

# Edward Gregson at 75

## A birthday tribute by producer and writer Paul Hindmarsh

Edward Gregson celebrated his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday on 23 July. Born in Sunderland six weeks after VE day, he has reached that time of life when most of us would be thinking of taking up some relaxing pastimes - tending the garden, walking the dogs, playing a favourite piece of Brahms or Beethoven on the piano or simply enjoying a glass of fine red wine in the garden while listening to the swifts ducking and diving overhead. Eddie (as he is widely known by his many friends and colleagues) achieves all that and much more. Retirement is not a word he or probably any high-achieving creative artist would recognise. Gregson at 75 is enjoying something of a golden period of productivity, which is not at all surprising, since he now has the time to devote solely to his music.

For over 30 years Gregson's professional life followed parallel paths, one towards the top tier of music education and the other towards the international reputation he now enjoys as a composer. In 1976 he was appointed to the music staff of Goldsmith's College, London. Twenty years later, Professor Gregson, as he had become, moved to Manchester to become only the second Principal of the Royal Northern College of Music, following the retirement of John Manduell. Nurturing the skills of future generations of composers, teachers, and performers brought him deep satisfaction. However, his own music has never existed in an academic 'ivory tower'. Former students at Goldsmiths, where he had been Head of Composition, speak of the wisdom and relevance of his advice, born of hands-on experience across the musical spectrum - through fulfilling commissions from leading orchestras, choirs and soloists at home and abroad, to raising the bar of artistic ambition in amateur and youth music. Gregson has been one of its influential luminaries within the somewhat insular world of brass bands since he arrived on the band scene in 1967.

And that is when I first became aware of Gregson's creative gifts. I was 15 and he a distant 22. We shared a common background in The Salvation Army [SA]. The musical tradition within its churches had reached a peak of creativity at the time. The name Edward Gregson was beginning to appear in the SA's music publications as

the composer of choral songs and band pieces. Late in 1967 I heard him perform the demanding solo part of a recently completed 20-minute **Concertante for piano and brass band** in Croydon's Fairfield Hall. I'd never heard a concerto for piano and brass band before or indeed anything on this scale at a brass event. Distant memory may have lent enchantment, but I retained a lingering impression of attractive romantic melody and a level of enterprise that was novel and exciting. Hearing it again at the RNCM Brass Band Festival in Manchester in 2017 confirmed that memory had not played tricks. Gregson clearly loved the piano concertos of Rachmaninov, Gershwin, even John Ireland. "Those early works of mine still have a freshness and honesty about them," Gregson has observed, "and I'm fond of them for those qualities alone." The *Concertante* - confident, well-crafted, if derivative - marked the beginning of a commitment to the concerto that has lasted a life-time.

On 8 February this year in Leeds Town Hall, the BBC Philharmonic premiered the fifteenth and latest essay in the form, if the **Concerto for Orchestra** is included in the list. Number fifteen is a haunting **Oboe Concerto** entitled *A Vision in a Dream*, composed with the silky skills and eloquent lyricism of the orchestra's principal oboe, Jennifer Galloway, in mind. As a young man Gregson, "was intrigued to discover the ways in which composers pitted the soloist (or individual) against the power of an orchestra and, as in a Shakespearian tragedy, how themes were shared and developed, often reaching a climax and resolution that no other musical form could achieve". He has never lost that curiosity.

Although the concerto collection is notable for its range and diversity, one recurring characteristic has become a Gregson 'trademark' - that of referencing, either through quotation or allusion, the music of composers who have informed the concept or content of the work in question. This intriguing 'referential' dimension is neither pastiche nor parody, but an integral part of the creative process - like a distant memory or connection. It's a testament to his skill and refined judgement that Gregson is able to 'pay homage', as he describes it, without diminishing his own 'voice'. The first concerto to include a quotation is ever-popular **Tuba Concerto** (1976), composed for John Fletcher, which includes a fleeting reference to Vaughan Williams' pioneering example from 1954. Other 'hat-tips' are embedded more firmly into the fabric of the music, as Gregson explained in a 2010 interview.

