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978-0-521-10599-6 - Duet for Two Voices: An Informal Biography of Edward Dent Compiled from his Letters to Clive Carey

Hugh Carey

Excerpt

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1. Introduction



The young don at King's: Dent, c. 1902.

‘We may be able to do our jobs a great deal better than the professional gang, but we always behave as if we were amateurs. We frequent the society of amateurs and feel uncomfortable with professionals. We refuse to concentrate on one thing and are no good at pushing ourselves continually; we are too much artists and too little business men.’

This extract from a letter written to Clive Carey in 1924 may explain why in 1976, when I write, Edward Dent’s centenary year, there is need for an introduction. For more than fifty years of English music Dent was at the hub of the wheel; by accepting a professorship in Adelaide Clive Carey, it is true, was just then moving to the circumference. During the years before 1914, both had made Cambridge the centre of their life, influence, and friendships; in the post-war world they never perhaps fully regained the sense of hope and discovery that had culminated in their production of *The Magic Flute* in 1911. This should have been followed three years later by Purcell’s *Fairy Queen*, last performed in England on stage in 1693. Production had to wait till 1920.

Although the authors of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Opera* state that ‘his influence upon English operatic life and its relationship to the European scene is incalculable’, Dent lingers obstinately in the footnotes; his translations begin to be ‘dated’, but otherwise he was so successful that his work is probably taken for granted. Now that the objects have been attained, it is hard to realise that so much needed to be achieved. We do now have a public for opera sung in English by English singers, and even composed by Englishmen; contemporary music is performed and widely understood in Europe.

Not all Dent’s judgements have stood the test of time – he would deplore the continued popularity of Elgar and of much of Puccini – but to read his letters is to be reminded how rarely he backed a loser; and his backing was persistent, costly and painstaking. With meticulous antiquarian

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Mr Clive Carey, baritone,
c. 1902.

scholarship that might have become merely conservative he combined a radical impatience, so that if one associates him very properly with rediscovery, notably of Scarlatti and the operas of Mozart, one must not overlook his championship of new music – his chairmanship of the International Society of Contemporary Music, his help to Roberto Gerhard to settle in Cambridge in 1938, and his advocacy of Bartók.

This account of his work is virtually an unintended autobiography. Dent was a prolific correspondent, and my uncle, Clive Carey, kept almost every letter which Dent addressed to him, beginning in 1902 and finishing only a few weeks before Dent's death in 1957. No doubt by reading all Dent's published work, aided by Lawrence Haward's bibliography, one could write another book, assuming that one had the qualifications to evaluate the soundness of each essay or review; but it would be a different and a drier one. Dent worked largely, as befits a don at King's College, Cambridge, through friends and friendships; he liked to get to know a man well enough to be able to criticise him frankly yet without offence; and few men have used correspondence more diligently to keep friendships in repair. To Clive, who, apart from Lawrence Haward and J. B. Trend, was perhaps his closest friend, he wrote more than four hundred extant letters, keeping also a substantial number of Clive's replies.

The letters may be the manifestations of frustrated creativity as an original composer; they represent a necessary output of self-expression. He rarely changed a word or blotted a line, writing with a fluency far greater than his legibility. He is rarely trivial, in the sense of concerning himself with ephemeral things – meals and engagements, time-tables and tittle-tattle to amuse an hour or arrange a meeting. Inevitably each reader will subject him to different criteria. To some the in-fighting over the appointment of officers of a university musical society appears unimportant; to others the programme of an Italian town band, or the behaviour of a group of Englishmen on a continental express. The highlights may be obvious – *The Magic Flute* production, a description of the first performance of Holst's *Planets*, discussion of the future of opera in England, almost extinguished in the Second World War; the problem is what to exclude.

Fate has dealt kindly with the memory of some of Dent's friends while obscuring others. Shall the editor of his

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Dent's family home, Ribston Hall, near Wetherby.

letters treasure each mention of Rupert Brooke while omitting Mrs Jenkinson's Mozart afternoons; retain Glyndebourne and jettison Glastonbury? If a document purports to be social history – and letters between friends can hardly fail to be that – it is tempting to include every word, annotating each obscurity so that there is an understanding of the passing reference to some little-known person or event. But a man must be a giant to receive such treatment, and modern publishing costs enable us to accord this only to the few, subsidised by the funds of some learned foundation.

