

Recreating *The Comic Spirit* - W Denis Browne's 'unfinished' ballet Robert Weedon

In J.L Carr's novel *A Month in the Country*, his protagonist Tom Birkin, a WW1 veteran uncovering a hidden medieval wall painting, reflects on his responsibility:

Really, I'm just a servant of the painter. And I hope I'm good enough to serve him, for he deserves the very best of servants.¹

The performance of William Denis Browne's ballet *The Comic Spirit* at the 2015 Waterloo Festival was the culmination of several years' work for everyone involved in the pursuit of giving his ballet the premiere it never had when it was written 100 years earlier.

Appropriately, every performer on stage was the same age or younger than Denis Browne was when he died in the Gallipoli Campaign in June 1915. The choreography was by Alexandra Davis, a very talented young dancer from the Central School of Ballet in her first solo choreography project. All of the musicians in the Southbank Sinfonia are excellent young musicians just on the cusp of professional careers in top orchestras.

As for me, my reconstruction of the final act of the ballet was the first time an orchestra had played something I'd arranged. I completed *The Comic Spirit* when I was the same age as Browne (26) in 2014. It was with a tinge of guilt that I followed the score through for the first time at the rehearsal this week and considered that I was, to a certain extent, sitting in his seat.

W. Denis Browne

Shortly after the outbreak of what became World War I, Denis Browne signed up with the Royal Naval Division and by early 1915 had set sail on the ship *Grantully Castle* bound for the Mediterranean with his best friend from Rugby School and Cambridge University, the poet Rupert Brooke, and the Australian composer & rower Frederick Kelly in an adventure that, at least from initial surviving correspondence almost has the feeling of a jolly boys' outing. By 1916 they were all dead.



William Denis Browne, final photograph before embarkation (courtesy of Nick Peacey)

¹ This is actually a quote from the wonderful 1987 film adaptation by Simon Gray.

As a lover of British classical music, Denis Browne was a name I had encountered before as the composer of the beautiful song *To Gratiana Dancing and Singing*, which Herbert Howells once said was 'one of the dozen or so tunes that had been present in his mind all his life'.²

According to the oft-quoted citation from his tutor and friend Edward Dent, Denis Browne was the 'cleverest' of the Cambridge musicians of his era. That quote made me sit up and take note, as that generation of Cambridge musicians includes one of my favourite composers, Arthur Bliss, who in my opinion created the finest British ballet score of the 20th century, *Adam Zero* (1946).

Further investigation of Browne's legacy leads to recordings of the few exquisite songs that remain in the repertoire; from the cheeky *Diaphania* to the spooky impressionism of his last song *Arabia*, but until recently not much else was available. Almost everything had languished unperformed in an archive. Luckily, with the centenary of World War I fast approaching, interest in the War Composers began to increase.

Clare College Archive

I was already writing my website about WWI composers when, as part of my previous job in Cambridgeshire Libraries & Archives, I was given the chance to look into something that might be suitable for a centenary commemoration event in the county. Denis Browne seemed a natural choice as a composer from Cambridge, and even more fortuitously his surviving manuscripts all reside in the archive of Clare College, just down the road from Shire Hall. There aren't a huge number - they all fit in one archive box - but even so there were more than I expected.

The story goes that on learning of Denis Browne's death at Gallipoli in June 1915, Edward Dent, perturbed by the outpouring of public sentimentality following Rupert Brooke's demise from an infected mosquito bite early in the voyage, gathered up Denis Browne's manuscripts from his Chelsea flat, sifted through them and burnt many at the composer's instruction to destroy anything that did not represent 'Denis Browne at his best'.³

With this in mind, I initially considered Dent as a literalist who destroyed the legacy of a young composer, but as the composer's great nephew Nick Peacey told me, in a rather distressing letter in King's College archive written by the composer either just before or even after he sustained his final injury makes the following request of Dent:

If anyone's to sift my MS music, will you? It's all rubbish except Gratiana, (perhaps) Salathiel Pavey, & the Comic Spirit. It lies at 6 Shawfield St Chelsea. Mrs Ridler will tell you where it is. It's a pity there's no more. There would have been if there had been time...Everything else except what I've mentioned must be destroyed.⁴

So, in fact Dent was actually ignoring Browne's bleak instructions by preserving far more material than he was told to, even if some works which may have been interesting to see were lost (after all, probably not many of us would want future scholars to rootle through our GCSE composition submissions in our bottom drawer and then criticise them). I do regret that Dent/Browne collaboration *The Enchanted Night* and his settings of Brooke are lost, though.

