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GEORGE ELIOT AND MUSIC

By Beryl Gray (Macmillan, 1989)

(to be published by Macmillan later in the year)

This is a fascinating investigation of the influence of music on George Eliot, and how that influence permeates both her life and her writing. The focus is on three novels - The Mill on the Floss, Middlemarch and Daniel Deronda - but before that there is a brief musical biography. Dr Gray asserts that hitherto the pervading presence of music in her work has been critically undervalued, that, in fact, music 'arches over' that work and 'greatly illuminates her artistry.' She praises the influence of the Brays in widening and deepening the young Marian Evans's capacity for appreciation, so that 'her sententiousness yielded to musical exuberance.' Then she traces the expansive Geneva experience, and the quick acquisition of a piano when Marian lodged with Chapman. She went to Covent Garden regularly with Herbert Spencer. Music had become and continued to be 'an integral part of her domestic life, and fundamental to her social relationships.'

More than half the book is devoted to an investigation of The Mill on the Floss: the yield for me was an imaginative and scholarly extension of the text. As Dr Gray says, 'it is with Maggie Tulliver that George Eliot first fully shares her own capacity for musical absorption.' The effect of sound in The Mill on the Floss is tellingly indicated: in a sense, for Beryl Gray sub-text is sound-text. She notes George Eliot's exactitude of musical choice, the care with which she worked out exchanges and emphases, going to the manuscript of The Mill to substantiate her conclusions. 'Stephen's vocal imperfections' are given a considered stress, Philip's choice of song emphasises his 'connectedness' with Maggie's childhood, the poignancy lying in the fact that it celebrates 'perfect sexual love'. With Stephen and Maggie there is the aggregation of 'The power of will, the power of soul . . . and the power of the gaze' which causes her to succumb. In Middlemarch, says Dr Gray, 'Once again, music and musical allusion codify and stratify the fictive world, and reveal the capacity for sympathy of each principal character.' She notes that Dorothea's acceptance of Casaubon is, in a sense, 'an aural mistake': it is linked to the 'book-smothered harpsichord' which she sees at Lowick. And with penetratingly accurate appraisal she picks out one of the weaknesses which weaken the reality of Ladislaw - despite all his singing, we never hear him, 'the register of his voice is never given.' There is some fine analysis of the role - the changing role of music - in the Lydgate-Rosamond relationship, and a quite beautiful focus on 'The self-revealing power of Dorothea's voice.' Daniel Deronda marks the full maturity of the musical influence and its expression. Here some strongly individual - convincingly individual - interpretations are backed by a scholarly investigation of George Eliot's derivations from the Belgian music historian Fetis and from Hullah's History of Modern Music. This is a first-rate and much needed book, and the only minor criticism I have about it is to say that in the long, perhaps over-long chapter on The Mill, there was some straying from the musical to the peripherally aural. And even here the interest level and the critical quality were high.