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**‘Waking up England’:
W. Denis Browne and *The Comic Spirit***

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I. Introduction

It has been said of George Butterworth: ‘Great in what he achieved, greater still in what he promised. No composer’s reputation stands on so small an output’.¹ The latter is a claim also laid at the feet of Frenchman Henri Duparc, but there is arguably no composer more worthy of Butterworth’s claim than William Denis Browne. Compared with the reputable output of Duparc (fourteen songs) and Butterworth (twelve songs and four orchestral works), four of Denis Browne’s six published songs stand as the lone pillars of his known output, the foremost being his influential setting of Richard Lovelace’s *To Gratiana Dancing and Singing*. There are a handful of other works in manuscript: a couple of orchestral dances, a few choral works, an Intermezzo for piano – also arranged for strings – a few more songs, and a ballet, *The Comic Spirit*. The actual body of material is less than it seems, some of the works being versions of the same music, but there is more than there should be. Upon his death at the age of twenty six, in the Gallipoli campaign of the First World War, a note was found in his pocket book addressed to his friend and mentor Edward Dent in which Browne wrote:

My dear Dent,
If anyone is to sift my ms. music will you? It’s all rubbish except Gratiana, (perhaps) Salathiel Pavy, & the Comic Spirit.... 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.²

Fortunately Dent didn’t keep to this, attempting to locate and preserve scores of incidental music, and publishing one of his other songs, *Arabia*³, in 1919.

In this interim study – the result of continuing research – I shall first give a biographical background before focusing more specifically around *The Comic Spirit*.

II. Biographical background

Born in Leamington Spa on 3 November 1888, William Charles Denis Browne was of Irish descent, both sides of his family having roots in County Tipperary where, notably, his paternal grandfather was Dean of Emly.⁴ He went to Rugby on a Classics scholarship in 1903⁵, winning music prizes for organ in 1904 and for piano in 1906⁶. It was at Rugby where Denis Browne first met Rupert Brooke, a year Browne’s senior and a friend he was to bury in April 1915. At the annual assembly of 1905 while Rupert Brooke was declaiming his prize poem, Denis Browne was on the stage providing interludes at the piano. By 1906 he was deputising for the chapel organist relatively frequently, and he asked Brooke to write a poem for him to set to music. The result was one of Brooke’s ‘ugly’ poems, ‘An Easter-Day Song in Praise of Cremation, written to my Lady Corsyra’⁷, although it is probable that it was never set. Browne

¹ *George Butterworth – The Man and His Music*, BBC Home Service, 14th July 1942, quoted in Barlow, p.11

² Letter WDB-EJD, 23.v.1915 (KC-EJD)

³ probably the first setting of Walter de la Mare, published in a collection of four songs, Monro (1919)

⁴ Taylor, p.6

⁵ Rugby School lists, (KC-RCB Pr/32)

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Hassall (1964), p.88.

followed Brooke to Cambridge in 1907 on a Classics scholarship to Clare College where he was appointed organ scholar. He immediately became involved in music and drama in both college and the wider university. In his first term he joined Rupert Brooke's newly founded 'Marlowe Dramatic Society', playing the part of Lucifer in Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*.⁸ The following summer was spent in Cambridge rehearsing for the Marlowes' next production, a tri-centenary performance of Milton's *Comus* in which Denis Browne was a dancer. The incidental music was compiled from Elizabethan sources by Edward Dent, and included an Almayne from *Elizabeth Rogers' Virginal Book* which was to form the basis of Denis Browne's most famous song, *To Gratiana Dancing and Singing*, composed in November 1912⁹. Edward Dent later tutored Denis Browne in harmony and counterpoint under a Stewart of Rannoch Scholarship in Sacred Music¹⁰. In this Dent was to encourage him to make transcriptions of Elizabethan music for lute; he made more than forty such transcriptions.

For Rupert Brooke and his circle it seems that the Elizabethan era was the aesthetic ideal – possibly a signifier of the times, seen in the revival by Richard Runciman Terry of the performance of Tudor polyphony at Westminster Cathedral and the revivals of our heritage in both hymnals (Westminster and English) and the folksong movement. The effect of these revivals on original works of the period was significant; the integration of the Elizabethan was nowhere more immediately significant than in Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis*, premiered in 1910. In the Brooke circle the Elizabethan ideal is epitomised in a poem by Brooke written in January 1911, 'A letter to a live poet', in which he writes, 'Sir, since the last Elizabethan died,/Or, rather, that more paradisaical muse, ...no man's hand, as thine,/Has...Struck certain magic strains...'¹¹.

In wider Cambridge life Browne was part of the chorus in the 1909 Greek play, *The Wasps* of Aristophanes, for which Vaughan Williams wrote the incidental music – the overture from which Browne was to perform in 'a spirited and ingenious arrangement' for piano duet at the 'Terminal Smoking Concert' at Clare on December 3rd 1909¹². Alongside him in the 'tiresome old men of the chorus'¹³ was Stuart Wilson, whom Browne was to accompany in recital on several occasions, including a private recital at 10 Downing Street. Both Denis Browne and Stuart Wilson were to become good friends with Vaughan Williams: they gave the first complete play through of RVW's ballad opera *Hugh the Drover* to Harold Child (the librettist) and the Vaughan Williams' in June 1914. In 1914 Browne also helped to reconstruct the first two movements of the *London Symphony* when the full score had been irretrievably lost in Germany¹⁴, as well as giving the first performance of three of RVW's *Five English Folksongs* with Guy's hospital chorus on May Day of that year.¹⁵

The other close musical friendship built at Cambridge was with Clive Carey. Carey studied sporadically at Clare College from 1900, when he went up as an Organ Scholar. By the time of Denis Browne's arrival in 1907 Carey was still in and out of Cambridge and, probably through their mutual friendship with Edward Dent, built up a close friendship themselves. Carey was

⁸ Hassall (1964), p.124.

⁹ Most sources date this song as February 1913, but it is extensively referred to as having just been written in a letter to Dent dated 20.xi.1912 (KC-EJD)

¹⁰ Taylor, p.8.

¹¹ Collected poems, p.57

¹² Lady Clare Magazine, Michaelmas Term 1909, p.17.

¹³ Edward Dent wrote to Clive Carey in November 1909 wondering if he had 'interpreted it and VW right: apparently the tiresome old men of the chorus are symbolised by Stanford and Parry – "the men who fought for Athens in the good old days" and now get in the way of the younger men, hostile to any new movement. When Philocleon tries to be modern and gets drunk, he sings the march from *The Birds* with Josef Holbrooke harmonies or worse. The music is appallingly hard to grasp, and I think it is intended to be a wild nightmare opera.' (Quoted in Carey, 1979, p.49).

¹⁴ referred to in a letter RVW to EJD [1914] (KC-EJD RVW/2.4)

¹⁵ Taylor, p.17.

studying composition at the Royal College of Music, but was also active as a singer, conductor, organist, folksong and dance collector, and, later, as an actor. In 1910 Denis Browne and Clive Carey collaborated in providing incidental music for a production in November that year of Henrik Ibsen's *Love's Comedy* – one of two known collaborations between them, the other being a work called *The Enchanted Night*.¹⁶

By the end of 1909 Browne was looking to the future and wondering if he could make a career in music. At the beginning of 1910 Browne wrote to Dent:

'My elder brother has mercifully come back from India and has persuaded all my family (except my father) to consider seriously music as a profession for me. We have not mentioned it to my father, who as you know is old and deaf and therefore not open to sustained argument... My brother can procure plenty of statistics shewing that my chances for the home civil are absolutely nil.'¹⁷

