

## REFLECTIONS ON AN ORCHESTRAL PERFORMANCE

Written for "The Listener" by J. C. BEAGLEHOLE

APART from all ballyhoo and build-up we may, I think, be pleased. And one wants to be a Builder and not a Wrecker. But probably the time has come for a little cold—well, temperate—appraisal, rather than build-up; it may be, indeed, that they also build who only raise objections.

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THE great occasion is past. The National Orchestra of the New Zealand Broadcasting Service has given its first concert. The Prime Minister was present; Cabinet Ministers were present; all the nobility and gentry and intelligentsia were present—or at least a good proportion of them. It was reported to me that in the interval one of them had said, in annunciatory tones, "This is the Birth of a Nation." The printed programme was large and lavish, the audience was tremendously enthusiastic, the walls of the Wellington Town Hall visibly trembled; heaven knows how, at the end of all that impassioned activity, Mr. Andersen Tyrer still kept his tie straight; no circumstance indeed was lacking that could lend dramatic significance to the occasion. And yet I had a little doubt. Had a nation indeed been brought to birth in that public and resounding fashion? Or before assenting, had we better wait a little and see?

It is the privilege of the enthusiast to be enthusiastic, of the believer to have faith; it is the duty of the critic to examine, with coolness and what knowledge he has; and if he has enthusiasm and faith and hopes, to base those sentiments on the examination of the actual. This is extremely important in view of the potential importance of a National Orchestra; for an important orchestra will be able to stand any amount of criticism; it must have a heart that can be stabbed again and again; a vitality that thrives on analysis and dissection; it must be so constituted that controversy is its stimulant and attack its challenge. It should fear nothing so much as admiration without discrimination. Music, as much as any of the arts, needs a standard to live up to; an orchestra, being so complicated a musical instrument, needs to have that standard set and emphasised insistently—merely because the very complexity may tempt people to say, "Well, considering the difficulties, they really did very well indeed, don't you think?" And to do "really very well indeed considering" this, that and the other thing, is really not to do well enough.

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IN the light of which preamble, let us consider the Sixth of March. The orchestra really did very well indeed. Put coarsely, and perhaps rudely, it wasn't nearly as bad as I thought it would be. In a hall you've got to get over the mere excitement of seeing the machine working, the most emotionally intoxicating piece of machinery ever invented. All those reciprocating parts, if your orchestral experience is limited or long ago—the mere presence together of strings and woodwind and brass, working even fairly competently through a real symphony—is liable to go to your head and you may talk of the birth of a nation. But close your eyes and just listen, think of any first-rate recording you have heard, and you will be able better to maintain your balance. In finding reasons for a performance being good enough or not good enough, we can take account of attendant or causative circumstances, but those reasons shouldn't affect our final verdict. So I say what I have said at the beginning of this paragraph, or put it more positively and say that the orchestra did better than I thought possible.

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IT could have done a good deal better still, I feel, if the programme had been better chosen. I suggest very modestly to Mr. Tyrer that it was badly chosen. Dvorak's *Carnival*, Brahms' Second Symphony, Enesco's second *Rumanian Rhapsody*, Butterworth's *Shropshire Lad Rhapsody*, Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegel*, the Prelude and Liebestod from *Tristan*, plus some quite gratuitous encores—what can you make of that as an exercise in programme-building? The romanticism is all too thickly spread. Indeed, I was driven to the conclusion that the principle behind it was not a strictly musical principle at all but a determination to

give everybody in the orchestra a chance to be heard at some time or other. But then we missed the bells and the glockenspiel; still, their potential players got in in other ways. Surely this sort of orchestra, playing on this sort of occasion, and laying a basis for our national musical life, needs bit of straightforward classical solidity? It isn't up to Mozart yet; but wouldn't a Haydn Symphony or an early Beethoven, have been better than the Brahms; and would it have been any less popular? Or if the Brahms, couldn't more use have been made of contrast? How gratefully the Butterworth sounded, as the nearest thing to contrast in the programme, though I have never heard a rhapsody played so unrhapsodically. I am not asking for dullness—the Enesco, for all its sound and fury, everybody almost falling over in the labour of adding to the "orchestral texture and wild rhythm" (*vide* my evening paper) was terribly dull.