² Phillip A. Cooke, David Maw, *The Music of Herbert Howells*, Martlesham: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2013, 105

³ Hugh Carey, *Duet for Two Voices: the letters of Clive Carey and Edward Dent*, Cambridge University Press, 1979, 84.

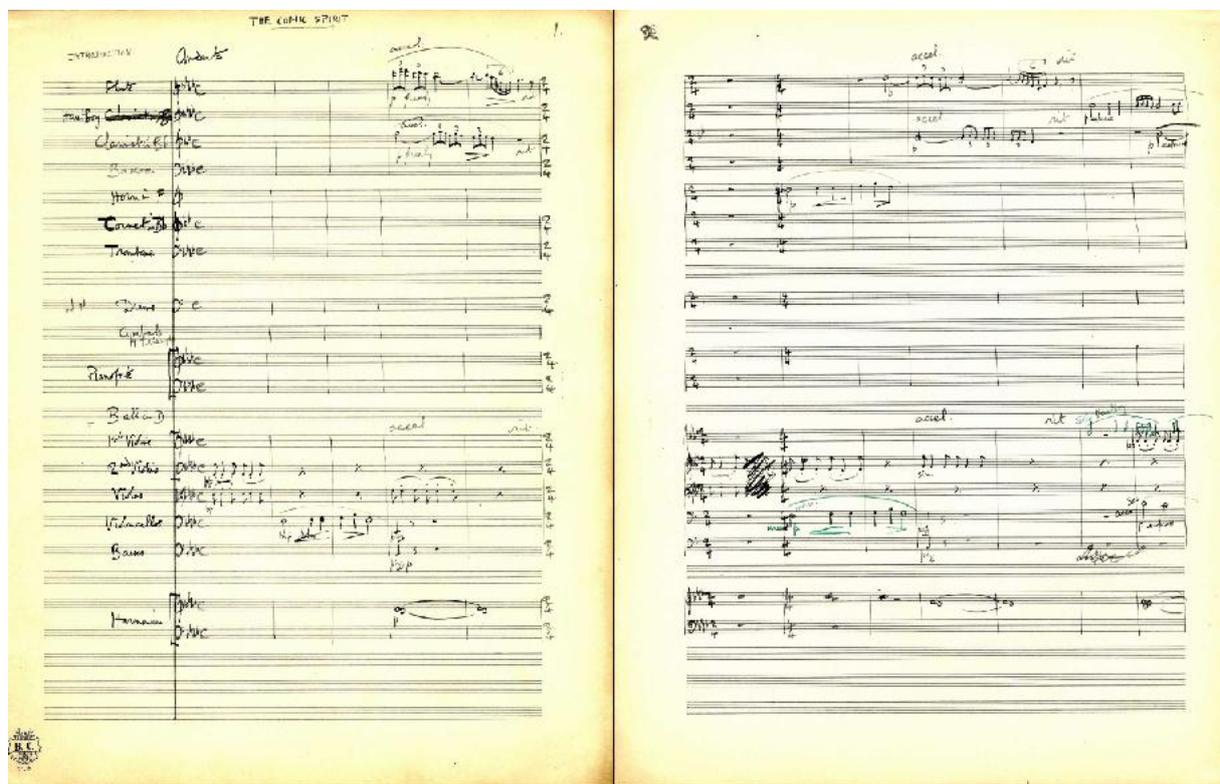
⁴ King's College Archive Centre PP/EJD 4/61.

There are, however, the *Two Dances for Small Orchestra* and works derived from it, some choral music including a 'Mag & Nunc' (which has also been revived) and a few more songs. Plus *The Comic Spirit*.

On my first visit to the archive I was intrigued by the ballet in its various incarnations, which was more complete than I had imagined, but at this stage knew it was too big to look into properly. The helpful archivist, Robert Athol, allowed me to have a scan of the *Two Dances for Small Orchestra* with its catchy first movement.

Because Browne's works are still under the copyright of his estate, Robert put me into contact with the composer's family, represented by Nick Peacey. He was in the early stages of planning what became the Gallipoli Music Memorial project and I was able to send him a (horrible) Midi file of a transcription I had made of the *Dances*. He was surprised when I told him there was an even longer orchestral work which had never been performed.

