

BEECHAM CHOOSES N.Z. SOPRANO FOR LEADING ROLE

"Most of the singers I introduce to the public are entirely unknown," says Sir Thomas Beecham. "They are not however, unknown 24 hours afterwards." The critic, apparently respect his judgment, too, which should augur well for Edna Graham, the Christchurch soprano who has been chosen by Sir Thomas to sing the principal role at the first performance of Delius's opera *Irmelin* next month. Some background to the opera (and to Sir Thomas) is supplied in the article below, received from a "Listener" correspondent in London.

THE invitation to the Gondo-
liers Room at the Savoy
Hotel said that "the briefest
possible mention" would be made
of Delius's opera *Irmelin*, which
will be produced for the first time
by Sir Thomas Beecham in May. No
one expected the allusion to be brief
and no one was disappointed, for the
conductor's spoken prose is better than
what most men write and the Beecham
wit can be worth a guinea a word.

Can any good music be expected in
this age? Can infant prodigies conduct
orchestras? Can butchers be considered
respectable? These were only some of
the questions answered in Sir Thomas's
sparkling 25 minutes.

And "Can I go away now?" asked his
manager, Mr. Alfred Nightingale.

This question was prompted by Lady
Beecham pleading: "Please don't stand
on that chair, Tom darling. Sit on the
table." Sir Thomas had climbed on to
the seat of one of the Savoy's spindly-
legged chairs the better to address the

gathering of musicians,
music-lovers and critics
—he would be the first
to insist that they are
distinct classes. As he
leaned by Mr. Nightin-
gale's shoulder, he re-
plied:

"No, you can't. I've
had two cocktails. Be-
sides, you know I'm
notoriously unsteady"—
a reference to the occa-
sions when he has ap-
parently found a podium
a precarious perch.

Delius, who was his
friend, he said is one of
the modern composers
who annoys him least.
He was a mature com-
poser from the start and
Sir Thomas had dis-
covered that the Delius Trust is re-
ceiving far more fees than it used to.
This shows either that Delius's work
is becoming more popular or that
people are sending the fees without
playing the music. Knowing the musical



"So long as I am able . . . there will be no Delius opera produced in this country without adequate singers"

world, he rejected the second possi-
bility.

"Apart from 200 or so other works,
he composed six operas. Two have been
given occasionally and then put on the
shelf. Four have never been heard;
Irmelin is one of them. When I have finished
with it, it is not likely to be performed any-
where again. Take that
either way," he said with
an assertive flick of his
goatee beard.

The opera is a varia-
tion on the theme of the
princess and the swine-
herd. "She was a very
nice young woman. She
had 100 offers of mar-
riage and refused the lot
—I may say entirely un-
realistic and unmodern."

It runs for about 110
minutes. "Of course, we
spin it out to nearly
three hours, and give
everyone a chance to re-
cuperate at the bar."

The singers? "Most of
the singers I introduce to
the public are entirely
unknown. They are not,
however, unknown 24
hours afterwards.

"So long as I am able
—and I may not be able
long, due to circum-
stances beyond my con-
trol—there will be no
Delius opera produced in
this country without ade-
quate singers," said the
73-year-old conductor.

Someone recalled that
Sir Thomas had once
complained that opera in
Britain was in the hands
of butchers. "Butchers,"

he replied, in mock anger, "are a very
respectable class. They have been known
to have emotional lapses."

FROM the respectable *Irmelin*, he
turned to speak about another much-
discussed young lady, eight-year-old
Giannella de Marco, the Italian prodigy
conductor now in Britain. It only showed
that the business of conducting was a
mechanical affair and that conductors
would have to look to their jobs.

"Obviously anyone can get up and
conduct so that the orchestra plays, one
may say not in obedience, but in spite of
them, yet with a certain competence." A
friend of his in South America had
trained an orang-utan to conduct and
was proposing to send it on tour dressed
as a Red Indian, but "the Royal Phil-
harmonic Society, which has a sense of
dignity I find overpowering, may not
care to take part."

Sir Thomas gave his reasons for be-
lieving that *Turandot* was the last good
opera, and that there may not be an-
other good one in our time. How
brief, he said, was the period in which
the Greeks wrote their great plays;
briefer still the period of the Eliza-
bethan dramatists. It was a wonder that
the age of the great composers had
lasted for more than two centuries. Why
should it continue?

"No one has written a good tune for
25 years, and it is certain that in the
next 25 years no one will write a good
tune again," he asserted. "But do as I
do—view the prospect with calm and
equanimity."

With that Sir Thomas stepped down
off the delicate Savoy chair, and it was
time for lesser musicians—and music-
lovers and critics—to have their say all
at once.

—J. W. Goodwin

Edna Graham

EDNA GRAHAM, shown at right as
Micaela in *Carmen*, was chosen for
the title role in *Irmelin* after being
auditioned for another part at Beecham's
London home. The opera will be per-
formed for the first time by the Royal
Philharmonic Orchestra, under the baton
of Sir Thomas, at a music festival in
Oxford early in May.

At the time of her audition for
Irmelin, Miss Graham was teaching in a
nursery school by day and giving con-
certs at night. Since 1947 she has com-
pleted a four-year course at the Royal
Academy of Music, and has toured the
provinces and Scotland with the Carl
Rosa Opera Company, singing such roles
as Musetta in *La Bohème* and the doll
in *Tales of Hoffman*. At the end of the
tour she was offered musical comedy
roles, but accepted the nursery school
post to enable her to remain in London
for auditions. The policy paid. In
addition to the role in *Irmelin* she has
been engaged by the famed Glynde-
bourne Opera Company to sing the
Naiad in eight performances of *Ariadne*.
During Easter week she also gave her
first solo recital for the BBC's Home
Service, singing songs by Richard Hage-
man and William Walton. She has been
heard frequently in the BBC's Overseas
Service.

Writing on "New Age Music" in *John
o' London's Weekly* recently, Sidney
Harris said of Miss Graham: "She is still
an unknown quantity . . . but Sir
Thomas can be trusted to make a good
choice."

