Composing test-pieces – an art or a science?

by Edward Gregson

Composers arousing controversy? Surely not! What is the world coming to?

Of course, that has been going on since the world began, if you get what I mean. The history of music is littered with countless examples, from Gesualdo's madrigals to Bach's chorale harmonisations and improvisations on the organ to a bewildered congregation in Arnstadt, from Beethoven's revolutionary third and fifth symphonies and his extraordinary but 'perplexing' late string quartets to Berlioz's 'deranged' *Symphonie Fantasique,* from Liszt's outrageously virtuoso piano music and his performances of them, turning respectable aristocratic ladies into swooning wrecks, to his son-in-law's (Wagner that is) epic transformation of a innately conservative tradition in opera into an explosive means of emotional expression and psychological potency, and from Stravinsky's daring explorations of new rhythmic structures in *The Rite of Spring* to Schoenberg's invention of a new, highly organised, but controversial atonal language… the list goes on and on!

Fast forward to the world of brass bands and its major repertoire, and we find there is no shortage of controversy. Many of us experienced the furore over Robert Simpson's *Energy* ('a strange musical language within an even stranger musical structure'), Birtwistle's *Grimethorpe Aria* ('a dissonant mess'), Elgar Howarth's *Fireworks* ('too much percussion'), John McCabe's *Images* ('noise in place of music'), Wilfred Heaton's *Contest Music* ('too thinly scored') or, more recently, Judith Bingham's *Prague* ('no tunes'). Now, not all of these works were originally written as test-pieces, and some have never been used as such, but what they have in common is that they ruffled the feathers of an inherently conservative section of conductors, players, and audiences. And yet, at least in the current writer's opinion, they are all wonderful examples of brass band writing at its very best. So were/are some composers 'ahead' of their audience? The answer is almost certainly yes, but we should not forget that what might seem radical today becomes tomorrow's mainstream.

Enter Paul Lovatt-Cooper and the apparent fuss over his latest work for brass band, set as the test-piece for the recent Royal Albert Hall National Final. Why has it caused such a furore? Well, as I understand it, mainly because some people think that it is a rather poor piece of music, while others think it is wonderful and was just right for the occasion! I am not entering into that particular debate here, particularly as I haven't as yet heard the work in question. In any case, you will not find me criticising a fellow composer (at least not in print!) as to the merits of his or her music, particularly as in this case someone who is at the beginning of his composing career, and trying to make his way in a challenging and competitive environment – so good luck to him on that front!

No, what has caused me to put pen to paper on this occasion relates to some remarks he made in a recent interview about his new work with Paul Hindmarsh in British Bandsman (Issue No. 5688 - 22 October), in which he said: "When you write for a band contest you've got boxes to tick. You've got to write something for the audience to enjoy..."

So why, I hear you ask, does such a remark worry me? Well, firstly, as far as audience enjoyment is concerned, although it is true that most composers hope that an audience will respond well to a new work by them, even enjoy it (well, at least gain some satisfaction from it, be it emotional, intellectual, or just plain physical i.e. 'the tingle factor'), it should not be the starting point for any new composition. Indeed, to write 'for an audience', unless it is within a purely commercial context (and perhaps PLC thinks that band contests are just that, in which case his comments are justifiable), is an unwise proposition, as all audiences will differ in their opinions, tastes and prejudices. Nevertheless, a composer must satisfy *himself* or *herself* first and foremost - anything else is a bonus.

No, audience satisfaction viewpoint apart, it is the 'ticking of boxes' comment that really raised my hackles. In his partial defence, I understand the 'innocence' of this remark, and the basis of the comment. In other words, there would be little point in writing, say, a work that is long, quiet, and unrelentingly slow (although I have often thought that the slow movements of either Holst's *A Moorside Suite* or Heaton's *Contest Music* would suffice to test any band anywhere or anytime), or a work that is technically and musically just too simple for the section for which it is being written.

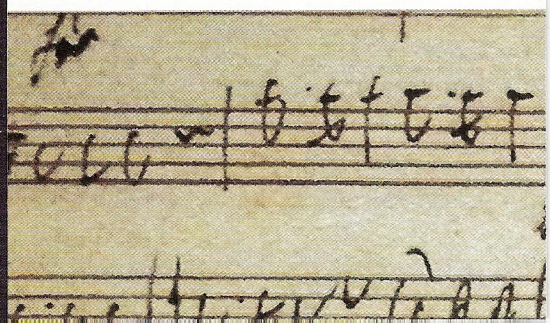
However, apart from these basic 'common-sense' considerations, there is a much more important point to be made. If the approach of any composer asked to write a piece of concert or contest music, irrespective of what it is being used for, is the 'ticking of boxes', then music as an art form will be finished for good! Such a formulaic approach, can surely only produce music of a rather ephemeral nature. Was Elgar ticking boxes when he wrote his *Severn Suite*? Similarly, Holst's *Moorside Suite*, Vaughan

Let it remain as an art, not a science!

Williams' *Variations*, Bliss's *Kenilworth*, Simpson's *Energy*, McCabe's *Cloudcatcher Fells*, Wilby's *Paganini Variations*, and so on? I think not! Indeed, it is extremely erroneous to think that the writing of test-pieces is somehow different and unrelated to the art of writing 'other' music - it is not! Music is music is music...

The very notion that there is somehow a formula to be applied when writing a brass band test-piece is misleading. It almost puts the process into the realm of science, where tried and tested formulas, analytical processes and the like, can be put through the computer, 'evidenced' or 'proven', and replicated for future uses. Such a prescriptive rationale is far removed from the essence of the creative arts in general and musical composition in particular, where intuition (not withstanding the intellect) without reliable 'evidence' is a virtue and plays such an important role in the mechanics of the creative process itself.