Denis Browne went down from Cambridge in 1911, having obtained degrees in Classics and Music, and in 1912 obtained the post of assistant music master and organist at Repton School. He had left a lasting mark at Clare College where he had overseen, as organ scholar, the building of a new chapel organ in around 1910.¹⁸ His sense of dissociation from Cambridge and his circle of friends was greatly felt, as seen in a letter written to Dent in May 1912: 'The last five years at Cambridge are in retrospect such an entirely blissful time that I feel a little stranded in this outpost.'¹⁹ Alongside his loneliness he became uncertain of his own abilities and lacking in confidence, writing to Dent, '...My own nerves seem to be entirely gone. I can't play to anybody...I never was and never can be a pianist...'²⁰ With much relief Denis Browne left his position at Repton in November 1912, having been struck with tenosynovitis which rendered him unable to play the piano or organ for a time. On leaving Repton, and being unable to play, Browne turned to 'exercising my mind instead of my fingers with much benefit to the former. I have got a trilogy of songs for you to damn: at least I hope you will damn them, though I shall be sorry if you condemn them. I have thought them out with immense pains, and fairly sweated blood over them: one [*Epitaph on Salathiel Pavy*] is rather pseudo-naïve (do you remember Alkan's Mr. Jenkins?²¹), one [*To Gratiana Dancing and Singing*] is thick and I fear rather pompous and the second verse has no *raison d'être* for its accompaniment; but I think it will sound good. The scheme is somebody dancing a pavan all the time (*Comus* pavan, only you wouldn't know it) while the observer keeps up a detached commentary sitting on a bench by the wall with his head between his hands... One of the interludes is a step in the direction I suggested to [Armstrong] Gibbs²² the other day, which I am half afraid he took seriously – i.e. a song with accompaniment supplied by harmonies induced sympathetically from a piano in the next room...the words sung *bouche fermée*, and the melodic line adumbrated by rhythmic motions of the body. The work would of course be printed in invisible sympathetic ink.'²³ In asking Dent to damn these songs we perhaps see a recurrence of Denis Browne's lack of self-confidence from his recent time at Repton. It seems that Armstrong Gibbs was later drawn to the idea suggested to him by Denis Browne, composing a part-song setting of Walter de la Mare's *Reverie*, probably in about 1933, which begins:

¹⁶ Noted in Carey, 1979, p.74n.; also referred to in a letter EJD to EM, 2.vii.1915 re. the location of Browne's mss. following his death.

¹⁷ Letter, 3.i.10 (KC-EJD)

¹⁸ In a letter to Dent in September 1910 he wrote of the deadlock in the building of 'my' organ (KC-EJD, 5.ix.1910)

¹⁹ Letter, 23.v.1912 (KC-EJD)

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ possibly a reference to Alkan's *Esquisse*, 'Pseudo-naïveté', the dominant figure of which is that which forms the principal accompanying motif of *Epitaph on Salathiel Pavy*.

²² English composer Cecil Armstrong Gibbs (1889-1960), a contemporary of Denis Browne's at Cambridge.

²³ Letter WDB to EJD, 20.xi.1912

When slim Sophia mounts her horse
And paces down the avenue
It seems an inward melody
She paces to.²⁴

A year earlier Gibbs also composed four variations for strings on the same Alymane (called a 'Pavan' by Denis Browne) which formed the backbone of Denis Browne's *Gratiana*.

On 20 September 1912 Rupert Brooke introduced Denis Browne to Edward Marsh,²⁵ private secretary to Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, on which occasion he also first met poet Wilfrid Gibson. The date is significant in that it is reported in Marsh's diary as that on which he first started the notion of a 'Georgian' poetry that was to give a label to the Georgian movement to which it could be argued Denis Browne belonged.²⁶ When Browne moved to London in around February 1913 he was to build up a very close friendship with Marsh. The closeness of their friendship is illustrated in a letter from Marsh to Rupert Brooke written in February 1915, when both Brooke and Denis Browne were at the front: '...Denis promised to take care of you, and you must take care of him – I shall live in a shadow Rupert till I see you and him safe and well again – you know I'm glad and proud that you are going, and I don't think it's particularly dangerous as such things go – but it's when you and he come in that I feel what the war can do to me as a person....'²⁷ Marsh and Browne were to meet regularly, Browne being introduced to many new friends within Marsh's artistic circles. In London Denis Browne began to develop a reputation as a respected writer, critic, performer and teacher, with a notable interest and knowledge of modern developments in music. He taught at Morley College as Gustav Holst's assistant, took over from Clive Carey as organist and director of the choir at Guy's Hospital, and built up a number of professional engagements as a pianist, principally as accompanist. He also gave occasional solo performances, including a pioneer performance of Alban Berg's piano sonata, the first in London, in a programme which included two other modernists, Bartok and Scriabin.²⁸ As a conductor on one notable occasion in May 1914 at the last minute he stood in for Hugh Allen (then director of the Bach Choir and the choir at New College, Oxford) to direct the New Dorking Choral Society in a performance of Mendelssohn's *Elijah*.²⁹ Denis Browne also wrote a number of articles for *The Times* and the short lived *Blue Review* for which he was the music critic. Edward Marsh states that an introduction to Jack Squire over lunch on 2 February 1914 'led to [Denis Browne] becoming musical critic of the *New Statesman*'³⁰; seven articles followed between February and August of that year, including a review of Vaughan Williams' *London Symphony*.³¹

Denis Browne's appointment as music critic of *The Blue Review* could have been through the influence of Dent, Marsh or Brooke, all of whom wrote for the periodical. It was founded and edited by John Middleton Murry as a successor to *Rhythm*, which was described by Katherine Mansfield – Murry's wife – as 'the organ of the advanced artists of this country and, to a certain extent of the continent'.³² The assistant editor of *The Blue Review* was Wilfrid Gibson, who alongside Brooke was to be one of the 'Dymock poets', another of whom, Lascelles Abercrombie, Marsh was to introduce Browne to in March 1914.³³ Gibson and Browne

²⁴ from Walter de la Mare *Songs of Childhood*

²⁵ Noted in extracts from the diaries of Edward Marsh (KC-RCB, L10/2 and L10/5)

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Letter EM to RCB, 26.ii.1915 (KC-RCB, L/8.28b)

²⁸ Newspaper cuttings from The Times, Daily Telegraph and Morning Post, 12.5.1914 (in Browne's album of cuttings, KC-RCB, Xd/32)

²⁹ Newspaper cutting from the Surrey Times, 23.5.1914 (in Browne's album of cuttings, KC-RCB, Xd/32)

³⁰ Entries from EM's diaries, noted by EM in KC-RCB, L/10

³¹ listed in Taylor, Appendix A.

³² Letter from Katherine Mansfield to Compton Mackenzie, November 1912. (Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield, p.115)

³³ Entries from EM's diaries, noted by EM in KC-RCB, L/10

became friends, and following Browne's death Gibson commemorated him in his short collection of poems, *Friends* (1916), in which Brooke is also commemorated:

W. D. B.
(Gallipoli 1915)

Night after night we two together heard
The music of the Ring,
The inmost silence of our being stirred
By voice and string.

Though I to-night in silence sit, and you
In stranger silence sleep,
Eternal music stirs and thrills anew
The severing deep.

The incident recalled in the poem was also mentioned in a letter from Browne to Edward Dent. Browne and Gibson had met at Covent Garden at a performance of one of Wagner's Ring operas, after which they went back to Browne's rooms and played through some of the opera. Browne wrote that Gibson '...though entirely charming is entirely unmusical and can't appreciate or dislike as I do. A lot of it is so beautiful that I don't really mind....'³⁴

Browne contributed a review article to each of the three issues of *The Blue Review* before its peremptory demise following the July 1913 edition which ultimately resulted in Middleton Murry's bankruptcy. However, not all of the contributors seem to have recognised the worth of Browne's work: for the second issue Katherine Mansfield had written an epilogue which ran to six and a half pages. When asked by Murry to cut it down to six pages she replied: 'I can't cut it. To my knowledge there aren't any superfluous words... Can't you cut a slice off the D. Brown [*sic.*]. I really am more interesting than he is – modest though I be...'³⁵

One of Browne's articles for *The Times* was a review of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* given by Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* in July 1913. He wrote of it to Edward Dent: 'I saw the 'Sacre du Printemps' the other night. It is amazingly clever, it does at any rate allow one to listen to the music and watch the stage without being conscious of a divided attention. The music sounds very odd, but nothing beyond the bounds of possibility, and the rhythms on the stage convulsed ... to its counterpoints, just as the colours and grouping answer to the orchestration.'³⁶

It had probably been Edward Marsh who had first taken Denis Browne to see the *Ballets Russes*. Having initially met him in September 1912, Marsh met him a second time via Rupert Brooke on 11 February 1913, not long after Denis Browne's arrival in London. Their friendship seems to have begun in earnest at this time, Browne writing to his mother 'I hope I shall see something of him, for he is a delightful person.'³⁷ The three of them dined together the following day and went to see the revue *Hullo Ragtime!* (for Brooke one of at least ten visits to the show which was a favourite of his³⁸) and, most significantly for Denis Browne, to see the *Ballets Russes* at the Royal Opera House on the Wednesday of the following week.³⁹ The programme that evening was Balakirev's *Thamar*, Debussy's *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, Borodin's *Prince Igor*, and Stravinsky's *Petrouchka*.⁴⁰

³⁴ 14.v.1913 (KC-EJD)

³⁵ Katherine Mansfield to John Middleton Murry, 19.v.1913 (Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield, p.124)

³⁶ Letter, 20.vii.1913 (KC-EJD)

³⁷ Letter WDB to his mother, Louisa Denis Browne, 16.ii.1913, copied by Marsh into KC-RCB L/10.2.

