THE NAME ON BR

Rodney Newton looks at the life and outstanding career of Denis Wick, leading trombonist and d

Denis Wick enjoying his role as a conductor

Seldom can there have been an individual who has had as much influence over a specific area of brass playing as has Denis Wick. It can be argued that he changed the British orchestral trombone sound single-handedly, having pioneered in the UK the wide-bore instruments in common use today, and produced a vast range of mouthpieces and mutes that are in the instrument cases of innumerable brass players of all styles and levels throughout the world. Now 78, he shows absolutely no sign of slackening off, still heading an enormously successful firm and coming up with new ideas all the time to advance the art of brass playing. He has even started work on what is bound to be a best-selling autobiography.

Denis Wick was born in 1931 in Braintree, Essex and brought up and educated in Chelmsford, Thorne (Yorkshire) and Luton. His father had been a tuba player with Braintree Silver Prize Band, his mother had once been an officer in The Salvation Army (SA) and, after a move to Chelmsford, Denis's father began to work for the SA's insurance services and his parents renewed their association with the church. At the age of ten, Denis was handed a trombone and encouraged to join the local corps' Young People's Band (which also boasted a large adult band of 45 players). Young Denis proceeded to teach himself to play the trombone and joined the junior band at Chelmsford corps, taking his instrument and skills with him to Yorkshire and finally to Luton, eventually joining Luton Town Band during one of its 'golden' periods. However, at the age of 16 he heard his first live orchestral concert, which was given by the London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Eduard van Beinum in the Vauxhall Motor Works canteen and, inspired by the playing of its principal trumpet (a young man called Malcolm Arnold whose overture, *Beckus the Dandipratt*, was included in the programme), Denis decided that he had to become a professional musician himself. His parents were very supportive, but of modest means, and his mother went out to work in order to finance his training.

In 1949, he enrolled at the Royal Academy of Music to study the trombone with Sidney Langston, who had been principal trombone of the BBC Symphony Orchestra from 1932 until 1947 and was at that time Sir Thomas Beecham's principal trombone in the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (RPO). Langston was a very fine player, but seemed reluctant to pass on any information that he feared might allow his students to 'poach' his own work. Thus, Denis didn't learn as much as he wanted to and, out of frustration, left after only one year. An engagement with an amateur orchestra in Salisbury led to contact with two trombonists from the Bournemouth Municipal (now Bournemouth Symphony) Orchestra and, when a 2nd trombone vacancy arose shortly afterwards, he was surprised to receive a telegram from by no less than the orchestra's conductor, Rudolf Schwarz, inviting him to apply for a trombone vacancy. Although there were a number of other young players in for the job, all in their final year at music colleges, Denis was chosen and, at the age of 19, joined his first professional orchestra. In 1952, a year after Rudolf Schwarz, had moved to the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (CBSO), a principal trombone vacancy occurred there and Denis successfully auditioned for the job, remaining in the position until 1957.

His audition was quite stiff, as the CBSO's management wanted to be certain that Schwarz wasn't exercising any unfair preference towards his former Bournemouth players! Denis enjoyed his five years in Birmingham and, while he was there, he gave the first performance of Gordon Jacob's Trombone Concerto. By this time, Denis had developed a series of warm-up and flexibility studies which were put to good use when advising Dr. Jacob on the solo part, especially the cadenza in the last movement.

In 1957, Denis was offered the principal trombone positions with both the London Philharmonic Orchestra and the London Symphony Orchestra (LSO). Initially he found the choice difficult, however following the advice of Rudolf Schwarz, he accepted the LSO position, joining a section that included Chris Devenport and Tony Thorpe, with Hector ('Tiggy') Walker on tuba. This move eventually led to international recognition and the spreading of his influence throughout the British trombone fraternity and further afield. In an interview for the British Trombone Society on the occasion of his retirement from the LSO in 1988, he commented that, due to what was known as 'the big split' (when 15 principal players left the LSO to form Muir Mathieson's Sinfonia of London, which was largely used for recording film soundtracks), the LSO "wasn't really a proper job at all", since the departing players had taken much of the orchestra's best work, including the film sessions, with them. The LSO struggled with a lack of engagements and Denis had to make ends meet by deputising with his old orchestra in Birmingham while they found his replacement (which turned out to be Douglas Hinkley, another of Sidney Langston's former pupils). The standard of conductors also wasn't always of the highest level, apart from Josef Krips, the flamboyant Leopold Stokowski and the fiery Antal Dorati, who Denis described as 'the biggest kick up the backside the orchestra ever had.' Denis commented that he coped with the awkward ones "by smiling and looking intelligent!"

