

PRIZE-WINNING "TALE OF TWO CITIES"

"A MASTERPIECE of dramatic composition. Benjamin is in this line as much a genius as Puccini." The occasion for these enthusiastic words was the first performance (in the BBC Third Programme) of Arthur Benjamin's new opera *A Tale of Two Cities*, and the writer was Eric Blom, music critic for the *London Observer*. *A Tale of Two Cities* is based on the famous novel by Charles Dickens, and is the third opera written by the Australian-born composer. It was one of four prize-winning entries in a scheme promoted by the Arts Council in connection with the Festival of Britain. Transcriptions of this BBC performance, which was given last year, will be broadcast in a link of the YC stations at 7.50 p.m. on Friday, September 3. The BBC Chorus and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra are conducted by the composer.

This is only the second opera to be made from a Dickens novel, according to the producer Dennis Arundell, who contributes an introductory talk to the broadcast. The first was Albert Coates's *Pickwick*, produced in 1936. The libretto of *A Tale of Two Cities* is by Cedric Cliffe, and the composer describes the work as a romantic melodrama. Benjamin and Cliffe were faced with a cunningly woven story, the omission of one thread of which might well unravel the pattern. To avoid this they concentrated on a central character, not Sydney Carton, the ne'er-do-well who makes his great redeeming sacrifice at the end of the book, but Madame Defarge, a silent menace in the novel, but in the opera a vehement virago. Dickens-lovers will notice a different order of events and miss details essential to the novel, but the main lines of the story have been kept and the opera does not depend on a knowledge of the book.

New Opera by Arthur Benjamin

It is Arthur Benjamin's first full-length opera. His two previous operatic works were both one-act comedies—*The Devil Take Her* and *Prima Donna*. Describing the music of *A Tale of Two Cities*, Benjamin says: "I can say it is definitely opera—not music-drama. And to me opera means the Verdi-Puccini tradition." After describing his use of choruses in the big crowd scenes, he adds, "Listeners may be surprised to hear such jolly, peaceful music at the opening of the guillotine scene. But, after all, it was a sort of bank holiday



for that crowd, and we think it makes the ensuing horrors even more terrible."

As for the libretto, Cedric Cliffe has pointed out that although the work deals with the French Revolution, the political aspects of the subject are largely ignored. "Love, hate, revenge—these are the basic ingredients of so many of the best operas, and this story provides plenty of all of them. I think we are following Dickens pretty faithfully in

implying that the aristocrats did a lot of terrible things when they were in power, and that the mob did a lot of terrible things when their turn came, while the good, well-meaning liberals like Charles Darnay found themselves crushed between the upper and nether millstones. That, I think, is all the politics that there is in this opera."

After describing the operatic needs of condensation and simplification he says that he altered only one major episode in the book—the death of Madame Defarge. "We simply had to keep Madame Defarge alive until the last scene. She's such a magnificently dominating character that she can't help taking command of any scene in which she appears, just as Falstaff does. But I hope it will be agreed that the end which we have devised for her is in fact a fate worse than death."

The setting of the opera is Paris and London, and the six scenes are as follows: Scene I, Wine shop, Paris, 1873; Scene II, Garden in Soho, London, 1789; Scene III, Wine shop, Paris, 1789; Scene IV, Revolutionary Tribunal, 1790; Scene V, Prison cell, Paris; Scene VI, Place de la République, Paris. The principal characters are Thérèse Defarge, played by Marjorie Westbury (soprano); Ernest Defarge (Norman Lumsden, bass), Dr. Manette (Heddie Nash, tenor), Lucie Manette (April Cantelo, lyric soprano), Sydney Carton (Frederick Sharp, baritone), the Marquis de St.

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