³⁸ Jones (1999), p.299

³⁹ All engagements noted in the extracts from Marsh's diaries in KC-RCB L/10.2

⁴⁰ As listed in an advertisement in *The Times*, 19.ii.1913.

Christopher Palmer states that, despite the immediate ‘extremist’ impact of Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du Printemps* in 1913, the first performances of *Petrouchka* in London in 1912 ‘reverberated further, wider and longer’ than its successor.⁴¹ In the third volume of his autobiography, Osbert Sitwell wrote that the first pre-war performance ‘presented the European contemporary generation with a prophetic and dramatised version of the fate reserved for it... the music, traditional yet original, full of fire and genius, complication and essential simplicity, held up a mirror which man could see, not only himself, but the angel and ape equally prisoned within his skin.’⁴² Palmer further asserts that it is difficult ‘to appreciate the impact on English audiences of these early Diaghilev performances. They thrilled and liberated: nothing of their like had ever been experienced before.’ Musically, ‘the Franco-Russian orchestration [was] a seductively spicy alternative to the Anglo-German tradition which Elgar had been perpetuating.’⁴³ For perhaps the first time the piano was featured as a ‘quasi-solo but essentially *orchestral* instrument in an *orchestral* score.’⁴⁴ Howells made it his own as early as November 1914 in his suite *The B’s*, and, as we shall see, so did Denis Browne in his orchestration of *The Comic Spirit* in the middle of the same year.

III. Background to *The Comic Spirit*

The only biographical study of Denis Browne to date states that *The Comic Spirit* was ‘intended for performance in Bristol.’⁴⁵ The writing of the ballet would almost certainly have come around through Clive Carey. By mid-1913 the aspiring playwright Violet Pearn was working on a version for the stage of Algernon Blackwood’s novel *A Prisoner in Fairyland*, to be called *The Starlight Express*. Pearn was living in Guildford, sharing a cottage with Gertrude Pratt, the aunt of the actress Muriel Pratt who since 1910 had been a member of a repertory company at the Gaiety Theatre, Manchester. Also at Manchester’s Gaiety Theatre at that time was Basil Dean who, in 1913, moved to His Majesty’s Theatre in London as assistant stage-director to Herbert Beerbohm Tree. It is probable that Muriel Pratt brought Pearn’s *Starlight Express* script to Basil Dean’s attention who took an interest in the project, bringing in a financial backer and also asking his friend Clive Carey to provide incidental music by around the November of that year.⁴⁶ This would almost certainly have brought Carey into contact with Pearn and Pratt, the latter of whom was in the process of establishing her own repertory company which Carey was to join as an actor. Carey’s introduction to the company could possibly have come a different route, by way of Robert Maltby. Maltby had been a ‘prominent member of the Oxford University Dramatic Society’ and had played the part of Pan in a production of Denis Browne and Carey’s collaboration, *The Enchanted Night*.⁴⁷ Maltby was probably, alongside Denis Browne, one of Carey’s closest friends, and was also to become a member of Pratt’s repertory company. The company was to perform at the Theatre Royal, Bristol in May 1914, in a programme which was to include the first performance of Pearn’s debut as an original playwright, *Wild Birds*, and four other plays. Four of the main plays in repertory were to be accompanied by a one act prelude or postlude, and presumably it was over discussions about the accompanying works that sparked the ‘commissioning’ of Denis Browne’s *The Comic Spirit*.

The practice of accompanying a play with additional entertainments began, most appropriately for members of the Brooke circle, with the Elizabethans. David Mayer states that these were light pieces used to pad out plays and were normally done for commercial reasons in the spirit of

⁴¹ Palmer (1991), p.181

⁴² Sitwell, p.241

⁴³ Palmer (1991), p.181

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Taylor, p.17.

⁴⁶ Information mostly found in Ashley (2001), pp.193-5. The production of *The Starlight Express* was postponed following the outbreak of war. When it was produced after the start of the war in 1915, Carey’s music was forgotten and Sir Edward Elgar was asked to provide new music.

⁴⁷ Carey (1979), p.74

competition with other playhouses. Extended entertainments begin in earnest in about 1701 at which point “Italian Night Scenes” were introduced. These were derived from the Italian *Commedia dell’Arte* and were comedies in which the plot was communicated by slapstick and dance, rather than dialogue – the forebear of the common pantomime. Considered rather vulgar by many, they consisted essentially of a misunderstanding leading to a comedy brawl, and were very popular with audiences. In 1717 a work by John Weaver called *The Loves of Mars and Venus* was produced in London. Called a ‘ballet-pantomime’, it is seen by theatre historians as the first typically English show to be the clear ancestor of the pantomime as we know it. By the nineteenth century the mixed bill became a confection of curtain-raisers, short farces, pantomimes, the main entertainment, and afterpieces. However, by the 1860s, the long bill was on the way out; there may have been a longer piece and an afterpiece, but by the 1890s, most theatres offered only a single entertainment.⁴⁸ It is therefore perhaps slightly unusual for Muriel Pratt’s company to be offering such entertainment in 1914.

The place to be filled in the programme was the accompanying entertainment to John Masefield’s *Tragedy of Nan*. Given that the other accompanying works in the repertoire were plays, including such as Bernard Shaw’s *How He Lied to Her Husband* (a parody of one of his own plays), it might have been thought that something less demanding was in order, and so, perhaps with assistance from the rest of the company, Violet Pearn drew up the synopsis of a ‘ballet-pantomime’ – *The Comic Spirit*:

Fanny and Adolphus, two conventional types of the period 1830, are at a ball together. They leave the ballroom for a secluded anteroom, and there Adolphus pays his court to Fanny in the stilted manner of an artificial epoch. Stung by her coquetries, his wooing becomes more natural. The increasing sincerity of his passion seems to Fanny only roughness of manner, and she shrinks in alarm from him. The clock strikes twelve. The lights of the anteroom become strangely dim, and through the fluttering curtains appears the Spirit of the Future, the Meredithian Comic Spirit. With seductive movements he invites the two to play with him, but while Adolphus holds back, the woman in Fanny responds more readily to the call of the unconventional. Fascinated, she imitates his rhythmic steps, and vanishes through the curtains, only to appear a minute later in more natural dress. It is now Adolphus’ turn to be shocked at her disregard of convention: he repulses her, but on seeing her consoled by the Spirit, his jealousy is aroused. The Spirit sees his chance. Tormenting Adolphus he provokes him to fight. Hither and thither he leads him, plucking at his clothes, disarranging his hair, until little remains of the immaculate young man of ten minutes ago. Suddenly the Spirit thrusts out an arm, catches Adolphus by the throat, and forces him to his knees. In a moment Fanny is between them. The Spirit sees his aim accomplished, and disappears with shrill laughter, leaving the couple dishevelled, unconventional, but lovers.⁴⁹

The period of 1830 was probably chosen to complement that of Masefield’s play, set in rural Gloucestershire in 1810. The Spirit of the Future is referred to as a ‘Meredithian Comic Spirit’. George Meredith perhaps discusses his notion of a ‘Comic Spirit’ most succinctly in the preface to his 1879 novel *The Egoist*. Meredith conceives of a great ‘Book of Egoism’ stretching from ‘the Lizard...well nigh to the very pole’. It is a book of such size that ‘to be profitable to us the Book needs powerful compression... Comedy is the key of the great Book, the music of the Book. ...It condenses whole sections of the Book in a sentence, volumes in a character; so that a fair part of a book outstripping thousands of leagues when unrolled, may be compassed in one comic sitting... Comedy is a game played to throw reflections upon social life, and it deals with human nature in the drawing-room of civilized men and women... The Comic Spirit conceives a definite situation for a number of characters, and rejects all accessories in the exclusive pursuit of them and their speech. For, being a spirit, [it] hunts the spirit in men... Comedy [is] our means of reading swiftly and comprehensively. ...[It] proposes the correcting of pretentiousness, of inflation, of dulness, [*sic.*] and of the vestiges of rawness and grossness to be found among us. [It] is the ultimate civilizer, the polisher, a sweet cook... You may love, and

⁴⁸ Derived from e-mail correspondence with Professor David Mayer and from Lathan (1997).

