

MOZART'S OPERAS

A Critical Study

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EDWARD J. DENT

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PAPERBACKS

Mozart's Operas

A Critical Study



EDWARD J. DENT

Second Edition

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INTRODUCTION

MOZART's operas today rank beyond dispute, along with those of Wagner and Verdi, as one of the supreme peaks of the musical theatre; not surprisingly they continue to inspire new books and new interpretations almost every year. It was not always so. At the beginning of this century, apart from *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*, they were seldom performed and generally misunderstood, and had never been the subject of serious scholarly study. Much of the subsequent rise in their reputation has been due to Edward Dent. He first made his mark as moving spirit and translator in a production of *The Magic Flute* at Cambridge in 1911, which was acclaimed as a revelation, and followed it up with this book, first published in 1913 and extensively revised and rewritten in 1947.

The book threw fresh light on almost every aspect of the subject and was soon accepted as a classic, a status it has never lost. Dent was the first to place Mozart's operas in their historical and social context, to make a close study of their librettos, and to consider them as mature and complex works of musico-dramatic art. To an extensive knowledge of the musical background—he quotes from no fewer than eight of Mozart's lesser contemporaries—he added wide reading, which enabled him to draw illuminating parallels from the other arts, a practical knowledge of the theatre, and a felicitous and witty style. Not all his judgements command universal assent. Some will jib at his dismissal of *Die Entführung*, for all its mixed style, as 'a thoroughly unsatisfactory work', and the Requiem as 'the product of a morbid and diseased imagination'; and recent experience has proved that *La Clemenza di Tito* is no mere museum piece. But his singling out of *Idomeneo* in 1911, when it was virtually unknown and long before its first production in Britain, as an indispensable key to the understanding of Mozart's genius for the theatre ('There is a monumental strength and a white heat of passion that we find in this early work of Mozart's and shall never find again') is only one example of his exceptional insight.

Dent says in his 1947 Preface that he intended the book for the general reader rather than the musicologist. Perhaps for that

reason he does not always give full references, and some of his citations are so recondite that they are difficult to check. But he wears his learning lightly. Discussion of solemn matters is always liable to punctuation by shafts of sly humour: see the footnotes on pages 92 and 161 and the reference to Mozart's *Musical Joke* on page 145. The book is full of fruitful digressions, or apparent digressions, for example on national variations in recitative and musical nationalism in general, on the ramifications of the *Don Giovanni* story and the links between *The Magic Flute*, *Fidelio*, and the opera of the nineteenth century; there is even a learned historical note on the *jus primae noctis*. Dent cannot always resist a shy at a favourite Aunt Sally. He tells us that 'priests in opera are always odious', and that the High Priest in *Idomeneo* no doubt stage-managed the oracle; but he treats Sarastro with all reverence. When he is provocative, his object is usually to provoke the reader into thinking for himself.

Such errors of fact as I have discovered (with help from Professor Peter Branscombe) are for the most part relatively unimportant. Many of them occur in the chapters on *The Magic Flute* and the last year of Mozart's life, which have been the subject of much recent research. The dates given for the commissioning of *The Magic Flute*, the Requiem and *La Clemenza di Tito* are more precise than the known facts allow; and Alan Tyson's paper studies have modified the chronology of Mozart's work on these projects. Both *La Clemenza di Tito* and *The Magic Flute* enjoyed more immediate success than Dent suggests. Schikaneder's Theater auf der Wieden was no 'flimsy erection' (see Dent's Note to the Second Impression); he was not the author of the words of the Masonic cantata (K. 623), first performed on 18 November 1791. There are even minor mistakes in the plot of *The Magic Flute*: the Orator (Der Sprecher) does not appear until Act II, Monostatos's sentence to the bastinado is commuted by Sarastro, and the Queen of Night orders Pamina to obtain from Sarastro a circle or orb, not the sevenfold shield of the sun.