His work with the LSO is exemplified by the many of the fine recordings he made with the orchestra, especially the two of Mahler's 3rd Symphony with its extended trombone solos in the first movement (one with Jascha Horenstein, still in the catalogue, and the other with Sir Georg Solti, currently unavailable), and Sir Colin Davis's recordings of the Berlioz *Grande Messe de Morts* and the Mozart Requiem. He and his late 1970s section (Roger Groves, Eric Crees and Frank Mathison) can also be heard to great effect in company with their peerless tuba-player colleague, John Fletcher, on the soundtracks of *Star Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*. Along with his work in the LSO, he also managed to find time to play with the London Sinfonietta (a chamber orchestra specialising in contemporary music) and, for a short period, the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble (PJBE). In addition to the Gordon Jacob, he has had other concertos written for him, notably by Buxton Orr and Alun Hoddinott. However, it was during the early part of his tenure as principal trombone with the LSO that the British

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yen of designers and manufacturers of mouthpieces and mutes, and talks to the man himself.

trombone revolution started.
While with the orchestra in Belgium at the 1958 Brussels Exhibition, he managed to acquire a Conn 8H tenor trombone, which made a much bigger sound than the instruments players in the UK were using at the time. His colleague, principal horn Barry Tuckwell, commented, "It sounds like you, but even more so!" Denis managed to convert his LSO colleagues to Conns as well and the difference in sound quality was very noticeable. One by one, other UK players followed suit and began to acquire Conn trombones, despite their high price due to import restrictions. Denis then found that the Vincent Bach 4G mouthpiece he was now using on his Conn was fine for loud playing, but during very quiet passages, the instrument sounded somewhat 'anonymous' ("You couldn't tell whether it was a trombone, a horn or a euphonium," he said). So, he decided to take matters literally into his own hands and set about producing something better. While at school in Luton, he had a first-class education in technical drawing and engineering skills, since it was the ambition of most of the parents to get their sons into the drawing office at Vauxhall Motors, which offered excellent career prospects. He searched around and came across an old Salvation Army euphonium mouthpiece with which to experiment, cutting a thread on it so that different rims could be tried. He had also found a small engineering company run by Bill Cox, a retired merchant navy ship's engineer. Denis showed his prototype to Bill, and Bill made a tool known as a 'former', producing an initial run of 100 mouthpieces, which Denis sold for £5 apiece. Orders began to come in and Denis began to introduce new trombone models, along with one for euphonium. Around this time, Boosey & Hawkes invited him to help develop the Sovereign trombone which, of course, needed a suitable mouthpiece, and suddenly, Denis found himself supplier of mouthpieces to one of the world's biggest instrument manufacturers. With the help of his colleagues (and, of course, Bill Cox), Denis was able to design and produce a whole range of brass instrument mouthpieces which Boosey & Hawkes sold until the firm's manufacturing arm closed down. In consultation with some of Britain's finest brass players, Denis then began a project to develop better mouthpieces, the range eventually extending to over 100 carefully worked-out models for every possible brass instrument, with every product made to precise tolerances and hand finished with an excellent standard of polishing and plating.

The mute-making business began a little later, and Denis recalled, "Around 1969 I had tentatively suggested that somebody ought to design mutes that actually played in tune and worked in every register. We had been recording film music with Bernard Herrmann, who had helped to make all those Hitchcock films such a success. He was contemptuous of the old fibre mutes that I and my colleagues in the LSO trombone section were using. He called them 'psychological mutes' and we knew what he meant. Our trumpet colleagues were using a famous US make, but they always played slightly sharp with a very tinny sound and we did not blend at all. I found a newer American trombone mute which I thought would solve our problems. It made a great sound, but unfortunately it was just too big to handle easily and, on one memorable occasion, it refused

