



EDWARD JOSEPH DENT

*Portrait of Dent in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge
by Edmond X. Kapp*

EDWARD JOSEPH DENT

1876-1957

THE election of Edward Dent to the Professorship of Music at Cambridge in 1926 marked the beginning of a new epoch in the history of Cambridge music. Hitherto the Professor had almost always been a composer; Dent's predecessor, Charles Wood, was a gentle and retiring man much appreciated by his pupils but he only held the post for two years and did not make much impact on the Faculty. Before him there was Stanford who in his younger days had been a powerful and stimulating influence but in his later years he was, so far as Cambridge was concerned, conspicuous largely by his absence. Dent was the first Professor who was predominantly a scholar; he had been a Fellow of King's College from 1902 to 1908, and had written important books on Alessandro Scarlatti and Mozart's Operas. More recently he had become well known on the Continent, not only for his books but for the vital part that he had played in the establishment of the International Society for Contemporary Music. But after the termination of his Fellowship at King's he had held no official position at Cambridge, and in the musical life of London he was a curiously isolated figure.

To some extent this is connected with the contradictory effects of his early background, for he was the son of John Dent of Ribston Hall, Wetherby, where he was born in 1876. This background, like that of Parry, had been well-to-do and squirearchic, and, like Parry to a lesser extent, he reacted against it, especially against all things ecclesiastical; all through his life the words reverence and devotional suggested an attitude of mindless submission. In the family circle music as a profession was suspect; when he was a small boy one of his aunts, horrified by his determination to be a musician, suggested that perhaps he might become 'a musical clergyman, like Dr. Dykes'. But, though he was anxious to be thought a socialist and always voted Labour, there was in him a streak of aristocratic fastidiousness that somehow prevented him from feeling entirely at ease in the professional world of London, and led to an instinctive suspicion of popular fashions.

After leaving Eton, where he had been a scholar, he took the Classical Tripos at Cambridge, but music was already his main interest. Musical activity at King's was rich and varied. The

choir had been raised to a very high standard of performance by Dr. A. H. Mann of whom Dent wrote many years later a charming and sympathetic obituary for *The Monthly Musical Record*, though the two men were very dissimilar in their approach to music. There were other musical activities of a less organized kind. The strangest were the soirées held by Oscar Browning (O. B.), an eccentric historian whose rooms contained peculiar instruments known by the undergraduates as obeophones. But it was Browning who first introduced Dent to the music of the composer with whom he is most widely associated, Mozart. At that time he was keenly interested in composition, and it must have seemed rather damping when Stanford advised him to translate operas; 'Ye write very good English and ye're quite musical': in later years, however, he acknowledged with amusement Stanford's perceptiveness. After taking the degree of Mus.B. he wrote the dissertation on Alessandro Scarlatti for which he was elected to a Fellowship at King's; eventually this was expanded into what is still considered the standard work on that composer. It was during this time that he acquired his love for Italy, which remained with him all his life. He spoke the language fluently, with the double consonants articulated with exquisite precision. The character of Philip Herriton in Forster's *Where Angels fear to Tread* was to some extent modelled on him. Of his contemporaries at King's the one with whom he kept most closely in touch was Lawrence Haward, who became curator of the Art Gallery at Manchester.

During his six years as a Fellow of King's Dent lived in College and lectured and taught for the Faculty of Music. Despite his genuine regard for Stanford, his relations with his colleagues on the Faculty were not always happy, but among the younger men he aroused great enthusiasm and formed many close friendships, notably with Clive Carey and W. Dennis Browne, a very promising composer who was killed in the 1914 war. At this time there was much dramatic activity in Cambridge. In 1907 the Marlowe Dramatic Society was formed, and gave *Faustus* as its first production. This was followed by *Comus* and it was in connection with this that he first met J. B. Trend, a delightful and enthusiastic character who later became Professor of Spanish. He and Dent became close friends and at one time shared a flat in London; the ebullience of the one contrasted piquantly with the fastidiousness of the other. Another important friendship started about this time when Busoni gave a recital in Cambridge. Dent gave a supper party for him, and was fascinated by his sharply

