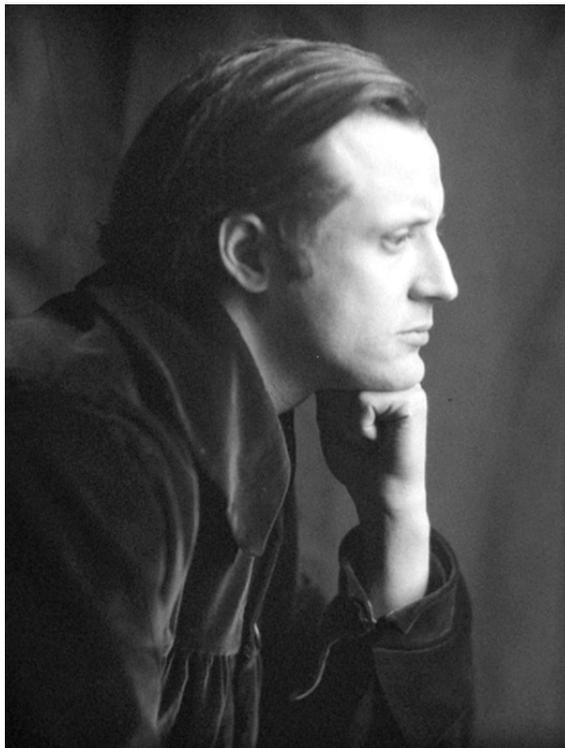


MUSICIENS D'AUTREFOIS

Review of Bernard van Dieren, Down Among the Dead Men. and Other Essays (Oxford, 1935: Oxford University Press), Spectator 155 (1935), 1 November 1935, 732 (letters, 22 November, 874; 29 November, 906)



THIS IS a very unequal book: unequal not only from essay to essay but from page to page, from sentence to sentence. It takes the form of a long and exasperated commentary on the recent state of music, musical criticism and musicology generally, mostly muttering fiercely to itself, but now and then enlivened by terrific broadsides to the address of musicians or critics held to be chiefly responsible for the decay of artistic standards. The criticisms arc

often original and just, many comments – those, for instance, on Berlioz as a melodist or on Meyerbeer as an innovator – are both brilliant and illuminating, and the general outlook is that of a discerning, independent, abnormally sensitive artist of absolute integrity; but the book is in places quite unreadable. Mr van Dieren, reporting on a world whose inhabitants seem to him to be for the most part ignorant, vulgar, stupid or blind, has allowed his indignation entirely to destroy his sense of prose style: the pages of this book are crammed and choked with endless epigrams, conceits and verbal jokes, which flow from his pen with the impartial prodigality of Nature; two or three are successful, the rest are acutely embarrassing. The facts being what they are, it is only fair to warn the reader of what to expect: words like 'Mendelssohnnies', 'Schumannikins', 'Stravinskytens' will set the most insensitive teeth on edge. And yet, in spite of this, the book is interesting and even distinguished.

The weakest essay is that on wit in music, which, when it is not ruined by the author's own variety of it, proclaims defiantly many a well-worn truth. The most useful are the pages in which he defends the memory of the insulted or the forgotten – Piccinni, Meyerbeer, Donizetti, Offenbach, Alkan. Soon someone will rediscover Dittersdorf or Salieri, and doubtless we shall be none the poorer for it. Mr van Dieren dislikes irreverence and regards tradition, particularly that of the Roman Church, as giving background and discipline to composers who might lose themselves in the void; but an artificially adopted framework will kill at least as much as it preserves: how much life is there today in d'Indy's works, in the *Psalmus Hungaricus*, even in the *Symphonie des Psaumes*? The desire to return to Bach or Palestrina is a certain sign of artistic bankruptcy; where so little creative power is wedded to so much self-consciousness the result is bound to be pathetic caricature.

The problem of the conflict of tradition and individuality haunts Mr van Dieren and finds striking expression in what is the longest and by far the most interesting essay in the book, a study of Ferruccio Busoni. He knew Busoni intimately and venerates his memory; but he allows one to see what the devotion of Professor Dent unconsciously covered over; that he was, and remained until the end, a tragic figure, unable either to emancipate himself from

the tradition in which he grew up, or to come to any kind of terms with it.

