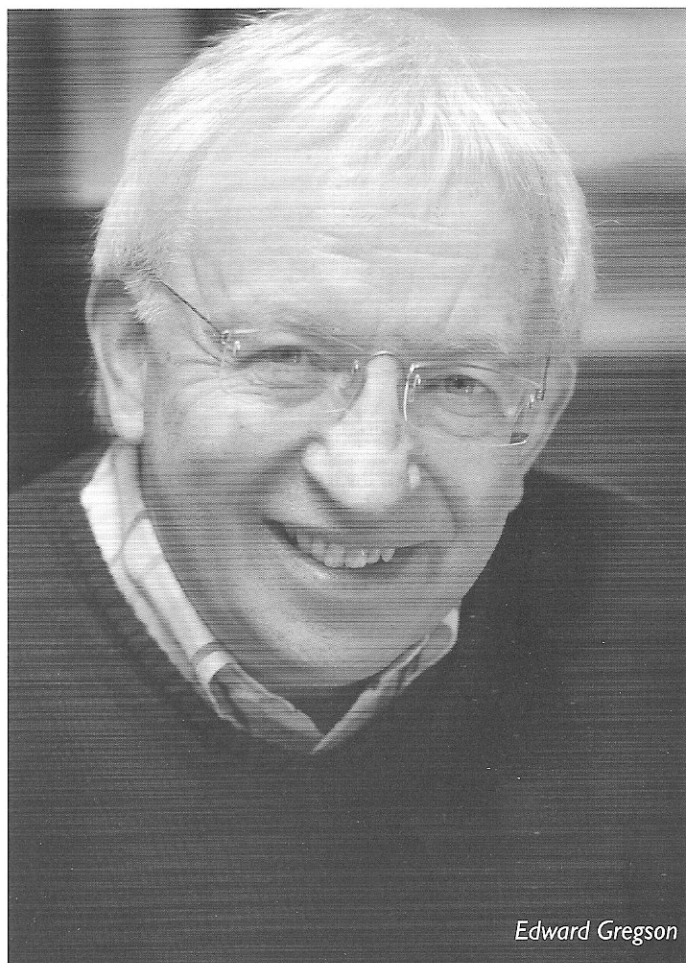


AN INTERVIEW WITH EDWARD GREGSON



Edward Gregson

Professor Gregson is a Patron of the Alan Bush Music Trust. Earlier in the year, he found time in a busy schedule to be interviewed by the Editor.

MH: In July 2008, you retired after 12 years as Principal of the Royal Northern College of Music. What do you regard as the most memorable highlights of your distinguished career?

EG: Well, first of all, I must say that it was a privilege to lead the Royal Northern College of Music for twelve years. When I left the RAM as a student in 1967 I embarked on an academic career almost straight away. I taught at Goldsmiths College, University of London, for almost twenty years before taking up the post of Principal at the RNCM in 1996. As for memorable highlights, well there were so many of them that it would be difficult to be selective, but I'll try!

MH: Which one are you particularly proud of?

EG: One of the things I'm most proud of, for obvious reasons, was the foundation of the annual contemporary composer festivals. I started these in 1998 when I persuaded Hans Werner Henze to come to the RNCM for a five day festival of his music – it was sensational! We could not have mounted such a festival without the collaboration of

the BBC Philharmonic. This also meant that we were guaranteed broadcasts on Radio 3, an important aspect in attracting such distinguished international composers. But it was the mix of student performances (over 70 per cent and professional performances that really made the festival. The commitment and dedication of the students in preparing such difficult repertoire was impressive and every composer who visited us (starting with Henze) was full of praise for their efforts. Since then the list of visiting composers has been impressive, from Andriessen to Birtwistle, from Corigliano to Lindberg, from Maxwell Davies to MacMillan, as well as many others. The award of a Queen's Anniversary Prize for Higher Education (unusual in itself to go to a music college) for these RNCM Festivals, was reward indeed.

The other main memory I have is of the pleasure of experiencing student successes, and helping them in their transition to professional careers; but also of those many students who did not make it as they might have wished, but who will make a valuable contribution to society in a variety of ways.

MH: Now that you are able to devote more of your time to composing, can you tell us something about the projects and commissions on which you are currently working?

