

THE STATE OF THE NATION

“ Said Councillor Robert Whitney, ‘ Not only local people but music enthusiasts from all over London would attend these concerts. Why should St. Marylebone have to pay for these people’s pleasure? ’ The Germans were great music lovers—but look where it got them. ”

This quotation, taken from a newspaper report of a London Borough Council meeting, represents a significant part of the background against which our current musical renaissance must be judged. Last year the Arts Enquiry produced a *Report on Musical Life in England*^{*}, and in recent months there has appeared another of the annual British Council Reports, *The Year’s Work in Music*[†], as well as the *Fourth Annual Report of the Arts Council of Great Britain*[‡]. The first-named is notable for its facts and figures—the cost of orchestras, the size of audiences, etc.—and should prove a useful source of information, a serviceable corrective to loose thinking, for some time to come. The second is deliberately more selective, pinpointing in a series of essays various aspects of the current scene—“ Musical Life outside London,” “ Musical Research,” etc.—and concluding with a “ Selected Bibliography of Published Music and Musical Literature ” and a “ Selected List of Recordings of British Music ” for the year under review.

The first is intended primarily for home consumption; the second, presumably, for consumption overseas, since the purpose of the British Council is to spread our culture abroad and explain us to foreigners. And though, in the introduction to the second, it is affirmed that “ there is no hesitation to criticize, where necessary, or to refer to weaknesses as well as strength in the organisation of our musical life,” the contributors, when they do roar, roar “ as gently as any sucking dove ”—and just about as ineffectually. For instance, of Covent Garden: “ The repertory is too small, it is said with truth, and many fine native conductors and singers are overlooked. ” The last part of this is a matter of opinion, but “ many,” to say the least of it, errs on the side of exaggeration. As for the first part, to have built up from scratch a repertory of twenty-three operas in three years is surely as good an achievement as could be looked for even under a “ native ” conductor.

The Arts Council report is, in a practical sense, perhaps the most important of the three, for as far as our domestic diet is concerned, this Council is the goose that lays the golden eggs. It is a good layer, and a quiet one: e.g. “ The Council’s record in music appears at first sight to be less adventurous than in other branches of work. There were, in fact, no new experiments during the year . . . ”

One may long speculate why, at any given moment in a country’s history, one or other of the arts should suddenly burst into flower. Such flowerings are rarely attributable to immediate social causes—a particular condition of wealth or poverty, security or insecurity—nor can they be easily explained in relation to those deeper tides and currents of consciousness (the *Yin* and *Yang*

* Music: A Report on Musical Life in England sponsored by the Dartington Hall Trustees (P.E.P. 15; -)

† The Year’s Work in Music 1948-49 (Longmans Green & Co.)

‡ Fourth Annual Report of the Arts Council of Great Britain. 2/6

states of Chinese philosophy) which determine the climate of the soul. The fact remains, however, and it is the first of the many facts adduced in the Arts Enquiry survey, that from about 1870 onwards English musical life has shown an increasing vitality unknown since the late seventeenth century. Neither of the present century's two wars has seriously interrupted this progress. The more recent one, indeed, may be held to have stimulated it, for many people, some of them to their own considerable surprise, discovered in music an emotional release from the strain and frustration of their daily lives, that was as real as water to a desert traveller.

Yet the present state of the nation is far from being wholly good. Let us glance first of all at the orchestral field. Here the Arts Council, in itself a clearer endorsement by Government of the right to existence of the Arts than we have ever had before, and with a considerable amount of public money at its disposal, can do something to mitigate the harshness of the economic laws of supply and demand. Something, but not enough to entitle any music lover to feel smug or Councillor Whitney unduly apprehensive that we are following the same primrose path as the Germans.

