

MUSIC DOWN UNDER

Australia, Spring 1945

MUSIC in Australia seems now to be at the point reached in America about forty years ago, the awkward teen-age, with a future bright and promising. Orchestras, conservatories, teachers, interpreters are very good and some rank with the world's best. From Nellie Melba to Marjorie Lawrence, musicians have gone from this continent to make history elsewhere. Sooner or later everyone who is anyone makes at least a flying visit here. The influence of English culture is of course marked in the musical field as in every other, but the Australians – there are seven millions of them – are what anyone would call a young and healthy people, they have their own ideas, and they are receptive to new ones.

One of the most potent institutions for speeding up the development process is the Australian Broadcasting Commission. Like its great empire model, the BBC, the ABC is a federal enterprise. It is a proving ground for many young artists and it now supports five symphony orchestras, one in each state, New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and Victoria. Of these only two, the Melbourne (Victoria) and Sydney (N.S.W.) are comparable to orchestras in the United States.

During a recent furlough from service in New Guinea which I spent in Sydney, I had the good fortune to meet several composers of Australia, and to be present at an event of some local glamor. This occasion was the world premiere of an opera, *The Pearl Tree*, written by Edgar Bainton, an Englishman who settled here ten years ago and is now Director of the Sydney Conservatorium. Bainton's work, based on an Indian mystical legend, was composed here and may pass for a contemporary Australian product. It was competent and well written, refreshing in spite of its obvious references to Delius. The scenery was acceptable, the performance adequate and all in all the work showed a good theatre sense. Bainton's *Symphony*, played locally by the Sydney Orchestra, is a finer work and though not of world importance is mature in its romanticism. The contrapuntal technic is good and occasionally the tonal texture seems quite original.

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Of the native Australians three deserve consideration for having made a real contribution to Australian music. They are Alfred Hill, Roy Agnew and Frank Hutchins.

Agnew, the most extensively published, died very recently in the early fifties after a full and active career. He studied first in Sydney with a well known Italian pianist but, so far as composing goes, was largely self-taught. After a long stay in London, he came back to Australia in 1935 under contract to the ABC for a recital tour of the Commonwealth. In 1937 Agnew began a series of weekly sessions over the ABC which were devoted to "modern and contemporary composers." These made music history in Australia, indeed they created so much interest that the series was carried on for five years after that, well into the early war period. Of more than ninety works published by



ROY AGNEW

Agnew the majority are written for the piano; he is obviously the "Australian Chopin." The best known works are his *Fantasia Sonata*, *Sonata Poem*, *Sonata Ballada*, *Sonata Legend*. The early pieces show the influence of the American, MacDowell, the middle period that of Scriabin, but his more mature music gives us a personality definitely his own. He played a number of pieces for me which I found eloquent and poetic in the slow passages, percussive in the fast ones. Agnew is the most "daring," perhaps also the most important of the composers Australia has so far produced.

Alfred Hill, now in his late seventies, reflects the period of his generation. His music is solidly conservative and reminds one of our own Daniel Gregory Mason. The violin is his principal instrument; it was what he studied at the Leipzig Conservatory where, incidentally, he met a fellow Australian, Ernest Hutchinson. His memories go back to performances with the Gewandhaus Orchestra under Reinecke, Brahms, Grieg, Tchaikovsky, Bruch and Goldmark. After leaving Europe he settled for a time in New Zealand and there began to exploit the native Maori folk music. A number of his works, *Waiata Poi*, *Waiata Maori*, and the cantatas, *Hinemoa* and *Tawhaki*, have been published in New York. Another important work in the Maori idiom is a short opera, *Teora*; in addition there are a great many orchestral and chamber music pieces, some of which have been published in London. He has conducted in various parts of New Zealand and Australia, he was



ALFRED HILL

one of the founders of the New South Wales Conservatorium of Music. At the present moment this venerable and versatile composer is still turning out new works.

Frank Hutchins, of the succeeding generation, although born in New Zealand considers himself Australian, since he has lived here the greater part of his life. He too studied abroad having gone to London on the advice of Paderewski to enter the Royal Academy of Music. In Sydney he has been professor of piano in the State Conservatory. His works include a *Piano Quintet*, a *Ballade for Orchestra*, a *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra* and a great number of vocal pieces.

Hutchins has a rare gift for melody. He is a romanticist at heart and I found his little pieces for solo voice and womens' voices most charming.



FRANK HUTCHINS

The *Fantasy Concerto* for two pianos and orchestra, performed two seasons ago by the ABC symphony, has about the emotional climate of Rachmaninov. All his larger works have been performed in Australia as well as in England and two have been recorded by Columbia. His credo he summarized for me as follows: "I look upon every composition as an effort to attain greater sureness of expression. Apart from the main points in good orchestration, I like to feel that a composer develops his own individual color in the field, so that his work eventually bears an individuality of style. To me, it seems important not to be unduly influenced by every new tendency, however attractive it may appear. Instead, one must advance on lines best suited to one's own musical reactions. I cannot help feeling that a composer should write about things to which he reacts naturally."

There are others whom I did not meet, Bernard, Douglas, Hyde, and several of the younger men. The youngest composers will, I suspect, develop much along the lines of our present American generation. However, it will be some time before Australian music comes into its own. Australia is still a young country, musically speaking.

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