

Edward Gregson *Composer*

My parents were Salvation Army ministers so I was surrounded by brass band and choral music as a child, and I've carried many of those sonorities with me. I learnt the piano, but when we moved town my parents couldn't find a teacher and I was left to my own devices. I started playing what was in my head on the piano and writing it down: I've composed ever since.

I heard little classical music at home, however, which gave it a greater impact when I was introduced to **BRAHMS'S** First Symphony at my grammar school. The visceral impact of that raw power and passion was overwhelming, although I couldn't at the time grasp its intellectual craft. I also encountered the First Piano Concerto, which turned out to be significant. The big symphonic drama of a soloist pitted against an orchestra appealed to me – one of my first large-scale compositions was a Horn Concerto (1970) and I've written ten concertos to date.

After encountering Brahms I devoured the orchestral canon. It was as a teenager in Manchester that I first heard **STRAVINSKY'S** *Rite of Spring*: I don't think any composer can hear that work and not be changed by it; it remains a landmark in the history of Western music. It was thrilling to see the score and the way Stravinsky deals with asymmetric rhythm; I was bowled over by the rhythmic complexity of it, and the almost primeval simplicity of the modal melodies with which he pulls the work together.

I went to the Royal Academy to study with Alan Bush, who was terrific and disciplined: he dissected counterpoint for me. He was keen on **BARTÓK** and introduced me to the quartets, which had a vital role in building my development as a composer and my approach to structure, form and rhythm. Bartók made me see that the heart and the mind have to work together, the rigour and the passion: he uses earthy folk melody and treats it in a radical, truly modern way. Even today his music sounds startlingly new. The Fifth Quartet is my favourite. It embodies two things: there's the intellectual discipline in its construction – its arch form, and the way that in the first movement you have three subjects



YOUNG AT HEART:
Edward Gregson, a long-time supporter of BBC Young Musician

EDWARD GREGSON WAS born in 1945 and studied at the Royal Academy of Music. Initially a composer for brass and wind bands, he went on to compose orchestral works, including ten concertos. He was professor of music at Goldsmith's, and then principal of the Royal Northern College of Music. A third disc of his concertos is being released on Chandos, with the Trombone Concerto played by 14-year-old BBC Young Musician winner Peter Moore, and his Cello Concerto (*A Song for Chris*), played by another former BBC Young Musician, Guy Johnston.

which are recapitulated in reverse order with the material inverted. Then there's the quality of the musical ideas, which are exceptional.

If I learnt the power of rhythm from Bartók, **SHOSTAKOVICH** was an inspirational figure for his refusal to be swayed from his own musical path in the face of unimaginable forces. When I was a student you weren't allowed to like Shostakovich, he was discredited by the New Music brigade. But history has sorted all that out: we can see now he is Mahler's successor. The work of his I love above all others is the first Cello Concerto. I quote from it in my own Cello Concerto, written in memory of Christopher Rowland,

who taught chamber music at the Royal Northern College, and was one of the greatest teachers I've ever come across. As leader of the Fitzwilliam Quartet, Chris gave the British premieres of Shostakovich's final three quartets.

The last composer who has made a big impact on my own writing is **JOHN ADAMS**. I remember hearing his *Harmonielehre* in the late '80s and realising that here was a new expressive aesthetic which opened a door for me. Adams was vilified at the time; he didn't get the intellectual seal, but he had combined Minimal techniques with late German Romanticism and created something new, using a vast orchestra. I always think the first movement is like Bruckner on speed! My response was *Stepping Out* for string orchestra. ■
Interview by Helen Wallace

EDWARD GREGSON MUSIC CHOICE



Brahms
Symphony No. 1
Berlin Philharmonic
Orchestra/Claudio Abbado
(download at www.deutschegrammophon.com)



Stravinsky
Rite of Spring
Columbia Symphony
Orchestra/Stravinsky
Sony SMK 89875 £8.99



Bartók
Quartet No. 5
Emerson Quartet
DG 477 6322 £12.99



Shostakovich
Cello Concerto No. 1
Rostropovich, Philadelphia
Orchestra/Eugene Ormandy
Sony MHK 63327 £8.99



John Adams
Harmonielehre
San Francisco Symphony
Orchestra/Edo de Waart
Nonesuch 7559791152 £12.99