

BRITANNIA RULES THE AIR

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FOR years I had been hearing of the advantages of government controlled radio free from all advertising drivel. Consequently, while in England this summer, I was in no mood to be disappointed by the performances of the British Broadcasting Corporation and so, with great enthusiasm, sat down beside an English radio set to listen. This first experience brought, significantly enough, two and a half minutes of "Bow Bells." Bow Bells need some explaining. When a program ends in England it is not uncommon to hear the announcer cheerily say that he will be back shortly, and so you may sit waiting for an interminable two minutes. In the early days good wholesome English folk who tuned in on this period of silence were baffled; had they gone suddenly deaf, or had the radio, despite its guarantee, folded up on them? Being too conservative to ask, they often turned out the radio and the lights and went to bed, closing down the English countryside an hour or two before gay nine o'clock. After a time someone hit upon the idea of recording the chimes that come from London's famous Bow Church (a real cockney, as you may remember, is one born within the sound of Bow Bells). Ever since, that record has been played during those ghastly intervals—thus multiplying cockneys by the thousands, and permitting announcers, orchestras, and speakers to wander like lonely clouds while Bow Bells sing clear in the night.

This is not, of course, the only feature of English broadcasting; but there is plenty more of what it takes to provoke an American visitor to stand up and sing *America*, even if it has the same tune as *God Save the King*.

There are some things to be stated about the B.B.C. before we discuss the type of music that comes through the English ether. First of all, in the actual broadcasting, there are (a) the important

National outlet which carries programs to all parts of England and (b) the various regional outlets which broadcast from the Midland, North, West of England, Welsh and Scottish regions. What a Britisher can get on his wireless depends to some extent, as it does here, on the kind of wireless he has. However, generally speaking, I think it is safe to say that for the most part the average British listener has only two choices in radio fare, the National or his own regional broadcasts. Second, the B.B.C. makes claim to being entirely non-political. This calls for a considerable amount of tight-rope walking, and I think that it is well known that more falls are taken to the right side than to the left! Music too is affected. It would be impossible, for instance, to hear over the B.B.C. a work such as Marc Blitzstein's leftist song-play *I Have a Tune . . .* and as for its being commissioned! On the other hand, there are many programs like the one called "Red Sarafan" which, though classified as pure entertainment, consists of small talk by White Russians on the glories of the "old regime." Third, the B.B.C. operates on the thesis that, as an instrument of government, its job is to educate—a task pursued with a singleness of purpose and lack of variety that is sometimes appalling.

But if you do live in England, it is possible to hear a consistently well regulated series of concerts on the air. Some will be played by the B.B.C. Symphony Orchestra, a really splendid organization, chiefly featuring Sir Adrian Boult as conductor. Last May and June, Arturo Toscanini guest-conducted six concerts in Queen's Hall for the London Music Festival. Besides the B.B.C.'s own orchestra series, there are special studio concerts, Sunday orchestral concerts, outside broadcasts including opera, sometimes from other countries, a notable example being that sent from Budapest of Bela Bartok's *Bluebeard's Castle*, special recitals, the contemporary music series, chamber music programs, organ or harpsichord recitals, and talks by such notables as Dr. George Dyson and Sir Donald Tovey.

Programmatically they all have high standards: the music is essentially off the beaten track. Whole weeks are devoted to such material as the entire repertoire of Schubert's piano sonatas, Kühnau's Biblical sonatas for harpsichord, church music by sixteenth century Spanish composers, or, as a literary tie-up, the

various musical settings of Goethe's works. Noticeable in all the programs, outside of those which are purely historical, is the inevitable inclusion of at least one English composition. In fact, programs that contain *only* one are in the minority.

Unquestionably, for the production of serious music the British system has the advantage over the American. No sponsor need be considered (that is, no commercial patron). As for the public, it exists only to be educated. This condition, however, makes for dissatisfaction in one group or another, but it is after all impossible to please everyone. Thus, having such freedom, the B.B.C. music department is able to present, in 1937, the eleventh season of the Contemporary Music Series, a type of program that could not be commercially sponsored in our country. It is through this series that most first performances (both world and English premieres) have been heard in England during the last few years. Moreover, as concerts they are excellent. Three were given from mid-April to mid-June, the third being sent from the International Society of Contemporary Music Festival in Paris.

Obviously somewhere in the intricate organization of the B.B.C. there are men both aware of and interested in contemporary music. Last summer I heard a concert which included works of the Americans, Piston, Sessions, and Harris. It was well received in England. I was told by an official of the B.B.C. that they are interested in the American composer but find it difficult to get hold of his works, since so little publishing is being done—once again that vicious circle of music unpublished because nobody wants it and nobody wanting it because it's unpublished. In looking at the English works in the first-performance list I have been surprised by the small number played from manuscript. The list does include a huge amount of music by Englishmen, but this, at any rate, does not keep the B.B.C. from arranging programs by continental composers of interest. For instance, in January 1937, England heard for the first time the Darius Milhaud opera *Christophe Colomb*, with the composer conducting. Translated into English for the occasion, the opera elicited an enthusiastic response. Bartok is well represented by music seldom heard, such as his *Hungarian Peasant Songs* and *Dances of Transylvania*. Kodaly's *Te Deum* for chorus and orchestra re-

ceived its first public performance from the B. B. C. Aaron Copland's name appears on the contemporary music series as do those of Ernst Krenek, Conrad Beck, Ernst Toch, Igor Markevitch, Dmitri Shostakovitch, and Alban Berg. Delius, Holst, Elgar, Bax, Lambert, and Walton are played constantly, as are a host of lesser English composers.

In America, the two broad classifications for radio music are "classical" and "jazz." In the latter field, it is perfectly possible for an intelligent person to listen to orchestras like Benny Goodman's, Tommy Dorsey's, Duke Ellington's, or Glen Gray's and have a roaring good time. Jazz, in the last two or three years, has been lifted to a high plane of excellence, in orchestration, harmony, and pure inventiveness. But not in England. Unless run off from American records, it is definitely on the dismal side, with all the old root-ti-toot crash style. One may indeed understand the Englishman's indifference to dance music, for, with the exception of Jack Hilton and Ambrose, there are few orchestras worth listening to. But since all the music on the air cannot be symphonic, even on a government controlled radio, the fill-in periods usually bring a popular type of matter. In England, this takes the form of *salon-musicale* hours—the only thing found in years to equal the London fog for dreariness.

On the whole, give me the American broadcasting system for entertainment—entertainment at any time I happen to want to turn on the radio. The English system seems to have a great advantage over ours, for the composer, but the importance of that advantage must be weighed by the type of audience reaction the concerts receive. It is the lack of invention in the non-serious musical programs that gives American visitors such a bad impression of English broadcasting. There seems to be a movement afoot among the younger B.B.C. generation to remedy this condition. How far they can go remains to be seen. As yet, the policy ruling personnel of B.B.C. is made up largely of retired Colonels, Admirals, and so forth. This is not just an English joke. Apparently a person's ability for either music or radio is not an important qualification. Think of radio being run in this country by political appointees and you'll see what I mean. . . . except that our appointees wouldn't be able to muddle through.