The surviving score



The Comic Spirit - opening pages of manuscript (Clare College Archive, CCPP BRO/1/14)

As one of the few works Denis Browne listed as worthy of preservation, the *Comic Spirit* is most tantalising. The plot is pretty thin - in fact it occurred to me that if you cut away Violet Pearn's florid synopsis about George Meredith, it can facetiously be summed up as "Girlfriend and boyfriend have commitment issues, fall out in a nightclub and are reconciled after another more flashy bloke turns out to be a rotter". It's a familiar story.

The music however, is most unlike a British composition from 1914. It features unexpected textures and harmonies and some odd orchestration choices - a harmonium for example. There are also interesting time signature changes just like the sort of thing Stravinsky and Holst were

using in their latest works. Even as a piece of 'light music', it is the work of a composer who had heard *Petrushka* and other ground-breaking scores of the period; Denis Browne had written an article for *The Times* about *The Rite of Spring*, which he had heard twice by 1914 and rated highly.⁵ Unlike some of his contemporaries at the RCM, Browne was clearly uninhibited by conservative Victorian composition tuition.

Three versions of the ballet exist; a piano duet, an arrangement of the work for two pianos and an incomplete orchestration which the composer was evidently working on just as World War I broke out. The ballet is referred to as 'unfinished' in several reference works, which is misleading; as noted by Dr Philip Lancaster in his detailed 2004 article 'Waking up England' in the journal *British Music*, the end of the ballet is simply lost.⁶

While the orchestration was probably never completed, the second manuscript books of both piano versions have been mislaid, thus making the work appear as if it was never finished. It was performed in the composer's life, however, in its two piano version at the Theatre Royal in Bristol in May 1914 for several nights in what was presumably a try-out for an intended orchestral performance later. There is a story that Edward Dent had a full score to try and persuade Diaghilev's ballet company to perform it, but if it did exist, it's lost. The surviving material amounts to more than 15 minutes of continuous music in full score.

Having told Nick Peacey about the *Comic Spirit*, he suggested I should meet with Dr Kate Kennedy of Cambridge University. She was researching Denis Browne for Radio 3's *Music in the Great War* series. In one of those rather Powell-esque coincidences that seem to pepper this story, I already knew Kate from a conference on WW1 music she had organised in 2009.

Kate had been tasked by the BBC to put together a variety of programmes about WW1 composers and the music of the period, and Denis Browne was high on her list as the majority of his works had never been recorded before. It was Kate who proposed something on a scale I hadn't imagined before - a full recreation of the ballet for orchestra...with dancers.

Completing *The Comic Spirit*

Having obtained permission from Nick to complete the ballet, I started to realise what I'd let myself in for. Before even starting the completion, the whole score had to be transcribed from manuscript onto the computer. Because I was doing this in evenings and weekends, it felt like a long process, but valuable as it gave me a great insight into all the themes and orchestration style of the composer. It gradually reveals itself page by page, even if the computer playback is a poor substitute for a real orchestra.

I was lucky that Denis Browne was himself very meticulous; I think I only spotted a handful of errors in the score and his musical calligraphy is mercifully very neat, even if it was often difficult to decipher the copious accidentals. Indeed any mistakes that came out at the rehearsal turned out to be mine.

Also fortuitous is that because the piano duet was used in the 1914 performance, it has a running commentary of the onstage action, right down to the rather quaint dialogue which made an appearance in the final performance:

⁵ Hugh Taylor, 'Times Critics' in *The Musical Times*, Vol. 129, No. 1745 (Jul., 1988), 329.

⁶ Philip Lancaster, 'Waking Up England': W Denis Browne and *The Comic Spirit* in *British Music Society Journal*, Vol. 26 (2004), pp. 47-74

169

I

II

"I have something for you."

*Yes? Have you really?"

*It will affect...

8vb

3

3

5

173

I

II

"Oh la! What can it be?"

... the whole term of my existence."

...or flat?"

Example of dialogue, scene 1, bars 169-176 (piano duet version)

These notes meant I could work out where we had got to in Violet Pearn's description. Unfortunately, I soon realised we were only two thirds of the way through the story when the material runs out - there was still a cruel rejection, a jealous fight and a reconciliation to go before the end.

I resolved to compose as little new material as possible, but to rearrange existing material from earlier in the work and Browne's other surviving compositions. The best clues were suggested by the surviving duet book and in particular the five minute 'overture' which starts the work before the dancers appear onstage. This contains thematic material not heard elsewhere in the surviving manuscript, leading one to assume it must be derived from a now-lost segment in scene three.