critical mind and his sometimes iconoclastic approach to tradition. The two men remained in touch until Busoni's death, after which Dent wrote a striking biography of him of which more will be said later. Meanwhile his first book, *Alessandro Scarlatti*, was published in 1905. Based on his Fellowship dissertation, it is an admirable blend of elegance and erudition, enthusiasm for the music being tempered by shrewd and penetrating assessment. Scarlatti's music is still insufficiently known, partly because much of it is still unpublished, but no one who has read Dent's book and studied the musical examples can fail to realize not only its importance in the history of music but also the very fine quality of the best of it.

When his Fellowship expired in 1908 Dent moved to a small house in Cambridge where he was well looked after by an efficient and devoted housekeeper. Though he held no official post there he continued to be greatly interested in the musical life of the University, and to make friends with the young musicians who came up at that time, such as Steuart Wilson and Armstrong Gibbs. The production of *The Magic Flute* in 1911 was a very important event in more ways than one. There was still a tendency in England to regard the music of Mozart with kindly condescension as a charming but superficial composer, and the strangeness of the plot of *The Magic Flute* in particular had stood in the way of its being appreciated. But Dent, so far from dismissing it as a crazy fairy tale, described it as 'morality play of the deepest ethical significance, but removed from any orthodox religion. It is perhaps the only work in which Mozart achieved sublimity.' This shows that, for all his passionate agnosticism, he never denied the existence of the sublime, which he could find more easily in the exotic mysticism of *The Magic Flute* than in any kind of orthodox Christianity. The Cambridge performance was produced by Clive Carey, conducted by Cyril Rootham, the stage managers being Dent and A. F. Scholfield, afterwards University Librarian. The part of Tamino was sung by Steuart Wilson. It was for this occasion that Dent wrote his translation, which, though very free, is far more effective on the stage than any earlier version. Before one of the performances Dent appeared on the stage to announce a change in the cast. The voice of a small child was heard asking whether this was the serpent, which resulted in the nickname by which Dent was known among his friends for the rest of his life. It seemed oddly suited to his thin, serpentine form, and to a certain Machiavellian streak in his personality.

For this production Dent also wrote a booklet dealing with the significance of the opera; this was eventually incorporated into the first version of his book *Mozart's Operas* which appeared in 1913. Both the book and the production of *The Magic Flute* played a very important part in the growing appreciation of Mozart in England, which has been maintained steadily ever since. The book shows a wide and deep understanding of the music, not only of Mozart himself but of his contemporaries. It stresses the essential seriousness of Mozart, analyses perceptively the Italian and German elements in his style, and always shows acute awareness of the characterization and of the effectiveness of the works on the stage. Dent's approach to opera was highly individual, and he had no use for that section of the audience which is concerned with vocal virtuosity; with his love for counterpoint, in the widest and least academic sense of the word, he was increasingly fascinated by the ensembles. In the second edition of *Mozart's Operas*, which appeared in 1947, he describes as 'the supreme moment of the opera' the sextet in the third act of *Figaro* which in the first edition is mentioned only in passing. He had a special regard for *Idomeneo*, which, largely through his efforts, was performed in Cambridge in 1939.

Although by this time he was the author of two important books, Dent was comparatively isolated in the musical world of England, though better known in the musicological circles on the Continent. The outbreak of war in 1914 certainly increased that isolation; he could not share the patriotic fervour felt by many of his contemporaries, including Rupert Brooke and, when war had ended, one of his greatest ambitions was to restore friendly international relations through music. The first two festivals, in 1922 and 1923, were held at Salzburg, but to Dent the Austrian tendency to romanticise the past rather than look ahead to the future was unsympathetic. Until 1939 the festivals were held in a different place each year, sometimes opening in one and continuing in another. Inevitably there were difficulties of various kinds; European music had already begun to move away from the classical tonality that had for several centuries been a unifying factor, over-riding international barriers and bridging the gulf between the more serious and the more popular kinds of music. Countries were moving, musically, in different directions, and the clash between the Teutonic and Latin temperaments was always liable to arise. After the performance of a work by Webern, an angry bellow of 'Questa non e musica' from an Italian was answered

