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EDWARD GREGSON



Rebecca Agnew

September 2008 is a very significant month for Edward Gregson. It will be the first time in decades that he hasn't had to return to an academic post after the long summer vacation, having just retired after 12 years as Principal of the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM) in Manchester. While over in Birmingham, his *Rococo Variations* will be premièred at the British Open Championships on 13 September, Gregson's first brass band test-piece for 17 years.

So how is he feeling in these early days of his retirement? "Great!" he laughs. "I'm a free man!" Gregson spearheaded some major changes during his tenure at the RNCM. "When I went to Manchester I said that I'd do ten years then retire at 60. I've gone on for two years more, but that was because we had a major £7m building project which I wanted to see through." The concrete, almost brutalist frontage to the college has been replaced with glass and steel, which Gregson describes as 'absolutely fabulous', and now houses 25 additional teaching rooms as well as two very large studios big enough to accommodate a chamber orchestra.

"The problem," Gregson explains, "is that, like anything in the public sector now, these jobs have become so bureaucratic, which is very time consuming. My problem has been finding time to write - over the past 12 years it has been difficult. I am going to miss the staff, the camaraderie though. It's a wrench but I think it's just time in my life to kind of change direction."

But more than anything, it will be the students that Gregson will miss most. "It's wonderful to see them arrive as first-year undergraduates and by the time they

leave you know they're on the edge of a big career." He recalls first hearing Jamie Prophet, now principal trumpet with the BBC Philharmonic, playing soprano cornet with the RNCM Brass Band. "I thought he was going to be something a bit special - you can just tell with people like that. Sure enough, in his final year he got the associate principal job, which was just fantastic."



Edward Gregson.

Another highlight of Gregson's time at the RNCM was the conservatoire hosting the former BBC Festival of Brass. "We took that over about ten years ago," he recalls, "with Paul Hindmarsh as artistic director for the past four." Gregson describes the weekend-long event as, 'the most important festival of its kind in the world because it's just about new music and not traditional repertory'. Typically, bands appearing at the annual event include Black Dyke, Grimethorpe, Fodens, Faireys, Brighouse & Rastrick, Cory and one other such group such as a band from Norway. "Those bands are very important for the festival," Gregson continues. "They take on all these new pieces but don't get much of a fee. They are the bedrock of the festival."

Moments which stand out over the years for Gregson have included conducting Black Dyke in the 2008 festival in the revision of his 1976 *Variations on Laudate Dominum*, and "just hearing stunning playing of stunning

repertory. It's one of the things I really love about the RNCM - two weeks before this there is a four-day chamber music festival, then there are jazz, contemporary music and cello festivals. It's a highly innovative menu which sets it apart from other conservatoires."

Gregson may have left the RNCM but he and his wife Sue will continue to live in the area. "As far as we are concerned Manchester is our life now," he says. "We have so many friends - I cannot imagine not living there. A lot of people retire and decide to live by the seaside - they downsize to a little place, they don't know anyone and life is a misery. The one thing that you should never do is retire and move house at the same time - people warned me about that. So we moved to our present house about three years ago as I knew I was going to be retiring. I've built a studio above the garage where I write."

So is Sue looking forward to having him at home every day? "I hope so!" he laughs. "That's got to be tested! I'm looking forward to spending more time with her and we hope to do some travelling. Having been in education for nearly 40 years one of the things I've not been able to do is go away in May or late September, and those are the great times to be in France or Italy."

Gregson's other plans as he begins his new life include a string of commissions waiting for him to write in his new studio. "I'm writing a song for an event in October, then some string orchestra pieces for Manchester Camerata and then some choral music and a BBC commission, which I'm not allowed to talk about yet. It's challenging but very exciting and I'm looking forward to getting stuck in."

Plenty to keep him going then, but Gregson, enthusiastic as ever, is looking beyond this list. "I want to write a one-act opera, I want to write more choral music and I want to finish writing a concerto for every instrument - I think I'm on number ten so far. I've got to write for flute, oboe and bassoon yet, but I'll probably get that down to two by doing a double concerto for oboe and bassoon. Then one for viola - that will be a challenge," he smiles, "and finally double bass. That's enough for the next five years!"

"You need to plan ahead quite carefully," Gregson continues. If a commission is proposed, he first decides whether or not he would like to take it on. "If it's something which really appeals, then I'll say, 'Yes, let's talk about it'. Planning is



A youthful twenty-one year old Gregson at the Royal Festival Hall in 1967 prepares for a performance of his *Concertante for Piano and Band* with the International Staff Band of the Salvation Army, conducted by Bernard Adams.

everything because you can't be trying to finish three major works in the space of six months - that would be crazy."