⁴⁹ A printed version of this synopsis accompanies one of WDB’s mss. of the ballet (CC-WDB)

warmly love, so long as you are honest.⁵⁰ The Spirit of the Future therefore is a personification of this 'Meredithian Comic Spirit'; the scene a vehicle for Meredith's ideas in the quashing of the egoist within Adolphus.

The provision of the music for the work may have initially been put in Carey's direction, but turned down given his commitment of providing incidental music for *The Starlight Express*, and his needing to learn the repertoire for the season in Bristol that he hoped 'would get rid of the ridiculous self-consciousness he felt among professionals.'⁵¹ Also, Carey may still have been trying to take things a little easier following his nervous breakdown a few months earlier in August 1913.⁵² Denis Browne was approached, and the winter of 1914 was mainly spent composing the music for the ballet.⁵³

The recommendations of Browne as composer for the work by Carey and Maltby must have been greatly respected. As a composer Browne had yet to make his name, the songs by which he is now solely known were either not published nor widely known or, in the case of *Arabia*, had yet to be written. Aside from a couple of works performed at Clare College (a set of canticles and two orchestral dances – one of the latter also performed in Stratford, conducted by Vaughan Williams during the summer season of 1912⁵⁴) and the now lost collaborations with Clive Carey, Stainer and Bell had published an anthem in 1912 and Browne had provided an eight part Latin Nunc Dimittis for Richard Runciman Terry, performed at Westminster Cathedral in Holy Week, 1913.⁵⁵ In 1910 Denis Browne had also published two Tennyson settings, although after his death Denis Browne's mother wrote to Edward Dent 'I know he always regretted having had those two songs published'⁵⁶.

The ballet was ready for a play-through by Denis Browne and Edward Dent in April 1914 in a version for piano duet,⁵⁷ and scheduled for its first performance in Bristol on 13 May. On 4 May Carey wrote to Dent from Bristol, where he was in rehearsal, 'It would be awfully nice if you could come down and see...Denis' play – tho' it will only be manageable on two pianos, I am afraid.'⁵⁸ It was first performed at the Theatre Royal in a matinee performance at 2.30pm on Wednesday 13 May, given again in the evening performance on that day, and subsequently on the 14, 21, 23 and 30 May,⁵⁹ this last being the final night of Muriel Pratt's repertory season. Muriel Pratt herself took the part of Fanny, Robert Maltby that of Adolphus, with Clive Carey taking the part of the Spirit of the Future⁶⁰.

There is no complete score remaining of the work – a fact which has given rise to the belief that it was never completed, and thus only 'intended for performance in Bristol'. There is an

⁵⁰ *op. cit.* Paraphrase of sections of the Prelude.

⁵¹ Carey (1979), p.71.

⁵² Carey's breakdown was mentioned in a letter WDB to EJD 26.viii.1913 (KC-EJD)

⁵³ Taylor, p.17

⁵⁴ mentioned in letter WDB to EJD 29.ix.1912 (KC-EJD); Vaughan Williams was conducting the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre orchestra during that season, which co-incided with the annual festival of folk music held in the town under the directorship of Cecil Sharp, and with which Vaughan Williams was also involved. It is possible that it was performed in a 'concert with dancing' on 5 August 1912, music played by the Stratford on Avon Town Band.

⁵⁵ Taylor, p.15; also referred to in the notice of his death in The Times, probably by Edward Marsh.

⁵⁶ Letter, L.Denis-Browne to EJD, 8.vii.1915 (CUL-EJD)

⁵⁷ Taylor, p.17

⁵⁸ Letter, 4.v.1914. (KC-FCSC 46)

⁵⁹ Derived from advertisements placed in the local Western Daily Press, 13.v.1914; 15.v.1914; 21.v.1914.

⁶⁰ in Hugh Carey's book about Clive Carey and Edward Dent he publishes a photograph of Bob Maltby in costume posing as the character of 'Puck' in Denis Browne's *Spirit of the Future*, apparently in 1913. The idea of the *Spirit of the Future* as a work rather than just the character we know of in *The Comic Spirit* is intriguing; it could be from another work we know nothing of, or perhaps it is the character of the Spirit of the Future but taken at a time when Maltby was to play the part rather than Carey?

incomplete orchestration and two manuscript books, both of which contain the first part of the ballet and obviously continued into a now missing second book. One of these books has the ballet scored for two pianos and the other for piano duet. In the letter above Carey told Dent that it would only be performed on two pianos. However, it may have been that, at a late stage it was found that a second piano would not be available. This might explain why, on 10 May, a few days before the first performance, when Edward Marsh visited Denis Browne he was copying out his 'mime-play'⁶¹, perhaps returning to, and editing the original piano duet version which he and Dent had used in April at their initial play-through following the completion of the score.⁶² This might be corroborated by the fact that the stage directions are noted in this piano duet score (although it could have been the cast working copy) and by the mention of the singular piano in the last line of the review in the local paper on the day following the first performance:

“Nan” was followed by a ballet pantomime in one act by Miss Violet Pearn, called “The Comic Spirit.” This little music play shows how the spirit of the Future alters the artificial conventionalities that bound Fanny and Adolphus in the period of 1830. It is a slight, pretty dainty trifle as acted by Miss Pratt, Mr. Clive Carey, and Mr. Robert Crighton. The music by Mr. Denis Browne did not get a fair chance on a piano.⁶³

The description of it as a ‘slight, pretty dainty trifle’ cannot help but have been accentuated by following the dark, dramatic ending of the Masefield play it accompanied. By the end of the two weeks they had moved the position of the ballet in the programme to come before *The Tragedy of Nan*.⁶⁴

Whether Denis Browne was present at any of the performances is unknown. Following the first performance, Muriel Pratt and her company gave an ‘At Home’ at the Theatre Royal. The local *Western Daily Press* gave a list of the principal attendees at the gathering and, given that he had been featured on the stage that afternoon, one would have expected Denis Browne to have been noted; his name does not appear, unless he was within the members of the repertory company. At the gathering it was reported that ‘Mr Clive Carey, a member of the company, sang and played his own compositions very charmingly.’⁶⁵ If Denis Browne had been there we might expect that he might have accompanied Carey, although if Carey had no scores, Browne would not have been able to accompany and Carey would have performed them from memory. Denis Browne, if regarded as part of the company, may also have taken part in the entertainment in which also ‘Mr. Robert Crighton [Maltby] and Miss Madge White also gave songs, and Mr. George Holloway gave a recitation.’⁶⁶

It seems that it was only after these performances that Denis Browne turned to orchestrating the ballet, leaving only 52 pages of the orchestration completed at his death. In its piano version it was to receive some further outings. On Saturday 18 July Edward Marsh and Denis Browne went to stay with Frederick Kelly⁶⁷ for the weekend at Kelly’s country home at Bisham Grange near Marlow, Buckinghamshire. Edward Marsh records the visit in his diary, and also states that on the Sunday ‘Denis played his music’⁶⁸, performing *The Comic Spirit* to the gathered

⁶¹ Entry from EM’s diaries, noted by EM in KC-RCB, L/10.2

⁶² The play-through in April in a duet version is mentioned in Taylor, p.17.

⁶³ *Western Daily Press*, 14.v.1914. The ‘Robert Crighton’ referred to is in fact Robert Maltby, whose full name was Clivi Robert Crighton Maltby.

⁶⁴ The programme for the last performance on 30 May 1914 states that *Nan* was preceded by *The Comic Spirit*.

⁶⁵ *Western Daily Press*, 14.v.1914.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Frederick Kelly (1881-1916), Australian composer, pianist and rower, educated at Eton and Balliol Oxford. He was assigned to the same battalion as Brooke and Denis Browne in the First World War.

⁶⁸ Entry in EHM’s diary, 19.vii.1914, noted in KC-RCB L/10.2

company twice. In his own diaries Frederick Kelly covers the events of the weekend, noting more than two performances of the whole, or part of, the ballet:

Saturday July 18 1914. Bisham Grange, Marlow

...E. Marsh & W. Denis Browne arrived at tea time to spend the week-end. After tea we all went to the Abbey... After dinner W.D.Browne played us Percy G's arrangement of the Londonderry Air, a Rondeau of Couperin, the l'assai from his ballet & accompanied M.A.K. in one of Faure's songs... We sat upstairs talking in my sitting room. WDB plays rather charmingly.

Sunday July 19 1914. Bisham Grange, Marlow.

It was inclined to be showery in the morning but the afternoon was fine if cloudy & we got in tennis before and after tea. In the morning WDB played E. Marsh & me his ballet 'The Comic Spirit' which has some rather charming music in it & shows some talent for dramatic writing. It has weaknesses of structure, however, & might be considerably improved. It would, too, be all the better for having some of the more obvious signs of the influence of Stravinsky taken out of it. I made him play it through twice. After dinner WDB played us his ballet 'The Comic Spirit' again.