More misleading is the untenable supposition that the plot was radically changed after the libretto was complete and some of the music written. Dent's hostility to Schikaneder—there is no evidence that he led Mozart into a riotous and profligate life, or that he was critical of the music—caused him to promote Gieseke (*sic*), a literary nonentity whose *Oberon* libretto for Wranitzky is a

crass plagiarization of the work of the North German actress-writer Sophie Seyler, into part-authorship of the *Magic Flute* libretto.

It would no doubt be possible to introduce corrections and qualifications into the text, but that would impair the flavour of the book, and incidentally deprive us of Dent's very entertaining account of Gieseke's activities in Greenland and Ireland. (The only changes to the text are the correction of some half dozen misprints.) While Dent was sometimes careless over detail or even occasionally wrong-headed, he had a firm grasp of essentials and a deep understanding of Mozart's character as a creative artist. The book has lost very little of its value and is a pleasure to read. The sentence with which Dent ended his 1947 edition, on a troubled world's need of 'the profound and noble sincerity of *Idomeneo* and the serene spirituality of *The Magic Flute*' conveys a truth without temporal limitation.

WINTON DEAN

October 1990

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

WHEN the first edition of this book was published in 1913 most of Mozart's operas were almost completely unknown in this country. Of those which I have discussed, *Idomeneo* had never been performed here at all; *Die Entführung* had been revived by Sir Thomas Beecham for a few performances in 1910, but before that had not been seen since 1881; *Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* were, of course, items of the regular repertory, at any rate of the Carl Rosa and Moody-Manners companies, though from the time of the Wagnerian invasion they were not so often given at Covent Garden. *Così fan Tutte*, after long years of oblivion, had been revived for one English performance under Stanford in 1890, sung by students of the Royal College of Music, and twenty years later it was revived by Beecham; *La Clemenza di Tito*, the first Mozart opera to be seen in London (1811), had been given again in German in 1840 and after that forgotten altogether. *Die Zauberflöte*, during the first half of the nineteenth century, had been performed in Italian, German and English at various dates; after that it had a fair number of performances in Italian, whenever star singers of the requisite calibre were available. The last Italian performance took place under Lago in 1892. The Cambridge performance in English (December 1911) was what originally led me to write this book. In those days people all talked of the opera as *Il Flauto Magico* and few even among musicians seemed to be aware that it had been composed to German words; the usual verdict on it was that it contained Mozart's divinest music set to the most ridiculous and unintelligible libretto.

The new outlook on Mozart dates back to the Mozart festivals which began at Munich about 1896 under the stage direction of Ernst von Possart and the conductorship of Hermann Levi. As they were organized as a sort of appendix to the Wagner festivals at Bayreuth, they were attended by a good many English visitors, and through them English people gradually began to realize that *Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* were both operas for a small and intimate theatre, that *Così fan Tutte* was an exquisite artificial comedy, and *Die Zauberflöte* a profoundly moving allegory. I have no intention, in this new edition, of reviewing all the subsequent

revivals of Mozart's operas; it would be a task beyond my knowledge to survey even those which have taken place in this country. There is no need to criticize the experiments of the past; we must concentrate our energies on the future. It is characteristic of our musical life that the most interesting Mozart revivals in recent years have been the productions of amateurs. *Idomeneo* was staged for the very first time in this country by an amateur society at Glasgow in 1934, and in English too; further performances were given elsewhere under the direction of the Misses Radford, the authors of the translation. The opera has also been performed by amateurs at Cambridge and Haslemere. To the initiative of the Misses Radford we also owe the revival of *La Clemenza di Tito*, first at Falmouth and then in London. *The Magic Flute*, neglected altogether since the 1890's, was staged at Cambridge in 1911, and this performance led eventually to the Mozart revivals in English that took place at the Old Vic soon after the end of the last war. And Sir Thomas Beecham will forgive me, I hope, if I class him amongst the amateurs in so far as he has organized performances of Mozart purely for love of the works without the least hope of professional profit thereon. Nor would I omit the extraordinary achievement of a pioneer in education, Mr. C. T. Smith, who in 1919 staged an astonishingly convincing performance of *The Magic Flute* performed by the boys of an elementary school in the Isle of Dogs, followed up by another at a similar school in Whitechapel. A German professor, who did not see the performance, asked me if it was not a shocking desecration of a masterpiece; a distinguished singer who did come to see it said to me, 'I have sung in this opera dozens of times in Germany; I now understand it for the first time.'