Of course, all of us as composers have a duty of care, of professionalism, where fulfilling the requirements of a commissioning body which asks for a certain length of piece, and/or (in the case of say a band competition, or a graded exam piece) a certain level of difficulty, are essential. But the 'testing' of technical difficulties must be contained within the nature and fabric of the music itself, within its 'soul', and not imposed as an artificial appendage. Let us look briefly at a composer who is one of the arch exponents of the art of test-piece writing - Philip Wilby. Why are his test pieces so rewarding for players, conductors and audiences alike, even though audiences have sometimes found his musical language 'difficult'? Well, it seems to me that Philip consistently sets *himself* a new challenge when he embarks on a brass band work. He is not repetitive - each of his major works has a different starting point, a different point of arrival. Having composed so many works for brass band, his invention is remarkable in this regard, even though it is true that he has modified or 'softened' the musical language he now uses from that used in his earlier non-brass band works, which tended to be more complex in almost every way. He has, however, kept



the integrity of his style and approach to the compositional challenge and the end result is music of a consistently high quality.

I have sometimes heard the comment about a particular brass band test piece: 'it's a technical work out, but there's no music in it!' What does this mean? Well my presumption is that there has been so much effort by the composer concerned to make the piece as difficult as possible, mainly in technical, not musical terms, that the music has no inherent substance. Of course, some brass band players love such a technical challenge, in which they can demonstrate their command of instrumental pyrotechnics - a super F here, a dazzling cascade of running semiquavers played faster than anyone else there - rather like setting a new 100 metres world record! Sometimes I feel that virtuosity for virtuosity's sake overtakes brass band performers (and some conductors!). However, there is nothing intrinsically 'wrong' with virtuosity as a musical component - indeed at various times in the history of music it has dominated the very core of musical expression and it can certainly give musicians and audiences alike a real 'high'. But surely virtuosity for its own sake has a short shelf life - it must be the servant of music, not its master! However, the tendency among brass band players and audiences for the thrill of the virtuoso moment is undoubtedly still there, and probably will always be. For example, how many times have we heard the audience gasp when the solo cornet splits the top C sharp, as if it's a life threatening moment, ruining the chances of that band winning the contest, when any adjudicator worth their salt will tell you that it is *not* the end of the world. Every brass player cracks a note from time to time, every pianist fluffs some chord or arpeggio, but it doesn't make them a bad player or a poor musician. On the contrary, there are some performers who play with a greater technical assurance than most others, and yet they have no 'music' in them. Give me the musician every day!

To return to the challenge and art of writing a good test-piece, what comments can I make that might help? Well, let us look at the past for a moment. I have already mentioned some outstanding examples of brass band music used (or indeed intended by the composer to be used) as test-pieces for a brass band competition. That we can listen to them today as works on a concert programme indicates to me that the composer concerned approached the writing of the work as a 'normal' task, without recourse to an artificial list of boxes to be ticked. So, for example, the idea that cadenzas somehow 'test' solo players in a contest better than any other means is surely erroneous. I have been guilty of this myself. In *Connotations* (1977) one of the variations uses short cadenzas for cornet, horn and euphonium. Although I tried to ensure that they grew out of the fabric of the music itself, would there have been another means of musical expression for me at that point? Well, probably yes. It's not that I regret doing it, but I haven't repeated the gesture subsequently. Somehow, it is perhaps too obvious a means of making life difficult for the players. There are other, more sophisticated ways of doing that. The way I approach the process of writing a new work that has been specifically commissioned as the test-piece for a contest is really no different from my approach in writing, say, a new orchestral work. I start with scraps of ideas, some melodic, some intervallic, some harmonic, some rhythmic, which soon develop into self-contained sections, then into an overall plan for a structure, or a particular musical form. Once again, a look at the repertoire of the past tells us that a brass band work, just like any other, can take on many different forms. Elgar, Holst and Howells gave us suites of three movements or more, Bantock a quasi-Sibelius tone poem, Vaughan Williams a set of variations, and so on. Eric Ball preferred symphonic tone poems for his means of musical expression (modelled on those by Liszt and Richard Strauss), Vinter a mixture of variations and three movement suites, with today's major composers for brass band, such as Wilby, Sparke, Graham et al, giving us a mixture of everything.

Then there is the thorny question of musical language and style. There is no doubt that some composers have adapted a more 'easy-going' style of writing when conceiving a brass

band work. Others (e.g. Birtwistle) have never compromised their aesthetic position, and as a result their music is hardly ever performed. Is that their fault or ours? After his experience of the hostile reception *Images* received when it was set as the Championship Section regional test-piece in 1983 (I remember it well as I was one of the panel which chose it!), John McCabe undoubtedly approached the writing of his next work, *Cloudcatcher Fells*, in a slightly different vein. The more dissonant harmonic language of *Images* was toned down, with melodic lyricism to the fore, but the essential core of the McCabe style, and certainly his musical integrity, was unimpaired. As with Wilby, he has given us some of the finest works written for brass band since the 1960s, and so it must be for any composer who wishes to write seriously for brass band, be it for a contest or a prestigious music festival – the old adage of never 'talking down' to your audience, and here I include players and conductors, is just as true now as ever it was.

So please, let us not talk about 'ticking boxes' when we discuss the composing of brass band test-pieces. Let it remain as an art, not a science!