

The Progress and Position of Broadcasting

An Analysis of Criticism and an Outline of Social Service



THE appeal of broadcasting to the emotional side of individuals naturally renders the subject of programme criticism so diffuse as to be difficult of analysis, but there are certain broadly defined categories into which our critics fall, although the exceptions to each almost disprove the rule. Covering all these there are to be found some simple psychological manifestations which emerge constantly: hardly ever does a critic admit in so many words that he is expressing his own views only. One will speak on behalf of his whole circle of wireless friends; another for the overwhelming majority of listeners in his vicinity; others—yet more confident—voice the views of anything from 90 to 99 per cent. of the entire audience. The latter is a very favourite percentage and is applicable impartially to any type of matter broadcast. There is, again, the impression that anything particularly disliked predominates. To those to whom dance music is anathema it appears to be broadcast in every programme. A listener who does not care for talks cannot switch on without finding one in progress, and another who longs for variety entertainment is utterly bewildered at the interminable transmissions of symphony concerts. Allowance is made for an element of the exaggeration of vexation in this, but much is written in perfectly good faith, and many a correspondent has retracted his words when his complaint has been answered. This leads us to one of the best characteristics of listeners—they are so ready to retract what has been written in a moment of disappointment or irritation, and before they have had an opportunity of considering the other side of the case. Very few, indeed, of the critics

A very interesting and informative analysis of the criticisms levelled against the British broadcasting programmes and a tribute to the real service which broadcasting is rendering is contained in the Handbook recently issued by the British Broadcasting Corporation. This article has much in it that is applicable to New Zealand. Readers in particular, will, we think, appreciate and enjoy the outline given of the service broadcasting is rendering in increasingly widening the circle of musical taste and enjoyment and providing a foundation for the development of a fuller cultural life. The future of music, under the stimulus of broadcasting, is thus brighter than ever.

really intend to be rude or cross. Many do not even pretend to be, and write with a sincere desire to help in the improvement of the service. Their knowledge of the conditions under which it is carried on is sometimes insufficient to enable them to frame practicable suggestions, but the B.B.C. has not infrequently benefited by honestly constructive criticism, which is always welcome to us.

TYPES OF CORRESPONDENTS.

It must not be presumed that the atmosphere of Savoy Hill is one of unbroken peace, nor that every listener who has a bone to pick with the programme does so without showing his teeth. It is not always easy to placate the correspondent who calls everything that he does not like or understand "piffle," and all that really does appeal to him, "not half good enough," and the feelings of some critics can never be allayed. There is a respectable gentleman living in a respectable suburb of a respectable town who does not permit his daughters to hear love songs or dance music. He, it is feared, will never again look leniently upon the B.B.C. And the aunt (real) who was almost sure she heard one of her clan say "Botheration!" in the Children's Hour "one day last week," has doubtless already carried out her intention of demanding the return of her licence money. In such matters defeat is regretfully acknowledged.

THE INCORRIGIBLES.

A very curious type of critic exists, fortunately in small numbers. He generally possesses a super-something

set with innumerable valves, purchased at incredible cost, but its use imbues him with a feeling of dislike of everything broadcast, and a personal antipathy to all connected with the service. He is a most regular listener, and delivers himself at frequent intervals of letters, in which he points out that the B.B.C. is, beyond doubt, a hotbed of incompetence and drivell. It is not quite certain whether such listeners derive pleasure or pain from their reception and correspondence. They never express the former, so the B.B.C. is usually inclined to rank them, with due admiration and honour, among the martyrs. "I hope your face is getting red with temper as you read this," wrote one of the incorrigibles recently. It wasn't, but a terrible mental picture of the writer was being formed.

There is no need to devote much space to the anonymous critic who scribbles, "Your programmes are ROT-TERN," on a letter-card, and furtively drops it into a letter-box round the next corner but one. In fact, he is believed to be a lineal descendant of the small boy who chalked "No Poney" on the door, and ran away, so we do not take him seriously. Anonymous correspondents are so shockingly wasteful of time, stationery, and postage.