Monday July 20 1914. 29 Queen Anne Street, W

W.D. Browne, E. Marsh & Anthony Henley left at 9am...⁶⁹

Denis Browne wrote to Edward Dent about the occasion:

'I spent a most delightful weekend with F.S. Kelly at Bisham last Sunday. He is a fascinating personality and I like him more and more: but he is Toveyish about music, and we argued till we were black in the face. Relations were nearly broken off completely when I said I was ready to sacrifice the Ring for Boris, Mefistofele, Otello, and Falstaff. I played him the Comic Spirit and he – to my surprise – liked it very much, and made many good suggestions: but we fell out over my abuse of six fours – which I had never realised as a vice and don't yet. That's the sort of criticism I can't cope with.'⁷⁰

IV. *The Comic Spirit* – scores and music

As has been stated above, the three surviving scores of the ballet consist the first part of versions for piano duet and two pianos and an incomplete orchestration which runs for 52 pages, nearly up to the point where the two piano scores end. The score for piano duet appears to be the earliest of the scores, given that it has signs of 'work in progress' as it were – a number of which are probably edits made prior to the copying of the score into the version for two pianos, and possibly those revisions that may have been made prior to the Bristol performance as discussed previously. The orchestration, probably begun after the Bristol performances, is for a small orchestra consisting flute (piccolo), oboe [hautboy], clarinet, bassoon, horn, cornet, trombone, timpani, percussion and strings, with the unusual additions of piano and harmonium. It could be that Denis Browne had an orchestra in mind for a performance as provision has been made in the score for an orchestra without a horn or oboe. However, it is probable that, in using just single wind and offering alternative instrumentation, he was putting into practice a number of suggestions made in a special article written for *The Times* in early 1914 about 'The Chamber Orchestra' – written at about the same time Denis Browne was composing the ballet. In the article he asserts that:

⁶⁹ Diaries of Frederick Kelly, April 1911-September 1914, pp.311-12 (National Library of Australia ,ms. 6050/G22,918)

⁷⁰ Letter WDB-EJD, 24.vii.1914 (KC-EJD); the operas referred to are Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, Mussorgsky *Boris Godunov*, Boito *Mefistofele* and Verdi *Otello* and *Falstaff*.

‘for some years past most sections of the musical world have been busy showing us the result of experimentation with an ever-increasing orchestra. The technique of orchestration has made such strides that every composer nowadays has a command of instrumental technique that would have been considered incredible a few years ago. The actual imaginative quality of the work is consequently suffering from over-elaboration of orchestral skill.’⁷¹

Not only this, but Denis Browne goes on to identify a ‘practical need’ in that such over blown modern orchestration cannot be accommodated or afforded by the many provincial choral and orchestral societies, it being beyond their means to mount a performance.

‘If one of these local societies is poor, as is often the case, some of the wind has to be omitted, or its place filled by that much maligned instrument the American organ. In the first case the effect is incomplete, in the second there is a compromise. The remedy lies with composers themselves. Most of them write on a large scale as if their compositions were destined to be performed only in the metropolis. They may reply when this is objected to that they need such and such instruments to obtain their effects; but they have probably never explored the resources of the really small orchestra, and are entirely unaware that the gain in individuality of colour caused by the reduction of superfluous instruments fully outweighs the loss in general sonority.

In the small band details are, of course, much clearer than in a large orchestra, and slight shades of tone-colour go for much more. ...The quality of the wind section when the instruments are doubled or trebled becomes much more homogeneous and therefore really less effective than when each individual instrument can be heard as a solo. It is at last being driven home to us all that modern orchestras all sound alike.... the body of tone has become so homogeneous that the whole orchestra is becoming more like a large organ every day. If we listen to a small orchestra, on the other hand, every shade of tone is clearly perceptible, and we can realize the extraordinary individuality of a hautboy or a clarinet in a way that is impossible in other conditions.’⁷²

The inclusion of the piano in the score could show the influence of the first performance in this country in 1913 of *Petrouchka* as discussed above. In his ‘Two Dances’ (1912) Denis Browne had specified the use of piano as a replacement for a harp, but it could almost have been that the harp was added as an after-thought, the ‘harp’ label at the start of the system on the first page of each obviously having been appended to an already present ‘pianoforte’ and the ‘pf.’ label being iterated later on. The writing for the harp/piano in the second Dance in D consists of triplet arpeggio figures which would probably work well on either harp or piano and perhaps instigating the addition of the harp option. The writing in the first, Dance in A, would in parts benefit from a harp, notably a pianissimo glissando marked ‘sfumando’⁷³ which ends the work, requiring an effect which would be very difficult to achieve on a piano. The piano writing in *The Comic Spirit* is undoubtedly fuller, more pianistic and, in parts, arguably attains the more soloistic role perhaps founded in Stravinsky’s orchestration of *Petrouchka*.

Unlike the use of the piano, the inclusion of a harmonium in the orchestration of *The Comic Spirit* has no known predecessors in Denis Browne’s work. It could be a further accommodation of his ideas about creating an accessible orchestration as put forward in the article in *The Times* quoted above. In specifying the harmonium – the European equivalent of that ‘much maligned American organ’ – he dissipates the compromise that the redistribution of

⁷¹ W. Denis Browne: ‘The Chamber Orchestra – Bach to Schoenberg’, *The Times*, 10 January 1914.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ a variant of ‘sfumato’? – blended – indeterminate.

missing parts in orchestras of limited resources would otherwise create. He thus answers his own call to arms in his statement that ‘the remedy lies with composers themselves’. Denis Browne’s decision to include the harmonium in the orchestra could have been swayed by two contemporary influences. The first is Percy Grainger who was coming to the forefront as a composer around this time – a reputation consolidated by the several works featured in Balfour Gardiner’s concerts of British music given in 1912-13, part of which series Denis Browne attended and reviewed for the *Blue Review*. Grainger had first encountered the harmonium in around 1902 when he saw a demonstration of the instrument at the Savage Club. Almost immediately he started to incorporate the harmonium into his own works.⁷⁴ However, none of those Grainger works performed at the Balfour Gardiner concerts included a harmonium. Another work that could have inspired the use of a harmonium is Richard Strauss’ *Ariadne auf Naxos* (a work which also includes a piano in its orchestration), the first version of which received its first London performances in around June 1913. Edward Dent reviewed *Ariadne* for what was to be the last edition of the *Blue Review* and it may be that Denis Browne accompanied Dent to this performance.

The three extant scores of the work all end in about the same place – around the point in the synopsis (see above) where Fanny, after being enticed by the dance of the Comic Spirit, ‘vanishes through the curtains, only to appear a minute later in more natural dress.’ The ensuing dance which is begun in the piano scores continues furthest in the piano duet score in which the last stage indication given is ‘Fanny stretches out her arms to Adolphus’, presumably at which point Adolphus ‘repulses’ her. Up to this point the ballet is divided into four sections: an introduction and three scenes.

The introduction is a relatively substantial movement (just over five minutes) in which no action is noted in the annotated duet score, the synopsis and action only beginning with scene one. It is therefore purely there to ‘set the scene’, and introduces to us two of the principal motifs that appear in the ballet. The first motif (fig.1), as we shall see in the first scene, seems to be indicative of the love between Fanny and Adolphus. The second motif is that of the Comic Spirit.

fig.1



The Introduction opens with a repeated quaver-crotchet-quaver rhythm which underpins much of the movement. It could be that Denis Browne was consciously re-using this idea from a Dance in D, the second of two orchestral dances written in 1912 which also found form in an arrangement of the same music as an *Intermezzo* for piano, which itself was also scored for strings. Fanny and Adolphus’ motif is introduced in the cello and passed to horn and then oboe, each followed by a brief conversational triplet figure between clarinet and flute which ends with an arabesque. The openness of the scoring and use of solo instruments is proof of the effectiveness of a point made in the chamber orchestra article written for *The Times* mentioned above, making use of the individuality of the solo instruments, as opposed to the homogeneity of double or triple wind. The passing of the motif and its interludes also epitomise another point made by Denis Browne in the article: ‘...Above all, “conversation” between the instruments, the greatest of musical joys, will be able to be revived and re-enjoyed to the full.’⁷⁵ Likewise the openness of scoring could be attributed to his comment that ‘the functions of the instruments which take part in it should not overlap. They must all combine satisfactorily when necessary, but they must not trespass upon each others preserves.’ Such ideas could partly have been developed out of Stravinsky’s orchestration in which, notably in *Le Sacre du printemps* and

⁷⁴ from information supplied by Barry Ould

⁷⁵ Ibid.

