

as Mitchell would argue, to read them like Freudian set-pieces is to deny them the transcendence of great art: the ability to end up more than they began.

That said, Seymour is right to stress the collective coherence of the Britten operas: the way that, despite an incidental diversity of subject matter, they mostly fall into a purposeful trajectory that ends with *Death in Venice*, a 'confession' if there ever was one. But oddly, she fails to make much of what seems to me to be the most important unifying feature: that every one of the seven full-length serious (as opposed to comic) scores climaxes in a death that is in some way sacrificial.

It's a fact that Seymour touches on but doesn't adequately explore – beyond the suggestion that it connects with a comment made to the young Britten by W H Auden who, at that time if not later, made himself a guiding influence on the composer. Auden wrote to Britten: 'If you are really to develop to your full stature, you will have to suffer and make others suffer.' Whether or not Britten could be said to have put this advice into practice in his life, he certainly lived by it in his creative imagination. And there's an undeniable leitmotif in the operas of central characters who have to pay the ultimate price for self-knowledge – be it their own or someone else's.

One other small thing she fails to mention is the claim made by Valentine Cunningham in a recent Aldeburgh Festival lecture to the effect that the Latin learning games in *Turn of the Screw* involve covert lists of homo-erotic slang. Perhaps, like many of us in that Aldeburgh audience, she finds this on the whole unlikely. But it's surely worth mentioning? If it were true, it would assist her argument.

MICHAEL WHITE

The Opera Lover's Companion

by Charles Osborne

Yale University Press

ISBN: 0 300 10440 5

The core operatic repertoire today is dominated by the major works of five great composers – Mozart, Verdi, Puccini, Wagner and Strauss – together with operas by composers such as Handel, Donizetti, Rossini, Bizet, Bellini, Tchaikovsky and Britten, and selected works by an even larger number of others including Humperdinck, Leoncavallo, Mascagni and Weber. From all of these Osborne has selected 175 of the most frequently performed about which to write.

At first glance it may seem that he has simply produced a rival for *Kobbé* or the *Viking Guide*, but one major difference is that his book is not an all-inclusive survey. He features 67 composers while *Kobbé* covers 162, and *Viking* has 96 composer entries under the letter B alone. Turn then arbitrarily to Rimsky-Korsakov. Rimsky wrote 14 operas and yet only *Le coq d'or*, his last, receives an entry (and how often is that



The Inner Voice – The Making of a Singer

By Renée Fleming

Published by Viking

ISBN: 0 670 03351 0

This book could have very well been another wishy-washy autobiography – but is instead cleverly focused. Where the declaration of intent in the book's subtitle could still just been an excuse for anecdotal trumpet-blowing, there is nothing but focused and revelatory analysis of what goes into being a singer. So much so that the chapters are divided into the different stages or areas of a career: Family, Education, Apprenticeship, Mentors, Success, Challenge, Business, Longevity, Image, Performance, Roles, Backstage – and all are thoroughly explored. The fact that Fleming is at the height of her career while writing about this, rather than at the end and looking back, also gives every aspect and piece of advice a vibrant immediacy.

given in the major opera houses?). The format for each entry follows a similar pattern throughout the book. A cast list detailing the voice parts is followed by a note on the setting and date of first performance. There is then an essay on how the opera came to be written and fits in with the composer's other work, together with snippets about the first production, anything in fact that Osborne thinks will interest, entertain and inform the reader. This is followed by a plot synopsis, some observations on the musical quality of the piece, written in Osborne's typically trenchant style, and a recommended recording.

Although the operas chosen include all those regularly encountered in the opera house, Osborne excuses some perhaps surprising additional choices by pointing out that they are occasionally performed and are generally available as recordings. Bernd Alois Zimmermann, for example, makes it with *Die Soldaten*, hardly a staple of the repertoire anywhere (I could have done with more than a four-line summary of why musi-

Fleming's writing style is free-flowing, intelligent and well-crafted. There is no tweeness, nor breathless gratitude to those that helped and taught her, only recognition of the particular skills they had to impart and her own duty to absorb them.

In reading about her upbringing one begins to credit her with a hugely unfair advantage over most singers, with both parents teaching music and singing, not to mention her being a prom queen and a grade A student! But then we discover that in many ways this became a disadvantage to her, as she found herself 'going with the flow' rather than being driven, only finding her inspiration and drive quite late on. The point being that that all singers need to find their own dedication and commitment within themselves. She imparts the need to recognise what there is to gain in every situation, thus remaining consistently true to the aim of the book. There is quiet acknowledgement of her own talent, but no arrogance, for she ties the possession of talent always to the vital need for awareness of moments of insight, learning and inspiration – so as to open up that talent into its full potential.

Equally, she is not afraid to expose her moments of fear, weakness and even stupidity. This is perhaps most useful as it will prove to readers that they are not alone in suffering artistic, or just plain youthful, anguish.

At various points she interweaves her text with succinct, to the point descriptions of vocal technique that, while directed at singers, are clear enough to enlighten non-singing opera fans as well. In fact this book has a very wide scope for its readership. Actors, producers – anyone interested in the music world – would all benefit from this singer's intelligent insight.

ANTONIA COULING

cally he felt it worth including). There is also a nod towards the American market with the inclusion of Douglas S Moore's *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, for which he makes a convincing case for a new staging, Samuel Barber's *Vanessa* and four operas by Menotti. He does not include musical theatre.

Osborne certainly knows his stuff. Nowhere do you get the feeling he hasn't seen the opera he's discussing or is simply recycling second-hand opinions. He is so obviously passionate about opera and it rubs off. Unlike *Kobbé* or *Viking*, which are the standard reference books, he is aiming, not at specialists, but at those who enjoy the experience of opera, or are thinking of trying it, and want to know more.

This book is exactly what the title claims: an opera lover's companion. Reading it is like going to the opera with a knowledgeable friend who tells you enough to make you want to see the piece but not so much you're drowned in superfluous detail.

RICHARD FAWKES