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On Composing 'The Lodger

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That the story of Jack the Ripper continues to be a perennial source of inspiration to criminologists, novelists and playwrights is largely due to the fact that the identity of this curious character (who, after committing a series of spectacular murders in the London of the 1880s, suddenly disappeared) still remains a complete mystery. The speculations about him are manifold; he is reputed to have been, among other professions, a doctor, a butcher, a Russian spy. and the heir of an aristocratic English family. As far as I know, I am the only composer to have given him full operatic treatment, though he made a subsidiary appearance in Berg's Lulu. Mrs Belloc Lowndes's novel, *The Lodger*, on which the opera is based, shows him as a psychopath — at one moment kind and gentle, 'with lovely manners', and the next, a sexual and religious maniac chanting in a frenzy from Revelation 17 before stealing into the night to seek out and dismember yet one more prostitute.

While the Lodger himself is the title-role, the main character in the opera is his Landlady, Mrs Emma Bunting, who very soon realizes that the quiet considerate gentleman is none other than the notorious Jack the Ripper. The gradual dawning of this knowledge, plus the conflict in her mind -should she surrender a mentally sick man to justice? — form the core of the opera. Though *The Lodger* is principally concerned with death in one of its more lurid forms, there are lighter interludes including the Cockney chorus roaring out a musical song during their bestial pub-crawl and a romance between the rather simple-minded detective and the Bunting's equally ingenuous daughter, Daisy.

It is obvious that the story of *The Lodger* is a grim but straightforward one and I have attempted to meet it on equal terms with music which is clear and direct. I have also tried to bridge the all too wide gap between the opposed worlds of more advanced contemporary music and that of popular entertainment. As to the opera's musical construction, I have aimed to keep it as taut as possible with no loose ends to weaken the continuity. For the most part the word-setting is modelled on natural speech, in contrast to the occasional set numbers, solo and ensemble, which may seem rather unusual in a modern opera. I once overheard Vaughan Williams congratulating a British composer at the first night of his (extremely gifted) new opera. 'I enjoyed it very much,' Vaughan Williams said. 'Of course,' he added rather wistfully, 'I could have done with a few more arias.'

If, in the course of my opera, I have written a few tunes which an audience might even remember afterwards, I am not really ashamed.

Thematically, the opera is made up of a few main motives which unfold and are transformed into various guises until the final Epilogue where there is a crystallization of the elements of the whole opera.

Since *The Lodger* was first performed, by students of the Royal Academy of Music in 1960, there have been substantial alterations especially to the second of its two acts: there are additional choruses and a new section intended to heighten the dramatic intensity in the scene between Emma and the Lodger before his final disappearance.

The opera took about three years to complete. The libretto is by David Franklin and at all stages I was enormously helped not merely by his skill as a writer, but by his long stage experience as a soloist at Covent Garden and Glyndebourne.