Taking the subject of these notes as a whole, however, there is only one real complaint, and that is that there is not enough of it. This does not mean that programmes are put out for the purpose of arousing adverse comment, but where a public service such as ours works unseen, there must be innumerable listeners who are puzzled as to why seemingly incomprehensible things are done when a straight and simple path seems to be ahead. It is too much to expect them all to take it on faith that the sole purpose of the B.B.C. is to broadcast acceptable programmes in an acceptable manner, and doubts or perplexities may sometimes engender a spirit of suspicion and resentment which need not arise at all. Let such listeners present their problems, and they may be certain that they will receive sympathetic individual attention, and, moreover, that the opinions they may express will be definitely recorded in that register which is so helpful in the appraisalment of the public taste.

BROADCASTING AND MUSIC.

The advent of the gramophone has done a great deal for music, particularly since, in recent years, the leading companies have realised their responsibilities and provided a tremendous library of first-rate music at a moderate price. It was the more significant because it brought to the fore, for the first time, music which could previously be heard only by comparatively few people privileged to attend first-rate performances, as by a fine orchestra, under a great conductor, or, perhaps, a unique artist performing once only on a flying visit to this country. It is true that there had been introduced on a small scale the electrophone, a device for allowing people to listen at home to a concert received by microphone in a hall or theatre and transmitted by wires, like telephone lines, to the house; but a microphone efficient for this type of work had still to be invented, and the results were not sufficiently attractive to guarantee the commercial success of the scheme. The piano, too, had begun to make its way in this country, and has already done its similar share in spreading the gospel of good music.

Then came broadcasting—that magical agent that has made available, by means of comparatively simple apparatus, and at next to no cost, the finest things there are to hear in music. It annihilates distance. No longer is the promenade concert available only to Londoners, the Halle concerts to Mancunians, the Baptist Philharmonic to inhabitants of that city, and the Scottish Orchestra to those living in Glasgow. The shepherd on the downs or the lonely crofter in the farthest Hebrides, and, what is equally important, the labourer in his squalid tenement in our but too familiar slums, or the lonely invalid on her monotonous couch, may all in spirit sit side by side with the patrons of the stalls and hear some of the best performances in the world. Not only this. Broadcasting has brought into the lives of millions such as these the ever-flowing stream of music performed with sociable intimacy in the studio, the interesting series of talks, not only on music, but on every conceivable subject by the greatest authorities known, whether they be explorers, scientists, or professional and business men and women; famous poets reading their own works, and dramas from Marlowe and Shakespeares down to the present day, and including, not only many standard works, but, in addition, new plays specially written for the wireless medium.

TRUE DEMOCRATISATION OF MUSIC.

The effects of the understanding of music must already have been profound. Literally, millions of people have heard, for the first time in their lives,

the simple, youthful, and sparkling quartets by Papa Haydn and the elegant Mozarts, and the joyful early quartets of Beethoven, and realised that therein lies a wealth of melody undreamed of, of rhythms that incite the toe to tap as well as any reel or fox-trot. Sir Walford Davies's homely talks, illustrated by his ever nimble fingers, have awakened the unsuspected interest in the way music is made. Hosts of bright, impressionable children, whose music had consisted mainly of snatches of music-hall ditties inflicted by itinerant execrations in the bar entrance, or sobs of the worst type of sentimental slop played in the local cinema at the weekly "tuppenny" Saturday performances, have heard nightly over the broadcast such music as must have had a great and good influence on the sensitive unfolding mind.

Thousands of people, who have previously regarded the military band solely as the vehicle of a limited repertoire of noisy, banal music, discover that it can sound even more attractive playing a dignified, refined programme of stuff that proves its worth by unresented repetition.

THE FUTURE OF MUSIC.