This question of programme-building is an important one. It is a matter both of general design and of individual items. The popular, as we have had proved to us by more than one visiting performer lately, is not necessarily the lush or the cheap. One or two of the pieces put down for performance in the orchestra's concerts for school-children make my blood run cold. I'm not being ivory-tower and high-brow. I'm all in favour of popular music. If the orchestra fails to be a popular success it will have lost the greatest of its battles. The important thing to note, the initial premise in the plan of strategy, is that on any long-term evaluation the best music will also be the most popular. Put it in terms of diet—you can't live permanently on goulash and sweets and savouries; it's the bakers' strike that causes the most row.

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LET'S get back to the actual performance. It was more notable for hearty goodwill than for refinement. Mr. Tyrer has trained his team to play pretty well together, they attack well; and that is something "considering the circumstances"—considering the fact that some of these people have never heard an orchestra before, let alone played in one, or probably in any concerted music at all; and considering too that a good deal of their practice has been carried on in bits and pieces all over the country—an odd idea this, that you can break an orchestra up into four segments in four main centres. There was a lack of balance. I am told that in the Wellington Town Hall there is one place that is acoustically perfect, and I spent part of the second half of the programme looking for it. In the middle of the row, downstairs, close to the front, the brass nearly lifted us out of our seats. The trumpets really had no need to anticipate the day of judgment. The horns rather exploded at the beginning of the Brahms, but it looks as if they will work up a good tone. Thanks, largely, it seems to the Air Force Band, the woodwind section is both adequate and potentially very good, and it gave us some very nice bits of playing, when left to itself. The strings have so far worked up a fair measure of precision but little delicacy. The general uproar in the early part of the concert left me wondering whether the whole orchestra, or any considerable part of it, could produce a *piano* at all; but the strings managed to show promise of this in the first bars of the last movement of the Brahms; and it is to be hoped that in time Mr. Tyrer will get his people to whisper as well as to shout. They let go with the utmost enthusiasm, and if you are in that one ideal place in the Town Hall (alas! I never found it) it may sound truly musical, enormously thrilling; but how much more thrilling, how magical, the perfectly controlled whisper, the really angelical syllabing!

One thing that merits a strong and prolonged protest is the encores. To sandwich in Strauss's *Moto Perpetuo* and the egregious composition of Herr Weinberger in itself was to reduce the concert to triviality; the joke of Percy Grainger's *Handel in the Strand*, in this context, simply didn't come off. Why encores, anyhow? Mr. Tyrer and the orchestra ought to take a stand against this abuse of time and tolerance, not go out deliberately to foster it.

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WELL, that's how one person at least reacted to the show. I've tried to be honest. The very fact that the orchestra is at last in existence and giving concerts is important. For bringing it into existence the Government deserves all our thanks. Whether its existence is going to be of profound importance is a question to which an answer is not possible just now. The answer will depend partly on us—on our ability to give it support continuously, but critically. The nation, if it depends on the orchestra, does not

seem to me to have been quite born. To crab for the sake of crabbing at the moment would be both churlish and silly. Mr. Tyrer, as a conductor, has been the subject of considerable controversy; I must confess that for me (and I am pretty certain for the players also) some of the emphatic patterns he wove in the air were devoid of significance. But it would be both churlish and silly also to deny him credit for bringing the orchestra as a combination to the point it has reached. What I wonder now is how much further it is going to go. How much better is it going to be? In a year or two we shall know more about that. On the day when it gives a first-rate performance of a first-rate programme, and the roof of the Town Hall goes sky-high, blown off not by the brass but by the enthusiasm of three thousand New Zealanders trained (by the orchestra) and mature in musical judgement, then we shall be able to talk in terms of the birth of nations.