

RECENT BOOKS

RADIO BLUEPRINT

JUST what does radio do to or for the people? By popular consent we say it entertains and even educates. By actual test we know only how it sells.

Men pay huge sums for time-on-the-air to talk about tobacco, soap, drugs. The effects show in their sales records. They can also tell, through brief telephone calls (the Crossley and C. E. Hooper services), how many listen to which programs and, by a new gadget, the audimeter (A. C. Neilson), for how long. Even according to purely commercial standards these methods are crude.

The more important, if incidental, effects of the radio can be studied only with the aid of social science. After three years of investigation by questionnaire, house-to-house survey and the collection and weighting of statistical data, an over-all picture of "what radio means to different groups of people" begins to emerge from the Office of Radio Research. This organization with headquarters at Columbia University, operates — as who does not these days? — on a Rockefeller Foundation grant. Its director is Dr. Paul Lazarsfeld, distinguished psychologist and economist. Among his several associates is the well-known musicologist, Dr. Theodor Wiesengrund-Adorno. The first fruits of this labor appear in Lazarsfeld's book *Radio and the Printed Page* (Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940); *Radio Research 1941* is being prepared for spring publication.

Having studied the first, and some

material for the second, I want to recommend the books as required reading. This is not simply because both of them (particularly the projected volume) have sections on music. Despite — or because of — their calm statistical approach, they are a perfect antidote for the perennial American illusion that the benefits of mass production are automatic.

Musicians especially tend as a professional group to show extreme susceptibility to fuzzy ideas of "uplift" via radio. Whether of high or low estate, they ride along with the women's clubs in endorsing vast music educational schemes. I am not referring to the sinister implications of Virgil Thomson's phrase, the "appreciation racket." But it is a fact that elaborate "progressive" programs and courses, each more grandiose than the last, with the most distinguished sponsorship, continue to be promoted, on the vague assumption that exposure itself creates a market, that automatically it prepares the mass radio audience for the product of the concert hall and the class room.

Being proper social scientists, Lazarsfeld and his associates are not without their own brand of optimism. They believe in "planned programs" in "building audience appeal," indeed in a world which to some degree may be "improved" by radio education. But their recommendations are related to facts, and their approach is realistic.

For instance, "Who," they ask, "listens to what and why?" Under what condi-

tions "will or will not the masses choose to expose themselves?" The Federal Office of Education puts on an appealing program "Immigrants All - Americans All," to make the native-born more tolerant. But instead of the natives, it appears to be chiefly the immigrants themselves who tune in for comfort and re-assurance. There are plenty of parallels in the mis-firing of the music appreciation courses. After analyzing scores of booklets that accompany such series, including the noted Damrosch programs, Dr. Adorno finds that educators have yet to make the necessary differentiation between teaching in the academy and over the air.

There is no more sensitive barometer of social levels than audience reaction to "serious" music. The details of age, sex, geographic and social distribution of the radio-music audience are now well established. Radio is, as might be expected, more utilized by people in the lower-income brackets. But it is a popular fallacy that this enormous group also listens to "serious" matter. (A "serious listener" tunes in, at least half the time, to serious music, news or "service programs;" a "light" listener to dramas, comedians and popular dance bands.)

What about the "serious" listeners? The more erratic policies of sustaining programs appear to be determined by fan mail as an index of audience reaction. It is time, says Lazarsfeld, to recognize the general American inclination to "write in" on any provocation - whether to make good on the dime offer of a sewing kit or merely to please the program announcer. The cue to much elaborate musical correspondence lies in the message of the commentator whose ideas and even exact phrasing are generally "picked

up." Deems Taylor, for instance, has a powerful, evocative effect. He also, it appears, drives people into libraries. Believe it or not, "serious music" makes people read. "The reading pull of music is about as great as that of quiz programs." Listening to opera, says one fan, "is the only thing on the radio comparable to reading. . . . *it is beautiful and high class.*"

And now to that seductive mass audience, with which otherwise highly insulated individuals - teachers, general all-out theorists, even the most retiring composers - are always hoping to make miraculous contact. So far, it appears, Toscanini has failed. At least he is not yet for the hundred millions ("look at his Crossley rating" to quote Eddie Cantor's recent exultant, unguarded words). But hill-billy music and all the synthetic numbers in the despised "bad-taste" categories easily make the grade. One explanation is purely commercial manipulation by high-pressure methods (see the O.R.R. *Plugging Study* in this issue). There are also more vital factors - for instance that happy sense of "recognition" which can be stimulated only by a highly standardized product like modern popular music.

The analysis of such simple human satisfactions is the O.R.R.'s most important contribution. Lazarsfeld uncovers those deep instincts which rivet the hearing and the attention of the people. For instance the "gratification" inspired by the quiz programs - the pride in knowing the right answer, the pleasure in the public discomfort of those who don't. There is also the wonderful thirst for "information" which can be quenched from the most unpredictable sources. Here is the answer to an interview on a

so-called "service" program: "In the Aunt Jennie story today the fellow had an argument with the uncle and he blamed it on the girl. That is just like my boy friend. . . My boy friend is rather jealous. The other day I went to a dance and some of the other fellows told my boy friend. . . He has been so mad he hasn't talked to me since. Listening to stories like that makes me know how other girls act. . . Now I know how to tell my boy friend where he can get off at." This, I admit, is very down-to-earth, it is, in fact, rock bottom. The inveterate uplifter prefers the "self improvement" letter of the man in Iowa who does all the work on a four-hundred acre farm "but after listening to that Music Shop program each morning for one year, I decided to study again. So for five years I have been going seventeen miles every two weeks for my lesson." That is more soothing. It is also, no matter how rural, more special. Better for those who want to reach out to the millions not to forget the artless tribute to Aunt Jennie.

There is a steady drive today to take composers out of the concert halls into the less stuffy atmosphere of almost anywhere else. The vast spaces of the ether

have been painted as a kind of wonder universe where the artist may speak directly to the great, shadowy Whitmanesque multitude. Around this commendable urge there have been draped a few clouds of rather fancy illusion. Once the technical limitations of the microphone are thoroughly mastered, it seems, program directors will be able to take the air audience direct from *The Rosary* to the *Sacre*. If this dream is not held within bounds by the Crossley ratings, let it at least be checked against the findings of the Office of Radio Research.

Broadcasters of course will study these factual surveys. It is their business to know what the public wants and what it gets. They are also under compulsion to dedicate some time to non-commercial "education." Now the interests of professional musicians – composers for instance – are not always identified with those of business men. There is in fact a war going on today between several such groups. I believe it is to the advantage of musicians to know as much about the great passive radio public as do the men who pull both the purse and the heart strings.

Minna Lederman

SONGS OF THE AMERICAN FOLK

TO the folksong enthusiast, *A Treasury of American Song* by Olin Downes and Elie Siegmeister (Howell, Soskin and Company, 1940) brings welcome and heart-warming recognition. For the past fifty years, the folk-song collector, excitedly discovering the musical treasures of the back-country and the back-alleys, has called on the musician

for help and for approbation. The help received has been part-time and largely amateurish – time taken from more important concerns. Approval and understanding have manifested themselves in occasional spurts of interest and in rather condescending and self-conscious arrangements or thematic use of American folksongs.