

does. It needs small comment for the words burn with a soul's sincerity, lucid, dexterously woven. The style is the man . . ."

So, while my reading of this volume has encouraged me to believe in the possible value of a popular, compact one-

volume commentary on the New Testament, (especially one as cheaply produced and handily-sized as this,) I feel the cause of popularisation could have found a better champion.

COLIN CARR O.P.

IN DEFENCE OF OPERA by Hamish F.

Readers of *New Blackfriars* have had a foretaste of Professor Swanston's theses about opera. Set out at much greater length in this most intelligent and agreeable book they seem much more persuasive. There is a certain residual puritanism—I mean the Mary Whitehouse kind rather than the John Bunyan variety—that was obvious in the articles but is less obtrusive here. Still it exists. For one thing why *in defence* of opera? Father Swanston is not writing for sceptics or philistines in the world of opera. I don't see him attracting the editor of this journal into his circle of readers. No-one will get much out of his book without some enjoyment of and experience of opera performances. The defence is, to my mind, aimed against those who think opera trivial or immoral: anyone who thinks *Così* the one or *Tristan* the other is best written off as invincibly ignorant. What Father Swanston has done is to write a serious book for serious opera-lovers presenting opera as a form of drama of the most serious kind. There are no music examples in the book and it is as far away from such collections of opera plots as Kobbe as it could well be. The book is not about musical techniques nor about libretti but about the finished product. Father Swanston has, I think, produced the best discussion of the relationship of music to text I know. He writes about opera as a form of behaviour. Starting with composer and librettist, then looking at the result historically and assessing the part played by social factors, with some discussion of the role of singers (which he treats—and how right he is—as much less important than most writers on opera do) and a very perceptive essay on the producer and the production. The conductor, like the prima donna, stands in the background. This is a novel perspective but of a piece with Father Swanston's insistence that opera is a kind of activity that takes the form of comments on

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human experience. In the hands of the masters like Mozart and Wagner those comments are of a major order. With lesser masters such as Bizet and Bellini, something of importance is still said. Father Swanston's comments on *Carmen* give a fair sample of the strength of his approach. He points to the fracas its alleged 'immorality' caused on its first appearance and contrasts this with its speedy acceptance as suitable family entertainment. This because the audience all know; "full well that this is happening to someone else. The way in which the story is told by Bizet deliberately prevents it being understood as a story about ourselves." Operas of the very first rank are, of course, stories about ourselves and are liable to give great offence because they are true stories. What is more the truth of the story is essential to the greatness of the opera.

This view leads to problems not all of which Father Swanston has solved. He seems to me to elevate Richard Strauss to a ludicrously high level. He makes very high claims for *Rosenkavalier* but he never mentions what seems to me an insuperable objection to taking it seriously: the opera begins with the *Marschallin* in bed with her lover Oktavian, who is, of course, another high soprano. I think Father Swanston might agree that a production of *Macbeth* with Danny la Rue as Lady Macbeth could scarcely be taken seriously. Likewise *Rosenkavalier* seems to me to belong to the genre of old-fashioned pantomime with the qualification that the principal boy plays second fiddle to the principal girl in this entertainment. He does not care much for Puccini and his case against the operas is well-argued. He points out what is now generally accepted that Puccini had a strong sado-masochistic streak and this is what made him insist on having *Tosca* kept on stage whilst her lover is shot. I do not think Father Swanston has got the psychological dimension of his

criticism right. If one compares *Tosca* with *Butterfly* in the first case, Puccini's sado-masochism is merely a point of entry, in the second, it is the *raison d'être* of the whole enterprise. *Tosca* works, *Butterfly* does not. Much more seriously the same limitation prevents him from doing justice to *Tristan*. He mentions with approval a production of *Tristan* that makes King Mark Tristan's father, not his uncle. In the first place, this does grave violation to the text. In Tristan's great scene in the third act he explicitly relates the haunting theme played off-stage by the cor anglais for most of the Prelude to the occasion *als einst dem Kind des Vater's Tod verkundet* and the later occasion when he learnt that his mother had died in giving birth to him. It is unambiguously clear that he is the child the father's death was announced to. This is not a mere plot detail but part of a scene that lays bare the very considerable psychological subtlety that informs the opera. Although Wagner wrote before the psychoanalytic revolution he certainly anticipated it. *Tristan* is not an *Oedipus Rex*: it is an opera whose psychology is rooted in the emotions of childhood and an oedipal situation may in part be the source of those emotions. But just as while all or most human beings experience such a situation in greater or lesser degree, the later effects of this trauma take many different forms. Isolde is not a mother figure for Tristan but the focus of an overmastering sexual passion. The opera is remarkable because of the insight it offers into such a situation: to assign it to a simple category, a mere manifestation of an oedipus complex, is to do scant justice to what is offered. Likewise it is obtuse of Father Swanston to say that the plot in any way turns on the love potion. The lovers are hopelessly in love before the potion is ever mentioned. Isolde intends to

give Tristan poison. He is perfectly aware of what she would be at and will still take it: she proposes to finish off the same poison. It is Brangane who substitutes the love potion. The effect of the love potion is to make credible the swift dropping of inhibitions and move the drama along—it is enormously long already. In any case as Tristan points out the ingredients of the love potion are again psychological. It is brewed he says 'from father's grief and mother's woe'.

There is, of course, much more that is right with the book. I think Father Swanston is at his best on Mozart. He has dropped the 'explanation' of the plot of *Così* he offered in his article. I think he finds it difficult to accept that the very strong element of the ridiculous in the opera is perfectly compatible with high seriousness. He finds *Don Giovanni* unsatisfactory: it isn't easy to fault Mozart and I am not sure his perceptions are right here. He would include *Idomeneo* in the classic canon and I suspect he is not merely right but prophetic. His whole discussion of Mozart is quite superb.

There are odd slips. I hope he will pardon my pedantry in pointing out that Charlemagne was no more the ancestor of Don Carlos than he was of Father Swanston. Nicolai Gedda is not Italian. Caruso made a great many more records than the early wax cylinders Father Swanston is so dismissive about. He was the first recording artist to sell a million records and he established the gramophone as a serious source of musical experience in the process. In the opinion of people who heard him the later records are a remarkably faithful memorial of his voice. Much more important, anyone who likes going to the opera should buy this book and read it immediately if not sooner.

ERIC JOHN

SOUL FRIEND. A Study of Spirituality, by Kenneth Leech. *Sheldon Press, London, 1977 pp. 250 £3.95.*

I am sure that the editor of *New Blackfriars* would agree with me, but there is some value in writing reviews late. The zealous, punctual reviewer may rub his crystal-ball and prophesy that Dan Stupitt's *Ongoing Scenario of In Depth De-*

mythologization Situations will become a classic, or not, as the case may be. The one-year-late man, on the other hand, has this advantage: he replaces prediction with statement of fact. I can do that in this case. For many people Ken Leech's *Soul*