In revising this book for a second edition I have felt happily compelled to consider an entirely new class of readers, a younger generation which, thanks mainly to the Old Vic and Sadler's Wells, has learned to enjoy Mozart's operas in the English language. We stand, I hope, on the threshold of a new era in the history of English opera and opera in English, and we seem to have accepted Mozart as the foundation of our foreign repertory, and to be gradually learning to think of Purcell as that of our native musical drama. If any reader takes the trouble to compare this edition with the first, he will find that I have cut out large quantities of dead wood; it may have been desirable to say certain things in 1913, but it would be superfluous to reprint them now.

I have done my best to bring the book up to date in accordance with modern historical research, but I have rewritten it for the general reader rather than for the musicologist. Finally, I am glad to have revised many of my own critical judgements; I do not repent of my errors in this respect, for they were natural to the period at which they were set down. But thirty years and more of operatic study, including a good deal of practical work for the stage and the unique experience which one derives from making operatic translations, have given me, I hope, a wider view of opera in general and of Mozart in particular.

My thanks are due to my original publishers, Messrs. Chatto and Windus, for facilitating the production of this edition, although they were not inclined to undertake it themselves. They treated me very generously in 1913, and, considering the number of years it required to put that small edition out of print, I cannot blame them. For kind help in various matters I must thank Dr. Alfred Loewenberg, whose *Annals of Opera* has been my daily reading ever since it was published (and indeed for some time before that); Miss Barbara Banner, librarian of the Royal College of Music; Professor J. B. Trend, who has been my director of studies in Spanish; and, once more, Mr. Lawrence Haward, who gave me useful criticism on my first edition, and has supplied me with much valuable information for this one.

LONDON

January 1946

NOTE TO THE SECOND IMPRESSION

THE description of Schikaneder's theatre as 'little more than a wooden barn' (p. 211) is not strictly accurate. From the summer of 1786 there had been some sort of theatrical booth in a courtyard of the Starhemberg'sches Freihaus, and in January 1787 Christian Rossbach applied for permission to erect 'a wooden hut' there, but this permission was not granted. In March, however, Rossbach was given leave to erect a theatre with walls of masonry and a tiled roof, provided that adequate precautions were taken for safety and comfort. The interior was

of wood, and there were two galleries. The total area was about 100 feet by 50, and the stage was about 40 feet deep; the pit was not more than a few feet longer. The building was approached by a longish covered way in wood across the garden. Various alterations and improvements were made during the next few years, but even as late as 1794 Schikaneder himself described it as 'a deficient and irregular building'. It was first opened for performances on Sunday, 14 October 1787, but there is no record of what works were performed there. Rossbach's management lasted barely six months, and the theatre was taken over by Johann Friedel, an actor who had been for some years in Schikaneder's travelling company and had run off with Schikaneder's wife. He died in March 1789 and left everything to Frau Schikaneder. Her husband rejoined her, and having found a financial backer (a fellow freemason), Josef von Bauernfeld, took over the management in the summer. Friedel had produced only plays there; Schikaneder started off with an operetta, *Der Dumme Gärtner*, words by himself, music by Schack and Gerl. Various plays and comic operas followed, some of which were seen by Mozart.

An exhaustive history of the theatre and its complete repertory, as far as recorded, from 1787 to 1801, when the theatre was closed and Schikaneder migrated to the newly built Theater an der Wien, has been written by Dr. Otto Erich Deutsch.¹

1948

¹ O. E. Deutsch, *Das Freihaus-Theater auf der Wieden*. Mitteilungen des Vereines für Geschichte der Stadt Wien, Band XVI. 1937.

