

Challenging the imagination

By IFAN PAYNE
Music Critic

On Friday of this week, John Alldis will conduct the chorus of the American Symposium For Choral Music in a performance of *Elijah* by Felix Mendelssohn. Remembering my own experience of singing the work with a chorus in the Royal Festival Hall in London at a time when the work was so popular that it seemed as though every evening of every week the work was being performed somewhere in that city, I was surprised to find that Mr. Alldis had only conducted *Elijah* three times previously.

Fashions change.

So what choral works are audiences flocking to hear these days?

"Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* and Mahler's *Symphony No. 2*."

John Alldis is one of Europe's most renowned choral conductors. He has prepared various choruses for some "twenty or thirty" performances of the Mahler and of the Beethoven "about forty times."

"But at last, perhaps, we have seen the end of their popularity...audiences are beginning to stay away."

And there was I, stuck out amongst the milo on this prairie, sustained to a large degree by the knowledge that when things got duller than usual I could always go to the "big cities" and hear a performance of Mahler which would sustain me through the corn harvest and the high octane pig breeding season until I needed another fix from the Viennese master.

In discussing the phenomenon of repeated performances of the same old works *ad nauseum*, Mr. Alldis quoted something that the composer Pierre Boulez had said, "We (Alldis was presumably referring to himself — there was no other Englishman in the room) English people, I should say Anglo-Saxons (thank goodness he did not include Celts in that) tend to like music that reminds us of our childhood."

And this leads to an interesting problem.

"The trouble is," the conductor continued, "that all the performances that the audience listens to become comparisons with other performances and memories. They don't

actually listen to the music any longer."

People like to be cosseted by the known and the familiar.

And therefore with repeated hearings, each performance becomes "a competitive game...."

"On the whole, audiences do not like to be challenged and stimulated by new musical experiences."

Which is why John Alldis now makes his home in Paris, France, for



JOHN ALLDIS
...developing potential

seven or eight months of the year, where he works with the Group Vocal de France. For the atmosphere in France is quite different to that in Britain or, worse, in the USA.

For the French, Mr. Alldis explains, "music is like any art form in that it is something which is there for people to sample and experience, like politics or fashion. Parisians feel that it is necessary to discover what's going on."

The Group Vocal de France consists of eleven singers who, for the most part, sing unaccompanied. The Group performs a considerable amount of music by younger composers, Birtwhistle, Betsy Jolas, Bancquart, Manoury and Nunes. For works that require an instrumental accompaniment, the group is joined by the Ensemble Intercontempora.

This past January the Group Vocal

de France and John Alldis toured the east coast of the U.S. and received good reviews of their performances of avant-garde music.

We talk of some of the newer American performers and of their interest in vocal improvisation.

Mr. Alldis, still soft spoken, turns pedagogue: "What I would like to see here is people getting to grips with the dots...you know, with the written music. They should be performing all of Schoenberg and all of Webern, really getting to grips with it, and no pretending. Improvisation is fine, but it must come out of a thorough grounding in the Second Viennese School and what comes after."

So what about all of the schools of music who have such an emphasis on a thorough grounding only in pre-twentieth century music?

"Ah, yes...this is a problem. A lot of teachers are not of the generation that is faced with the necessity to experience and broaden their repertoire."

We agree that the music of the past should be approached from a thorough grounding in the music of today.

And furthermore, "The future of avant-garde music lies with the popular music of today", he says.

And then in direct contrast, as we walk out into the blinding heat of the mid-afternoon campus, we talk of the lack of tradition in the United States and the tragedy of the lack of interest in the two thousand years of truly traditional music of this country.

But for all the talk, and all of the mutual interest in a living music, whether it be folk music or art music, it is *Elijah* which is central to the business at hand.

"Mind you, we're finding *Elijah* a difficult work...it's a very 'living' piece — very current in many ways and it requires imagination and inventiveness on the part of the singers."

And, after all, says John Alldis, "music doesn't have more to offer than to challenge the imagination."

And he is happy here, as we walk down the hill, with that challenge, and happy to be working once again with the Symposium.

"I love helping people to reach the potential that is within them."