picture of the future of the violin makers' craft, but on the other hand a brighter story can be told about players, particularly in England, where large numbers of young amateurs are forming string groups. I saw one instance of this at an amateur festival held in an old manor house on the edge of the Cotswolds. The students were housed and fed there and looked after by a resident staff. So if at the moment we may feel a bit downcast about the makers and repairers, there is not likely to be any scarcity of performers, and we can only hope that the demand they create for instruments will be met," added Mr. Meier.



Ministry of Works photograph

"Harnessing Vulcan"

THE attempt to obtain hydro-electric power from the thermal areas in the Wairakei basin, near Rotorua, is the sort of project likely to tax the imagination of ordinary human beings. The thought of unlimited reserves of high-pressure steam (which here seeps through in the form of natural geysers) being harnessed and piped to turbines and generators to provide electricity for the lights in your living room has something even disquieting about it. However, the team of geologists and technicians now working at Wairakei have things well under control (the photograph on the left shows one of the test bores), and a radio party from Station 1YZ recently went down there and interviewed several of those engaged on the job. The resulting documentary programme, called *Harnessing Vulcan*, will be broadcast from 1YZ at 7.30 p.m. on Thursday, August 30.

Prospects of success are said to be promising. Already over a dozen small bores and some large ones are in action, and their working is being carefully studied before the next step is taken in what promises to be a long project—the establishment of generating equipment which may bring hundreds of thousands of kilowatts into the hydro-electric network of these power-starved islands.