What makes it hard to be selective with Dent is not only the wide variety of his interests, not all of which are likely to be shared by any individual reader, but still more the lucidity and wit of his prose. A long-forgotten concert may best remain in limbo, even if its choice of programme has some interest, but one discards it with reluctance: 'We at last tackled the Bach, but as Gray had copied some of the parts, and Levitt in his sweet innocence had begun by copying others from Gray instead of from the score the result was unspeakable. Letters never coincided, the first violins had two bars too many and the cellos six too few besides half bars, three-quarter bars and all sorts of

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vagaries! Gallia goes as swimmingly as such a saturated solution of sugar could . . .'. Does it matter what the Cambridge University Musical Society played in 1904, still less how they played it? In the end much depends on your interest in, and affection for, the writer himself, and your enjoyment of his wit and style.

Travels in Italy and Germany before the First World War in his company had something of the quality and observation of Samuel Butler; even when he was searching with uncanny prescience for autograph MSS of Scarlatti he wore his learning lightly, pausing to strike up a friendship with some young student met at a railway station, hearing whatever music the local opera house provided. As a personality he takes his acknowledged place in literature as the original of Philip Herriton in Forster's *Where Angels Fear To Tread*; as a musician, now primarily as a writer on opera and as a translator. His letters show the animation behind these masks; the asperity which characterised much of his talk and writing comes from a generous heart.

Ribston Hall, the saloon in Dent's boyhood.



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A family group at Ribston, c. 1890. Dent sits beside his mother with his three sisters behind, his father and brother stand together on the right.

At the time when his correspondence with Clive Carey began, Dent was twenty-six, newly elected into a fellowship at King's College, and Carey nineteen, organ scholar of Clare College. Dent came from the landed gentry – his home was Ribston Hall, a large estate between York and Harrogate; his father had been a Conservative Member of Parliament. However, he was a natural agnostic, sceptical of all 'establishments', academic or musical, with a Socratic tendency to question fundamental assumptions. Greek, too, was the value he placed on the friendship of men, as did his contemporaries at King's, Forster and Lowes Dickinson. For his fellowship he had submitted a setting for voices and orchestra of the first chorus of Shelley's *Hellas*. His means enabled him to be independent, but his temperament would in any case have made him so. He was not without fashionable prejudices; radicalism does not always redeem a man from being a snob. His anti-Semitism was marked but not indiscriminating – readers of Rupert Brooke's letters or of John Buchan can observe how

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Choristers at King's: Clive Carey with his younger brother Gordon, c. 1896.

widespread was this trait among university men before the First World War. He also found it hard to believe that any British composer could write well without the advantage of a university – or more particularly of a Cambridge – education, and his dislike of Elgar's (and Sullivan's) music and his antipathy to Beecham reflect this prejudice. In 1902, when his letters to Clive Carey begin, he was still uncertain whether his future lay in composition or in scholarship. Already he was fluent in German and Italian; the work on Alessandro Scarlatti, whose publication in 1905 was to establish his reputation, was nearing completion.

Clive Carey in 1902, and indeed throughout his equally long life, was less secure. His father, Francis Carey, naturally anxious and unassertive, had married Elizabeth Harrowell in 1877, when he was thirty-seven and his bride some twelve years younger. She was as forceful as he was mild. Francis Carey had retired prematurely from the City to Burgess Hill in Sussex, and the family of five children strained his limited resources. The three elder children, all girls, played, wrote and painted with more than usual skill – indeed Clive's first published songs were settings of his

Francis and Elizabeth Carey, c. 1887.



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Dent's contemporaries: a King's College group, May Week 1900.

sister Winifred's poems. Clive (and his younger brother, Gordon) both made their first acquaintance with Cambridge as choristers of King's. From there Clive went as a scholar to Sherborne (where Louis Napoleon Parker presided over the music), returning to Cambridge as an organ scholar in 1900, at seventeen somewhat younger than the average undergraduate of his day. Already he had something of a reputation as a singer, composer, pianist and conductor, and was combining rather sporadic study at Clare with work in London at the Royal College of Music, where he was Grove Scholar in Composition. Throughout his life he combined exceptional charm and artistic sensibility with a deep, though not always apparent, self-distrust. At Cambridge he needed the friendship both of contemporaries and older friends and received it in abundance – George Lyttelton and Alwyn Scholfield; Percy Lubbock and Edward Dent; and among the older men Monty James, Provost of King's, and 'Daddy' Mann, the organist.

Dent was probably jealous of these last, for his dislike and distrust of 'reverence' and the college chapel ensured that he would have little sympathy with men whose affections were firmly rooted there. Moreover, Dent and some of his contemporaries thought that Monty James's

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distinction as a palaeographer and in apocryphal studies was something of a deliberate withdrawal from the abrasion of contemporary life and thought; the Provost's reported saying that the three most boring topics are politics, economics and sex (all of them subjects to which Kingsmen have made a distinctive contribution) did not endear him to Dent and some other contemporaries of Morgan Forster and of Maynard Keynes.