He came to Berlin, that city with no tradition, in order to escape the despotic Italian education of his youth; he remained there in spite of constant persecution at the hands of a generation held spellbound by Wagner, by Strauss, attracted even by Puccini, but the experiment failed and brought added suffering with it; he was too complex, too divided, too self-torturing to secure calm by having easy recourse to this or that remedy; his personality contained something not merely passionate and turbulent, but an indefinable, violent, demonic element which frustrated his tremendous lifelong effort to achieve a lasting synthesis. He was, as we know, at a certain period of his life utterly preoccupied with Bach; but his favourite scores, Mr van Dieren says, were *The Magic Flute* and *Parsifal*. This is so startling and so revealing that those who understand anything need be told no more.

Having written with fascinating insight about the nature of Busoni's inner conflict with established values, Mr van Dieren finds it necessary to defend him against the charge of tampering with the classics in his interpretations. He declares that Busoni did no more than 'restore' the old masters, removing from their surface the dust and faded patina of the years, which only dons and sentimentalists fear to touch. This is an astonishing line of defence. Those who have heard him play will remember him not as a cautious and scrupulous 'restorer' of Bach or Beethoven, but as a man of magical power who flooded the senses with a vast opulence of colours whose like no words can possibly convey. His genius was so overpowering that everything he did was at the time completely convincing: not because the composer's intention for the first time stood clearly revealed – the liberties which he took . were too violent to allow any such illusion – but because the overwhelming intensity of his personality swept away all other standards of reference, and left his audience no choice but unconditional surrender. Mr van Dieren's theory is diametrically opposed to this: those who are interested must examine it in the light of their own or others' memories. They will find his book in places wildly trying, but with enough discernment, learning and passion for something better than a second *M. Croche*.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Sir, – Under the heading ‘Musiciens d’autrefois’ Mr I. Berlin informs his readers that my book – *Down among the Dead Men* – is ‘in places quite unreadable’, that my uncontrolled passions have entirely destroyed my sense of prose style, and that in fairness readers must be warned that the things I say ‘will set the most insensitive teeth on edge’.

I cannot help thinking that Mr Berlin found it all so unreadable that he must have abandoned the effort half way, otherwise how can I account for some definite statements that are quite simply contrary to fact? His readers are bound to think that I advise composers to go back to Bach, or Palestrina, or anybody, but in several places in my book I have made clear how hopeless any such efforts seem to me: cf. p. 70, where the danger and futility of ‘going back’ is being discussed. The same idea returns clearly enough in the final essay, in fact so often that I could hardly undertake to quote all the relevant passages. I might, however, mention the last paragraph of p. 244, beginning ‘a steadying spiritual orientation raises men of modest talent to a high plane of aspiration’ etc., and the last 35 lines of p. 252, beginning ‘many indeed give it up in despair, “go back” somewhere’ etc. Further, p. 258, where I ask ‘is it more pernicious to repeat recent experiments or imitate the idiomatic mannerisms of established masters?’ This is the second paragraph of the section headed 8. I cannot resist quoting the next paragraph: ‘where I recommended the example of polyphonists who wrote for the Catholic ritual I did not mean that one should copy them. The practical reasons that determined them do not always hold good for us. There is no wisdom in uncritical acceptance of another man’s stylistic principles. But we may with profit remember them.’

Finally, I might refer to the passage concluding section 4, on p. 218, with its reference to ‘slightly cracked enthusiasts who play “with the bow of Tartini”, or the lame idealist, who writes exactly like Palestrina, and yet again, not quite’.

Further it may amaze Mr Berlin’s readers as much as it amazed him to hear that Busoni loved the scores of *The Magic Flute* and of *Parsifal*, but it should be made clear that they were not ‘his favourite scores’ in the sense that he preferred the *Parsifal* music to the music of Bach. Why his veneration of Mozart should be

incompatible with his preoccupation with Bach I simply fail to understand. That I should have said that Busoni needs defence against the charge of 'tampering with the classics' in his interpretations could not be maintained by anyone who reads the relevant passages. And where I spoke of Busoni's courage in disregarding traditions of interpretation that for so many constitute an attractive patina, I certainly could not have suggested that he 'restored' the works by insisting on the original text in the conviction that this meant purity. The praise of Busoni's methods which Mr Berlin presents by way of contrast to my perverse assertions happens to be almost literally that which may be found in my own words.