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MOZART AS A CLASSIC

TO the historian of the future the first forty years of the present century may well appear to be the age of archaeology. Not only in the musical world, but in every department of culture and for the general reader as well as the specialist, there seems to have been prevalent an extraordinary interest in every possible kind of antiquarian study. It has been to some extent interrupted by the periods of war, but it existed before 1914, it was universally conspicuous during the period 1918-39 and there is every probability that it may continue, at least for some time, after the world returns to peace. How far this reversion to the past affected other countries it is difficult to estimate; as far as I can myself judge, the cult of the antique was pursued nowhere so devotedly as in England. It was characteristic that our illustrated weekly papers devoted at least a couple of pages in every issue to excavations, whether in our own country or in Egypt, Central America, or the Far East. Historical exhibitions of the art of various countries attracted huge crowds to Burlington House. Our musical life was characterized by a large number of revivals of old music; the movement may be said to have begun as far back as 1895, when Stanford celebrated the bicentenary of Purcell's death with a stage performance of *Dido and Aeneas*. The importance of that revival was that that opera, known for the previous two centuries only in concert mutilations, was brought back to its proper home, the theatre. Another landmark was the series of historical concerts and operas organized in 1914 for the congress of the old International Musical Society in Paris; that was really the beginning of the modern interest in the music of the early Middle Ages. Germany and Austria published innumerable volumes of *Denkmäler der Tonkunst*; France and Italy followed suit; while in England, especially at Oxford and Cambridge, there was a continuous practice of our own classics, notably the Tudor church music, the Elizabethan madrigals, and the works of Purcell both for the church and the theatre.

The early twentieth century was, of course, by no means the first era of excavation and adoration of 'the antique'; but whereas

the archaeology of the Renaissance implied an immediate recognition of ancient art and literature and its ruthless adaptation to the practical needs of that day, and that of a hundred and fifty years ago, whether we take Winckelmann or J. R. Planché as typical figures, was essentially romantic, i.e. enthusiastic and by our own standards uncritical, the revivalist movement of the present age has been resolutely scientific in all its ramifications. The musical researchers, like the students of Byzantine or Medieval painting, have refused to regard the music of the centuries before Handel as merely primitive and unskilful; they have set themselves deliberately to train their imaginations to realize, as far as any later generation can, the emotional and poetic values of this art, as well as merely to decipher its notation. We may indeed be grateful to the Church of England for preserving unbroken the tradition of Blow and Purcell, of Greene, Battishill and Attwood; a consciously scientific enthusiasm restored Tallis and Byrd to practical performance, and at the present day it is possible for the ordinary concert-goer to hear even occasional performances of still earlier music. Indeed, during the last forty years or so many of us may well have had the impression that we were living, both auditively and visually, in the galleries of a museum.

It is a museum through which most of us wander rather aimlessly, conscious only too often of tired feet and museum headache; but there is one room which seems to be always full, both of silent readers and students, and of listeners to any performance that may take place there—the room devoted to the memory of Mozart.

It is a curious thing that Mozart, the bicentenary of whose birth is within ten years of its celebration, should have become the most popular classical composer of the present day. Fifty years ago his reputation was rather faded, although Hans Richter is said to have prophesied that he had a great future before him. The nineteenth century began by adoring Mozart as the fashionable novelty; within a few generations it had established him as a classic, and it ended by relegating him for the most part to the schoolroom as a composer of sonatinas for little girls to practise. In 1906 Leipzig celebrated the hundred and fiftieth anniversary of his birth with a Mozart Festival which provoked one of the younger critics to publish a curious and instructive little book called *Mozart-Heuchelei* ('Mozart-Hypocrisy', by Paul Zschorlich,

