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Books in Review

Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques by the British scholar Winston Dean is, on its face values, a forlornly specialized study, running just over 700 closely packed pages, illustrated with 10 plates of period facsimiles and 136 musical examples, including a dozen appendices, numerous tables, countless footnotes, a four-page general bibliography, and two indexes—and priced (not at all unreasonably) at $20.20. And yet, in all seriousness, I urge nonspecialist music lovers not only to buy a copy—and read it in full—but to send copies to their favorite conductor, chorus leader, singer, or record company executive. If even a few should do so, it might well put an end to some two centuries of the most disgraceful neglect and grosses distortion any great composer has suffered. Some of us have long suspected that the great wealth of Handelian music we know must be only a thin fraction of that never given a hearing, many of us have realized that most Handel performances (including practically all of those on records) depart widely from the original scores; but not until we read Dean's book can we grasp any real measure of what we're missing and what travesties have been perpetrated by otherwise honorable musicians.

It is almost incidental that this detailed study of some eighteen specific works (and their times) is a monument of inspired scholarship or that it signals the emergence of Mr. Dean as one of the musicological giants of our age. The real value of Dean's study lies partly in its reminder that a true scholar can see his facts in the larger perspectives of both artistic and social history (and that he can write with acidulous bite as well as accuracy), but even more vitally in its single-handed triumph over some of the most deeply rooted misconceptions in all music. Here is a heartening reminder that (thanks to the preservation of original scores, librettos, and sketches, and to the revival of knowledge about authentic baroque instrumental and interpretive practices) it is now possible for a more enlightened generation to make belated atonement for the sins of its fathers. The power to move mountains is seldom given to one man, but Dean has provided a practical lever and fulcrum which the rest of us can use to work the miracle (Oxford University Press, $20.20).