*The Violin Concerto (1999) looks back with affection to some twentieth*

century landmarks of the violin repertoire. The **Concerto for Piano and Wind** (1995) pays tribute to those composers whose concertos I loved when I was a teenager - Rachmaninov, Prokofiev and Bartok. In the slow movement of my **Saxophone Concerto** (2006), I actually quote the opening of the Berg Violin Concerto, mainly because my own musical fabric in that movement is built on a twelve-note row with a strong reference to major and minor thirds (which the Berg note row is built upon). In my **Trumpet Concerto** (1983), the slow movement uses Shostakovich's musical cipher DSCH as the main reference point to what is an In Memoriam tribute to the Russian master who had died not long before I started writing the work. [EG]

Shostakovich looms large in arguably the most personal of the series, **A Song for Chris (2007) for cello and orchestra**. It was written as a tribute to the life and work of Christopher Rowland (1946 – 2007), who was Director of Chamber Music at the RNCM throughout Gregson's tenure as Principal and also a close friend. Chris was a founder member the Fitzwilliam String Quartet, which was the first to record the complete Shostakovich quartets. Not surprisingly, the Soviet master's musical 'ghost' appears throughout the concerto both in its gestures and in some thematic reminiscence. However, these are not the 'main events' in this beautiful score, which follows Gregson's well-established method, projecting the 'life' of its musical motifs from their enigmatic birth, through pathways of conflict and contrast to end in hopeful resolution, in this case a simple, uplifting melody with bells.

The fluidity of this 'conflict resolution' approach is heard at its most dramatic in the **Clarinet Concerto** (1994), commissioned by the BBC for the BBC Philharmonic and Michael Collins. The soloist begins the work with a cadenza, apparently improvising, trying out various rhythmic and motivic paths, rejecting some, taking others a little further. The music is in a constant state of flux and is left hanging enigmatically in the air at the end of the first movement. In part two, the soloist's leaping sevenths and ninths are smoothed out into a haunting modal melody. Finally, the opening ideas are transformed into a bold and energetic dance, capped by one of Gregson's 'big tunes', which he describes as, "the melody for which the whole concerto has been waiting. Its final bars resolve everything".

Earlier in his composing life, Gregson would not have attempted anything with such emotional range or textural freedom. Studying with Alan Bush at the Royal Academy of Music [RAM] in London (1963-67) instilled values of economy and self-discipline. As Gregson has recalled, “I was taught never to write notes that were not absolutely necessary”. His prize-winning **Brass Quintet** (1967) is a prime example - lean in texture, objective in character. Here was a young composer responding with enthusiasm the continental mainstream of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century - Bartok and Hindemith especially - and aligning himself, as he has said, “to the abstract notion of music being ‘powerless to express anything but itself’ to paraphrase Stravinsky”.

For the first ten years after leaving the RAM Gregson found himself writing predominantly for brass and wind band. The result was a varied, engaging and skillfully crafted body of work that remains core repertory for youth and community bands around the world. Gregson got back into bands, as it were, through the enterprise and foresight of one of the ‘movers and shakers’ in the brass band community, Geoffrey Brand (b.1926). Brand had just acquired the band music publisher R.Smith & Co. and was looking to freshen up the catalogue. Having recognised the potential of *Concertante* and Quintet, he offered the 22-year old composer an exclusive publishing contract, unheard of in our present age, to write four brass band pieces a year. This came just at the right time, as Gregson had received a major setback. Daniel Barenboim, then the young, dynamic conductor of the English Chamber Orchestra had declined to perform a chamber symphony - **Music for Chamber Orchestra** - that the ECO’s then manager Ursula Jones had commissioned. Her husband, trumpeter Philp Jones had already taken the Quintet into the repertoire of his celebrated brass ensemble. It was ten years before Gregson would write for orchestra again.