One of the finest British orchestras, the Hallé, is at present in dire straits, and its problems—which are in essence the problems of every orchestra—have been succinctly exposed in a recent brochure, *The Future of the Hallé Orchestra*, by T. E. Bean, which everybody who is interested in its future *must* read. Another orchestra, the Yorkshire Symphony, was recently in trouble locally with its programmes, and Councillor Good, of Hull, was forced to the conclusion that “Hull just can't take the strong meat.” This seems to confirm, irrelevantly, perhaps, but irresistibly, a view once expressed by Sir Alan Herbert:

“Some of you find Monte Carlo is dull.
Come over and try a wet Sunday in Hull.”

The Arts Enquiry has a more cheerful tale to tell of Amateur Music Making, in which is comprised choral societies, male and female voice choirs, brass bands, orchestras, operatic societies, and chamber music clubs. Here is really the bedrock of English musical life, the Spring from which the stream is fed. But here, as in other directions, finance is the perpetual problem, and were it not for the assistance given by the Carnegie Trust and the Arts Council, many choral societies might have found it impossible to keep alive, let alone to improve their standards. Fortunately, our amateur music makers are amply endowed with enthusiasm and determination—qualities which can sometimes and in some degree serve as a substitute for money—and the increasing attention which is being paid to music in schools is a guarantee that recruits will be forthcoming to join their ranks.

In connection with brass bands, the penalty imposed by purchase tax is mentioned. But purchase tax, as such, finds no place in the index, and it is to be doubted whether the crippling effect of this tax on all forms of instrumental activity, educational and otherwise, has been properly appreciated by the compilers of the Enquiry. It is certainly not realized generally that the professional musician has to pay purchase tax on what are, in actual fact, the tools of his trade.

Opera is dealt with at some length, while Ballet, no doubt with technical correctitude, is only touched on incidentally as its stable companion. What does not emerge is the closeness of their relationship as underlined recently

in a letter from Sir George Dyson to *The Times*. In this letter Sir George, doubling the roles of Fafner and Fasolt, complained, as a Governor of Sadler's Wells, that Covent Garden, of which he is a Trustee, was spending on opera some of the Arts Council money that ought to be supporting the Ballet School. Without entering into the merits of this particular argument, it will be generally agreed that the secure existence of a training school is an essential element in a State supported Ballet, just as an opera school is an essential element in State supported opera. Apropos of this, the Arts Enquiry Report is wrong in describing the Opera Studio as working under the auspices of the English Opera Group. The Opera Studio was set up, with the assistance of the Arts Council, to meet the needs of English opera companies generally, by teaching young singers how to act.

In any survey of musical life to-day the dominant impression left on the reader's mind must be that of the immense power wielded by the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Arts Council. That this power should be used with such wisdom and imagination as it is at present, is something that commands respect. Yet it need not be accounted as ungrateful if we keep a weather eye cocked for the germ of that deadening academism to which powerful bodies concerned with the arts are invariably susceptible, particularly if they are spending taxpayers' money, and if from time to time we ask the old, familiar question, *Quis custodiet custodes ipsos?* A.G.

ARTHUR BENJAMIN AND THE PROBLEM OF POPULARITY

A Critical Appreciation

by Hans Keller

The strongest single cause of the present-day cleft between composer and listener has been the increasingly swift raising of the norm of dissonance: if indeed "norm" is still the word: from modern music as a whole it is quite impossible to extract anything like generally valid harmonic formulæ. It is true that with the increased availability of art to the inartistic the problem of popularity would in any case have arisen; but the dynamic development and—in 12-tone technique—dethronement of harmony has left the majority of listeners so far behind that most talents trying to be popular fall between the proletarian and the musical stools. It is in fact the Marxist musicians' bad luck that they have to attempt their extreme solution of the question how to be popular at the very time when the history of harmony and tonality makes their task extremely unsolvable. Thus they have come to demand more than the maximal musical conservatism, and to consider the atonalists right-wing. Meanwhile the right wing, while condemning Moscow's artistic approach, regards the atonalists as left wing, and an unhappy time is had by all. The paradox is easily solved: a political revolution needs the mass; an artistic revolution revolts against it.