Theatre

ALL BRISBANE was at the Osipov concert on May Day, so far as I could see, except the folk-singers. A pity! These latter might have received a corrective shock. The Osipov troupe is not only great in itself; it also exemplifies a socialist approach to folk-music, diametrically opposite to the fashionable USA approach.

Though billed as a balalaika orchestra the Osipov ensemble is really an ‘orchestra of national instruments’, such as has become the recognised medium for public concerts of folk-music everywhere between Berlin and Shanghai. In the socialist world, the singer-with-guitar appears only in semi-private, or as an intermezzo between orchestral items.

Naturally such orchestras permit a lot of regional and national differences. The Chinese give the two-stringed fiddle a big role. The Uighurs, the Uzbeks, the Georgians, prefer their own native lutes. A ‘Volks-orchester’ in Germany uses a lot of mandolins, and shares the predilection of the Russians for free-reed instruments.

The basis of the Osipov orchestra is traditionally Russian: domras and balalaikas plus accordions and percussion; but the Osipovs add their own spices! They have two giant guslīs—zithers blown up to the size of harpsichords! They have flutes and oboes, described in the program as Turkestanian and Ukrainian respectively, but ‘symphonic’ in appearance. Just behind the alto-balalaikas sit four players of the rozhok, the Vladimir horn. And, to restore the chronological balance, one of the accordions is electrically amplified!

Does the mixture seem merely eclectic? I assure you that the actual sound, the blend and balance of tone, is superb: quite different from that of the violin-based symphony orchestra, but just as beautiful and just as varied. This folk-orchestra has a snap and precision in staccato passages, and an infinitely dreamy sostenuto that is all its own.

Repertory is surprisingly wide. Naturally they excel in Russian folk-dances, but they are not limited either to folk-music or to Russia. They expand into opera. They annex tunes from other countries and play them beautifully.

I think that this extraordinary concert left us all feeling a bit dissatisfied with our normal musical diet. After the Osipovs, ‘modern’ music (whether pop or polytonal) sounds so damned bloodless!

II.

The Osipov players make their effect, it seems to me, by uniting two sets of qualities which our civilisation holds apart, and which I shall summarise as ‘professional’ and ‘amateur’ qualities.

Ours is a class society. Its cultures are stratified. The ‘serious’ musician gets one kind of education, the ‘popular’ musician gets another. The two breeds speak different jargons, and do not flock together. They develop different professional characters.

The symphony-orchestra player is (of necessity) technically proficient. He may even be technically brilliant. But he is not required—he is practically forbidden—to be ‘spontaneous’ or ‘individual’. His thinking and feeling are done for him by the conductor. He wears a uniform like a waiter’s, just to remind us that the first symphony-orchestra players were lackeys. In private life, of course, he keeps his soul alive by playing jazz or chamber-music; but while on duty he is still a lackey.
At the other pole of our musical world stand many ‘pop’ musicians and most ‘folksingers’. They are in general self-taught rather than Conservatorium-trained, and consequently short of technique. Yet they are more artisans than wage-slaves; their individuality counts for something. Indeed they sometimes appear to exploit their ‘personality’ as a substitute for technical ability. Their historical ancestors were not lackeys but itinerant buffoons and ballad-mongers.

Paradoxically the two breeds are united in being equally remote from anything like a national culture. The orchestra plays fake-Schönberg: the ‘folksinger’ strains to imitate Dylan or Baez.

In Russia today (and in the other Union republics, and to a greater or lesser extent in other socialist countries) this stratification is far less evident. There is only one kind of musical education: the best. No quacks offer to teach you the balalaika in six easy lessons by post. The Russian music-student, like every Russian school-child, gets his grounding in the musical language which Glinka, Mussorgsky, Borodin, Shostakovich and Shishakov learnt from the Ivans and Katyas of the countryside and from each other. No one goes short of musical education for lack of funds. You may need more of it or less of it, but it is all of the same high quality.

Granting that 100% success is rare in any conditions, and granting that you’ll hear some pretty dismal playing from the bands in Intourist hotels, the system produces results. You find a very high proportion of amateurs and ‘popular’ musicians whose standards of taste and of technique are, in the best sense, professional. And you find comparable numbers of professional and ‘serious’ musicians who retain the freshness and zest of the amateur. The gap between the ‘two breeds’ is small and gets smaller; and the bridge across the gap is the genuinely national quality of the music.

