

Reports

THE SIX COUNTIES

THE ULSTER ORCHESTRA

The formation of new orchestras is always exciting. Up to now Belfast has had a part-time orchestra, the so-called City of Belfast Orchestra. This was always a misnomer, since it implied both a municipal status and a limitation of area. In fact, the Orchestra gave a number of concerts outside the city, and received no direct support from the municipality; it was the creation of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. Being only part-time, it was almost *ad hoc* at the start of each season and it was surprising that Maurice Miles got such good results with it. In addition, the BBC in Belfast had a Northern Ireland Light Orchestra, also part-time. The nucleus of both bodies naturally was the same.

A year ago the BBC decided to make their orchestra full-time and to transform it from a light-music group to more serious purposes under Terence Lovett. This meant that the previous nucleus was no longer available for the CBO. It was also apparent that the very close and friendly links between the Arts Council and the BBC in Belfast could always be severed by changes at the head of BBC Belfast or by new policy decisions from London. The original intention in creating the CBO had been to test the market for an orchestra in the province. From every point of view the time was ripe for the Arts Council to form a permanent orchestra under local control, though its conductor, Maurice Miles, would continue to be a visitor.

Recruiting for the new Ulster Orchestra took place during the spring. Rehearsals started in August. The first performance was in Derry on Sept 30, followed by concerts in 8 other towns and two lunchtime concerts in Belfast, before the real debut at the Ulster Hall on October 21.

Initially there are just under 40 members, *ie* double wind and no permanent trombones. Nearly all the woodwind are English and at their opening concert showed themselves to be a united octet, with beautifully matched intonation and style, which will soon become very highly polished.

A considerable number of the strings have come from Dublin. Grave dissatisfaction with the atmosphere inside the Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra resulted in about a quarter of that orchestra leaving during this year,

about half of whom are now in Belfast, including Janos Fürst, leader of the new orchestra and founder of the Irish Chamber Orchestra which had earned golden opinions in its short life. By the opening concert, it was clear that Mr Fürst had already created violin sections that were sections, with real corporate personalities. If he does not force the pace he should produce a string group of quality.

For the opening programme Maurice Miles had chosen the *Hebrides Overture*, the *Siegfried Idyll*, Schubert's Little C major, with John Ogdon in Beethoven 3. This displayed the good qualities of the orchestra. Unfortunately it did not induce a ready response from the conductor, who interpreted the music as though he were not very much interested in it. He has a potentially excellent instrument, but will have to inspire it by putting in more zest and life of his own — and I do not mean adding to some of his rather showy, but hardly significant, gestures.

The development of the Ulster Orchestra will have interest not merely as yet another orchestra or as part of the musical life of a provincial capital. For the Arts Council regards it as belonging to the whole Six Counties. In its first autumn, it will give 5 concerts in Belfast (one in conjunction with the BBC Northern Ireland Orchestra), 7 lunchtime concerts, and will play with the Philharmonic Choir in *The Seasons* and in *Messiah* (for no less than three nights). But in the same period there will be nearly two dozen public concerts outside Belfast (and the same number of children's concerts as well). These plans are based on previous experience that there is a real public demand for music — and often the smaller the town the larger the audience, so that towns of only 1,000 or 2,000 can produce audiences of 600 and 700 (many of whom come of course from the surrounding countryside).

Naturally an orchestra of Haydn or 'sinfonia' proportions will be limited in its repertory. But it certainly seems wise of the Arts Council to establish a permanent body on this scale first and then expand as experience teaches. Certainly its development will be watched very keenly indeed, and with goodwill.

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