

Scientist in Sound

Georg von Békésy

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A QUESTION arose in the mind of a young Hungarian physicist more than thirty years ago: how much better is the ear than the telephone system?

In search of the answers, Dr. Georg von Békésy turned his career into the study of the human ear and how it responds to sound.

Man Yesterday he received word that
in the his contributions
News to science had won the Nobel Prize.

Dr. von Békésy was working as research physicist in the Hungarian telephone system laboratory when the initial question occurred to him. It was inspired by a question from an economist, who asked how soon improvements could be expected in the telephone. "They didn't want to spend more money on more lines," Dr. von Békésy explained.

In this book, "Experiments in Hearing," he relates how he proceeded from basic communication techniques to his elaborate experiments on hearing for more than thirty-four years.

Although the prize is in medicine, he is not a physician. But he has two honorary degrees in medicine from the University of Geneva in Switzerland, and Wilhelm University in Muenster, Germany.

Dr. von Békésy is credited with being many kinds of scientist. A citation awarded him by the Acoustical Society of America in May, 1961, describes him as "physicist, anatomist, physiologist and experimenter extraordinary."

It continued:

"His joy is in the beauty of discovered order, and the pleasure he feels in a newly revealed insight shows through in the style of his communications to his devoted readers. It was really nature that devised the intricate auditory transducer and buried it deep in the hardest bone of the human body, but with such adroit and skillful craft has Békésy pored into its recesses and diagnosed its modes of action that the modern ear seems almost as much a matter of Békésy's contrivance as it is of nature's patient evolution."

Born in Budapest

Dr. von Békésy was born June 3, 1899, in Budapest where his father was in the diplomatic service, and where his mother, brother and sister still live.

A graduate of the University of Budapest, he taught there and worked in the telephone system's laboratories until 1946. In 1947, he went to the Caroline Institute in Stockholm, continuing to experiment there and at the



United Press International
"I like a lonely life"
(Dr. von Békésy with reporters)

Royal Institute of Technology. A year later, he went to Harvard as a research lecturer, and, since 1949, has been senior research fellow in psychophysics.

He works in his laboratory from early morning to 10 P. M. or later, his colleagues report. A bachelor, he lives in a small apartment near the laboratory.

"The lab looks like a submarine," he said yesterday in his accented English. "A small place, and full of equipment."

His hobby is archaeology, and he collects early and primitive art objects of all kinds, which are hung or displayed around the laboratory. They appear to be strange company for the magnified models of ears and the gleaming equipment.

Liking a Lonely Life

A slight figure with a fringe of graying hair, light blue eyes and a tiny mustache, he stands with a slight stoop, and weaves his hands as he talks. "This is not the usual way of my life," he said, as he looked about the room at a ring of reporters and photographers.

Was his a lonely life, devoted to science, someone asked.

"I like a lonely life," he answered. "If you don't want it, you have more invitations than you can afford to accept. Concentration on one field is possible only if you are lonely to a certain degree."

"If someone is a scientist, he loves to work on some problem and my hope is to contribute to the deafness problem."

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