

THE ORATORIOS OF HANDEL. By Percy M. Young. (Dennis Dobson; 18s.)

Dr Percy Young's account of Handel's oratorios is based on his deeply-held conviction that they 'represent one of the chief glories of musical achievement', and on his practical experience in conducting performances of these masterpieces (all save one grossly neglected by our choral societies) in Wolverhampton and Staffordshire. The book is a many-sided one—a work of literary and social history as well as of musical criticism. The opening chapters rightly stress the Italian origin of Handel's musical idiom. Then the author plunges us into the England of the Hanoverians and the 'Forty-five', of Hogarth, Pope and Gay, of the two Walpoles—the politician and the letter-writer—and of the rising middle class which patronised public concerts and founded those great charities, such as the Foundling Hospital, to which 'Messiah' brought such financial benefit. He urges the importance of 'viewing a work of art in its natural setting', as a product of the social and spiritual climate of its age, and, in that context, of 'seeing Handel as he really is', with all the human and dramatic insight, poetry and humour that his oratorios disclose, and with 'that breadth of outlook which, in an art-form adapted for the narrow limits of an English musico-dramatic by-product, links the composer with the great parts of medieval Christendom'.

There are one or two minor misprints which will doubtless be corrected in future editions; the most serious of this is the dating of the fine (and obviously fairly youthful) portrait by Kneller which forms the frontispiece as 'after 1750'. Kneller died in 1723.

R.H.

FREE AMONG THE DEAD. By Alfred Marnau. (The Harvill Press: 9s. 6d.)

It is possible that many people who would be deeply moved by this haunting novel will miss it. The title is sufficiently forbidding; the name of its author, a distinguished German-born poet, may not be familiar to the questing reader. The introduction on the dust-cover indicates that this is the story of a group of people somewhere on the borders of Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Austria awaiting 'the approach of inevitable destruction'. Hardly an escapist novel; and yet in another sense it is. The reader is held from the first page by a sense of urgency, caught up in an anxiety about the fate of these obvious victims of tyranny. There are moments of fun, moments of bewilderment, but always the undercurrent of tension. And all the time there is interwoven in the poetic narrative the comforting strands of a deep spirituality.

K.M.