Leipzig, 1906). I came across this book accidentally in Germany many years ago and expected to read an attack on the modern cult of Mozart which was already under way; I was quite surprised to find that the author's rage and scorn were directed against survivors from a much older generation, trying vainly to preserve the worship of a divinity long extinct. This explosive young critic was in fact a full-blooded Wagnerite, but with a hearty contempt for those who were still at the stage of enjoying *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*; at the same time he was furious with those whose reverence for the classics exalted *Don Giovanni* to the same level as *Tannhäuser*. Our modern devotion to Mozart is the result of an entirely different outlook on the whole of music. It would not be just to say that we regard Mozart's works, least of all his principal operas, as museum pieces; but our appreciation of him to-day is in many cases quite consciously a scientific appreciation, and even when it is experienced as a direct and natural enjoyment, that enjoyment is subconsciously due to a general background of musical education which fifty years ago hardly existed even amongst academically trained musicians.

Our modern opera repertory is in itself a museum repertory—or at any rate we should certainly describe it by that name if it was a drama repertory. Can anyone imagine a drama company, either in London or on tour, giving a different play every night, selected from, let us say, *Venice Preserv'd*, *The Rivals*, *The Lady of Lyons*, *Caste*, *Sweet Lavender* and *Peter Pan*? This might correspond very roughly to *Don Giovanni*, *The Barber of Seville*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Carmen*, *La Bohème* and *Hänsel and Gretel*. Our ancestors, from Handel's day onwards, never wanted revivals of old operas; they wanted new operas, just as we normally want new plays. There were no classics in those happy days, except that the operas of Lully were kept up for a good many years in Paris, while in England our nearest approach to a repeatedly revived classic was *The Beggar's Opera*. After these Mozart is actually the first composer of operas to become a classic, and with the most disastrous results.

Not one of Mozart's principal operas enjoyed during his lifetime what a modern composer would admit to be a success. *Idomeneo* (1781) was revived privately in Vienna in 1786; between 1800 and 1825 it was given on a few other German stages, or as often as not in concert form—the worst way of confessing that an opera is no use for the theatre. Then in the 1840's come a few German

revivals, going on at rare intervals to about the end of the century; Germany was obviously doing its pious duty to a classic, but *Idomeneo* never at any time became a regular repertory opera like *Don Giovanni*—it has always been what it still is, a magnificent museum piece. *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (1782) had thirty-four performances, after which the German opera house for which it was composed was closed altogether. The same fate fell upon that English opera house which was inaugurated by Sullivan's *Ivanhoe*, commissioned, like Mozart's work, to be the new foundation of a national opera. *Die Entführung* has had many revivals in many countries and many different languages, but even though a single production may be acclaimed as a success, the opera has never attained real popularity anywhere, not even in Germany. It was given in London in Italian in 1866, but it was never given at all in Italy until 1935 and then only in German, at Florence. *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1786), probably the most popular by now of all Mozart's operas in most countries, had no great success at first, except at Prague. After it was translated into German it established itself firmly, but it never seems to have attracted French or Italian audiences to the same extent. French audiences probably preferred undiluted Beaumarchais; Italians, we may be quite sure, preferred Rossini's *Barber*. The English theatre in the days of Bishop and Planché solved the problem as usual by compromise, ingeniously combining the two operas. *Don Giovanni* (1787) has always been regarded as the most famous of all Mozart's operas, mainly because it was the one work of his which the Romantic movement could seize upon, interpret in its own way and claim for its own. One of the most curious things about the subsequent career of *Don Giovanni* in the German countries is that its libretto has baffled some fifteen or sixteen translators; all German critics are agreed that not one of them is really satisfactory. As far as Mozart's own lifetime was concerned, it was obvious that no opera in Italian could be really popular in a wide sense and in that adolescence of the German operatic stage there must have been very few German singers who could cope adequately with the vocal difficulties of Mozart's music. The third of Mozart's Italian comic operas to words by Da Ponte, *Così fan tutte* (1790), has had the oddest misfortunes of all; every theatre that gave the other two has taken it up on trial, but it has never had a real success until the present day, although it obtained some considerable popularity in London in English

adaptations early in the last century. It is always gratifying to think that popular audiences in England enjoyed Mozart at a time when he was a comparatively modern composer; but we must not forget that his operas were mutilated and 'adapted' in a way that would now rouse universal indignation.

