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EDWARD J. DENT

Edited by Winton Dean

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PREFACE

These lectures, the typescript of which is preserved in the Rowe Music Library at King's College, Cambridge, were delivered at Cornell University (the Messenger Lectures) in the winter of 1937–8. Although Dent lived for another twenty years, he made no attempt to publish them. During this final period of his life he often spoke of a substantial work he was contemplating on Romantic Opera, with specific reference to Weber; and it seems probable that he withheld the lectures with a view to expanding the material into a broader and fuller treatment of the subject. Ill-health and other work prevented the fulfilment of this plan.

Dent would not have printed the lectures as they stand. He drew a firm distinction between a course of lectures and a book. 'The function of lectures is not to convey information, which we can now obtain far better from books, but to stimulate interest in a subject.' He does in fact convey a great deal of information, much of it recondite; but his principal aim was to serve as a kind of *agent provocateur* to goad his listeners into thinking for themselves. He was capable, in lectures as in private teaching and conversation, of making outrageous pronouncements and deliberately overstating a case to this end. I remember him girding at Beethoven and even his beloved Mozart when he thought that Haydn was underestimated, and irritating the fashionable worshippers of J. S. Bach by maintaining the superior merits of Handel.

This propensity accounts for a number of generalized statements that may strike the reader as rash or even perverse: for example his claim that the melodies of Cherubini's *Démophon* have much more charm and grace than Gluck's, his relative estimate of Weber and Schubert as opera composers, his dismissal of all Rossini's serious operas except *Guillaume Tell* and a single scene of *Otello*, and his remark that E.T.A. Hoffmann's musical technique was not far short of Weber's. Something must be

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allowed too for his chronic itch to take a shy at certain favourite *bêtes noires*, notably the church and the Germans; this was part of his rebellion against the conventions of the society in which he grew up.

Many such passages might have been modified, at least in emphasis, had Dent prepared the lectures for the press. He would unquestionably have filled a number of gaps, pursued to their conclusion many stimulating ideas thrown off as casual asides, and enriched his discussion of the music with printed examples, especially from the operas whose plots he analyses in detail. He might have softened his rather harsh treatment of Weber and Rossini, and would scarcely have ignored the use of *Leitmotiv* in *Euryanthe* (which he censures for formlessness) and *Fierrabras*, or in discussing Spohr have omitted all reference to his chromatic harmony.

The reader must also bear in mind the date at which Dent was writing. After nearly forty years a few – surprisingly few – of his utterances have lost their force. The operas of Berlioz, Rossini (other than *Il barbiere di Siviglia*) and Bellini are no longer strangers to the theatre, though the French operas of the Revolution decade to which he rightly ascribes such significance are still (apart from Cherubini's *Médée*) as unfamiliar as ever. It is difficult to imagine Dent finding nothing to admire in *Le Comte Ory*, which he does not mention; and he might have been less censorious of the inability of modern singers to do justice to Rossini and Bellini.

Despite these reservations there seem to me three potent reasons for publishing the lectures now, in the centenary year of Dent's birth. In the first place, they explore an important turning-point in musical history that has still not received full or even adequate study in print. Comparatively little of Dent's work, based on a detailed examination of scores and librettos and a wide knowledge of cultural history, has been overtaken by later research. Only in very recent years have musicologists extended their concentration on earlier periods to take in the nineteenth century. Dent reached conclusions that may still startle musicians and others brought up on accepted traditions: that the true initiators of Romantic Opera were the French, that it derived not from serious but from comic opera, and that it was the principal source of the nineteenth-century German symphonic and in-

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strumental style. If a detail here and there is exaggerated, I believe the main conclusions to be sound.

Secondly, the lectures are full of characteristically sharp perception, clearly and often entertainingly expressed, on composers familiar and unfamiliar and on the relationships between them. Readers of Dent's other books, and students who had the good fortune to be taught by him or to hear him speak, will recognize many examples of that provocative wit, compounded of penetration and paradox, with which he forced them to confront the music of the past. Those who never knew him may discover, if they have not done so already, why he enjoyed a reputation as one of the world's foremost musicologists and the man who raised British musical scholarship to an international level.

Thirdly, by their demonstration, implicit and explicit, of the methods of a great scholar and a great teacher, the lectures convey an important message to critics and historians of music. For Dent the primary value of research lay in 'a training of the imagination', and he was always urging that 'we must sharpen our critical faculties'. The chief obstacle to this exercise he considered to be the cult of 'the classics', which he mentions in the second paragraph of Lecture 9 and to which he returns at the end of Lecture 12. It was not that he himself thought little of the classics; but he distrusted the uncritical acceptance of traditional standards. 'Our minds are rendered sluggish by the constant habit of veneration'; this was the attitude he was concerned to shake. He urges his listeners to put their imaginations into training, 'to cultivate imaginative experience for the enrichment of memory and life, and at the same time to develop a habit of perpetual scepticism and criticism as regards all so-called acknowledged masterpieces. If you have ever allowed yourselves to reverence the great masters, I hope you will abandon that attitude, which is merely a polite mask for lazy-mindedness.' Only thus, Dent was convinced, can we clear our ears of the lumber of the past and 'have mental space as well as freedom of judgment to welcome and enjoy the art of today and tomorrow'.

The editing of the lectures has presented certain difficulties. They were composed straight on to the typewriter and only lightly revised. The revision generally took the form of mar-

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ginalia hastily scribbled in pencil, sometimes modifying and sometimes supplementing the text, and occasionally marking a point for reconsideration. I have incorporated this material in the text where it involved little disturbance, and elsewhere placed it in footnotes indicated by Dent's initials. Other footnotes are my own. In delivering the lectures Dent used live illustrations performed by students, and sometimes played and sang examples himself. With one or two exceptions, neither their placing nor their content can be identified, and I have made no attempt to supply the deficiency. The two brief musical examples on pages 12 and 22 were notated in Dent's hand.

Dent was a fastidious writer of English. The lectures contain occasional solecisms of syntax, awkward sentences and repetitions of words and phrases that he might have tolerated in speech or not bothered to alter, but would never have admitted to print. Following a number of his own amendments, I have slightly modified such passages, and shortened a few others where he repeats a point in almost identical terms. I have regularized titles of operas and names of characters, corrected a few slips and wrong dates, and omitted or adapted an occasional sentence where Dent bases a statement on premises now known to be erroneous. Provided his argument remains unaffected, a pedantic insistence on the letter would have done no service to his memory. I have not however interfered with generalizations which some scholars might wish to qualify, and only annotated them when they seemed to me likely to mislead. The lectures should not be regarded as a complete statement of Dent's views; the script probably served to some extent as a basis for improvisation and spontaneous elaboration. But while the style never received a final polish, its tone of urbanity seasoned with wit and a touch of *malizia* is unmistakable, and will surely be relished by all admirers of its erudite and idiosyncratic author.

My thanks are due to Dr David Charlton and Mr John Warrack for many helpful suggestions, and to my son Stephen for subjecting the material to a testing scrutiny that would have elicited Dent's amused approval.

WINTON DEAN

February, 1976