I say that having discarded the interpretative traditions he reconstructed the works in pristine freshness (p. 87), that he let us see them in a bright range of colours (p. 88), and that traditionalists were aghast at his ruthless exposition, and his uncompromising truth and intensity. Surely this is very different from what my readers would expect from Mr Berlin's criticisms, and particularly from his astonishing inference that I regard Busoni as 'a cautious and scrupulous restorer'

Yours faithfully,

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Sir, – I respect Mr Van Dieren as a genuine composer, and, since reading his book, as a critic of great originality, and should be seriously dismayed if I thought that I had misrepresented him in any way. But I fail to see in what respect I can have done so. To take the points in order:

(1) Mr Van Dieren again and again pays homage to the Church for the salutary and fruitful influence which it exercised on composers, and compares its discipline favourably with the chaos prevailing in our own day. To this I object that if the antithesis is to be real the contrast must be made with works of modern piety, which, I suggested in my review, are jejune to a degree. I went on to say that self-conscious adherence to a tradition was a sign of artistic bankruptcy, and leads to artificiality and caricature. I did not say, nor did I imply, that Mr Van Dieren took it into his head to recommend as a remedy deliberate academicism or archaism, a programme which no sane person ever openly advanced, nor one

which needs the multitude of passages quoted by Mr Van Dieren for its refutation.

(2) Busoni. To take the trivial point first: Mr Van Dieren says that *Parsifal* and *The Magic Flute* were among Busoni's 'beloved scores'. The juxtaposition seemed to me startling and revealing, particularly in the case of one so passionately devoted to Bach, and I said so. The obvious paradox is the combination of Bach and *Parsifal*, not of Mozart and Bach. I cannot but think it perverse of Mr Van Dieren to take it in the latter sense. As for the word 'favourite' used by me, if relief would be afforded Mr Van Dieren by the substitution for it of his term 'beloved', I would gladly offer the exchange, especially if he is right in holding that it is more foolproof and would not mislead people into supposing that Busoni preferred Wagner to Bach.

(3) On the question of Busoni's interpretation I cannot compromise. Mr Van Dieren convicts himself out of his own mouth: he says above that Busoni 'reconstructed the classics in pristine freshness' and on pp. 82 and 88 of his book that 'when the colour of an old canvas is freed from this disguise [traditional interpretation] it does not at once please the eye' and compares the classics in Busoni's interpretation to 'the National Gallery El Greco revealed after a healthy course of cleaning. Busoni's renderings were so many successful restorations.' They were fresh and they were successful; so much I say myself. What I deny most strenuously is that the freshness was 'pristine' or the success one of 'restoration'. Mr Van Dieren's view is quite clearly and unequivocally expressed, and in my review I gave reason for thinking it entirely incorrect. Mr Van Dieren speaks of 'ruthless' renderings. In my review I said that so far from restoring ruthlessly or otherwise, Busoni recklessly transformed and altered whatever he played, but was so overwhelmingly eloquent that one was temporarily robbed of all one's critical faculties. I cannot see a single point of real agreement between Mr Van Dieren and myself; because we both agree that Busoni's colours were bright and his playing intense – qualities which could not fail to strike anyone who was not deaf – it does not begin to follow that my main contention is, as Mr Van Dieren mildly alleges, a paraphrase of words of his own.

(4) As for Mr Van Dieren's general style, it is a reviewer's duty to warn his public, and in my first paragraph I quoted lurid

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instances of what I meant. I should like it to be put on record that that I was not deterred by this from reading the book to the end, and strongly recommend others to follow my example. I do not attempt to deny that there are some difficult moments in store for them, but if they persevere, they will be handsomely rewarded.

I am, Sir, etc.,

I Berlin

All Souls College, Oxford

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