Petrouchka, solo wind instruments, with their intertwining free counterpoints and arabesques, are very prominent.

This first motif is given an answering phrase developed from the interlude figures which is then repeated by a solo violin which then paves the way for the original two bar motif to be thrown around the orchestra, initially rising in tones, on B, C# and Eb, at which point it is joined by an Ab and Bb double pedal point and a steadily rising cascading figure derived from another answering figure to the main motif. Over this the motif raises a further semitone, resounding on unison brass, and resolves onto a series of alternating full orchestral chords of Bb and E major. The chords have an un-nerving effect, being rhythmically strangely positioned as well as tonally disparate. Perhaps this is intended as a dramatic signifier of the jolt that the increasing tension of Fanny and Adolphus' relationship, as described in the tension arising from the use of the motif, is about to receive. A solo clarinet heralds the appearance of the motif of the dance of that character who is to deliver that jolt: the Comic Spirit (fig.2).



The device used in the solo clarinet writing, where a wind or brass instrument is left lingering following a loud full orchestral chord, is one used by Stravinsky to link sections together. In *Le Sacre du printemps* between the scenes 'Jeu du rapt' and 'Rondes printanieres' Stravinsky leaves three flutes trilling after some full orchestral chords. In *Petrouchka* this is appended by a descending arabesque similar to the clarinet 'herald' heard here in *The Comic Spirit*. The subsequent orchestration of the Spirit's motif is also treated in a very Stravinskian manner: the clarinet is succeeded by an oboe interjection which is followed by a one bar linking figure in the piano, an instrument used similarly by Stravinsky when moving into the 'Apparition des masques' in *Petrouchka*. The brusque theme is then taken by solo oboe, the flute taking over the piano figure as an accompaniment. At the end of this the theme is repeated by horn, viola and cello, accompanied by semi quaver tremolandi above the tune in the violins and piano. This accompanimental idea similar to the measured tremolandi used, notably, in the Shrove-tide fair scenes in *Petrouchka* and accompanies the Comic Spirit motif whenever it appears in the work.

The last device used by Stravinsky which Denis Browne appears to have taken on board is one which lends itself to a dramatic work such as this ballet, and is used by Stravinsky for such purposes. This is the interruption of an idea in mid-flow with another very different idea. Where the Spirit's motif could be musically developed it is interrupted by some pointed chords over which a high flute repeats a quintuplet figure (fig.3). This is followed by a dissonant quaver figure in the wind and viola in D major with D and E sharps against repeated G and A naturals, following which the horn joins in in E flat (fig.4). The passage has the essence of a childish playground antic, and is perhaps representative of the Spirit's own antics or humour, the preceding flute figures being his 'shrill laughter' with which he is seen to disappear at the end of the synopsis.



fig.4 (reduction)

The image shows a musical score for a piano and bass. The piano part is in the upper staves, and the bass part is in the lower staves. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The piano part starts with a forte (f) dynamic and features a series of chords and eighth notes. The bass part starts with a fortissimo (ff) dynamic and features a series of eighth notes. The score is divided into four measures. The first measure has a forte (f) dynamic. The second measure has a fortissimo (ff) dynamic. The third and fourth measures have a forte (f) dynamic. The piano part has a fermata over the first measure of the third measure. The bass part has a fermata over the first measure of the third measure.

The initial part of fig.4 is replaced with an answering motif ('a' in fig.5) which is then extended in a passage in the mixolydian mode with a constantly changing time signature adding a playfulness (fig.5). The modality and style of the tune is perhaps reminiscent of a folk tune.

fig.5

The image shows a musical score for a flute. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The score starts at measure 72. The dynamics are mezzo-forte (mf) and crescendo (cresc.). The time signatures are 3/4, 5/4, and 4/4. The score is divided into three measures. The first measure has a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The second measure has a crescendo (cresc.) dynamic. The third measure has a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The flute part features a series of eighth notes and quarter notes. The score is marked with a fermata over the first measure of the second measure.

Denis Browne knew Ralph Vaughan Williams, who was very active in the folksong revival, quite well, although he himself seemingly never took a real interest in it. It could be that the 'folk-like' quality in the tune is a brief view of the Irish strand in Denis Browne's background which he would have known through his parents, but which he touched upon more directly when he went to Ireland in 1912 to attend an uncle's funeral. He was apparently the chief mourner and reported of having had a 'jolly time'!⁷⁶

After the development of the Spirit's motif Fanny and Adolphus' motif returns, initially in almost melancholic fashion around an arpeggiated harmony in the piano, then turning into an animato section which returns us to pedal points and the motif being thrown once more around the orchestra in various keys, before climaxing in a brief dramatic moment accentuated by another strangely off beat fortissimo chordal figure. This releases into a moment of quietitude with chordal strings developing the quaver-crotchet-quaver underpinning figure with the introduction of triplets. The movement ends with a short pianissimo passage with flute, clarinet and six solo strings.

This ending could once again address another point made by Denis Browne in his article published in *The Times* on the chamber orchestra. He defines a 'chasm between quartet and the full orchestra that we have never seriously attempted to fill'. He states that there are two approaches to filling this: from an orchestral stance, reducing its scale, as Denis Browne himself does at the end of the introduction, or from the other direction, expanding the scope of the string quartet or other chamber ensemble.

In this introduction it could be argued that we find a microcosm of all but the resolution of the scene that is to unfold in the ballet that follows. We have already hypothesised as to the scene being 'enacted' in the introduction up to the appearance of the Spirit. Would it be tenuous to suggest that the initial return to Fanny and Adolphus' motif after the Spirit motif has passed is Fanny attempting to reach out to Adolphus, only to be 'repulsed' in the brief animato and

⁷⁶ Denis Browne wrote of the funeral in a letter to Edward Dent, 25.iii.1912 (KC-EJD)

subsequently consoled by the Spirit. The end of the introduction, being left musically unresolved as it is, leaves us hanging on the outcome of the scene, perhaps not wanting to pre-empt the reconciliation which is the goal of the work.

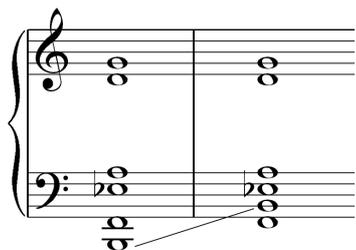
The first scene opens in an anteroom off a ballroom in which a waltz is in progress, the music of which is heard in the background. Over the top of waltz Denis Browne layers a 'conversation' between cello and flute which, in the piano duet score, corresponds to implied conversation and gestures between the couple that enter the room in this 'mime-play'. These 'conversations', especially that of the coquettish flute, following Fanny's attitude, build on the use of the solo wind discussed previously with a rhythmic freedom adding to the conversational nature. When she stops teasing and consents to give Adolphus a rose from her bouquet, briefly accepting his wooing, the waltz, about to resolve onto its native A flat major, cuts to Fanny and Adolphus' tune in the romantic key of D flat. When Fanny wants to return to the ballroom to dance the music returns to the waltz in the ballroom. Two bars later, when Adolphus goes after her to entreat her not to go, the piano punctuates the waltz with a falling octave figure (a figure reminiscent of the falling octaves which punctuates the 'Danse Russe' at intervals in *Petrouchka*), making way for renewed wooing with the brief return of Fanny and Adolphus' theme. The call to the dance again returns, Adolphus again going after her, noted by the falling piano figure, before a more impassioned scene where, after Adolphus has wooed more passionately, Fanny turns cold on him and Adolphus gets angry.

Such writing as Denis Browne provides, adjusting the music in time with the action of the ballet is not at all musically coherent. The disparate keys – moving instantly between A flat, D, B flat and D flat majors – changing time signatures and thematic ideas might confuse the listener. It may be that another composer may have attempted to umbrella the action of the scene with a more uniform, musical manner; Denis Browne, however, approaches the scene with strict dramatic illustration. Such a loss of fluent musical structure in favour of the dramatic is outweighed, as we have seen, by the use, and development of the two principal 'leitmotifs' that pervade the work.

Such dramatic illustration as we have found so far in the work continues into the piece-meal of gestures and drama that forms the opening of the second scene. A clock chimes midnight, given by a bell in the orchestration but in the piano scores annotated as a chord the root of which is almost at the very bottom of the piano – perhaps an unusual register for a chiming bell which tends to be denoted in the middle to upper register of a piano.