Die Zauberflöte (1791), being German to begin with, and, besides that, composed deliberately for a popular audience, naturally held the stage all over Germany as soon as the public's initial hesitation towards it had been overcome by persistent repetition. Here again England showed more appreciation of it than other countries; France started on the fatal policy of 'adaptation', and Italy, after a few early performances, decided firmly that Mozart was not for her in any operatic shape. *La Clemenza di Tito* (1791) was in itself such an anachronism, so belated a survival of the ancient 'dynastic' operas that one could hardly expect it to survive its own first production at all; but evidently there were still theatres in which *opera seria* was not considered altogether dead. It was the first Mozart opera to be produced in London, and appropriately enough, for Mrs. Billington's benefit, for she was a superb singer of the old school. For later generations it could only become even more of a museum piece than *Idomeneo*.

The general history of opera in the eighteenth century has been a good deal misunderstood owing to the fact that our popular textbooks have all derived their information from German sources; it has been the invariable tendency of all German historians to exaggerate the importance of Gluck under the impression that Gluck was a German composer. I do not for a moment wish to suggest that Gluck's achievement as a composer has been overrated; but it is completely erroneous to imagine that he destroyed the old-fashioned *opera seria* at one blow and prepared the way for Wagner and Richard Strauss. In the first place, Gluck was not a German at all; he was born of Czech parentage as a subject of Prince Lobkowitz, although his birth-place after Napoleonic times became part of German territory. He was educated at Prague and Komotau, as far as can be ascertained, and then sent to complete his studies in Italy. His early operas were all Italian and mostly written for Italian theatres. After he settled in Vienna, his duty as court composer was to provide French comic operas and Italian serious operas and what we should now classify in English as *masques* (in Italian) for the entertainment of the imperial family. Later on some of

his operas were performed in French adaptations in Paris, and a few more were composed to French words for the same stage, if composition is the right word for what were largely compilations from earlier and forgotten works. Except for a few Odes of Klopstock, Gluck never set a word of German to music in the whole course of his life. As far as music was concerned, Vienna in Gluck's day was an Italian city; the life of Mozart shows it all too plainly.

The old *opera seria* represented by the musical dramas of Metastasio had been pre-eminently a dynastic and aristocratic entertainment. It may have enjoyed some popularity among the middle classes in Italy, where its language was that of the people, but north of the Alps it was supported entirely by the princes of Central Europe, the Russian court and the English nobility. A few members of these aristocracies may have understood Italian and many more may have pretended to do so; but the main function of the Italian opera (as in our own day too) was to be expensive and exclusive. In Paris a national opera in French had been created by Louis XIV, but after he grew old he ceased to interest himself in it, and operatic activities were transferred from Versailles to Paris and to private houses as well, as it became more and more the amusement of the nobility and the new class of wealthy *bourgeois*. In 1752 came the famous *Guerre des Bouffons*, a musical war that had a much more powerful influence on French opera and on music in general than the more celebrated war of the Gluckists and Piccinnists a generation later. The victory of the *Bouffons* meant not so much the triumph of Italian music over French as that of comic opera over serious opera. Europe in general had grown tired of Metastasio; I name the poet rather than any composer, for the composers were innumerable who set his librettos, and those librettos imposed on the musicians a rigid uniformity of style and plan. In all countries a new public for opera was growing up; opera was no longer reserved exclusively for royal weddings and birthdays. The new public did not want to throw dynastic opera overboard all at once; what may be called dynastic opera survived up to Mozart's *La Clemenza di Tito* and in some places even into the following century. But the number of comic operas produced between 1750 and 1800 is enormously greater than that of the serious operas, and this is true, not only for Italian opera, but for French, German, and English, as well. From the Italian point of view, the novelty of