(There is a parallel here with a much broader social phenomenon. Capitalism nurtures two antithetical attitudes: that of the ‘lone wolf’ and that of ‘go with the mob’. Socialism makes possible the synthesis: ‘be one of the team’.)

The Osipov orchestra is the perfect example. The technical level is professional. The spirit is amateur in the best sense; they play ‘for the love of it’. The effect is one both of polish and of spontaneity.

This air of ease, of good-humor, of sharing a joke among friends, while simultaneously giving of one’s musical best, is not easily achieved. There has to be a particular sort of solidarity among the players, a particular attitude towards the audience, and (most important) a particular relationship to the music played.

You do not get the same air of spontaneity from a symphony orchestra trained to give exactly the same care and the same detachment to Cesar Franck as to Richard Meale. You cannot expect it of the untrained amateur, either, who is so intent on getting the notes right that he has no time to think of anything else. You only get it when the players are both technically proficient and totally at home with what they play: as in this case when Soviet-trained musicians are disporting themselves in their natural element, their own national music. They are so much at home with it that they are incapable of treating it with too little seriousness or with too much.

That is genuinely the folk-music attitude; and it is precisely among the ‘orchestras of national instruments’ that you find it at its best today. It is naturally a national thing; but it is a good grounding for internationalism too.
There is a horrible fascination in imagining how we, in Australia, would set about returning the Osipov visit. Just what sort of troupe would we send to give equivalent programs in Russia?

If it were left to musical officialdom, our troupe would consist of the current successor of Gladys Moncrieff to sing Bless This House, The Bells of St Mary's and selections from Lola Montez; a violin-piano-and-cello team to play some Alfred Hill, Arthur Benjamin and Percy Grainger; and a comic baritone to do The Road to Gundagai, Tie Me Kangaroo Down and (as an encore) Click Go the Shears. Nightmarish, isn’t it?

Or conceivably we should send a dozen ‘folksinger’ soloists; many of these would be quite good, mark you, but the lack of variety would cripple the show.

But the limiting factors on what we could send are not absolute; they have nothing to do with the individual abilities of Australian musicians, and they have very little to do with our surviving folk-culture. Given the right government, the right educational policy, the right kind of official support for the arts, we could do a lot better.

We could send, in time, a ‘national-instruments orchestra’. The existing ones—German, Chinese, Polish, Russian, etc., etc.—grew from small beginnings; so would ours. Ours would be a magnified ‘woolshed band’, and there would be a lot of happy argument about its exact make-up. My own notion is that it should be basically a band of fiddles, accordions, and guitars or banjos, plus a double-bass (? home-made), plus soloists on tin whistle (doubling bamboo flute), mouth-organ and gum-leaf, plus percussion and effects, including bones. Add a tiny choir of singers, and an even smaller component of dancers.

Where are they to come from? Well, the company must include dark-Australians as well as paleface-Australians; and in existing circumstances we do not find the dark ones at the Con. So let us do some recruiting ‘in the field’ first, and approach the Con later. As some great man said—was it Gorki?—‘the countryside is the guardian of nationality’.

The gum-leaf soloist that I have in mind is a Stradbroke Island boy. A fine whistle-player, capable of doubling either on bamboo flute or on double-bass, lives at Stone’s Corner; his understudy comes from Border-town, SA. The solo mouth-organist was in the Reedy River cast, and works for the PMG. The purest, least contaminated guitar style is probably that of the Cairns region. Accordions? Meredith has trained some good young ones around Sydney. I think we should use Con students in the violin section, but they would need coaching by one of the real old hornpipe-fiddlers. We shall not find the right sort of dancers in the ballet-schools, though; we’ll look at the national-dance clubs in Ipswich and Newcastle for those.

A year’s training in ensemble and repertory would cost a good deal less than the upkeep of a bomber-squadron. Once the band was on its feet (using a purely traditional repertory) it would become a medium, a vehicle, for the work of young composers and arrangers; a nucleus of genuinely national culture. It would tour, and begin to earn its keep. It would go abroad. It would play Charley Sailor’s Woman-Song to the Muscovites, and The Cunnamulla Stocking Jig to the chaps in Kiev.

Only a few details to attend to first. A decent deal for the Aboriginals. A peaceful foreign policy. More money for education. Socialism. Oh well, back to the political grindstone!

JOHN MANIFOLD.