by an equally angry bellow of 'Mandolinist' from a German. It needed all Dent's diplomacy and linguistic gifts to resolve the constant bickering and jealousy of the delegates of various nations, all concerned with their country's 'rights'. Dent's reply was always 'none of us has any rights; we only have duties'. But, with all its troubles, the foundation of the International Society for Contemporary Music was a noble enterprise, and Dent's own reminiscences of it, which appeared in the first number of *Music To-day* (1949), are fascinating to read.

At the same time he played an important part in the foundation of the International Society for Musicology, which held its first meeting in 1927. A joint meeting of this and the I.S.C.M. at Liège in 1930 was an exceptionally lively and stimulating occasion. Meanwhile, on the death of Charles Wood, Dent was elected Professor of Music at Cambridge. At that time the Musical Faculty was small; the Music Tripos had not yet been established and there was only the postgraduate Mus.B. degree. Dent extended and modified the existing course in various ways, and taught composition to all the candidates individually. As a teacher he was highly stimulating; his criticism could be severe but was always constructive, encouraging the students to develop along their own lines. He urged them to extend their sympathies in as many directions as possible, and was always suspicious of a passive and uncritical acceptance of the established classics. He certainly had blind spots, one of which was the music of Elgar, but his much-criticised remark that 'for English ears Elgar's music is too emotional', may well have been more double-edged than was imagined at the time, and he was always critical of what he considered an ultra-respectable fear of vulgarity. Elgar's use of the direction 'nobilmente' seemed to him to be pretentious and to him as to some other English musicians of that time, the highly charged atmosphere of *Gerontius* was unsympathetic but he always admired *Falstaff*.

Shortly before his election to the Professorship Dent wrote a short book called *Terpander, or Music and the Future*: this is lively and provocative, designed to stimulate and to puncture prejudices and the unthinking acceptance of tradition. His next book, *Foundations of English Opera*, was originally planned in 1914, to coincide with a projected performance of *The Fairy Queen* at Cambridge. Owing to the outbreak of war, the performance was postponed till 1920, and Dent's book, drastically revised, did not appear till 1928. As a learned musical scholar who had also had much practical contact with stage productions

he was particularly well suited to deal with this subject and the book is of great interest and value. It was followed five years later by *Ferruccio Busoni, a biography*, which throws fascinating light on both the writer and the subject. In many ways they were very unlike, Busoni being far the more extrovert, but there were intriguingly contradictory traits in them both. Dent's leftward political views were constantly held in check by an innate fastidiousness, and Busoni, though he had lectured on Karl Marx to working men in his youth, tended more and more to regard music as something that should be reserved for an intellectual élite. Some of Busoni's pupils felt that Dent had presented a rather over-intellectualized picture of Busoni. But the book is of absorbing interest, and gives a vivid picture of the constant conflict between the German and Italian sides of Busoni's personality.

Since the 1911 production of *The Magic Flute* at Cambridge Dent had been active as a translator; he had no sympathy for those who held the view that an opera should only be performed in its original language. His versions aimed above all at clarity and effectiveness on the stage: the language was sometimes colloquial to a fault, but the characterization was often brilliant. In 1935 he read to the Royal Musical Association a paper on the problems of operatic translation, ending with a gently cynical reference to the conservative instincts of singers and listeners. Remembering his generally cosmopolitan attitude to music in general, one may feel surprised at his insistence that opera must be sung in English by English singers for the English people. But this seemingly chauvinist attitude grew from his desire that opera should be available to as many people as possible. For this reason he found Sadler's Wells far more admirable than Covent Garden and did not approve of Glyndebourne. In 1945 he published a short history of Sadler's Wells, *A Theatre for Everyman*, which contains a vivid portrayal of Lilian Baylis. To the list of his operatic translations should be added a very lively version of Goldoni's *A Servant of Two Masters* which was on several occasions produced successfully at Cambridge.

