Music and Theatre

*Essays in honour of Winton Dean*
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Edited by Nigel Fortune
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Edited by

**NIGEL FORTUNE**
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Preface

Winton Dean celebrated his seventieth birthday on 18 March 1986. Three years ago – a little late, perhaps, for us to hope to achieve publication by the actual birthday – an editorial committee was set up to plan and guide a volume of essays to salute the occasion. It consisted of Anthony Hicks, Curtis A. Price, John Warrack and myself, together with Rosemary Dooley of Cambridge University Press (succeeded, when she left the firm, by Penny Souster). I was invited to be editor; I gratefully acknowledge the advice and support of my colleagues, as well as assistance from John H. Roberts.

Winton’s devotion to opera and other dramatic music ensured that the broad theme of the book virtually chose itself. From the start we aimed at a relatively small number of substantial essays rather than a larger number of short ones, even though this meant that we had, with regret, to disappoint several scholars who would doubtless have graced the volume no less than those whose contributions appear in it. We felt it appropriate that about half the essays should concern Handel, or matters from his lifetime, the remainder being devoted to the work of later opera composers, including those, such as Janáček and Britten, with whom, as with Handel, Winton has shown particular sympathy. We decided to round out the book with two further contributions: Stephen Dean agreed to compile a list of his father’s writings; and for an appreciation of Winton as man and scholar we turned to Philip Radcliffe, who knew Winton longer than any other scholar – in fact from the time he greeted the eighteen-year-old Cambridge freshman until his deeply regretted death in a car accident while this book was in proof.

The members of the editorial committee join with the other contributors in paying tribute to Winton for his outstanding scholarly achievements and in sending him our warmest good wishes for happy and productive years to come.

Except in a few cases explained as they occur, bibliographical sources are spelt out throughout the book; the one general exception is The New Grove
Preface

*Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. S. Sadie (London, 1980), which is referred to simply as *The New Grove*. Musical pitches are referred to by the Helmholtz system, in which c' is middle C.

* Birmingham

* Nigel Fortune
Winton Dean

PHILIP RADCLIFFE

Winton Dean went from Harrow to King’s College, Cambridge, in 1934, as a classical scholar. His father, Basil Dean, was an eminent theatrical producer, and his mother, Esther van Gruisen, came from a distinguished family, being the niece of Rufus Isaacs, the first Marquis of Reading. Winton read Classics and English and achieved good results, but his interests moved increasingly towards music and drama. He appeared twice on the stage, in 1936 as Demeter in Aristophanes’ The Frogs and a year later in Handel’s Saul, in which he was cast as Jesse, with a white beard and followed by a long procession of descendants. He also showed skill in the difficult art of translating words from a foreign language to fit music. This he did for the choruses in Walter Leigh’s music for The Frogs and again for Weber’s Abu Hassan; the latter was very effective on the stage, especially the words ‘Cash, cash, cash’ sung by the chorus of creditors. At about this time he met Thalia Shaw; they were married in 1939, and she has been the most devoted of wives.

Winton’s intelligence and vitality, which have remained undiminished, were widely noticed and appreciated, but it seemed uncertain in what direction they would lead him. A dissertation on Walter Savage Landor did not bring him the Fellowship at King’s for which he had hoped, and during the next few years he was torn between the writing of fiction, drama and poetry (not always serious). During the 1939–45 war he worked for Naval Intelligence. Shortly afterwards he embarked on an intensive study of the music of Bizet, to which he has always been devoted. This resulted in the volume on the composer in the Master Musicians series (1948), and its notable success showed that Winton had found his true métier. He had not studied music academically at Cambridge, but he was a keen attender of concerts and operas, with a remarkable memory and strongly developed critical instincts. His sympathies inclined more to the Latin than to the Teutonic, and he was ideally equipped to write about a composer whose music, because it is immediately attractive, has sometimes been patronized by the over-solemn.
Philip Radcliffe

The book contains much valuable material on Bizet’s lesser-known works, especially the important La Coupe du roi de Thulé, but also succeeds in the harder task of making original and perceptive comments on works as familiar as Carmen and the L’Arlésienne music. The depiction and development of character in opera have always been of vital interest to Winton, and here he is particularly happy in his observations on Don José. The various elements in Bizet’s style and their gradual integration are traced with clarity and sympathy, and the complicated and frequently contentious background of French opera is vividly portrayed. In 1965 a revised edition appeared, incorporating much new material resulting from the researches of Mina Curtiss. Winton also wrote the articles on Bizet in the fifth edition of Grove’s Dictionary and in The New Grove, as well as a short study of Carmen published by the Folio Society in which the opera is considered side by side with Mérimée’s novel. His writings have led to a far more balanced estimate of Bizet and an enhanced understanding of his achievements.

