

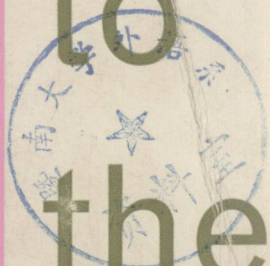
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KITTY
BARNE

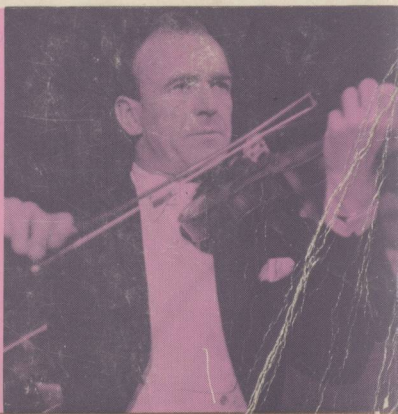
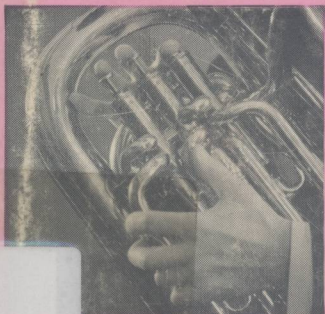
listening



to
the



orchestra



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Listening to the Orchestra

By
Kitty Barne

Here will we sit and let the sounds of music
Creep in our ears.

The Merchant of Venice.



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1932
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FOR
S. H-M.
Music Lover

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LISTENING TO THE ORCHESTRA



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PRELUDE

THIS book is Sir Philip Sidney's handful of grapes to induce a visit to the vineyard. It is an offering to the more humble music lover; to the infrequent concert-goer who knows nothing of music except his joy in it. It is for the large and undistinguished audience, the middle and near-middle brows, who get their music mechanically or not at all; who seldom hear any discussion on music; who have not the language and find books and articles on the subject distressingly full of unknown words; but who cry with the poet:

My little skill,
My passionate will
Are here; where art thou?

because they know music is as necessary to them as the air they breathe.

We amateur listeners do not love great music until we know it, and with our untrained ears that means many hearings. Only when we know it can we take part in it as we listen. Only then are we like Keats watching his bird—'if a sparrow comes before my window I take part in his existence and pick about the gravel.' So we build up a precious collection, pursuing our symphony, lover-like, from radio to gramophone, from gramophone to concert hall, adding to our store year by year. Here it is that this small book may help. We enjoy our symphony concert a hundred times more if we have a working knowledge of the orchestra, that superb instrument played to us by its conductor; also if we have read enough musical history to get an idea of how music grew—slowly, inevitably, unfolding its beauties as it towered up, like some great forest tree; and, finally, if we know

▼

something of the life and labours of the great masters, and how the masterpieces came to be written.

At this moment—1940, this time of hateful war—it is the orchestral concerts that are crowded. It is to the symphony, great music without the encumbrance of words or the distraction of the human voice, that the music-lover looks for the expression of the eternal truths above the din and smoke of the martyred earth. To watch it handed down from one composer to the next, gradually ridding itself of its limitations, slowly shedding the conventions that hampered inspiration, the insincerities that came from too much patronage—to watch this fascinating history unroll under the appalling stress of the wars and revolutions that continually swept Europe is to realize the limitless strength of art.

Wars of ideas were, and are, fought out on the spiritual plane no less faithfully than on the earth. In these wars music had a part to play, and has one still.

November 1940.

America has arrived but lately into the great world of music. Her journey thence with her musical pioneers, 'characters' every one of them, makes fascinating reading. They were not only musicians, these early composers, they were people with a mission and their mission was nothing less than the creation in their country of what our fathers very rightly called a *soul* for music. They did it, as is America's way, with incredible speed, taking a hundred years where Europe took five hundred, and, like 'Father' Heinrich, too often their only wealth when they came to die lay in 'several large chests full of original compositions.' Their works are rightly

forgotten long since, but they themselves should be remembered, more particularly now when we have seen the enthusiastic and lavish hospitality that welcomed music when war drove it out of Europe to take refuge across the seas. A chapter on the story of American music was added in the 1946 edition.

And now, in 1953, one on British composers.

