

Every Italian Peasant Knows Something of Broadcasting

Written for "The Observer" (London) by Hila Matheson

THE centre of interest in Italian broadcasting is shifting from the urban middle classes who first welcomed it, to the rural and primitive populations, with whom it is seen to provide an unrivalled means of contact. The new audience involves new methods of approach, and a new initiative on the part of broadcasting authorities or the State. Mahomet, in fact, must go to the mountain if he wishes to move it.

Villagers, whether in Asia, Africa, or Europe, are becoming the object of intensive study for broadcasting purposes, and particularly, of course, in States which are concerned to build up deliberately a single ideal for the whole community. Broadcasting in this sense has been a commonplace in Russia for several years; it has more recently become a function of Government in Germany; and in Italy it has since last spring been placed in the charge of a special organisation known as the Ente Radio Rurale. Its director, Signor Lando Ambrosini, has been good enough to see me in Rome, and to describe to me, with the help of one of his programme staff, the lines on which he is working. It is true that in Italy, as in Russia and Germany, the microphone is an organ of propaganda for spreading a particular point of view. The methods adopted, however, are of interest in themselves, and are to a great extent applicable in any broadcasting organisation which is facing the problems of general popular education.

Radio Rurale is financed by an allocation granted by the Duce. It has a central staff of about twenty, responsible for administration and the planning of special programmes transmitted at particular hours from all the ten Italian broadcasting stations. It began its task, very admirably, by considering the problem at the listening end. If the remote villages of the long peninsula were to be able to get good reception, steps had to be taken to bring first-class receiving sets within the reach of their small means. A competition was accordingly held among wireless manufacturers for a five-valve superheterodyne apparatus. It was to cost not more than 600 lire (roughly, ten guineas), it was to be made of high-quality material, with a gramophone attachment and two loud-speakers. Ten firms won the approval of the judges for their designs, and were commissioned to manufacture the special sets, for sale, on the basis of ten monthly payments, to schools, Fascist groups, parish priests, local civic



officials, and others specified. The money for the sets was to be raised by these units themselves, but the instruments, once bought, were to be kept in order by the manufacturers at a low scale of fixed charges, defects being made good at the makers' expense.

The success of this scheme seems to have been very remarkable. Over 50,000 sets have been bought in this way in less than a year by peasant and village school groups; and the price, from May, will

be lowered to 500 lire. It is estimated that more than a million children are following the school broadcasts as listeners to these particular sets, and three times as many if the city schools are included which are equipped with wireless independently of Radio Rurale. It should be added that the village sets are excused the payment of a license fee, as blind persons are excused in Great Britain. The authorities claim that the Italian receiving sets are very much more satisfactory, and give a far better performance than the "people's sets" which have been designed and marketed on somewhat similar lines in Germany.

I asked Signor Ambrosini whether Calabria and the south were able to afford even these cheap sets. Radio Rurale appears to pay special attention to the poorest areas, where, on account of their very poverty of resources, broadcasting is likely to be of most use. There are funds available for helping poor villages to acquire sets, which are also distributed through the popular Latin device of lotteries. Sicily and Sardinia have both received special consideration, and 380 village sets are already working in Sicily. It is interesting to note that Piedmont, presumably on account of its high level of education, is the province which makes least use of Radio Rurale facilities.

Reception problems still loom large in connection with educational broadcasting in England, both for schools and for adults. It does not necessarily follow that Italian methods are applicable to English conditions, and the idea of public competitions is more familiar in Italy than in England. Nevertheless, some practical co-operation between broadcasting authorities and wireless manufacturers ought not to be impossible; and if the charter of the B.B.C. in its present form precludes the Corporation from encouraging the construction of particular receivers for a particular kind of work, and for securing some standard service of maintenance, this is perhaps a matter which will receive attention when the charter comes up for renewal.