Although in later years Winton has been increasingly concerned with Handel, he has continued to write on other composers. In 1971 he contributed to The Beethoven Companion (ed. D. Arnold and N. Fortune) the admirable chapter ‘Beethoven and Opera’, comparing the versions of Fidelio and demonstrating how that of 1814 shows at the same time an increased musical maturity and a lessening of dramatic power. In 1974 he read to the Royal Musical Association an interesting paper on Donizetti, stressing his influence on Verdi. More comprehensive is the chapter ‘Shakespeare and Opera’ in Shakespeare and Music (ed. P. Hartnell, 1964). This essay, which is both erudite and entertaining, examines innumerable operas, from the marvelously preposterous; the descriptions of the plots of some of the more bizarre and obscure ones are often hilarious, while the discussions of Otello and Falstaff are so perceptive and sympathetic that one wishes that one day Winton might write a book on Verdi. Equally valuable are his chapters on French, Italian and German opera in vol. 8 of the New Oxford History of Music (The Age of Beethoven 1790–1830, ed. G. Abraham, 1982). His inherited love of the theatre, allied to sensitive musicianship – and no doubt reinforced since his Cambridge days by the strong influence of Edward Dent, whose passion for opera was equalled only by his dislike and suspicion of all things ecclesiastical – has ensured that Winton is particularly at home writing about dramatic music.

Somewhat apart from Winton’s other writings is the long article on criticism that he originally produced for Grove’s and which has reappeared in revised form in The New Grove. An exhaustive history of criticism through the ages is followed by a section on the nature of criticism. Winton has long been an admirable reviewer of books and performances, and he is fully aware of the problems involved. The article ends with an impressive
Winton Dean summing-up of the necessary qualifications for a critic. In many ways this is one of the most remarkable of Winton’s writings. Towards the end of it he observes: ‘With very few exceptions active composers and performers make bad critics’; the fact that he himself is neither a composer nor a performer has probably been an asset. Though he has decided musical tastes, these are barely perceptible in the article, which contains this memorable sentence: ‘One of the critic’s roles is that of watchdog, and he must bark as appropriate.’

In his own criticism Winton has followed his precepts admirably. The critic must approach opera with care: it is only too easy to stress some of its many elements at the expense of others, but Winton has always maintained a fine balance between them. An article in the Musical Times (cxlvi [1978], pp. 854–8), ‘Opera and the Literary Approach’, is an excellent demonstration of his approach; it is a detailed review of three books on opera, obviously of unequal value, which are assessed with masterly clarity and scrupulous fairness. This same balance of judgement can be found throughout Winton’s many critical writings, both substantial and occasional; for instance, he recognizes Donizetti’s influence on Verdi without exalting the older composer at the expense of the younger, and he has always shown a healthy independence in his attitude towards fashions. The fascination with characterization so apparent in his book on Bizet indeed pervades all his work.

Probably the most celebrated element in Winton’s output is his work on Handel, the product of an enthusiasm dating back to his years at Cambridge. The estimation of Handel’s music in England has fluctuated widely. A hundred years ago it was he who drew the large audiences (though for rather a narrow range of works), while Bach was the scholars’ composer. But now the position, if not completely reversed, is very different. The popularity of Bach has steadily increased during the present century, and the fact that Handel’s music is now the object of detailed study by distinguished scholars has resulted in a broader and deeper knowledge of his enormous output and has shown that his range is far wider than was realized by those who knew him simply from hearing inflated performances of Messiah. Cambridge played an important part in the new attitude to Handel. In 1925 Semele was very successfully performed there on the stage, and it was gradually realized that many of the more dramatic oratorios are more effective in a theatre than when performed in evening dress in a church or concert-hall. Some of the directions in the early editions of the librettos, such as ‘exit David through the window’ in Saul, suggest that Handel himself would have enjoyed seeing the works performed in this way. Mention has already been made of Winton’s appearance in Saul; it is appropriate that one of Handel’s greatest works should have been the starting-point of his career as a Handel
The rediscovery of Bach in England undoubtedly affected the attitude of many scholars towards Handel, and this applied especially to the oratorios. Ernest Walker, for example, is frequently castigated by Winton for his rather ambivalent view of them. But it is only fair to add that Walker wrote enthusiastically about certain things in them and also about secular works such as Semele and Acis and Galatea; he was certainly not wholly anti-Handel but felt most sympathy for the works that could not challenge comparison with Bach. When two composers of equal stature are born in the same year it is hard to take a completely balanced view of them, and it is typical of Winton’s fair-mindedness that, although he surely finds Handel the more congenial, he never makes the mistake of belittling Bach.

