

# **IN MEMORY OF DENNIS BRAIN**

By Elizabeth Owen (mother of three students of Dennis)

## **Background**

My contact and later friendship with Dennis Brain commenced in 1989 and lasted to the time of his illness and death in 2021. I first met him in July 1989 after moving from Sydney to Canberra with my late husband Peter Owen and our three children, Ruth, Michael, and Katherine. Dennis was recommended as a piano teacher for my elder daughter Ruth by her existing piano teacher in Sydney, Mrs Kathryn Phillips. Dennis and Kathryn were acquainted professionally, both being piano examiners with the Australian Music Examinations Board (AMEB).

My daughter Ruth commenced as a student with Dennis when she was sixteen and in Year 11 high school and in Grade 7 piano. Ruth continued as a student with Dennis for some years, gaining her Associate of Music Australia Diploma (A.Mus.A.) when in her early twenties, and enrolled in a Bachelor of Engineering degree at the Australian National University (ANU). She later commenced singing studies, progressing to Grade 4.

In the early 1990s my younger daughter Katherine commenced piano with Dennis, piano being a second instrument. She was already studying violin with Mrs Josette Morgan of Hughes. A few years later, she also commenced singing lessons with Dennis. While studying with Dennis, she passed both Grade 7 piano and Grade 8 singing with honours, while progressing her violin studies under Barbara Gilby through a Bachelor of Music degree at the ANU.

Dennis also taught my daughters Theory of Music, and my son Michael when he was preparing for his A.Mus.A. in violin. Without tuition from Dennis, and passing Grade 6 Theory, Michael would not have qualified to sit for the diploma in violin. Michael has indicated to me that Dennis took time and energy to coach him for this theory exam, even though he was not one of Dennis' students. Michael has said that he was very appreciative of his support. So, all three of my children owed him a debt, and very much appreciated his dedication and skills as a teacher.

## **Dennis the teacher**

Dennis impressed me as a very caring and dedicated teacher. He treated his students with respect and encouraged them to achieve their full potential. He was sensitive to his students' personalities and their differing abilities, adapting his teaching approach to their individual needs. This was also demonstrated in his guidance over selection of pieces which were most suited to their temperament and skills. From conversations with him, I discerned that he would not tolerate bad behaviour or laziness and had occasionally discontinued lessons with a few students who persisted with these habits. As he pointed out to me, there were other students eager to learn on his waiting list who would eagerly fill such a vacancy.

A student's degree of musical ability was not a motivating factor for Dennis as to whether he accepted him or her as a student or continued to teach them once accepted. At the time, there were other teachers in Canberra who accepted only musically gifted students. Dennis told me that such gifted students in effect taught themselves and only required guidance, whereas the less talented but motivated students needed a good teacher. He also said that he himself learned more to improve his own teaching approach from such students. I found it interesting that he acknowledged that he was learning from the student in such circumstances. I presume he meant that he acquired new skills to communicate with them and get through to them, whereas the more talented students would grasp intuitively at what he was aiming.

## **Dennis the promoter of student talent**

While Dennis would regularly hold end of year concerts for his singing students at his home in Chapman, a particularly memorable occasion was an event he organised at the restaurant Bookplate in the National Library of Australia. The restaurant was booked out for the event by students and friends of Dennis, and

the dinner guests provided the entertainment for the evening. This included both his singing students and piano students. My three children performed an instrumental work, with Ruth playing piano and Katherine and Michael violin. A particularly memorable performance was given by all the male singers who performed a Drinking Song with lyrics from the play *The School for Scandal* by Sheridan. While Dennis was at the piano, the men of course were all holding their glasses aloft during the chorus: "*Let the toast pass; Drink to the lass; I 'll warrant she 'll prove an excuse for the glass.*" My son Michael, not a student of Dennis, has commented that this concert was one of the few occasions on which he heard Dennis sing, and that his voice was memorable and distinctive.

### **Dennis the friend**

During the years that I knew Dennis, my husband Peter Owen and I became friends with Dennis on a personal level. There were occasions when he visited our home for dinner with his lifelong friend Bruce Pearson, and sometimes with other friends whom he had known since he was young in Narredera NSW. We were also guests at his home in Chapman on a number of occasions with the same group of friends, including some of his adult students. On such occasions we enjoyed his excellent cooking, accompanied as always by some good red wine. There were occasions when we went to dinner at one of several Chinese restaurants, including those at Hawker and Cook. Dennis and Bruce knew the staff, and consequently, we received special attention.

When my mother celebrated her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1991, I mentioned to Dennis that she was very fond of a song by Handel called "*Silent Worship*". She had a friend in her youth who used to sing it. Dennis made a special recording for her in which he sang this and played the accompaniment. She was very appreciative. He also made a recording of the song "*Send in the Clowns*" for her, another song she particularly liked. It demonstrated how thoughtful and kind Dennis could be, though he had never met my mother who was in an aged care facility. Dennis sang *Silent Worship* when my younger daughter Katherine was married in December 2004. The ceremony was conducted in Commonwealth Park near Lake Burley Griffin. Hearing Dennis singing this on a beautiful afternoon in early summer was very special. Given that Katherine had lovely golden hair, the last two lines were very appropriate: "*Rivalling the glittering sunshine / With a glory of golden hair.*"

Following the death of my first husband Peter in 2008 and my remarriage to Neil Mordue in 2012, Dennis welcomed Neil as a friend and showed the same warmth to him as to Peter. Again, there were many happy occasions of evenings out at the Beijing restaurant in Hawker.

What more can I say? Just the Dennis Brain was a wonderful person whom I remember with love and affection.

Dr Elizabeth Owen  
36 Marrakai Street Hawker ACT 2614  
Ph 02 61612871; 0409037325  
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***Dennis's students: Katherine (piano, singing and theory), Michael (theory), Ruth (piano, singing and theory).***