Gregson's willingness to try his hand at such a wide range of compositional genres - from brass band music to opera, from string quartets to choral works - is refreshing. "What interests me as a composer is breadth. I've written everything from educational music to heavy symphonic music. It's a great challenge to write a simple grade three examination piece when you've got only eight notes to play with, a time limit and can't include any tricky rhythms - it really tests your originality."

Will Gregson be returning to write for brass bands in the near future? Luckily for his fans, his *Rococo Variations* will be unveiled at the British Open Championships on 13 September. "It's the first test piece I've written for 17 years, having made a decision in 1991 that I'd had enough of writing for brass band." Gregson admits that after *Connotations* (1977), *Dances and Arias* (1984) and *Of Men and Mountains* (1991) he felt, 'that's it, I can't say anything else really.'

In 1998, Gregson was asked to write the test piece for the 2000 European Championships. The commission didn't come to fruition but Gregson had half-composed the piece, so he approached Nicholas Childs who was then conducting Fodens. "I asked him if he might like the piece," Gregson recalls. "It happened to be their centenary, so they commissioned it and *The Trumpets of the Angels* was performed at the Bridgewater Hall in Manchester in 2000. It was a large-scale, 20-minute-long piece, with organ and off-stage groups and very symphonic in scale."

"After that I felt I couldn't write anything else for brass band as I'd said it all," he goes on. "Then, as often happens, I was working on my Saxophone Concerto in 2006 and, like many other composers, I



Edward Gregson in 1993, at the time of writing *Of Men and Mountains*.

found myself with a tranche of material that I had written but which didn't fit. Suddenly, and I can't explain why, it turned into an idea that I thought would be good for brass band. Then the whole idea started to germinate and I thought, 'This really could be a brass band piece.' Then I remembered that Martin Mortimer of the Open Championships had been asking me for quite a long time to write a test piece and I'd always said no." Gregson picked up the phone to call Mortimer and soon found himself commissioned to write the 2008 test piece.

The result was *Rococo Variations*, which Gregson admits was "not the kind of piece I'd ever thought I'd write. It's a set of variations on a quasi-baroque theme, which isn't the sort of thing I normally do. I can't even explain why it turned out like that. In one sense," he continues, "it's going back to a traditional structure, but I hope it still has innovative ideas."



Edward Gregson conducting Brighouse & Rastrick Band in BBC Studio 7, Manchester in 1986 for a broadcast and CD recording of his music. Robert Childs here plays his *Symphonic Rhapsody*.

For one, each of the six variations is dedicated to a different composer, namely Elgar, Howarth, Ray, Steadman-Allen, Eric Ball, John McCabe, Wilfred Heaton and Philip Wilby. "It's a sort of *hommage*," Gregson explains. "Each of the variations has a signature, a little quote from their music in it. I asked permission from

them all except for those sadly no longer with us - I do hope they're not turning in their graves!"

As we flick through the score, hot off the press, Gregson talks me through the work. "What I'd call the main emotional heart of the music is the variation called Lament, which is basically a chaconne - 16 repetitions of a bass theme which is based on the opening theme. It's dedicated to Wilfred Heaton, who is a composer I particularly admire. In the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s he wrote music for brass bands which was adventurous for its time and very symphonic, with real depth. This is the longest variation - it lasts about four-and-a-half minutes - and in a way is probably the most difficult to play."

The final movement, which is dedicated to Philip Wilby, is a fugal scherzo because, Gregson smiles, "Philip writes bloody good fugues! I've used one of his themes which enters in counterpoint against my theme."

Gregson believes that composing a test piece has its own peculiar challenges. "Writing for competitions is always difficult because you've got to contend with what I call the expectations of the performers, who always want very virtuoso, showy music and I can understand that. For me, writing a test piece isn't any different from writing any other piece of music. If you try to approach it with the mentality of 'I'm writing a test piece', it will become meaningless, formulaic and no-one will want to hear it. So, hopefully, it's a piece of music first and secondly a test piece. That's the only way I personally can approach it."

From a technical perspective, test pieces must be written for a standard competing band plus percussion and adhere to a set time restriction. "You've got all the best bands in Britain there," Gregson goes on. "In that sense, technically you can do what you want. It's fantastic that you don't have to restrict yourself. I can say to myself 'I know that's difficult but it doesn't matter!' But I don't think you should set out to write a virtuoso piece. There are compromises with writing a piece like this, but I think in the end what is important is to have the integrity to write a piece of music."

When composing *Rococo Variations*, Gregson limited the number of percussion instruments in his score. "I haven't written for loads and loads of percussion," he explains. "I think a lot of brass band pieces these days are overscored for percussion, calling on about 25 instruments. But I have written quite an exposed part for marimba, based on the fact that all the top bands have these fantastic percussion sections. Most of them were trained in

conservatoires, so they can all really play.”

