

Basso from Shanghai

(Special to "The Listener"
from Sydney)

A CHINESE bass who sings in six languages is something of a novelty in the musical world and likely to remain so. Yi-Kwei Sze, who will leave for New Zealand on September 1, after a five-months' concert season in Australia, says it was against this that he had to battle when he went to the United States in 1947. "Whoever heard of a Chinese bass?" was the retort of the director of the San Francisco Opera (Gustavo Narola) when Yi-Kwei Sze's agent first proposed him.

Two years after his arrival in the United States Sze made his debut at Carnegie Hall and, as he says, he "lost a lot of money." Now he is well established, accepted on the merits of his truly beautiful voice. Concerts, opera, television, radio: engagements pile on one another.

Sze is a quick, gay little man, 36 years old, with an eager personality and a way of talking in vivid, picturesque phrasing, for all his strong accent and occasional lack of a word. When he can't find the word he wants his wife will supply it, or give a rapid explanation in Chinese. But though she is a musician, too, she leaves him to do the talking.

How did he come to take up western music? Because in the cosmopolitan city of Shanghai where his father had bought a building business western music was taught. "As a matter of fact," he admitted, "I wouldn't make much of a job of a traditional Chinese song." But of a westernised Chinese song, yes: such songs were important items on his programmes. Americans expected a bracket of Chinese songs at any solo recital he gave. He would sing them in Chinese as a rule, but with a westernised accompaniment. Here Nancy Lee Sze, who is his accompanist as well as his wife, interposed with an explanation that any Chinese music played on the piano was of necessity westernised, for the traditional Chinese instruments were string and woodwind and the tonal scale was quite different.

Mrs. Sze and her husband met at the Shanghai Conservatory, but were married only after they met again in New York where she had been studying at the Juilliard School.

He said a good many Chinese in Shanghai had taken up Western music and at present there were a few doing further studies in the United States. He didn't know of any who were nearing concert pitch; he thought he was likely to continue to be "the only Chinese" for quite a long time yet. Of what was happening in the musical world of China itself he had no idea; but he could tell me that Chopin had been banned from the Shanghai Conservatory after the Communists took over, as too western and too decadent.

When he began his studies he had expected to make a concert career in China, for in those days, before the Japanese and before the Communists, there was a lively musical life in Shanghai. But the Japanese came and the years following were dangerous and cut across with dreadful experiences—including a thousand-mile walk to Chungking dressed as a coolie. After the war he went to

Hong Kong, and from there to New York, for New York seemed to him the magnet for all aspiring concert artists. As an artist he appreciates New York for the opportunities it gives him; otherwise he would prefer not to be there, for it is too full of noise, too man-made, too far from the earth. You feel as you

talk to Yi-Kwei Sze that he is terribly homesick for China, and for Chekiang Province where he was born. He said he wished he could leave New York and buy a farm and grow flowers. "And sing just for my friends." Not so Mrs. Sze. "I'm a city-bred girl," she said. "And I like the country for a little only."

But she obviously felt she would not be called upon to forsake her career to become a farmer's wife and was not

worrying about her husband's predilections. She gave him an unruffled smile as he talked about his bucolic aspirations.

Yi-Kwei Sze has not yet made any appearances in England or Europe, but hopes to do so. A BBC offer came recently, but as it clashed with commitments already made he was obliged to turn it down. But before he "takes up farming" he hopes to sing at Salzburg and Edinburgh, in London and in Paris.

I asked him what he thought about singing opera in English, a lively subject in Australia which now has two opera companies, both of them singing in English. Unlike John Brownlee, he did not concede that it was a success, musically speaking.

"I can see no sense in singing, say, *Bohème*,

in English," he said. "Everyone knows it and the Italian cadences fit in so much better with the music. But when you have a new opera, or an unfamiliar one, then it isn't a bad idea; it gives audiences a chance to get acquainted with it. But (and here he was most emphatic) the translation must be good."

He mentioned a new Italian opera *The Oracle*, with a libretto about San Francisco's Chinatown "in which I am the only Chinese, and all the others, except one, have to wear Chinese make-up!" The composer, Franco Leoni, wrote rather in the Puccini style, fluid and lyrical. So far he has not sung in *The Consul*—hasn't even seen it—but he admires Menotti's work.