Handel’s Dramatic Oratorios and Masques (1959) is planned on a spacious, almost Wagnerian scale. After a first part containing chapters on the nature and background of the oratorio, the far longer second part consists mainly of admirable detailed analyses of all the individual works; much work also went into the twelve appendices. The book was quickly acclaimed as a first-rate piece of scholarship, and, if anything, it has grown in stature with the passing years. It shows deep knowledge not only of Handel’s music but also of that of his contemporaries; it is very well informed about the complicated interactions between the various genres of music at the time; and, with all its learning, it is always thoroughly readable. Winton never fails to discriminate between the greatest and the less great moments. An enthusiast for music in the theatre, he is alive to potential absurdities, as a remark such as the following shows: ‘Alexander, even slower off the mark than most operatic heroes, sings three recitatives and two airs and rushes to war.’

The idea of Handel as first and foremost a musical dramatist may have seemed shocking to many traditional Handelians, but Winton presented it with great conviction in what is so far his largest single work. But it was not, of course, to be his last word on Handel. In 1965 he went for a year to Berkeley as Ernest Bloch Professor and delivered a course of lectures on Handel’s operas as well as undertaking other teaching. John H. Roberts has kindly provided this impression of the impact that Winton made:

For those of us lucky enough to participate in one of Winton’s seminars it was an unforgettable year. He charmed us all, of course, and awed us with his prodigious knowledge of Handel and opera. But what above all made the experience so extraordinary for a group of American graduate students was his refusal to separate the scholarly and the social. Our class meetings, though rich in intellectual content, were a little like parties, with each of us vying to provide the most sumptuous refreshments, and our frequent extramural gatherings, usually to hear some choice tape, were hardly less educational. The high point of the year was perhaps the party...
Winton Dean

for Winton’s birthday – his fiftieth – when he was presented with a large basket of
avocados and serenaded with a Mozart canon retouched by Sally Fuller as ‘Felicitas tibi
Wintonius et jocunda nativitas’.

The lectures were eventually published in book form as Handel and the
Opera Seria (1969). In the preface Winton explains how, having said
comparatively little about the operas in his book on the oratorios, he has
become increasingly aware of their merits. He divides the operas into
various categories and examines them in some detail with his characteristic
blend of erudition and humour. With John Merrill Knapp he embarked in
the 1960s on a more monumental study of the operas rivalling his book on
the oratorios, and, as I write, the first volume, covering the operas up to
1726, is in proof.

Looking back for a moment at Winton’s work as a whole, it impresses
not only by its erudition but also by the elegance and clarity with which it
is presented. However abstruse the matter, the style is never pontifical or
dry: his study of English and the Classics, and his natural feeling for
the language, have ensured the total absence from his writings of the peculiar
language that Eric Blom once called ‘musicologese’.

When Winton arrived in Cambridge it was soon realized that he was
someone in whose company nobody could feel dull, and his resilience has
always been a strength to him. His life has had its sadnesses; his
undergraduate years were clouded by family troubles, and in 1945 his
two-year-old daughter died tragically. Against this must be set the
unfailing sympathy and devotion of Thalia as wife, typist and chauffeuse
and in many other capacities, and also his very happy relationships with
his son Stephen and his adopted daughter Diana and her family. Three
times a year the Deans go to Fairlnee in the Scottish borders, where
Winton is liable to undergo a surprising transformation from musical
scholar to sporting country squire. Since 1957 they have lived near Witley,
Surrey, in Hambledon Hurst, a house that formerly belonged to Winton’s
grandparents and has always had happy associations for him; no one who
has been there will forget its warm, friendly and stimulating atmosphere
and the lively conversation ranging not only over music and the theatre
but quite possibly over such matters as current politics or cricket (another
of Winton’s enthusiasms). For one who has known Winton for over half a
century it is a real pleasure to send him affectionate greetings on his
seventieth birthday.