Meanwhile in the later 1930's the international scene had become increasingly sombre. After the rise of Hitler the German section of the I.S.C.M. withdrew and when Dent went to Halle in 1935 to lecture Handel he was so repelled by the atmosphere that he never again set foot in Germany. The outbreak of the Spanish civil war added to the general anxiety,

and the I.S.C.M. festival at Barcelona was fraught with worries of various kinds. It was largely as a result of this that Dent began to suffer from an ulcer that was to remain for some years. When it was particularly bad during the early months of the second European war, it had the unexpected effect of reviving his interest in composition, of which he had done little since the four very attractive songs that he had composed in 1919. One of these was 'The Oxen', but Dent would not send it to a publisher for fear lest it should be sung with organ accompaniment at the Albert Hall. Now in the hope of relieving the pain of his ulcer he wrote six motets, three of which were settings of Psalms. He was anxious that they should not be sung 'reverently' and one of them, 'I am weary of my groaning', includes a fiercely intense setting of 'Lord, let me know mine end!' But as his health improved the urge to compose left him and did not return.

On reaching the age of retirement he left Cambridge for London, but his musical activities continued in various ways. For many years opera had meant more to him than any other kind of music, and he had shown great interest in the stage performances of Purcell and Handel at Cambridge. By the time that he left Cambridge his hearing had begun to be distorted, and in his last years he was completely deaf. But he could not keep away from opera, especially Sadler's Wells, and he had hoped to write a book on Weber. One of his more unexpected activities was to arrange the first movement of Beethoven's 'Spring' Sonata for small orchestra for the Ballets Jooss. Eventually he died at the age of 81 in 1957, and he would have been sardonically amused had he been aware that his cremation was accompanied by 'The Angel's Farewell' from *The Dream of Gerontius*.

His personality contained many fascinatingly contradictory features. A reaction against the more conventional elements of his upbringing results in a streak of cynicism that never left him, but to those with whom he was in sympathy he was endlessly kind and helpful. His manner of speech was quiet and precise, with an occasional hint of his native Yorkshire. This gave a piquant flavour to his impish and sometimes caustic wit. He was intensely irritated by pomposity and self-importance, qualities from which he was totally free himself, but there was nothing frivolous or indifferent in his agnosticism. In the Master Mind Lecture on Mozart delivered to the British Academy in 1953, the year in which he was elected a Fellow, he confessed

to finding difficulty in distinguishing a vision of the sublime and a pompous platitude, but this does not mean that he denied the existence of the former, and he was once heard to say, after a performance of Purcell's *Dioclesian*, 'this has given me the kind of thing that I suppose some people get when they go to church!' His curiosity was unbounded and he was intensely interested in the modern music of his day, however unattractive he may have found some of it. His scholarship was always connected with practical music-making, and after his retirement his influence could still be felt at Cambridge in the stage performances of various seventeenth- and eighteenth-century works. His contributions to music as scholar, writer, teacher, and organizer were remarkably varied and, though it is now nearly twenty years since he died, there must still be many who remember with great affection his tall, spectacled figure, expressing highly individual and sometimes outrageous opinions in a scholarly and demure manner.

PHILIP RADCLIFFE

It came to light comparatively recently that the British Academy had never published a memoir of Edward J. Dent, a Fellow from 1953 until his death four years later. This deficiency has at last been made good, for in 1976 Mr. Philip Radcliffe of King's College, Cambridge, accepted the Academy's invitation to write an appropriate obituary notice for Professor Dent for its *Proceedings*. Mr. Radcliffe is also the author of a longer memoir of E. J. Dent published by the Triad Press. The British Academy acknowledges with thanks the permission of the Triad Press for the author to draw in one or two places upon that material.