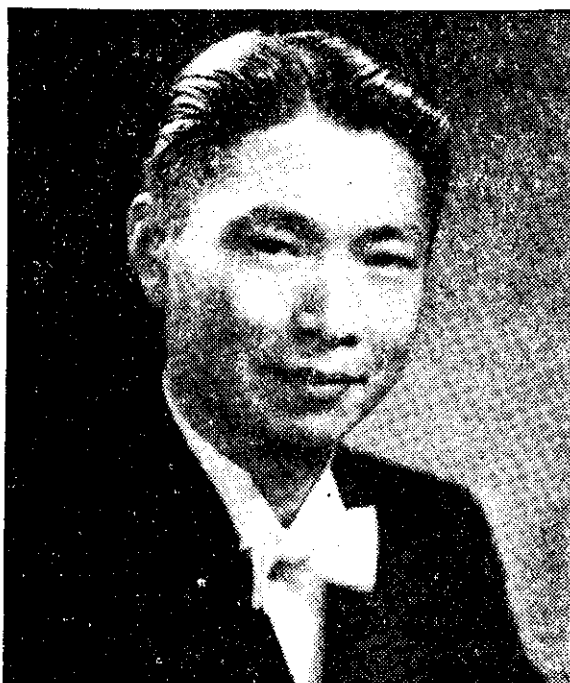
Mrs. Sze here added a word of praise for Menotti's TV opera *Amael and the Night Visitors* which she had viewed, and which her five-year-old son Alexander had liked.

"Alexander's the real musical genius of the family," Yi-Kwei said then, "already he knows several of my operatic roles."

Mrs. Sze said she was afraid Alexander would sooner or later supplant her as accompanist. "He really shows talent," she added. The little boy (who is at home in New York) was named after Yi-Kwei's teacher Alexander Kipnis.

—Margaret Clarke

(Yi-Kwei Sze will give the first solo recital of his New Zealand tour at Hamilton on September 3, and will make his first appearance with the National Orchestra at Wellington, September 8.)



YI-KWEI SZE
He would like to buy a farm

HOW TO FISH

THE coming fishing season will be a rather special one in the Bay of Plenty and Taupo districts—members of the Royal party are expected to try their skill with the rod there in the first few days of January. Something like 28,000 licences to fish in these districts are likely to be issued this season, and throughout the rest of the North and South Islands many more thousands of men and women will be spending their leisure hours by lakes and streams.

For this big audience 1YZ has prepared a series of programmes on all aspects of angling, to be broadcast under the title, *Tight Lines—the Angler's Programme*. Several months ago a conference called by the station worked out the broad outlines of the series, which will be on general rather than local lines and should interest anglers throughout New Zealand.

Tight Lines will start with a talk by Rowland Dickinson, fisheries assistant in the Internal Affairs Department, Rotorua, on the history and introduction of trout into New Zealand. This will be heard at 7.15 p.m. on

Tuesday, August 25. In the second of these weekly programmes Alan Pye, of Huka Lodge, Taupo, a veteran fisherman, with an international reputation, will be heard discussing angling as an art. Other talks will be about the choice of equipment, knots and flies and the care of equipment, the fundamental principles of casting, developing technique in casting, the strike, playing and landing of the fish and dry versus wet fly fishing. Those taking part will include Frank Lord, a Rotorua business man and an authority

on many aspects of angling; Con Voss, of Rotorua, New Zealand fly casting champion and New Zealand representative on the International Fly Casting Federation; S. A. McNamara, Conservator of Wild Life at Rotorua; and J. F. Thomas, President of the Bay of Plenty Fishing and Shooting Federation. The last two speakers will be heard together in the ninth programme, and the series will end with two programmes in which the experts will answer and discuss questions which anglers are invited to send to 1YZ.



ROTORUA angling authorities responsible for 1YZ's new programme: From left—back row, C. A. Voss, J. F. Thomas, R. Dickinson; front row, F. Lord, S. A. McNamara, Alan Pye, A. E. Sanit (chief announcer 1YZ), and 1YZ's station manager, K. G. Collins