

FRICSAY, ferenc, orch. conductor

Empress of the Symphony

The first line of defense of many U.S. symphony orchestras is manned by women. They are the determined ladies who establish "symphony work" as a prime social criterion, whose tea parties, meetings and fund campaigns often mean the difference between life and death for an orchestra. One of the grandest of all musical *grandes dames* in the U.S. is Houston's Miss Ima Hogg,† seventyish daughter of Texas' wealthy Governor (1890-95) Jim Hogg. She reigns as an absolute empress, and Houston Junior Leaguers have learned that the only sure way to her is through the symphony. When "Miss Ima" starts her annual fund drive at her mansion on Lazy Lane, the Houston girls fall all over their pretty feet to help, and the result is usually a fat (\$200,000) contribution to the orchestra's yearly budget. In her box at the symphony's opening night, she discreetly holds court, swathed in ermine.

December Huff. Ima Hogg is one of the orchestra's founders (1913) and president of the board. Her rule has been benevolent. Says she: "I've dreamed of enriching the lives of everybody through music." When she became president in 1946, the orchestra's budget was \$300,000. She imported Conductor Efrem Kurtz (at about \$30,000 a year), added \$100,000 to the budget and expanded performances. By last spring, the orchestra ranked among the first dozen in the U.S.

But last season there was trouble in

* The Deputy Prime Minister has his ornithological facts wrong; butcherbirds (shrikes) do not eat worms, nor do they eat and run. Instead, it is their practice to impale insects, field mice and small birds on thorns, and later return to the natural lardee to eat at leisure.

† Named after the heroine of a Civil War poem (*The Fate of Marvin*) written by her uncle, Thomas E. Hogg.

Houston's symphonic society. Word got around that Kurtz was considered good, but not great, and he received his notice. Guest conductors came for frank appraisal, and went, until Hungary's Ferenc Fricsay (pronounced free-cheye) appeared and led a stormy performance of Bartok that had the audience stamping approval. He won the contract hands down, but now he in turn is in trouble with President Hogg. Fricsay, who since 1948 had built Berlin's RIAS Orchestra into a first-rate ensemble, talked of grandiose plans for the future of the Houston Symphony, e.g., to up the budget to \$700,000 in five years and tour Europe and the U.S. These ideas sounded too ambitious even for Miss Ima's board. Fricsay left Houston in a huff last December, and last week, touring Switzerland on midwinter vaca-



Pete Vasquez—Houston Post

HOUSTON'S IMA HOGG

The difference between life and death.

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tion, he cabled that his rheumatic arm would prevent his return for the scheduled spring season.

Esthetic Dustbin. None of her symphonic sisters across the country would have panicked in such a fix, and Miss Ima rose to the occasion. After some quick transatlantic negotiation last week, she announced a major coup: to take over for Fricsay during the spring season, Miss Ima landed one of the world's most famous conductors. His name: Sir Thomas Beecham. Said Miss Ima: "He was very gracious. We feel elated."

Choleric Sir Thomas has appeared in Houston once before, in 1949, and took far more kindly to it than to some other U.S. cities—for instance, Seattle, which he called "the esthetic dustbin of the world." Moreover, he understands Miss Ima's kind of dominion. Says he cheerfully: "Music is a parasitical luxury, supported by the few. It is something that must be inflicted on the public."

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Houston, Tex

As the city's tastes matured, the requirements for music changed. In 1947 Efrem Kurtz came from Kansas City, bringing some new players and new disciplines at rehearsals and performances. A Midwest tour was a large success and a few recordings were made.

By 1950 a lively rivalry had sprung up between Kurtz's Houston Symphony and Antal Dorati's Dallas Symphony.

Ferenc Fricsay was brought from Berlin to take over in 1954. He remained only for part

of one season, board and conductor having failed to concur on major issues. Sir Thomas Beecham was hailed to finish out the season and he did, with joyous music and his usual pithy asides.

