

**Review of 'Charles Dickens, la musique et la vie
artistique à Londres à l'époque victorienne' by James
Lyon**

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Review of Charles Dickens, la musique et la vie artistique à Londres à l'époque victorienne

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James Lyon, *Charles Dickens, la musique et la vie artistique à Londres à l'époque victorienne*, Beauchesne, Collection L'Education Musicales, 2014, 266 pages, 29 euros.

This book was written by an author with a passion for both music (in particular sacred music but other forms too) and for Dickens. James Lyon is an expert on hymns who has written a series of works on composers such as Sibelius, Vaughan Williams and Janacek.

It constitutes a sort of encyclopedia of facts and anecdotes about artistic and musical life in London during the lifetime of Charles Dickens, recounted in parallel with his literary production and personal life. The links between these two themes – the times when Dickens mentions musicians or music in his works - are highlighted. The book is arranged as a chronology from his birth to his death, often presented month by month. The chapter titles are (my translations) "The beginnings 1812-1830" "Mastering his imagination 1831-1840" "On his American adventure 1841-1842" "From A Christmas Carol to Dombey 1843-1847", "His internal world and the external world 1847-1855" "Crises and rupture 1855-1860" and "The last ten years 1860-1870". This chronology is supplemented by a comprehensive dictionary of biographies of the people mentioned in the book, be they composers, conductors, artists or other. The book contains around 250 pages: 120 pages recounting Dickens' life and times, a 12 page index of musical works cited, and 80 pages of biographies.

One gets an impression of a Dickens enveloped in a rich artistic and musical capital city, giving lectures and public readings, joining exclusive clubs, and meticulously researching differing institutions in preparation for writing his novels. The book provides much in French for the aficionado of Dickens who might not have access to works in English, and concentrates on this one particular aspect in great detail. The complexity of the musical and artistic life of London is displayed.

Mr. Lyon's publication is not, as such, a work of historical scholarship. It does not defend a particular interpretation of the links between Dickens and artistic and musical life in London. The absence of a conclusion of any sort confirms that this is not the aim of the book. Its main objective is to open up an area which has been little studied, and to contradict the prejudice that claims that musical life in London was of little importance in the nineteenth century.

Overflowing with details, it can be difficult to read. A short but not untypical extract will show this to be the case:

En mai 1828, les non-conformistes ont enfin droit à leur émancipation civique grâce à l'abolition du *Bill Test and Corporation Acts* [sic] promu par Lord John Russell (1792-1878), *whig* alors passé par le gouvernement du duc Arthur Wellesley de Wellington (1769-1852). Le compositeur Auber, qui sera tant cité par Dickens, fait représenter à Paris son opéra en cinq actes *La Muette de Portici* ou

Masaniello. J.P. Collier et G. Cruikshank sont sollicités pour éditer les paroles et les illustrations consacrées au fameux et drolatique spectacle de *Punch and Judy*. Entre 1828 et 1842, l'éducateur Th. Arnold, père de Matthew, dirigera la Rugby school dont il fera un véritable modèle pédagogique [...]. En novembre 1828, Charles quitte Ellis & Blackmore pour l'étude de Charles Molloy, où il ne restera que peu de temps.

At this point, the reader who is unsure of the historical rôle of Auber, Collier, Cruickshank or the two Arnolds, will find all of them in the biographical index at the end of the book, in a surprising amount of detail. For Cruickshank (known for his drawings and caricatures), for example, one can find in the index the date he was baptized, and the exact address at which he died (263 Hampstead Road). For Matthew Arnold, one will discover the different posts he held (secretary to Lord Lansdowne...) and a description of the development of his ideas on literature, on translation and on literature.

One often comes across interesting paragraphs and new facts, but they are at times rather overcome by the mass of details gathered in an antiquarian spirit more than an intellectual one. The interest of the author in sacred music leads him to recount this history, even when it has little connection with Dickens, in passionate colours and at length (for example p.93). In other sections, space is given to controversial personal opinions of M. Lyon, such as the denunciation of the French revolution quoted from Carlyle, out of the blue, on page 53.

In general, then, a work which will be more useful as a source than as reading material for itself.