

Zeitschrift:	The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber:	Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band:	- (1963)
Heft:	1435
Rubrik:	Our Next Issue

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THE ZURICH CHAMBER ORCHESTRA AT THE BATH FESTIVAL

As announced in the "Swiss Observer", the Bath Festival had included in its programme this year two concerts by the Zurich Chamber Orchestra under its conductor Edmond de Stoutz.

These two concerts, held on 13th and 14th June, bore witness to the close relations which have developed between this Swiss ensemble and the great violinist Yehudi Menuhin, to whom the Bath Festival is indebted for so much of its success. Not only has Menuhin, whose love for our country is well known, been the brilliant soloist at several of the Orchestra's concerts in Switzerland, but it has now become a tradition to hear them play together every summer in the inspiring atmosphere of the ancient church of St. Nicholas at Gstaad.

In receipt of no subsidies from public funds, and composed solely of full-time players, the Zurich ensemble is better known in our country — and in often-toured Germany, Holland, France, Spain, Italy — than in England, where it had so far never played. But for the generous patronage extended to the event by Swiss enterprises the Bath visit might not have been possible. The Nestlé, Acrow, Lindt and Suchard companies, and the London agencies of the Swiss National Tourist Office and Swissair, once again demonstrated the active interest they take in fostering Anglo-Swiss co-operation in the sphere of the arts. It is indeed encouraging to note that the preoccupations of great Swiss enterprises such as these do not lie exclusively in the direction of expanding turnovers, but so willingly turn to higher manifestations of the creative spirit.

It was in the newly restored Assembly Rooms that the first concert by the Zurich Chamber Orchestra took place, in the evening of 13th June. The original design of this building was the work of John Wood Junior, to whom 18th-century Bath owes most of its architectural splendour. In the concert hall, where the Swiss Ambassador and Mme. Armin Daeniker sat next to Yehudi Menuhin and the musicologist Nicolas Lubokov, every seat was occupied. The programme could not have harmonised better with the setting, opening as it did with the D Major Symphony (K.84) composed by Mozart the very year that saw the completion of the Assembly Rooms. Yet such works by Viennese composers of our own century as Webern's "Five pieces for string orchestra" and the three pieces from Berg's Lyric Suite in no way detracted from the homogeneity of the programme. Their special appeal lies in a surprising effect of the harmonics of the violins in the one, and in highly delicate and brilliant nuances of the strings in the other. Although so characteristic of our times these works clearly revealed that evening the underlying continuity linking them with the music Mozart wrote one and a half centuries before. The soloist in Mozart's Piano Concerto in E flat major (K.449) was the young pianist Fou Tsong, Menuhin's son-in-law, whose firm, vigorous playing was on the whole well matched to that of the orchestra. Finally Haydn's Symphony No. 73, known as "La Chasse" because of the pictures evoked by the brass instruments in the last movement, would have ended this concert, had Bartok's gay Rumanian Dance not been played as an encore.

Despite the rather erratic acoustics, and the street noises which, through the open windows, marred some of Webern's more delicate passages, the success of this concert was gratifying indeed. As "The Times" reported: The playing of the orchestra "was robust . . . ;" the con-

ductor "never failed to make transitions and structural reprises sustain their direction and their vitality."

The second concert took place on 14th June in the admirable setting of Wells Cathedral, where the orchestra was dominated by the strange flying buttress that supports and divides the crossing of the transept. In the triple nave not a place remained empty. In the pews could be seen many personalities, among whom the Mayor of Wells, and the President of the Festival, Sir Edwin Leather, accompanied by his guests the Swiss Ambassador and Mme Daeniker.

This time again the programme admirably matched the setting: Bach, Vivaldi, Albinoni and Geminiani (he lived in England a long time) were the close contemporaries whose music was heard that evening. The precision, the sensibility allied with dynamism, and the vitality of the orchestra revealed in its full glory the inspiration that makes very moving related works of Geminiani's Concerto in G. minor, Vivaldi's short but admirable symphony Al Santo Sepolcro, and Albinoni's Sonata. Vivaldi's Violin Concerto in C minor Il Sospetto, played by Menuhin with a vigour always controlled by feeling, would certainly have provided the best moment of the evening, had there not followed Bach's Ricercare from "The Musical Offering", and finally the chorale "Vor deinen Thron". The counterpoint of the six voices in the Ricercare is truly superb. What makes the chorale unique, however, is that it was the last one Bach composed. Dying and already blind he dictated the notes to one of his sons. There was, therefore, no orchestration, and that performed at Wells was by Edmond de Stoutz. A concert in that great cathedral could not possibly have ended on a more fitting and moving note than the interpretation of this ultimate work of a composer who was animated by an unshakeable faith, and who without doubt will remain the greatest of all times.

On their first visit to England the Zurich Chamber Orchestra and its conductor enjoyed a well-deserved success, which the British press was unanimous in underlining. All Swiss living in this country will rejoice at it and join with the "Swiss Observer" in calling for the return of this string ensemble, which in Germany is held as one of the best five in the world.

(From a special correspondent.)

GUY BOVET

Guy Bovet, the young Swiss organist (born 1942) who was heard in London for the first time on 11th March this year, won the first prize for improvisation at the International Music Competition held at St. Albans from 26th to 30th June. As announced in the "Swiss Observer", he gave another recital on 30th June, at Holy Trinity Church, Brompton. His interesting programme included works by Frescobaldi, Cabanilles, J. S. Bach, Jean Langlais, and himself. A brilliant improvisation on a theme handed in by a member of the audience vividly demonstrated the artistry that earned him the St. Albans award. As was said when he was introduced, we can expect to hear much of M. Bovet in years to come. He is at present organist at the Châtelaine Church in Geneva.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

Our next issue will be published on Friday, 26th July. We shall be glad to receive manuscripts and reports not later than Wednesday, 17th July, and short news items by 19th July.