*If Geoffrey hadn’t offered me that contract I doubt whether I would have written much at all for bands; but I was straight out of college, with a wife and a new baby and we needed to earn a living! Nevertheless, I’m pleased that I did write all that band music over that ten-year period (1967-77). I think I subconsciously softened my language when I wrote for band – whether that was right or not I don’t really know, but it’s a fact. I wouldn’t write in that style any more, but the brass band is still one of the most exciting mediums to compose for. [EG]*

The decade of brass began with a light and bright youth band piece ***Voices of Youth*** and culminated with the work that sealed his reputation in the banding sphere, ***Connotations*** (1977). Of all the earlier works, ***Essay*** (1970) deserves to be far more widely appreciated. Periodic commissions from the leading British and European brass band contest promoters have resulted in a collection of important and influential works for bands - ***Dances and Arias*** (1984), ***Of Men and Mountains*** (1991), ***Rococo Variations*** (2008) and ***Of Distant Memories*** (2013). However, of arguably greater artistic significance is a further group of major pieces in which Gregson has sought to broaden the musical scope and reach of the medium. The earliest example is the first mature concerto, for French horn and brass band (1971), which pursues a rapprochement between the technical and stylistic ambition of the mid-twentieth century mainstream and the more conservative traditions of the brass band. More recently, ***Symphony in two movements*** (jointly commissioned in 2012 by the national youth brass bands of Great Britain and Wales) brings the full force and resource of Gregson's symphonic language to bear on the brass band without compromise. It is unquestionably his most 'complete' work for brass band.

*Symphony in two movements* would not be the compelling first symphony that it is, nor would the later concertos exhibit such range of technique and expression without a period in the early 1980s when Gregson took himself 'back to school', as it were. After a decade writing for bands, his appointment at Goldsmith's College led to what amounts to a fresh start - a return to the orchestra and to his own instrument, the piano. ***Five Songs of Innocence and Experience*** (1980/2017) inhabit an altogether more poetic, sensuous sound world than the abstractions of *Connotations* or *Essay*. In 1982, with a hat tipped firmly towards Arnold Schoenberg's *Six Little Pieces* (1911), Gregson composed six miniatures of his own [***Six Little Pieces for piano***] Schoenberg had used his set to search for control over his thematic and harmonic (atonal) processes from sets or rows of pitches - five, seven, ten. Gregson is equally rigorous in his determination to make every note count, taking his cue, as did Schoenberg, from Brahms's preoccupation with manipulating motivic cells, which like an invisible thread knit together his late piano pieces. With their examples to inspire him, Gregson was able to expand his 'tool box' and enrich his technique.

He put some of these new acquisitions to immediate use in his next work, ***Piano Sonata in one movement***. Inscribed 'To Michael Tippett in admiration', Gregson

modelled his experimental work on the mosaic structure Tippett developed for his second piano sonata. By constructing a single movement from a myriad of short, contrasting elements, each with its own tempo and character, Tippett conjures the full gamut of emotions - anger, danger, fear contrasting with wistful vulnerability, tenderness, ecstasy - all in the space of 12 minutes. The 'drama' builds through juxtaposition rather than organic development in music that paradoxically appears simultaneously epic and epigrammatic. Gregson's powerful interpretation of the template - relating character and gesture to specific tempi - remains ultimately goal orientated. His expansive 18-minute canvas is framed in a sonata form arc, the dramatic nature of which provided, as he observes, with "the connection with Tippett and, of course, Beethoven." *Piano Sonata in one movement* is the main work in a recording of the complete piano music, given a revelatory performance by Murray McLaughlin (Naxos 8.574222).

Reflecting on over six decades of composition, Gregson recognises, with ample justification, that his music has become, "deeper in its emotional utterances. The harmonic writing has become more sophisticated and the structures longer and more complex. But I haven't lost my penchant for writing melodies and I hope I never will!" Indeed, some of his most serene and beautiful tunes are to be found in his later work - at the climaxes of the clarinet, cello and saxophone concertos, at the emotional heart of *Symphony in two movements* or imparting a nostalgic dimension to the ***Euphonium Concerto*** (2018). Counterbalancing Gregson's love of memorable melody is the vitality of dance. Song and dance vie for supremacy in a trio of brass pieces from Gregson's Goldsmith years: the syncopated lift of ***Three Dance Episodes*** (1976) and the dynamic and expressive contrasts in ***Equale Dances*** (1983) for brass quintet and its 'cousin' *Dances and Arias* (1984), his edgiest brass band piece. Many of the concerto finales are also founded on dance measures. The original version of Concerto for Orchestra was called *Greenwich Dances*, and the later exotic Concerto for flute and large ensemble began life in 2010 as ***Aztec Dances for flute or recorder and piano***.

