

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) *Elégie* for horn & piano (1957)

Très calme - Agitato molto - Très calme

Poulenc dedicated this *Elégie* to the memory of the virtuoso horn player Dennis Brain who was killed, aged 36, when his TR2 sports car hit a tree beside the A1 on 1 September 1957. Dennis, whose father (Aubrey), uncle and grandfather were all professional horn players, did more than anyone to popularise and liberate the horn in post-war Britain. Britten and Hindemith both composed for him. His legendary and hugely popular recordings of the Mozart horn concertos with Karajan (another fast car enthusiast) and the Philharmonia were allegedly played from memory while Brain read *Autocar* magazine from the music stand.

Poulenc's later music has a seriousness that is largely absent from the music of his youth. His mother, a talented amateur pianist, was from a well-known Parisian family of artists and craftsmen, his father was a devout Catholic from the Aveyron. At family musical soirées the young Francis would listen from under the grand piano, but it was a formative experience with a nickelodeon in a Paris arcade that convinced him that he wanted to be a composer. His natural gift for writing simple folk-like melodies impressed Bartok, and his individual style was influenced by Stravinsky and by Eric Satie. He preferred writing for wind rather than strings (it is said that Fauré's violin sonata had driven him upstairs from under the family grand) and his work shows a tension between his mother's Satie-like personality, and his father's serious catholicism. Following the death in 1936 of his friend and fellow composer Pierre-Octave Ferroud in a car crash in Hungary, Poulenc turned more to the Catholic faith and composed a number of sacred choral works. The *Elégie* is one of his least comfortable works, capturing the harshness of Brain's awful death, and giving the horn a tragic eloquence that, like Britten's earlier *Serenade* (written for and performed by Brain), inspired later composers.