

Gregson's early Essay for brass

Paul Hindmarsh continues his Regional test-piece previews with the challenge set for the 1st Section.

The spring of 1971 was a landmark time for the 25 year-old Edward Gregson. On Saturday 13 March in the Queen's Hall, Wigan, Black Dyke Mills Band gave the first performance of his Concerto for French Horn under the baton of Geoffrey Brand, with Ifor James (soon to take on conducting Besses o' th' Barn Band) as the soloist. The anonymous reviewer of British Mouthpiece (was it the redoubtable Ted Buttress, I wonder?) commented on the novelty of this combination of brass instruments and the ambition of the work itself, writing: 'It certainly took the audience very much by surprise... Perhaps the ardent pundits of our movement will not agree, but it is true to say that we have got to accept the trend of modern composition.'

A few days later, on 3 April at the Royal Albert Hall in London, Gregson's brand new *Essay for Brass Band* was performed by the bands competing in the Championship Section of the short-lived WD & HO Wills Championship. This contest ran for just four years at what was, with the benefit of 45 years perspective, a pivotal time for brass bands in this country. The 1970-71 World Championship experiment had got off to an inauspicious start and the set test in 1971, Robert Simpson's *Energy*, failed to ignite the spark. This rather conservative, Beethovenian work, in the context of symphonic music, was perhaps just one step too far removed from the usual run of band test-pieces at that time. The increasingly influential Geoffrey Brand, by then the Editor of British Bandsman and Managing Editor of R. Smith & Co., secured ownership of the National Championships the following year and under his ambitious direction and fresh creative outlook, the future for composers for brass bands in general seemed very bright. As a former radio producer, Brand possessed that BBC 'nose' of knowing what music 'fitted' where and how far to take his audience and players along the continuum of risk. Thus we had a succession of fresh but safe options as new Royal Albert Hall tests - Malcolm Arnold's *Fantasy* and Robert Farnon's *Un Vie de Matelot* - with Heaton's *Contest Music* held back for well-documented reasons.

On the concert stage, Geoffrey's re-branding of possibilities began during his Black Dyke days and was far more ambitious and far reaching, with three

major concertos - Gregson, then Horowitz (euphonium) and Tomlinson (cornet) - and particularly Thomas Wilson (*Refrains and Cadenzas* for the Cheltenham Festival) setting new benchmarks for composers new to brass bands. Brand took particular interest in Edward Gregson, having admired his prize-winning *Brass Quintet* (1967), taking him under contract at R. Smith in 1969 with a small retainer to provide four new works a year. This golden opportunity for an emerging composer lasted until 1975 and effectively launched Gregson's composing career within the brass band community. *Voices of Youth*, *The Pacemakers* (another Wills commission), *Partita* and, especially, *The Plantagenets* (1972) have remained cornerstones of their areas of banding literature. *Essay* has not turned up as often, unquestionably because it is the more difficult to bring off in purely musical terms.

Gregson retains a soft spot for his Horn Concerto and for *Essay*: "I like *Essay* more than *The Plantagenets*," he comments, "which for me is far more conventional. It was written as a more straightforward sequel to the abstractions of *Essay*, the first movement of which is much more interesting in its expansion of tonality." As originally conceived, *Essay* and *The Plantagenets* were both symphonic studies. The latter's descriptive title was added as an aid to understanding the music's heraldic character. *Essay* is essentially a miniature symphony, with two fast movements framing a central, dramatic elegy. By giving the work literary connotations, Gregson is reflecting the way in which the music 'behaves'. It's not 'about' anything other than what the notes on the page might suggest. Throughout the history of the brass band test-piece, abstract musical argument has often proved problematic. The title might suggest a work of impenetrable modernism. This was the period when the Schoenberg's ultra-democratic method of organising the 12 equal semitones of the octave was being nudged aside by other serial systems of organising pitch and rhythm. Look closely at the main theme of the first movement of *Essay* and you might think that Gregson too was going down the Schoenberg route (Ex.1). All 12 semitones are at play here in a somewhat neutral announcement, *senza vibrato*, as if to say, 'this is my theme'. However,

Essay remains essentially tonal music. The theme winds itself down to end on E flat (concert), which is the tonal root of the work, however much the writing veers away from it especially in this first movement. As yet there isn't a defined character, just a rather unstable collection of pitches that will require precise and pure presentation.