The effect of broadcasting on music itself—what will it be? This is a question which cannot be answered. The growth of discrimination among the listening masses must already be tending to discourage to some extent the production of poor quality, and to encourage better, healthier music. It is improving the standard of performance beyond measure, and this is all for the good of music itself. One sees with satisfaction that accepted masterpieces in music—symphonies, for instance, of Beethoven, Mozart, Haydn—are yet more firmly established by their increased performance and hearing over radio. Music is of the stuff of immortality; in the finest written music there is this quality, and it cannot, surely, be changed. What is certain is that masterpieces themselves will be recognised as such sooner than ever before, firstly, because of the desire of the broadcasting authorities to give performance to new and sincere work, to afford the fellow-countrymen of the composer an opportunity to hear it, and secondly, because of the increasingly receptive and understanding mind of the average listener.

Broadcasting, in short, is the greatest ally that the divine muse has ever had on earth. It is the final step on the democratisation of music that perhaps had its beginnings in a community sing-song among missing links in a primeval forest—who knows?

Those pessimists who insist that in making the concert available to the public by broadcasting one greatly reduces the box office takings, must find it hard to sustain their arguments against such evidence as the attendance at the "proms" this year (1927), where almost every night not a seat has been unbought, and queues of would-be promenaders have been turned empty away. Many similar cases may be quoted from broadcasting history during the last few years. Even allowing for the fact that at first many people came for the novelty of seeing a microphone, or that publicity such as was given early in 1927 to "the impending doom of the Queen's Hall and of the 'Proms'" doubtless has accounted for a certain amount of hall attendance, there is no real cause for thinking that broadcasting has affected concerts

as badly as some would have us believe. On the contrary, we are convinced that broadcasting has created a great field of potential concert audiences—people who, until their interest was awakened by radio in music, would never have dreamed of going to a symphony concert, but who soon (if they are not now) will be among the most zealous of regular attenders at the Queen's Hall and elsewhere.

INFLUENCE OF THE MUSIC TRADE.

It is appropriate here to mention the influence of radio upon the music trade. The branches of it which have benefited most have undoubtedly been the gramophone industry, and the publishing of very light, e.g., syncopated music. This was most noticeable first in the case of the Savoy Band's transmissions, and the enormous demand for records of these orchestras. It applies also, to a less extent, to records of classical music; the growing interest in, and the desire for, better music have had a definite reaction indicated by the increasing demand for this class of record. The music publishing and instrument trades are passing now through a period of depression, and it is not fair to lay the blame entirely at the door of the poor scapegoat—broadcasting. There are many causes partly responsible—the general trade depression, owing to a present comparative lack of ready money, and the introduction of the "hire purchase" principle in many other lines, e.g., the automobile, are perhaps the chief.

BROADCASTING AND THE AMATEUR.

This a reflection of the temporary effect upon amateur are of the introduction into homes, upon a huge scale, of music played well. People—many of them, at any rate, are discouraged from trying to make music for themselves. There will be a reaction, the cumulative effect of increasing appreciation of music itself, and eventually these people will return to their pianos, their violins, their singing, with renewed energy and interest. What is good to believe, too, is that they will then try, not to smash out Rachmaninoff's "Prelude" as it was done at the local concert last night, but to play musically and joyfully the delightful little Bach movement they heard at 7.15 to-night on the wireless; not to imitate this unrefined, unphrased, unmusical noise of the prima donna singing bad English songs at the Royal Albert Hall, but the restrained, musical singing by a good radio artist of some good (though still tuneless) English songs.

The attitude of the B.B.C. to amateur art is entirely one of encouragement. It is always agreeable to consider choral and orchestral societies' performances with a view to relay them by microphone, on condition that the performance given is of such a standard as to provide something of definite programme value. This attitude is shown by the happy relations existing between the corporation and the Federation of Music Festivals, with whose interest and activities it is entirely in sympathy, and by its co-operation with community singing and similar organisations.

The importance of the Watts governor in controlling the steam engine finds a counterpart in the quartz crystal as a device for governing the frequency or wavelength of a broadcasting station. The recently appointed American Federal Radio Commission, in discovering that nearly one-half of the broadcasting stations are straying from their assigned frequencies, is accepting this thin cleavage of crystal as an arbiter of disputes and as an eliminator of interference in broadcast reception.

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