

Tempo

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF MODERN MUSIC

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One of the terms of reference of the recent enquiry on orchestral resources in Great Britain, under the chairmanship of Professor Alan Peacock, was "the relationship of the contemporary repertoire and the living composer to financial considerations." This was however, the last and very much the least concern of the committee, and it will hardly be a surprise, though it is still a disappointment, to those concerned with contemporary music, that only five pages of the 125-page report are devoted to this problem. What is perhaps more surprising is that the list of people who gave evidence to the committee does not include, apart from Malcolm Arnold as one of its members, any major composer of any generation. No wonder one witness (not named in the report) could get away with saying that "the real problem has been finding new orchestral works that are both practicable and of any real significance". Anybody who has followed the course of British music since the war could have given the committee a long list of works, even confining themselves to composers still under forty, that are quite significant enough to go into the repertory, for a while at least, and perfectly practicable if adequate rehearsal time is allowed. The real problem, as the report elsewhere makes clear, is lack of money for such rehearsal.

Since writing the report, Professor Peacock, chairing a debate at the Cheltenham Festival, has heard Peter Maxwell Davies speaking for a motion proposed by Hans Keller, "that the extinction of the symphony orchestra is inevitable". (Thanks to better deployed arguments, based on artistic instead of materialistic considerations, the motion was carried by 51 votes to 46). Whether or not Mr. Keller's case was sound (Maxwell Davies's seconding did not support all of it), there can be little doubt that the vitality of the symphony orchestra is suffering from the lack of contact with contemporary music. Increased subsidies, as the report declares, are essential to the remedy of this situation, as they are to the solution of the other present difficulties of orchestras in this country. It is very doubtful, however, whether the committee's tentative recommendations on the establishment of fellowships for composers, and more particularly on the appointment of composers-in-residence to grant-aided orchestras, would best serve either orchestras or contemporary music. Specific financial allocations for the rehearsal and performance of contemporary music in closely-defined categories would be a better answer, with fewer attendant problems.

The Arts Council will also no doubt be studying with interest and perhaps surprise some of the findings of the survey of audiences outside London, published as the final appendix to the report (pending a full report to be published later this year). Questionnaires to audiences at popular and less popular programmes in five towns showed that at the less popular programmes an average of 24 per cent attended on a subscription ticket, whereas at the popular programmes the comparable figure was only 8 per cent. Also at the less popular programmes as many as 24 per cent said they would be attracted to more concerts by more unfamiliar works. There seems to be something to be learned from this.