

**Edward Gregson Festival,
Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester**

A three-day festival of music composed by a Conservatoire Principal could be a dull affair. But not when the composer in question is Edward Gregson. His idiom is straightforward English new-Romantic – strongly communicative, without being sugary or vapid. And a full evening of it makes if anything for an excess of panache.

The BBC Philharmonic began with *Blazon*, a mini-concerto for orchestra whose bluff Waltonian textures, spiced up with borrowings from Tippett and Lutoslawski, are emblematic of Gregson's work as whole, as is the influence of the brass band repertoire in which he first made his name.

The solo concerto has become Gregson's favoured arena for large-scale orchestral composition. His recent *Violin Concerto* traces a particularly happy course from dreamy lyricism to exultant folk-like dancing, and Olivier Charlier revelled in its mellifluous poetry and strong rhythmic pulse. Similarly the *Clarinet Concerto* of 1994, persuasively delivered by its dedicatee Michael Collins, positively leaps from the page.

Martyn Brabbins' unfussy yet vigilant conducting encouraged the BBC Philharmonic to go well beyond dutiful delivery of the notes, though the strings needed every ounce of concentration to cope with *Stepping Out* – a short, funky essay in which, as the composer notes, 'Adams meets Shostakovich' to pleasing effect.

Working with the grain of performers' instincts is the great strength of Gregson's music, yet, judged in a higher court, potentially a weakness too, since his affirmations encounter so little resistance. In Monday's concert of chamber works he took the risk of programming four of his own pieces alongside classic 20th-century scores, all played with aplomb by Gregson's own RNCM staff and students.

Few living composers would come out well from having their *Oboe Sonata* set against Poulenc's masterpiece, or a violin-and-piano *Serenade* against Stravinsky's *Suite italienne*, or *Six Little Piano Pieces* against Schoenberg's eponymous set. In fact the remarkable thing is that those Gregson works never overstayed their welcome, and his *Sonata for four trombones* was by no means over-shadowed by Tippett's *Sonata for four horns*.

In addition to these pairs, the *Five Songs of Innocence and Experience* made the concert over-long but effectively represented the passionate side to Gregson's work. His may not be music that pushes the envelope in any way, and it has no pretensions to world-domination. But there will surely be an honourable place for it so long as musicians and audiences demand fresh, immediately rewarding repertoire.

David Fanning
The Daily Telegraph