Gregson uses a concise sonata form framework in this opening movement, and his musical argument is tight and remarkably assured. As a young man, two of Gregson's musical idols were Brahms and Hindemith - on the surface at polar opposites in terms of style, but whose approaches to disciplined thematic metamorphosis (Brahms), fourth-based counterpoint and extended tonality (Hindemith) were hugely influential on the young Gregson. The title *Dialogues* suggests a conversational approach to the development of this theme. As with all conversations, the character, energy and emotional content seems constantly in a state of flux throughout, yet every note has its place within the argument and needs to be delivered with precision and clarity. After the theme is announced, the middle of the band, followed by a pair of solo cornets, take a jaunty tangent, softening the stark fourths and fifths with interlocking thirds, but this is abruptly crushed by abrasive bi-tonal chords (written G flat against C, a tritone dissonance) that set up a determined but fractious repost on unison trombones. The basses then calm this first subject down by returning to the original theme. Listen how this ends. We are back on the root pitch, but the instability caused by the way it is approached, via the perfect fifth on G flat, continues into the next section as a harmonic background while the written F root turns into the dominant fifth of the contrasting second subject (Ex. 2), which is in a kind of modal B flat minor. How different this sounds to the somewhat stark music we've heard until now. This is another side of Gregson's musical personality - a modal melody, sweeter, certainly more English in character. It's not sweet for long, however, as bitonal flutter tongues and percussion subvert its clean lines. The horns attempt to restore order with lyrical triads, which, as the development section gathers momentum, take the conversation into

Ex. 1: Dialogues, main theme

Allegro giusto ♩ = 126

Ex. 2: Dialogues, second subject

flugel horn solo

Ex. 3: Soliloquy, main melody

euphonium solo



Ex. 4: Epigram

Allegro ritmico ♩ = 120

a. first motif

b. second ides

more assertive mode with an important fanfare variant of the theme answered by disorientating fanfare triads. Out of the thematic and tonal confusion, the main theme is tentatively ushered in (*poco meno mosso*) and what appears to be a recapitulation of first and second subjects begins.

But this is a false 'dawn', as almost by stealth the development-cum-reprise turns back on itself, unwinding through the triad fanfare (high euphoniums and baritones and then horns) back to the main theme a fourth lower (flugel and solo horn in a tricky unison). We only need to be reassured of its presence once, as it has featured so prominently throughout the movement in various contrasts, rather like a Haydn first subject. It enables a smooth transition to the second subject, with scoring neatly and cleverly reversed. The conversation continues into an extended coda, where principle theme, second subject and fanfares triads all strive to assert their dominance over unpredictable tonality, the journey of which remains unresolved right to the final bars, where the main theme is asserted one last time, only to be cut off by an abrupt G flat to F (written) full stop.

The second movement, *Soliloquy*, includes

a series of lonely elegiac solos. It is dedicated to the memory of Gilbert Vinter, who had died the year before composition, and whose transformative contribution to brass band test-piece literature Gregson is paying personal tribute. "I went to my first National Final in 1964, when *Variations on a Ninth* by Gilbert Vinter was the test-piece," Gregson recalls. "I didn't really know a great deal about contesting music before then, except for the scores my brother Bram brought back from the Royal Albert Hall each year. Vinter made such a difference to brass band music in just a few short years."

The main melody, which although derived from the contour of the first movement theme, is intended to recall the gentle lilt of *Elegy* from Vinter's *Entertainments* suite (Ex. 3). Euphonium, solo horn, baritone and flugel all try out the opening bar before the solo cornet takes flight in one of the most demanding and extended of solos from that era of test-pieces, gathering in intensity and tessitura, like an operatic aria, to an elevated top C climax. The dramatic central section, with its layered fourths (in contrast to Vinter's layered thirds in *Variations on a Ninth*) and double dotted articulation suggests some cataclysm. The flurries of semiquavers and

bass quartet interjections provide further 'hat-tips' to the Vinter style. At the heart of the movement, the mid-point of the work, Gregson brings back his principal theme, *con forza*. When the *Soliloquy* melody returns on solo trombone, scalic embellishments create further momentum to propel the movement to a sonorous climax that will require careful control and bags of stamina to lift off the page convincingly.

Gregson calls his more conventional finale, *Epigram*, which in literature is the name for a short, often satirical poem of a few lines in length. Sometimes it's just a witty one-liner, as here, in the light-hearted way in which Gregson contracts his material. The opening theme (Ex 1) is condensed to a bitonal generating idea on trombones and basses, and as a contrasting idea a semiquaver flourish (Ex. 4 a & b). As this extrovert, dance-like music unfolds, other ideas are revisited, including the triad fanfares. The central section introduces further contrast in the form of a much broader, modal melody, which this time isn't undermined but is celebrated as this lively, technically very tricky but musically less challenging movement resolves the unanswered questions Edward Gregson posed in his opening conversation.