

THE MAKING OF A STRING QUARTET

"GRILLER'S Pressure-cooker Course" someone called it; and trying to discover the elusive secrets of chamber music playing in a short two weeks seemed to make the dubbing apt. In California each year, the Griller String Quartet takes six weeks to two months to coach players in the art of string quartet playing. Here at St. Peter's School, Cambridge, with 80 to 90 students almost desperately anxious to get to the heart of the matter, 12 working days became a frantic frenzy of music. Of all ages from 14 to "over 60," from the enthusiastic amateur to the experienced professional hoping to find some refurbishing of old skills, teachers, students, farmers, doctors, nurses, office workers, and housewives released temporarily from the worries of domestic life—they all had one thing in common. This was to reach nearer perfection in the art and craft which was for some a pursuit, for others a profession, and for all, a pleasure.

Chamber music is not a pastime for the recluse. It is "music among friends." Two at least are needed, 20 are too many. To the purists, four is the ideal number, especially if those four comprise two violins, a viola, and a cello; in fact, a string quartet. But there comes the rub. Four's company, but only if temperaments and musicianship are mutually compatible and reasonably flexible. When they meet for the first time in the hectic circumstances of a short vacation school, the difficulties are immeasurably greater.

A holiday music school, particularly such a specialised affair as one devoted to chamber music, is something like life aboard ship. It brings out both the best and the worst in people. Settling down with three strangers to tackle new music, knowing that all too soon one's tentative efforts are to be overlooked by a member of a world-famous quartet who probably knows the work back to front, is not a situation conducive to complacency, nor is it likely to be a solace for frayed nerves. The ego struggles for existence. People who go to bed early, people who get up early, people who do neither, people who have never slept in a dormitory; people who eat anything, people who are fussy about their food, people who like coffee, people who must have tea, with milk, without milk, sugar please—all the varieties of habits and the vagaries of human nature have to be adapted quickly to an unusual and quickly-moving mode of life.

Musically, there are the same corners to be rubbed smooth. Inevitably the violinist turned up who, drafted as a second violin, subtly evaded this important responsibility to wangle a first desk; but there was also the first violin who gracefully declined the more exalted position to play the second part. As surely, there were those who made it plain that they were disappointed at finding themselves teamed up with others whom they regarded as musical inferiors; but these were offset by some who cheerfully submitted to the frustration of moving at a slower rate, just for the good of the cause. The energetic and enterprising were likely to achieve more than their fair share of tutorials unless they were closely watched, while a few gentler characters might have been too rarely in at the kill without

the little prodding that was given them now and again.

To the observer able to stand aside from this maelstrom of musical activity, the moulding of disparate personalities into something like a community was as interesting as their integration into a musical unity. Both processes were made easier by the fact that the members of the Griller Quartet must themselves have been through the experience. After 25 years together they have achieved a musical and temperamental flexibility, an ability to give and take and to adjust, which is astonishing. For the whole 12 days, neither in public nor in the semi-privacy which is the best a residential music school can offer, was their unruffled relationship at any time disturbed. No terse comment, no sharp and hasty contradiction ever broke the stream of musical enthusiasm. Not that Sidney Griller, Jack O'Brien, Philip Burton and Colin Hampton are "yes-men," complacent in calm deference. Four very acute minds constantly sharpen the feelings into a composite musical intelligence. As much as the music, the civilising influence of the Griller Quartet members gave the School its character.

The Art of Teaching

The success of the School was due in very great measure to the members of the Griller Quartet. This is not such an obvious statement as it may seem, for fine musicians do not necessarily make good teachers, nor even more readily, good companions. The Griller Quartet players were all three. Indefatigable—even when three of them at one time or another were laid low with temporary indisposition—they spared neither themselves nor others in the drive of their work, although Mr. Griller did remark in passing that New



SIDNEY GRILLER conducting



AN OPEN rehearsal by the Griller Quartet in the gymnasium of St. Peter's School, Cambridge

BY OWEN JENSEN

Zealanders, as far as their music went, very often tended to work in too frenzied a fashion.

The main part of the School programme was devoted to tutorials in which each member of the Quartet coached a student ensemble while other students listened, or went away and practised—whichever might be, for the moment, the most profitable. As all tutors pointed out, they were not concerned so much with wrong notes (in small quantities), lapses of intonation, or the day to day accidents of practice, but rather with the broader aspects of chamber music interpretation—the niceties of nuance, the feeling for rhythm and speeds, or sensitive perception of instrumental balance, together with such technical problems as affected the flow of musical thought.

Ninety-minute tutorials became the concentrated essence of teaching as fundamental points were revealed. Students were made to think for themselves.

"What is the real difficulty there?" says tutor-cellist Colin Hampton, stopping a student quartet and appealing to the first violin.

"Well," says the violinist, thinking hard, with a covert glance at the listeners who, he knows, are thinking hard, too. "Well, I suppose it's because you have to have a long bow for the two notes going down and only a short one for the single note up."

"How are you going to get over that?" says tutor Hampton.

"Shorten the long bow."

"Yes, and?"

"Bow faster for the one note."

"Yes; anything else?"

"Lighten the bow."

"Ah, now you've got it. And, of course, you've thought it all out for yourself."

This driving away at significant ideas gave the teaching its greatest effectiveness and the students, some of them at least, found in the long run that perhaps they knew a little more than they had believed, even if they had been a little careless in applying their knowledge.

A holiday music school of two weeks is not, of course, a conservatorium, nor

does it in any way pretend to be. Teaching in a formal sense, therefore, becomes only a part of the activities. A variety of other approaches keeps musical development moving. For instance, just when students' difficulties loomed large and no amount of rehearsal seemed to affect them much, the Grillers invited everyone along to an open rehearsal when they worked at part of their next concert programme. This is the authentic way to rehearse. And so that there shall be no doubts about the matter, Sidney Griller expounds on practice methods. A film strip of a Beethoven Quartet score helps to focus attention on its musical beauties and problems. Violin and cello seminars, informal discussions—these are all grist to the Griller mill. A public concert in Cambridge in association with Cambridge Community Arts Service and a magnificent performance of Haydn's *The Seven Last Words* in the intimately impressive St. Peter's Chapel are both an inspiration and an incentive.

Then the ever energetic Mr. Griller grabs a baton and beats out the phrases of the Bach Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 as all the strings become an orchestra—"I've been wanting to do this for years, but no one will ever let me!" Mr. Griller's conducting, maybe, is not as good as his fiddling, but he certainly knows his strings. And as for Jack O'Brien, always urbane, Philip Burton with something of a more sedate leprechaun about him, and Colin Hampton from whom there flows a continuous stream of quiet enthusiasm—they each seem to be able to turn to violin, viola, cello or even piano, and deal authoritatively with the problems that arise.

All this was the Griller School of Chamber Music at St. Peter's, Cambridge. All this went towards making some of New Zealand's best string players, some woodwind and a bunch of pianists into efficient members of chamber music teams, and, more especially, making what many consider one of the most perfect of musical mediums, the string quartet. How to do it? Well, Sidney Griller's recipe is: "Hard work and creative musical thinking. And when your quartet gets into difficulties of disagreement—have a good row!"