The printed score to *Rococo Variations* has several introductory paragraphs, penned by Gregson, where he addresses the issue of performance style. “I’ve said that as the theme is quasi-baroque, they should aim to play in as period style as can be done.” Gregson would ideally like players to keep dotted rhythms clean and crisp, almost double-dotted, and use very little vibrato. “I always try to see that a

brass band can be a wonderful vehicle in terms of expressivity between what I’d call a traditional sound and an orchestral sound. When bands play straight, clean and right the way through the instrument, it creates a magical sound.”

Gregson spent most of the 2007 Christmas vacation working on *Rococo Variations*, which he completed shortly after. The RNCM Brass Band did a few run-through of the work for proofing purposes, so Gregson is looking forward to hearing 17 back-to-back performances of his latest composition. “The top British bands are incredible in what they can do and I have huge admiration for them.” *Rococo Variations* is dedicated to Gregson’s brother Bram, a former euphoniumist and now a brass conductor and music educationalist who lives in Canada. “I think he quite likes it,” he smiles.

Despite having little involvement with the brass band world over the past couple of decades, either as composer or conductor, Gregson likes to keep an eye - and ear - on banding. “On my travels, I have heard a fair number of some of the top bands in Norway and Holland,” he recalls. “I think



Edward Gregson takes a liquid break during rehearsals of the première of his Tuba Concerto in 1976, much to the amusement of the members of Besses o’ th’ Barn Band. John Fletcher (for whom he wrote the concerto) is in the foreground.

the rise of European banding over the past 20 years has been remarkable and now there’s not much to choose between the top British and the top European bands.”

“Interest in brass bands seems to be growing around the world - in America they have a national championship now,” he goes on. “There’s a lot of gloom and doom talked about brass bands, labelling them as dinosaurs, but I don’t think that’s true. I think banding’s great strength is that it’s an amateur music tradition - people love playing and people love listening - and I feel pretty buoyant about that. It’s a great tradition and we should be proud of it.”

Talk of the brass banding scene brings us to the subject of the BBC Young Musician of the Year Competition 2008, which was won by the 12-year-old trombonist Peter Moore. “What a musician!” Gregson exclaims. “He’s a local lad and a student at Chets,” - namely Chetham’s School of Music in Manchester where Gregson is a governor. “He’s a lovely boy and a musician who happens to play the trombone. Just listen to his phrasing, his musicality and his sound - they’re all impressive. And he’s got a hell of a technique. I don’t know how he does it at the age of 12 - heaven only knows what he’s going to be like at the age of 18!”

Gregson is particularly delighted that Peter Moore plays in brass bands alongside his parents and his siblings. “It’s a great story - coming straight from a brass band to become Young Musician of the Year. He’s a very well

adjusted boy and very well supported. It really is good news for the brass band movement.”

As he begins his change of lifestyle, Gregson will continue as a governor at Chetham’s and will also remain on the board of the Performing Right Society where he is a writer-director. “I’ll have to try and resist any further offers though,” he smiles. “I’m worried people might say, ‘Ah, well, he’s retired now. Let’s ask him to become an external examiner’.”

For now, Gregson is looking forward to the response to his latest CD, which has been recently released on the Chandos label. It has already received rave reviews in Gramophone magazine and The Times. The disc - his second for Chandos - features recordings of Gregson’s Saxophone Concerto, his Concerto for Piano and Wind *Homages*, and the Trumpet Concerto, where the soloist is the Norwegian Ole Edvard Antonsen. “He’s just the most phenomenal player,” Gregson enthuses. “He’s as well known as Håken Hardenberger in Europe although he doesn’t come to the UK much.”

Antonsen contacted Gregson back in the late 1980s and told him that he would like to perform and hopefully record his trumpet concerto. That recording sadly never came to fruition, so Gregson was delighted to invite Antonsen to finally record the concerto for Chandos, and even more delighted when he said yes. “I think he’s just sensational,” Gregson beams. “It’s a fantastic CD.” Clark Rundell conducts the BBC Philharmonic on the disc, which also features saxophonist Nobuya Sugawa and pianist Nelson Goerner and was recorded just across the road from the RNCM at New Broadcasting House, Manchester.

After decades of juggling his two careers as composer and educationalist (prior to the RNCM he spent 20 years at Goldsmith’s College, London), Gregson is now more than ready to focus almost completely on writing, with a healthy list of commissions lined up. “I’d like to do more conducting too if the right invitation came,” he adds. “I’m also going back to doing some jogging and try to get fit,” he continues. “We live quite near the Macclesfield Canal and there is a lovely circular run of about two-and-a-half miles. I’m going to discipline myself to get up, have a light breakfast then a jog. That’s my aspiration. Whether I’ll do it or not is another matter!”



Ib Lanzsky-Otto (left - then principal horn with the Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra) and Edward Gregson in light-hearted mood in Gothenburg in 1985, discussing the score of the Horn Concerto in preparation for a broadcast of the work by Swedish Radio.