Denis Wick as we all know him so well

to come out of the bell of my trombone, then finally slipped from my fingers with a tremendous clatter during a live broadcast of a BBC Promenade concert. André Previn, our conductor, was not amused and something had to be done. At the time I had a student who was also a brilliant graphic artist, with a talent that enabled him to make a perfect freehand drawing of anything, instantly. I remember the day well - it was December 26, 1969. With three children, Christmas had been a busy time, but now I could relax. I had assembled every trumpet and trombone mute that I could find and invited my young friend over to draw all of them, which he did in just a few minutes. I then superimposed all the drawings for trumpet mutes, and discovered a curious phenomenon: if I drew (with the aid of compasses, I should add) a kind of median line between all of them, the proportions seemed just about perfect. There was a symmetry between height and width, and all the curves were proportionate. The same happened with the trombone mute, arrived at in the same way, although this was more difficult, as I was determined to make it grippable by my not very big hand. So, when I next visited Bill Cox, I showed him my drawings and asked if these mutes could be made. He said, 'You need a metal-spinner'. I had no idea what a metal spinner might be and I must have looked puzzled. 'Leave it with me,' he said, 'I'll get some prices for you.' A week later he told me, 'About £2 each for the trumpet mutes.'
By now, Boosey & Hawkes had been selling my mouthpieces for 18 months, so I asked Bill Martin, their buyer, if they might be interested and for about how much they could sell them. 'About £2,' was the reply. It had seemed a good idea, but there was no profit margin, so I more or less forgot about it - that is, until almost a year later. I was returning home after an LSO recording session at the marvellous Kingsway Hall (now long gone) when I saw a discarded newspaper on the seat next to me on the tube train. In the classified advertisements section a proclamation read, 'Metal Spinning Capacity Available'. Where had I heard about metal spinning? Yes, of course! A phone call led to an appointment to visit a Dickensian–looking workshop in Camden Town, north London.
I showed my drawings to the three elderly, odd-looking characters there who looked at them quizzically, being unsure exactly what a brass mute was. 'How much?' I asked, and they consulted with each other. 'Abaht ten bob,' was the reply, which was a quarter of what old Bill Cox had quoted! I picked up the first samples a week later. They had spun a dozen or so in aluminium, using simple hardwood tooling. The arrangement was that if the mutes worked, I would order 100. The first batch looked good, if rather dirty. At home, a search in the rubbish bin produced some discarded cork table mats. I cut out some pieces of cork, glued them on and the following day, recording again in Kingsway Hall, I passed one down to Howard Snell, who was then our principal trumpet. 'What's this?' he asked, rather suspiciously.
'A mute,' I replied.
'I can see it's a mute,' said Howard, adding, 'where did you get it?'.
'Never mind that,' I replied, 'what do you think of it?'
He tried it and exclaimed, 'This is fantastic!' He

passed it down to George Reynolds and Willie Lang and they all turned round like a close-harmony chromatic triad. I handed out two more, they loved them, and the rest, you might say, is history. Within the next weeks, I had literally dozens of calls from London trumpet players who also wanted them.

"40 years later, many thousands have been sold. Several metal spinning firms have made them for me; they have been anodised from almost the beginning. They have been copied by various rival companies (imitation and flattery?) and I am grateful for the muse that seemed to have visited me all those years ago. These were the first of more than 30 models, that have formed the backbone of my business for all that time. The trombone mutes were, when I first made them, better than anything so far, but not quite good enough. There were some extra resonances which had crept in on the highest notes. I made some changes and found that I could move these resonances to other notes, but after making several new versions, I eventually came back to the original when I found that the anodising process immediately solved the problem. I was finally convinced that it was as perfect as I could make it, when the composer and conductor, Benjamin Britten, overheard me demonstrating one to Stuart Knussen (the LSO's principal double-bass) and Howard Snell during a tea break at the famous Snape concert hall, when we were recording Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius* with Britten conducting. He asked what we were doing and insisted on listening himself, virtually taking over the testing process, asking for me to play at every dynamic, making exhaustive comparisons with all the other (mainly American) makes, and told us that mine was much more to his taste than any of the others. This was a tremendous compliment from a composer who has been described as an 'orchestral chemist' for his brilliant orchestration (Stuart Knussen said, in his unmistakable Manchester accent, 'Meck sure you get that in writing!')."

