

# QUIET PLEASE...!

**MANY YEARS AGO I NOTICED THAT HERBERT HOWELLS, affectionately remembered as a distinguished composer and Pastmaster of the Company, wrote in *Who's Who* that his recreation was 'seeking quiet'. At the time it seemed to me this was an objective scarcely worth mentioning, since it was surely no problem; but in recent years it has become a very serious matter. For many people it is almost impossible to find quiet, even in the country or at any hour.**

In countless homes and places of work, radio or television is switched on first thing in the morning and may remain so for the rest of the day; and often much too loud. The appalling consequence of this, it may be said, is that there is too much music. People cannot get away from it should they wish to do so. We may laugh at Mahler, who was obliged to ask his wife to bribe the farmers to remove the cow-bells; but a persistent sound of that kind is just one that can make composition impossible.

Country house opera in the garden can be enchanting for those who wish to hear it, but it can be an abominable intrusion upon neighbours who, for one reason or another, do not want it. (*Preserve Harmony!*)

Another factor to consider is the large number of people who hear music (that is – who are *aware* of it) but do not *listen*. Music is too good to be treated like that.

It is astonishing how many programmes on the radio or television use some kind of background music. Thus, an interesting talk in an art gallery or a museum – or in a garden – is provided with music as though the pictures or objects on view are hardly of sufficient attraction in themselves. Of course, this merely shows what we musicians know very well; that with the greatest respect for the other arts, ours is capable of enhancing them all; but it may be inappropriate to use music in this way.

Listeners to BBC Radio 3's weather and news at 6.55 am on weekdays will have noticed that about five minutes of music is played as an introduction. Some may have been amazed to find that the same little piece is repeated for two or three months on end. One verse of the National Anthem before news broadcasts throughout the last war was acceptable as a patriotic gesture, but can anyone now stand the same little *chanson de matin* every day?

We do well to remember that the availability of music today, whether at public concerts and opera or in our homes at the touch of a switch, is a recent development. Seventy years ago a 'Musical Evening' at home, with contributions from any who were willing and able, was normal entertainment as it had been for generations. This meant

**By Liveryman Professor Robin Orr**

that concerts and operas were important events, generally available only to those living in or near the cities, and often only infrequently.

Growing up in the country in Scotland I did not hear a symphony orchestra until I was at least fifteen years of age. This was the London Symphony Orchestra with Beecham in Dundee; and my first opera was *Die Meistersinger* – the British National Opera Company under Aylmer Buesst in Aberdeen. These events made an overwhelming impression. I would not wish such a delayed introduction to music upon young people today; but now that it is available to children from birth – like electric light and constant hot water – it is inevitably cheapened.

In 1926 I became a student at the Royal College of Music and went every evening to the Promenade Concerts in the old Queen's Hall and to the LSO concerts throughout the winter. This was indeed a new heaven and a new earth. At the College, Percy Buck (then Professor of Music at London University) presided once a week over what was termed The Music Class. Standing at an upright piano upon which had been placed a tray of tea with scones, he talked informally on all manner of subjects such as neumes, plainsong, counter-tenors, leitmotifs, and the almost unmentionable things (at least at the RCM at that time) coming from Vienna.

What though the title (The Music Class) might have implied that there was no other significant music in the building, it did certainly offer a most valuable glimpse into corners that were generally ignored in the prevailing concentration upon the practical and performing aspects of music which over-

looked the important back-up of studies in history, analysis and criticism; the need to know a great deal more than the notes. Fortunately, the music academies today pay more attention to this, and the universities encourage practical performance.

Music in schools has come a very long way since the days of a weekly singing class with Tonic Sol-Fa; but it is still not secure, owing to the lack of government conviction – here as elsewhere – since the inspiring days of Jennie Lee as Minister with responsibility for the Arts.

Before the second world war Walford Davies had addressed the young people in an inspired weekly programme of BBC Radio ('the wireless'). Some may recall his avuncular greeting: "Good afternoon scholars all". Now it would be more likely to be "Hi – Today we're gonna make an opera". The enthusiasm with which some teachers get to work tends to bypass the essential foundations of musical creation. A juvenile composer must first learn to walk; but to make an opera you also need to know how to run. It is also good to know when to be quiet.

The seeker after quiet has many obstacles to contend with today. Among them is one which I feel sure would have been anathema to Herbert Howells: HYPE... Under the guise of helping the public to decide what cars to buy, books to read, food to eat etc. etc. this form of promotion, unknown in the days before radio and television, has also been taken up by the press. It is a devilish imposition, not least in music, where some of the works so prompted are of no great distinction and might justifiably be condemned as a swindle under the Trade Description Act. Let us make our own choice.



Professor Robin Orr. Photo: Jane Bown