

# DENNIS BRAIN (1921-1957)

by Benjamin Britten, C.H.

Since the war, the horn playing of Dennis Brain has been one of the most familiar, certainly one of the happiest, features of British musical life. No season went by without his superlative performances as soloist in horn concertos. He was frequently to be seen at the first desk of one or other of the London orchestras, and no one will ever forget his inimitable tone and phrasing in the solo passages, from the small fragments in the works of the earlier masters (often devastatingly high—but so securely played), to the full dress melodies of more recent times (including Siegfried's horn call). Then there were his many appearances in chamber music either with a piano (Schumann's *Adagio and Allegro*, op. 70) or a string group (Mozart's Quintet, K. 407). His own excellent ensemble, too, has delighted us with musicianly and beautifully rehearsed performances of music from Mozart to the present day, some of which was inspired by and written for Dennis.

The tragic car accident of 1st September leaves a musical gap which can never be filled. It has robbed us of an artist with the unique combination of a superb technical command of his instrument, great musicianship, a lively and intelligent interest in music of all sorts, and a fine performing temperament, coupled with a charming personality. It has also robbed us of a man of rare generosity, simplicity and charm.

I first met Dennis in the early summer of 1942. I was writing incidental music for a series of radio commentaries on war-time England which were being broadcast weekly to America at the ungodly hour of 3 a.m. The orchestra was that of the R.A.F., in which he was the first horn. I well remember being approached by him at one of the rehearsals, over, I think, some technical point in a solo passage. (Needless to say, having heard his playing in the first programme of the series I took every opportunity to write elaborate horn solos into each subsequent score!) We soon became friends, and it took him no time at all to persuade me to write a special work for him. This turned out to be the *Serenade* for tenor, horn and strings, the première of which he and Peter Pears gave in 1943. His help was invaluable in writing the work; but he was always most cautious in advising any alterations. Passages which seemed impossible even for his prodigious gifts were practised over and over again before any modifications were suggested, such was his respect for a composer's ideas. He of course performed the work on many occasions, and for a period it seemed that no one else would ever be able to play it adequately. But, as usually happens when there is a work to play and a master who can play it, others slowly develop the means of playing it too, through his example. I must be grateful to Dennis for having challenged all other horn players in his playing of this piece. Some of my happiest musical experiences were conducting this work for him and Peter Pears—a succession of wonderful performances progressing from the youthful exuberance and brilliance of the early days to the maturity and deep understanding of the last few years.

Later, in 1954, I wrote another piece for Dennis, again with tenor, but this time with piano accompaniment, in memory of Noel Mewton-Wood. Noel

was a close friend of all of us, and had given many recitals with Dennis. His death was equally tragic and unexpected. (One is left aghast when one thinks of the loss sustained by English music in these two deaths and that of Kathleen Ferrier, all young artists at the beginning of dazzling careers, in the space of only four years). This time the work was a subdued *Canticle* (my third), the setting of a tragic poem of Edith Sitwell, and from the start Dennis understood the remote, elegaic mood. I shall never forget his playing of the dark opening, the slithering chromatic scales, or the thunderous low notes.

He came many times to play for us at the Aldeburgh Festival, but last June he came primarily to conduct. Here again he showed many of the same fine characteristics—musicianship, intelligence, enterprise and hard work—and one felt that his conducting would soon possess the same ease and persuasion of his horn playing. However, what one remembers most clearly of that evening was not his conducting, but his playing in this same concert of the unfinished movement of Mozart's fragmentary horn Concerto in E. The *tutti* started with its glorious richness. Delicate phrases followed with warm and intense counterpoint; brilliant passages for the violins, soothing oboe melodies. Then the solo entered—firm, heroic, and all seemed set for the best of all the wonderful Mozart horn concertos. And then suddenly in the middle of an intricate florid passage, superbly played, it stopped: silence. Dennis shrugged his shoulders and walked off the Jubilee Hall platform. That night, as always, he drove back home to London after the performance. Aldeburgh is not so far from London as Edinburgh, but far enough after a heavy day of rehearsals and performances, both conducting and playing. One protested, one always did, but off he went, laughing. That was the last time I ever heard him play, the last time I saw him. That Mozart fragment sticks in my mind as a symbol of Dennis's own life. But it is not so easy for us to shrug our shoulders.

## THE MAGIC FLUTE:

Auden v. Dent

by Joan Cross, C.B.E.

It was surprising to discover that Professor E. J. Dent's English version of *The Magic Flute*<sup>1</sup> has been in use in this country for thirty-five years or more. His version, made originally for Lilian Baylis's opera at the Old Vic in its semi-amateur days, is familiar to all regular opera-goers here, for it has been in constant use since the opening of Sadler's Wells in 1930, and at the Royal Opera House since the establishment of National Opera there. Now, W. H. Auden, the librettist of *The Rake's Progress* and one of the foremost modern poets, has wandered into the thankless field of opera translation and the English version which comes from his hand and that of his collaborator, Chester Kallman,<sup>2</sup> has already been used in a television performance of *The Magic Flute* in America on the occasion of the bi-centenary anniversary of Mozart's birth. It was much praised.

Familiarity with the Dent version over a long period exposes only few and