After the last bell has tolled the second scene begins with a section aptly marked 'misterioso'. A chord is sustained in tremolandi on muted strings playing *sul ponticello*; a bass drum quietly rumbles; the harmonium is given the direction to use a very soft 'vox angelica'. The chord (fig.6a) is strange but it appears that it is directly derived from the work of a Russian composer Denis Browne greatly admired and wrote two articles on, Alexander Scriabin. The chord is a transposition of what is known as Scriabin's 'mystic' chord (fig.6b), first found in his fifth piano sonata, which Denis Browne certainly knew and had studied. Its appearance at the moment when the 'mystical' Comic Spirit is about to enter the scene is particularly apt. The influence of Scriabin's fifth sonata is perhaps further echoed in the piano's triadic chordal figure over this mystic chord. Marked 'quasi corni lontano' in the piano duet score, the figure could be a distant echo of a similar figure which opens one of the three themes of the sonata – a theme marked by Scriabin 'quasi trombe imperioso'.

fig.6



The Comic Spirit Scriabin's Piano sonata no.5
(transposed down a fifth)

Following the ensuing scenes of trepidation we meet with the string chords originally found at the end of the introduction which rhythmically developed the quaver-crotchet-quaver root of that movement. Here it is denoting the trepidation and yet attraction that Fanny finds in the strange moves the Comic Spirit is making towards her, trying to entice her to join in with his dance. He begins his dance in earnest at a section marked *Vivo*, given a sub-heading in the piano duet score of 'Dance of the Spirit of the Future'. The music is that of the Spirit of the Future's motif and is given, undeveloped, in exactly the same fashion as was first heard in the introduction. At the end of his dance, Fanny, 'intoxicated with excitement' begins to dance to the music of another waltz being played by the band in the background. The end of this waltz is given a sumptuous full orchestration by Denis Browne, with harp like figures in the piano which could perhaps have been inspired by the orchestrations of Edwardian popular music he may have encountered. This waltz suddenly gives way to a reprise of the 'Dance of the Spirit of the Future', at the end of which Fanny and the Spirit disappear through a curtain at the back of the stage, leaving Adolphus alone, brooding.

The orchestral score ends in the third scene just as Fanny appears through the curtains in a more natural dress, 'without her curls', before launching into the dance that Adolphus finds so shocking. The dance that follows, as seen in the short piece of continuation beyond the orchestral score extant in the piano manuscripts, is directly copied from a reprise of the main dance theme in Denis Browne's *Dance in A*, which, although revived for the performance at Stratford conducted by Vaughan Williams in 1912, was one of two dances originally composed at Clare College in around 1910. The last two bars of the orchestral score that end the transition into the dance, are taken directly from the opening of the original 1912 dance (a strange lack of immediate tonality for the opening of a work) and is given in almost exactly the same orchestration. The only differences are that the falling melody now in the clarinet (fig.7b) was originally in the first violins, who are given a new line, and the addition in the flute over the top of these two bars in which he layers a return of the ballet's first, 'Fanny and Adolphus' motif (fig.7a). This additional layer is an example of the contrapuntal freedom employed by Denis Browne, adding the line with no apparent regard for the extraordinary resultant harmonies at a point in the original *Dance* where the resultant harmony from the chromatic counterpoint employed defy straight-forward tonal analysis (fig.7). The effect of these extraordinarily free counterpoints and resultant discords in the transition is the heightening of the sense of release into the *A* major dance that follows.

fig.7

Handwritten musical score for two pianos (Pf. 1 and Pf. 2) starting at measure 449. The score is in A major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. Pf. 1 has a melodic line with dynamics 'pp espress' and 'mf espress'. Pf. 2 has a bass line with dynamics 'mf espress' and 'a'. A bracket labeled 'b' spans the first few measures of the top staff.

The dance is given in the original A major key, and one wonders whether the previous transition was contrived to find its way from the A flat of the previous section into A major. It could be that Denis Browne was trying to save time whilst composing the work and thus re-using the original Dance without change. In using this old material it could be assumed that the orchestration would have remained close to the original. The orchestrations of the two works are almost identical, the ballet having the addition of bassoon, trombone and harmonium to that original score. On the other hand we could consider a comment about Denis Browne's working practices by Edward Dent in relation to the writing of *To Gratiana Dancing and Singing*:

'The composer showed it to me in various phases. His first attempt was absurdly ineffective; then gradually the idea took shape in his mind, and after many alterations and revisions the final version was evolved. That was characteristic of Denis Browne. He was not one of those romantic musicians who are supposed to throw off masterpieces in the heat of passion. He was determined to get every detail exactly right; never a note too many, and every note in its precisely appropriate place. That is the scholarship of a musical architect; and its reward... is the achievement of beauty.'⁷⁷

If this is the case, perhaps Denis Browne had reached that state of precision with the Dance, and felt that its use in *The Comic Spirit* would give opportunity for his Dance to reach a wider audience. However, given that the dance was originally written whilst at Cambridge in around 1910 and revised in 1912, it would be hoped that he would have developed as a composer and would therefore feel that it may need updating in keeping with his maturing ideas. Such a maturity was increasingly being seen in his songs and can be seen by his increasing contrapuntal fluidity as seen in the ballet. Maybe, given the 'light' nature of the work, Denis Browne deemed it unnecessary to pursue anything more rigorous than the original score.

We have touched briefly upon the probable influence of Scriabin on the work, the echoes of the fifth piano sonata appearing at the opening of the second scene. Scriabin's egocentric outlook is far from Denis Browne's reputed unassuming nature, but Scriabin's disregard for anything but his own ideas led to a sound world which Denis Browne was greatly interested in, and can be further seen in *The Comic Spirit*. We have recently mentioned the chromatic freedom found in the transition into the last Dance in A arising out of Denis Browne's free contrapuntal writing.

⁷⁷ Dent, 1922

This strident example is not a singular moment, chromatic lines pervading almost every page of the score. Denis Browne firmly believed, and expressed strongly in a few articles, that a trend for vertical harmony, especially, he noted in an article in the *Blue Review*, as found in Debussy's music, was taking over from counterpoint, and that, although the 'bugbear of most composers'⁷⁸, counterpoint was crucial to the art of the composer. Scriabin was a composer who employed counterpoint with a free use of chromaticism which, in his later, incomplete sketches, tended towards an obsession with the use of twelve note chords – a chord consisting every chromatic note available – something also explored by Alban Berg from 1912, in whose work Denis Browne was also interested. With his interests in the works of Scriabin, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and other contemporary lines of thought, it is intriguing to speculate whether Denis Browne would have experimented with more distinctively atonal music.

Despite this pervading chromaticism, which tends to give the work a more modern romantic feel, the ballet has obviously been tailored towards a light, easy-listening audience, with its direct, simple tunes and motifs balanced with a keen sense of humour. Comparing this with the greater originality and introspection found in his last few songs, the ballet shows Denis Browne as a versatile composer capable of adapting to such different moods as required. In the immediate context of direct influences on *The Comic Spirit*, it seems that Frederick Kelly's observation that the work would be 'all the better for having some of the more obvious signs of the influence of Stravinsky taken out of it'⁷⁹ is impractical, a number of those signs correlating directly with Denis Browne's own ideas, as seen in his Chamber Orchestra article in *The Times*.

It is frustrating that the scores stop, although we can probably go slightly beyond what is extant with the score of the Dance in A, leaving probably about a quarter of the ballet unaccounted for. It could be that the 'playground' idea within the Spirit's music both in the Introduction and in his Dance would have formed the basis of the taunting of Adolphus, and the subsequent scene of reconciliation based on those ideas met towards the end of the Introduction in which Fanny is attempting to reach out to Adolphus for reconciliation, only to be rejected. Whilst the orchestration was incomplete (where the score ends the book continuing with ten blank sides of manuscript paper) the two piano scores constitute a full manuscript book each, obviously continuing into a second volume. This second volume could have been unlabelled, the title probably only being inscribed on the first volume. Edward Dent gathered together the manuscripts; he would have passed them into the safe keeping of either an archive or another person. As we shall see, we know that Dent had a complete score of the ballet in some form. We may hope that, being perhaps unlabelled, the second volumes of the scores may one day be found in the hidden recesses of an archive where they do not know what it is the manuscript book contains. In the mean time, given the recent trends in the revival of the recording of British 'light music', it would be interesting and worthwhile for those complete scenes from the ballet – some fifteen minutes of music – to be given an outing.