In ten years much has been swept away by the ruthless flood of war and revolutionary change: amongst other untruths, accepted for so long, the dictum, 'England is a land without music,' has been drowned and is stone dead. But now, when music pours out all day long and we all, like Esterházy, have our private orchestras and click them on as an accompaniment to daily life, very often paying little attention, we must listen harder than ever to get the joy of it. And we must listen remembering that music is alive and growing all the time. New composers making new sounds giving out new ideas must be given a hearing and a welcome, for they belong to 'that new world which is the old.'

1953.

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B.B.C. SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA. FLUTES

TUBA

B.B.C. SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA. TRUMPETS

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THE ORCHESTRA

'MUSIC sweeps by me as a messenger carrying a message that is not for me'; that was George Eliot's regretful comment after a concert.

That the message was there she knew; but she had no power to intercept it. Nowadays music sweeps by faster than ever, the latest kind often riding a whirlwind, and listening has become more and more an active thing, a collaboration with the composer instead of a passive unthinking reception of whatever sounds strike the ear.

It may seem an effortless business, listening. Surely, you will say, any one can just listen. But real listening, the kind that has understanding in it, that both hears and feels, comes with practice and nothing else. 'Don't you wish you could, madam!' was Turner's classic rejoinder to the lady who complained, disbelievingly, that when she looked at the landscape she could not see half the colours that he put into his pictures of it; in the same way, when you hear musicians argue about, say, some particularly beautiful passage for the horns, you will find yourself murmuring, only probably with more humility than Turner's lady, 'I didn't hear them,' and feel you have missed something. Even if you know there are such things as horns in the orchestra, even if you know them by sight, you may not have learnt to distinguish their voices, and without that knowledge your pleasure in great music is bound to be much less; you will always be missing something.

It is well worth while making the effort to learn something about the instruments you watch with such fascination when a symphony orchestra assembles for a concert, and a twittering, buzzing, burring murmur fills the hall. The oboe gives the A and they all give tongue in pursuit of it; you marvel that the same thing can be said in so many different ways. The fiddles are tuning up—you can see them doing it—but what are all the others doing? Why does that man put his hand into the bell of his brass instrument? Is the drummer screwing up something all round the rim of his kettle-drums? It is all interesting to know. Every instrument you see has a history that takes it back to the Dark Ages, perhaps to ancient Egypt, perhaps to the horn by which Alexander the Great gave the signal to his whole army, a mammoth that took sixty men to blow; perhaps to Pan cutting the first reed from the river. . . . Their lovely voices are the result of the efforts of generations of unknown warriors of the musical world, composers and players, fighting for their new ideas, their startling modernities, shocking listeners down the ages into accepting them. To know something of this is to enjoy their music all the more.

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The symphony orchestra as one hears it now in any of the great cities of the world is not just a conglomeration of instruments, but one super-excellent instrument in itself; an instrument of marvellous precision, beauty, and variety of tone, capable of expressing the most passionate, the most subtle, or the most ethereal of emotions, or no emotion at all, at the will of the master, the conductor, who plays upon it.

In considering the orchestra it seems inevitable to

consider the conductor first of all, for he has of late become the supreme figure of the concert platform. It is his interpretation of the music, and his characteristic way of producing it, that in these days draws the audience as much as the music itself. To watch him control the immense forces under his command has a fascination beyond telling for some people; they take seats close beside him, and concentrate their attention on his every movement. At the moment, when orchestral playing is reaching a very high standard, he is perhaps the emperor among musicians.

He derives from the ancient time-beater, a person who seems to have functioned to keep some sort of musical coherence as soon as minstrels began to experiment with playing their notes together. There is an illustration in an old manuscript in a Paris library of a minnesinger, Heinrich von Meissen, who, as far back as 1318, seems to be superintending the efforts of a collection of singers and players by waving his hands at them. As time went on the harpsichord (forerunner of our pianoforte) became increasingly important. Every orchestra had one, or an organ, and the conductor generally took up his position at it, keeping the music together by playing the chords that the composer had indicated by means of figures below the bass notes. He was responsible for the harmony, while his singers, fiddlers, and pipers wove their melodies together, playing from their often very incomplete parts with considerable independence. They were allowed to put in what they called 'graces,' adornments of their own, a privilege that must surely have complicated matters for the conductor, since it is in the very nature of executants to enjoy showing off.

Then, as the collection of players grew in numbers,