Interrogating fully the career-defining 'referential' dimension in Edward Gregson's work, exploring the boundaries between influence and paraphrase, quotation and emulation, would make a fascinating study in itself. Examples abound in his chamber and choral music as well as the concertos: *en passant* to Ravel in ***The Dance, forever the Dance*** (2001) for mezzo soprano, chorus and orchestra; for comedic

value parodying Wagner in his Ivor's Academy award-winning adventure story for children's choir and orchestra ***The Salamander and the Moonraker*** (Hallé Commission 2018); the stylistic 'invasions' of some favourite composers in ***Tributes*** (2010) for clarinet and piano and ***Triptych*** (RNCM commission, 2011) for solo violin - all achieved with skillful sleight of hand.

In the BBC Philharmonic commission ***Dream Song*** (2010), themes from Mahler's Sixth Symphony are summoned almost to the surface only to recede and then re-appear, subtly transformed through some masterly orchestration into a menacing nightmare vision or evocative pastoral dream. Gregson's considerable achievement is to suggest Mahler's world, but to remain entirely himself in the way the material is manipulated and structured, even down to the hypnotic sound of steel pans rather than Mahler's cow bells.

The exotic sound world of Olivier Messiaen is reflected in another major canvas, ***The Trumpets of the Angels*** (2000) for brass, organ and percussion. Commissioned for the centenary celebrations of the Cheshire based Foden's Brass Band, this epic *pièce d'occasion* is inscribed, 'In tribute to Olivier Messiaen'. The principal material, but crucially not the underlying musical processes, are a response to the masterpiece for wind and percussion, *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum* (1964). In 2016 Gregson created an impressive new version, *Music of the Angels*, to exploit the brilliance and power of symphonic brass and percussion. This and a version of *Symphony in two movements* for large brass ensemble are featured in the latest release of Gregson's orchestral music from Chandos, performed by London Brass with conductor Rumon Gamba (CHAN 20127). This is the fifth production of Gregson's orchestral music from Chandos Records, thanks to the continued support of managing director, Ralph Couzens.

On a personal note, since meeting Eddie for the first time in 1996, I have enjoyed collaborating with him on a number of recording projects, including the latest Chandos album and a production of his moving ***Missa Brevis Pacem*** (Doyen DOY CD943). Eddie's enthusiasm is infectious, his energy boundless. Looking on from afar - well actually from my office a few hundred yards along Manchester's Oxford Road - I was aware of the positive affect he had on the life of the RNCM, particularly its public profile, and on the quality of its performing groups. The RNCM Brass Band Festival, which I instigated as a BBC series and have curated since 2006, would not enjoy its world-leading status without his foresight in taking it into the RNCM's artistic

programme when the BBC called time. It was a privilege to be able to commission his first **String Quartet** to mark the centenary in 2015 of the Manchester Midday Concert Society, of which I was then Director of Concerts (2006 - 2016). Eddie has since gone on to write a second [**2nd String Quartet**] as part of a residency at the Presteigne Festival in 2017.

Edward Gregson is a direct but generous communicator and that is reflected both in the 'personality' of his music - often challenging but always approachable - and in the contribution he has made to the artistic community in this country. He has received honorary degrees and fellowships from a dozen English universities and conservatoires, and is a Companion and Emeritus Professor of the RNCM. In 2016 he spent a year as resident composer of the famous Black Dyke Band, with whom he has enjoyed a close association through the band's continuing series of Gregson albums on the Doyen label. He continues to support the work of composing colleagues as a writer/director of the Performing Rights Society.

From his discovery of the great piano concertos as a young man to the thrill of hearing the Navarra Quartet or the BBC Philharmonic perform his most recent compositions, the power of music to make connections with composers of the past, with performers of the present and with those who will create the future has been the motivating force for Edward Gregson - composer, educator and encourager.

*I regard music as the greatest of the art forms, as I know of no other medium through which people can be 'moved' en masse. A great performance of a great work of musical art is the most sublime experience for many of us. Thus, such an experience (say of Bach's B minor Mass, a late Mozart piano concerto, or any of the Brahms symphonies) can change our lives for the better. What other art form (apart perhaps from the theatre) can achieve that? [EG]*