

When Rolf's a Pied Piper

GETTING 400 children to a theatre and asking them to sing for an hour is not as easy as it sounds. But the headaches it creates are often tempered by the reaction from the youngsters to an awe-inspiring experience of being in a television studio.

The current series of BBC's *We Want To Sing* is produced in the magnificent leisure complex known as *The Forum* on a sprawling new estate at Wylenshaw.

But the show actually begins about three months prior to the recording. Some schools write in and ask to take part in the programme. Others are approached by producer Hazel Lewthwaite and her team. In either case approval has to be obtained from the education authority.

"I like to get representatives from both schools together and ask them to bring in about a dozen children. We sit them on the floor—don't tell them what it's all about—and ask them what they like



● Rolf Harris

to sing. They nearly always say what they think teacher would like them to say," said Hazel.

"So then I ask them to imagine they are on a coach going to Blackpool—what would they sing then? Then, they come out with all the pops."

But this can prove difficult. Very young children have problems with a syncopated melody and often they only know the chorus.

"Bear in mind some of them can't read. But each child gets a copy of the words of the songs they have chosen and they practise them at school. One by-product is that their reading often improves," Hazel added.

"We leave the choice of which children will actually take part to the school. If they want to hold the Sword of Damocles over their heads, it's up to them.

COLIN MADDOCK to-day talks to Hazel Lewthwaite producer of *We Want To Sing*—the programme in which 400 children lustily sing their favourite songs.

And believe me, some of them do."

Hazel chooses the "celebrity" who will lead the sing-song from those she thinks will go down well with the youngsters.

"You have to look for people who we think will be good with kids and people whom the children know. Walk through here," she said, indicating the foyer of *The Forum*, with someone like Rolf Harris and it's like walking through with the Pied Piper."

Recording day begins in the morning with the Northern Dance Orchestra on *The Forum* stage with the guest stars—on this occasion it was Rolf Harris and the Springfield Revival group—and the army of technical and production people television demands.

The NDO lean on their saxophones and trombones swapping gags. Rolf Harris tinkles on a piano and the group sprawls in the auditorium seats as they await their rehearsal call. Cameras are shifted and trundled around, the lighting is tested.

The orchestra members enjoy themselves with a cacophony of noise from hooters, rattles and whistles which are to be included in a special football medley at the end of the show. And when the group is called they shed their lethargy and spark into life with an up-tempo song which is to be their solo spot.

Come lunchtime and the arrival of children still a couple of hours away, the artists and crews break for lunch. Those who are to appear before the cameras change and have make-up applied if necessary.

Rolf Harris has his lunch interrupted half a dozen times by people wanting autographs and also finds time to chat to a little old lady who has travelled all the way from Bolton to see him.

"I had a nice chat with him—he's lovely," she said afterwards.

Shortly before three o'clock the children begin to stream in chattering excitedly.

"We have to try and stop them from dressing up—otherwise they would all turn up in their party dresses and it

would look a bit unnatural," said Helen Lewthwaite.

Once they are all in the youngsters are given a briefing on how the programme will run, when to clap, when to sing and they try out a particularly tricky bit in one of the songs.

"If for any reason we have to do a re-take of a song we have to re-assure them it's not their fault and that they are not to blame," explained the producer. "When the band plays quietly they'll probably stop singing and we have to re-assure them."

But they get in good voice with "Knick, Knack Paddy-Wack" which they all know well. A few, however, are completely overwrought and sit with glazed eyes at all the activity and bright lights and forget to sing.



● Hazel Lewthwaite, producer of *We Want To Sing*.

TO-MORROW: Drama on location.