The duet book version also betrays that the composer recycled a few tunes from earlier compositions, the most obvious being 'Fanny's Dance' in scene three, which is a revised version the first of Browne's *Two Dances for Small Orchestra* first performed at Clare College in 1912.

I noticed that Browne's duet arrangement was very similar to his incomplete full orchestral transcription of his first dance as the *Miniature Suite for Full Orchestra*, and realised this gave clues to his orchestration and the chance to hear another of Browne's 'lost' works which would otherwise also remain unperformed. The work as heard is a hybrid of both versions, as the

Miniature Suite features multiple horns, woodwind and harp parts, but is certainly different from the earlier orchestration.

The end of this dance, as 'Fanny stretches out her hand to Adolphus' marks the end of the surviving Browne material, leaving a suspended cadence.

Noticing that the driving staccato rhythm heard in the introduction to the ballet is the same as his second *Dance for Small Orchestra* (also known as the *Intermezzo*), I speculated that the composer was intending to use material from this in *The Comic Spirit* as well.

Thus, after a brief reprise of Adolphus's brooding 'Rose' music from the opening of act three, as his anger builds towards the fight scene between Adolphus and the Spirit, the tension is broken by the energetic central section of his second *Dance*, with a dialogue created between the two by repetition of motifs representing each character. As an aside, I must congratulate Lexi the choreographer here, who rendered this scene as a balletic brawl worthy of the ballet's "pantomime" label.

I again trawled the overture for the climax of this scene using material that had hitherto not appeared in the main score. As the fight literally spirals out of control it ceases with a discord as the Spirit grabs Adolphus, and normality is restored as the Spirit 'disappears with shrill laughter', with the descending 'laugh-like' flute theme from the introduction.

As the lights go back up, represented by a rising sequence based on material again from the introduction, Fanny and Adolphus's reconciliation is based on an extended version of the tender quartet section which concludes the introduction, with the addition of a melodic line based on Fanny's Dance; Adolphus is now dancing to her tune.

I was tempted to end the work on this quiet moment, but while the main narrative content of the work ends with Fanny and Adolphus's reconciliation, as a comic work I was keen for the work to finish in as suitably rousing manner as it opens. Thus I appended a short coda bringing together the themes we've heard before, excluding the waltz tune that seems to have been the cause of all their troubles; the work could be interpreted as a triumph of the modern composition style over stuffy Victorian writing, as typified by the waltz.

The coda was perhaps the most difficult part to recreate convincingly, as there is no precedent of a 'triumphant' conclusion in any of Denis Browne's surviving works to draw from; his songs and orchestral pieces all end very quietly and without fuss. I based the coda on the opening of the overture with reprises of some of the themes from the work representing the characters, with Fanny finally joining together her Dance theme with Adolphus's 'Rose' theme.

Finally in the climax, the Spirit's 'Dance of the Future' with its energetic changes of time signature makes a exultant reappearance. I couldn't resist the chance to bring this super tune back for one last time, and added two bars of anticipation with a huge climax for the whole orchestra just before a key change that might appeal to fans of Westlife.

Just in time for a possible curtain call, the 'jump' music heard at the Spirit's first entrance in scene II makes a defiant appearance before the final cadence. The last chords are a slightly unsuccessful attempt to emulate the thick piano writing heard in his songs.

I completed the piece on New Year's Day 2014. My appreciation of Denis Browne had grown considerably - I still can't get the 'Spirit of the Future' dance out of my head.

The 'Spirit of the Future' theme, first appearance in the introduction bars 68-76 (duet version)

I also felt I had got to know something of the composer through the little quirks and ideas he put in his music that must have been reminiscent of the man. It reminded me of the James Elroy Flecker poem Gerald Finzi had buried under the porch of his house:

Since I can never see your face,
 And never shake you by the hand,
 I send my soul through time and space
 To greet you. You will understand.

We can't know what Denis Browne would have thought of it, after all he probably never heard the *Comic Spirit* in its orchestral version and may have revised it after the war, or even felt it too frivolous after what he'd experienced, had he lived.

He may not have intended the end to be anything like my version, and almost certainly would have hated somebody else presuming to finish something he'd written. He was a proud and intelligent man, after all, and one whom we know was also brave, self-critical, emotional.

I hope the riotous applause that followed the ballet's premiere on Thursday was for the talent of the orchestra, the dancers, but most importantly William Denis Browne, 1888 - 1915.

Robert Weedon
 June 2015