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2. *Chiefly Scarlatti*

When his correspondence with Clive Carey began in June 1902, Dent was in Paris, pursuing his Scarlatti studies. In the first letter he asked Clive to let him know how far the second violin part went in a copy of some motets which he had been making in Brussels the previous year, but had not had time to complete, as he would shortly be returning there to finish it. The instructions began like this: ‘If you will ascend into my upper chamber (but be careful, as I let my rooms for the King’s ball and you may find a young lady there – however by the time this reaches you I think she will be gone) you will find on the top of the tall bookcase opposite the window some portfolios’, and continued for several lines.

It was typical of him at this age that he was ‘frightfully bored with Paris and perpetually cold’, though in the same letter he describes a Sunday night at the Opéra-Comique – he was disappointed by *Le Domino Noir* and nearly suffocated by the want of ventilation; it was preceded by ‘a stupid little one-act thing of E. Reyer’s called *Maître Wolfram* in which the hero is organist of the cathedral at Bonn and there is a chorus of University students who sing the most approved Biergarten stuff, and Wolfram directs on a chamber organ till he falls dead. It was pretty in a way but most boring’; the following Thursday he went to a concert in aid of those who had suffered in the eruption of Mont Pelée in Martinique (scenes from Rameau and Jannequin’s *Les Oiseaux* the principal attractions). Not being in a Bayreuth mood he failed to attend *Crépuscule des Dieux* with Richter conducting.

Meanwhile he had discovered two Scarlatti autographs in the library, neither noted in the catalogue, but ‘old Weckerlin the librarian was so sniffy and incredulous when I showed him the first that I shan’t say anything about the second’.

Nearly a year passed before the next letter (May 1903), written from Florence during a thunderstorm; Dent was spending a few days there, paying a round of calls ‘which I

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A postcard from Dent, 1904.

oddly enough rather enjoy, as they are all very cordial and delightful'. He had been working at old operas, and seeing a few: *Traviata* at Palermo, *Barbiere* at Naples, and *Lucia di Lammermoor* at Florence. 'I am crazy for Donizetti Bellini and early Verdi and don't wish ever to hear a note of Wagner again.' Boito's *Mefistofele*, heard at Rome, was glorious – 'I wish you would make Gray do it again at the C.U.M.S.,¹ the prologue I mean, which is quite good for a concert, as all the action takes place behind the scenes!'

Dent's particular irritation was that Dr Hugo Goldschmidt, who wrote a 'fairly good book' on Italian opera in the seventeenth century, was now using the bibliography of Scarlatti which Dent had published the previous November, and preceding him 'like a pilot engine to a royal train' about a fortnight ahead. 'I expect he will publish something stupid about it all (at Montecassino the Prior who is a friend of mine said he thought Goldschmidt knew no Italian) and get all the credit of my work: he being German and well known: I being an unmusical Englishman and young into the bargain... However, I can't imagine that he was received with more cordiality and kindness than I am by all these dear people.' Already his journey had taken him to Palermo, Naples, Montecassino, Florence, Bologna ('an Italian Cambridge, and if it wasn't the worst climate in Italy I would go and live there'), and Modena. Meanwhile, the Cambridge University Musical Society was performing Sullivan's *Golden Legend*; Dent was glad he was not in Cambridge to hear it.

By the time the correspondence was resumed, in March 1904, to run unbroken at monthly intervals or less till 1919, Clive had become better known in Cambridge and outside it and Dent (who kept the unimportant letters which Clive was writing to him at this period) was watching jealously over his progress as a singer and songwriter and over his popularity and friendships. The particular occasion of his success had been the performance of the Greek play in December 1903, *The Birds* of Aristophanes, set to Parry's music. Parry had written a new Parabasis for Clive, as

¹ The C.U.M.S. (Cambridge University Musical Society) gave its first concert in 1844. From 1873, when Stanford (an undergraduate member since 1870) became the conductor, it began to undertake concerts of major choral works, commonly drawing upon the services of professional orchestral players from London. By 1900, when Alan Gray was its conductor, most of the orchestra was resident in Cambridge; Clive Carey used to help by taking orchestral rehearsals. The C.U.M.C. (Musical Club) was a smaller body founded in 1889, holding weekly meetings for chamber music, and supplying professional classes in ensemble work.