⁷⁸ W. Denis Browne: 'The Chamber Orchestra', *The Times*,

⁷⁹ Diary of Frederick Kelly, 19 July 1914 (quoted above, p.13)

V. Postlude

After *The Comic Spirit* all that remains of anything composed by Denis Browne is the Walter de la Mare setting, *Arabia*. There is no final copy of the song; only a draft dated 22 June 1914. Following his death, Denis Browne's mother wrote to Dent 'I have found amongst the things that have come back a little m.s.; I am wondering if some of it may be the setting for the love Rupert [written] just before they went out'⁸⁰. Perhaps this manuscript was that of *Arabia* and that it was intended that it be dedicated to Rupert Brooke? An entry in Edward Marsh's diary mentions a possible other work, stating that on 25 June 1914 he and Denis 'went to a pastoral play at Aubrey House in which [Robert] Maltby...performed' and for which Denis Browne had apparently arranged much of the music.⁸¹

July was spent writing articles, performing (including the recital at 10 Downing Street), and moving house from number 11 to number 6 Shawfield Street. There was also a party at Arthur Bliss's and the weekend at Bisham Grange where Denis Browne played *The Comic Spirit* to Frederick Kelly.⁸²

On the evening of 4 August Denis Browne dined with Edward Marsh, Marsh 'returning to his post at the Admiralty just before the ultimatum to Germany ran out'⁸³ and war was declared. By 8 August Rupert Brooke and Denis Browne were endeavouring to sign up to go to the 'front', eventually succeeding in joining the Royal Naval Division, solely at the recommendation of Edward Marsh. After a brief spell of training at the end of September, Sub-Lieutenant Denis Browne was sent with the Anson Battalion on a brief and aborted operation before returning to England. On 27 February 1915 Denis Browne, now assigned to the Hood Battalion alongside Brooke, Frederick Kelly and Arthur Asquith (son of the Prime Minister), set sail from Bristol for the Dardanelles on board the 'Grantully Castle'.⁸⁴ Edward Marsh wrote to Rupert Brooke on the day before their sailing:

'Denis promised to take care of you, and you must take care of him – I shall live in a shadow Rupert till I see you and him safe and well again – you know I'm glad and proud that you are going, and I don't think it's particularly dangerous as such things go – but it's when you and he come in that I feel what the war can do to me as a person....'⁸⁵

On 11 April Denis Browne wrote his last letter to his close friend from Clare College, Mansfield Forbes:

'...no fighting – yet. That's coming, and stiff too. And it's the oddest thing of all that I shall be in it. Goodness only knows how afraid I shall be. I only pray there may be enough of me not afraid to make it all right. Anyway, we are all in the same box; and the more badly frightened you are the more fun it is eventually.'⁸⁶

On 23 April, yet to see any action, Rupert Brooke died of blood poisoning; he was buried by moonlight on the island of Skyros at a place under an olive tree Denis Browne had found a few days earlier. On 8 May Denis Browne was wounded in the neck by a bullet and was sent to hospital in Cairo. He rejoined his battalion at the beginning of June. On 4 June Denis Browne himself was lost in action at Achi Baba: 'Browne was on the left of a the line of 250 men advancing on a front of 200 yards. The objective was the farther of two enemy trenches about 350 yards ahead. Browne jumped into the first trench, bayoneted a Turk, and was almost instantly shot in the left shoulder; turning to one side he bayoneted a second Turk as another

⁸⁰ Letter Mrs. L.Denis-Browne to EJD, 20.ix.1915. (CUL-EJD)

⁸¹ EHM diary entry in KC-RCB L/10.2

⁸² EHM diary entry in KC-RCB L/10.2

⁸³ Taylor, p.18

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ EHM to RCB, 26.ii.1915 (KC-RCB L/8.28b)

⁸⁶ letter, 11.iv.1915, quoted in Carey (1985), p.24.

bullet drove the iron buckle of his belt into his body. As a petty officer bound up his wounds he fainted. On regaining consciousness he offered the man his watch and some money. They were refused, but the man accepted his pocket book, then had to retreat in haste. The ground was at once retaken by the enemy.⁸⁷ His body was never recovered.

Inside his pocket book was a letter to Edward Dent, written in anticipation of his not making it through the battle:

‘It’s odd being dead. Rupert’s gone too, so there’s no reason why I should mind; and at any rate I’ve had a run for my money, and he was stolen unfairly before a shot was fired. There will be no-one to give me such a jolly funeral as I gave him, which is a pity.

Think of me sometimes.
WDB⁸⁸

Denis Browne’s loss was keenly felt, being portrayed in Wilfrid Gibson’s *Friends* as well as receiving tributes in *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Cambridge Review*, the *Musical Times* and a poignant one from his colleagues at Guy’s Hospital, published in the *Guy’s Hospital Gazette*. His close friend Stuart Wilson wrote to a friend in King’s College:

I have been meaning ever since I left Cambridge to explain that when I was in your rooms on the Friday night and rather fell to abusing Kings I very likely said more than I meant. I had heard that evening that Denis Browne was killed and I felt that half of that which had made Cambridge seem, looking back at it, worth while, was gone, gone to join the increasing army of ghosts wherein very soon I shall find myself more at ease than I ever should in the combination room of Kings.⁸⁹

According to Denis Browne’s wishes Edward Dent tried to gather together all of his manuscripts, although, in agreement with Denis Browne’s mother, didn’t do much with them until after the war. Dent wrote:

‘When one recalls the world-wide enthusiasm that hailed the works of Rupert Brooke after his romantic death in the Aegean, it is easy to see how a similar excitement could have been worked up for the music of that friend who had buried Rupert Brooke a few days before he himself was to fall. But Denis Browne was far too honest an artist to have wished for such a reputation. He would have hated such uncritical enthusiasm. For this reason I have kept back the manuscripts entrusted to my care. I felt that it was difficult to form a serene judgement during the years of war. What was good among them, would, I felt sure, survive and shine out in spite of any changes of musical style that might take place in later years.’⁹⁰

A year after the war ended Dent published *Arabia*, and later, in 1923, *Diaphenia* and *To Gratiana*. The latter had also been orchestrated by Dent in 1918 and sent to Henry Wood for possible inclusion in a programme at the Proms.⁹¹ Of *The Comic Spirit* Dent seemingly thought much:

The Ballet ‘The Comic Spirit’ is important, as it has been acted and might be acted again. I talked to Maltby about it on Sunday, but he seems to think no agreement on the dramatic rights...was made – this is natural...[they] were all very intimate friends and were not considering legal rights etc. Maltby says that Denis scored about half of it for orchestra, but the score is not among your parcel. I expect it is in Clive’s flat. If it can be found, Clive or Geoffrey Toye could probably finish it, and it might be performed.⁹²

⁸⁷ Hassall, 1959, p.347

⁸⁸ Letter WDB to EJD, dated 23.v.1915

⁸⁹ Letter from Clive Carey in the ‘Shepherd’ papers in the archives at King’s College.

⁹⁰ Dent, 1922

⁹¹ A letter from Henry Wood to Dent dated 11.vii.1918 acknowledges receipt of the score (KC-EJD)

⁹² Letter EJD to EHM, 2.vii.1915 (KC-RCB L/11)

Dent also copied out the score of the ballet and twice showed it to Massine, one of the principal members of Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*, to no effect.⁹³

As indicated earlier, Armstrong Gibbs kept part of Denis Browne's memory alive in his work. Herbert Howells said of *To Gratiana Dancing and Singing* that it was 'one of the dozen or so tunes that had been present in his mind all his life'⁹⁴, and was quite possibly in his mind when composing his songs *Come Sing and Dance* and *The Lady Caroline*.

It is intriguing to think of what might have been: would his seeming predilection for the stage have continued? Would Rupert Brooke and Denis Browne have collaborated? The idea of the latter was certainly mooted. In May 1913, whilst Brooke was on his American tour, he wrote to Denis Browne from on board the S.S.Cedric:

'I hope you're composing hard, and variously. For one day soon we must do a show together – some theatre show – where poetry and music and ancient and modern and wit and tragedy and satire and suffering and dirty jokes and triumphal processions shall be so mixed together that the public won't know whether it's on its head or its heels for joy. We might do a Georgian Pantomime. Oh we're all going to wake England up when I return from the west.'⁹⁵

⁹³ Taylor, p.23

⁹⁴ Banfield, p.154.

⁹⁵ letter, RCB to WDB, 22.v.1913. (KC-RCB L/10.5 1913.33A)

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- National Library of Australia: Frederick Kelly diaries (NLA-FSK)

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