EG: Now that I've retired from the 'day job', I've had the satisfaction of becoming a full time composer for the first time in my life. I shall be very busy fulfilling commissions over the next few years. In terms of recent works, I recently completed a new work, *Dream Song for Large Orchestra*, for the 'Mahler in Manchester' Festival (a BBC commission). It was premiered by the BBC Philharmonic and broadcast recently on Radio 3. My next work is for unaccompanied solo violin, commissioned as the test piece for the Manchester International Violin Competition in 2011. I have a new CD coming out on

the Chandos label next year (Volume 3 of my concertos and orchestral music), which will include my concertos for trombone and cello, as well as my first orchestral work, *Music for Chamber Orchestra*, which I started work on when I was still studying with Alan Bush (it is dedicated to him). So I'm very pleased that this is being recorded as it is a tribute to someone I greatly admired, both as a composer and teacher.

MH: I've met other former students of the Royal Academy of Music who studied composition with Alan Bush. They have frequently commented on his rigorous style of teaching. What do you remember of this?

EG: It is true that Alan was a rigorous and demanding teacher, but that is how it should be. He made you justify everything you wrote down, from harmony to counterpoint, from orchestration to rhythmic structures. But he also dealt with minutiae: I remember very well his taking me to task for writing so many octaves in the left hand of my piano music. He told me that octaves should only be used for colouration or emphasis, not as a norm. Of course, he was quite right! I also learnt a great deal from him about counterpoint, where his own music was a shining beacon of the art. One only has to look at his string quartet, *Dialectic*, arguably one of his masterpieces, to wonder at the control of writing in four parts, where line is everything and harmony reduced to second class status. Tippett has written about how much he learned from Bush's music in this regard, as I certainly did. It is also his control of ever expanding form in that work which also impresses – it seems to have an inner life of its own.

MH: What else do you remember?

EG: Alan was also such a widely read person that lessons with him were not always just about music; they embraced philosophy, literature, poetry, and much else. He was also a composer with prejudices, as we all are; for example he abhorred serial composition, but knew the repertoire. I remember going to him one day, as a second year student I think, and saying that I felt I should know more about twelve-tone music, and attempt to write some. He turned to me, with a slightly withering look, and said,

'My boy, if you wish to know more about the dodecaphonic method of composing [note the use of terminology!] then I can teach you all you need to know in an hour or so, and you will be perfectly competent in that method, if that is what you wish!'

So, of course, he did! He knew his Schoenberg and Webern very well; it was just that he did not agree with them.

In the end, my abiding memory of Alan is of a dedicated teacher who gave 100 per cent

to his students and that is something I have tried to replicate in my own composition teaching.

MH: What are your thoughts on the status of British classical music today?

EG: British contemporary classical music is in a difficult position right now. It is harder than ever for composers to get commissions, performances, broadcasts, and recordings of their music, particularly if they are just starting out in their careers. In addition, the Performing Rights Society has made income potential for classical composers much more difficult in recent years by reducing rates and tariffs for live performances and broadcasts. Commercial music rules the world! In my own case, if I didn't have performance and broadcasting royalties from overseas, I would be in a sorry state in relation to my composition income.

MH: Will things improve in the future?

EG: I remain optimistic about the future because I believe that society will always need contemporary composers, just as it needs playwrights, poets, painters, architects et al – indeed all those people who add creative value to our otherwise increasingly commercially-driven world. Fortunately, audiences are still intellectually curious about new art, and still have the desire to experience it. I felt this most recently in the Mahler Festival in Manchester, when every Mahler symphony was preceded by a new commission. The capacity audiences were genuinely interested in, and supportive of, these new works, and all the composers received wonderful receptions. That gave me great heart!

MH: Yes, it is encouraging! Finally, coming back to the Alan Bush Music Trust, of which we are both keen supporters, how best do you think that the Trustees might proceed in future to bring Alan's music to a wider public?

EG: Like all charities, the Trustees must have a genuine passion for the aims of the Trust. In this case, Trustees should endeavour to do their utmost to promote interest in the music of Alan Bush, to initiate new ways of furthering the cause, and to use what influence they have to assist pragmatically. For my part, as a Patron, I try to use what limited influence I have to encourage performances of his music, particularly by young and upcoming musicians. Future musicians should be aware of the wonderful qualities of his compositions and that is difficult in such a global market place; but, as the saying goes, if something is worth doing it's worth doing properly!