Denis Wick isn't one for resting on past achievements or standing still, and development, or in some cases, redevelopment, takes place continually. He explained, "Over the last few years, I had heard it said that my older trumpet straight mutes were better than those in current production. Of course, retooling had taken place, probably five or six times over the years, and the new tooling has always been made to conform with the latest production. So, I searched for the original 1969 drawings, eventually found them and discovered that there *was* a slight difference, so I had the tooling remade yet again. The new 'old' models are indeed much better - that extra 2mm on the base diameter and 1.5 mm on the height have added a bit more volume, although the intonation has remained good. These new 'original' mutes have been on the market for several years now, so although there was nothing seriously wrong with the slightly reduced version, the new ones are something rather special. I am told that the newest

The late-1950s LSO trombone section

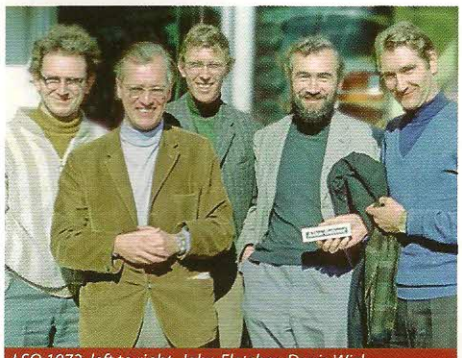
versions, with brass or copper bases, are even better!"

During the process of designing a practise mute intended to make near-silent practise possible, but also to maintain good intonation and a 'feel' not too different from normal playing, Denis made a valuable discovery. He explained, "One aspect of the brass-blowing body machine, which is hardly ever emphasized enough, is the throat. By opening the throat area - or closing it - the tone-quality can be varied enormously. Although the differences are not quite as much as in singing, they can easily be heard on any brass instrument. It remains a problem, however, to put across to the young player the concept of 'open your throat'. Many ideas like 'swallowing a football' - 'yawning outwards' or 'cooling a hot potato' work to a greater or lesser degree, as I found in my own teaching, but needed to be said so many times! I discovered that by using my practise mute for loud practise, this tight throat problem could be eliminated in minutes. There was an additional bonus in that breathing became much more efficient when the throat was forced open by the resistance of the mute. The total result exceeded my wildest dreams. Here was a way of speeding up the teaching process, especially with young players. Even the smallest and weakest could sound almost professional in volume within a matter of weeks rather than years. I well remember a very little girl who suddenly was able to produce an amazingly loud *fortissimo*.

I began to realise that I had stumbled upon a teaching technique that could help young brass students in a very positive way. Worldwide sales of practise mutes for trumpet, piccolo trumpet, French horn, tenor and bass trombones seem to show that other people think so too, and there are now practise mutes for all brass instruments."

That is not the limit of Denis Wick's activities, though, and this seemingly inexhaustible man has long been a much sought-after teacher. Having been appointed Professor of Trombone at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in 1967, he taught there regularly until 1976, continuing to work as a consultant professor and conductor until 1989. His intensely musical, yet very practical, approach to teaching is widely respected. He was appointed Professor of Trombone at the Royal Academy of Music in 2000 and awarded a fellowship in 2002. His textbook, *Trombone Technique*, is used worldwide and considered one of the most important publications of its kind, with translations available in Japanese, German, Swedish and Italian. On his retirement from the LSO in 1988, he was awarded the annual award of the International Trombone Association, presented each year to an individual who has greatly influenced the field of trombone, and in 1990, he was elected Second Vice President in charge of international affairs. From 1992 to 1995 he served as President of the British Trombone Society and, although now retired from professional trombone playing, he continues to be in demand as a conductor and for masterclasses worldwide. In 2006 he was presented with the Neill Humfeld Award, which recognizes outstanding trombone teaching. From 2004 until 2006 he served as President of the ITA, brought the International Trombone Festival to Birmingham and made great strides to internationalise the Association's magazine. His conducting work began at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in the 1960s and has naturally been centered on brass and wind ensembles. It also included for many years an excellent youth symphony orchestra which has bred generations of professional players. His own London Wind Orchestra made prize-winning recordings in the 1970s which set new standards of excellence for this kind of ensemble, and his publishing company, Denis Wick Publishing, specialises in wind band and brass ensemble repertoire, most of which he transcribed himself.

It is plain to see the extraordinary influence this man has had on brass playing, and it is small wonder that the name on so many brass players' lips is that of Denis Wick.



LSO 1972, left to right, John Fletcher, Denis Wick, Peter Gane, Frank Mathison and Tony Parsons.

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