

Edward Gregson

His name tends to be associated with brass band music, but, finds **Richard Whitehouse**, this composer has a whole lot more to offer

Over the course of any era, there are those composers who set the pace in terms of music's evolution and others whose output may not be game-changing though is life-enhancing or at least enriching. Such a composer from the present era is Edward Gregson. Long associated with writing for a specific medium, he has over recent decades amassed a substantial output that takes in almost all major genres and lacks nothing in technical finesse or actual substance.

Although he was creative at an early age, it was during his years at the Royal Academy of Music that Gregson began to write in earnest. His final year there saw the premiere (at the Royal Festival Hall, London, with the composer as soloist) of *Concertante* (1966) for piano and brass band, now among his earliest acknowledged works, whose all-round expressive deftness made its revival 50 years later more than worthwhile. In 1968, Gregson wrote what should have made his name among younger British composers, but *Music for Chamber Orchestra* did not find favour with Daniel Barenboim (conductor of the commissioning English Chamber Orchestra) and was shelved. A pity, as this substantial piece, dedicated to his teacher Alan Bush, is a persuasive amalgam of facets drawn from composers such as Shostakovich and Arnold, with its slow movement exuding a sustained and affecting emotional plangency.

The brass band writing in the Horn Concerto has a textural range and resourcefulness comparable to that found in an orchestra

An indirect result of this incident was that Gregson, involved with the brass band movement from his earliest years, soon became synonymous with the too often dismissed genre of brass band music. A fine instance from this time is the *Horn Concerto* (1971) for Ifor James, in which the writing for band has a textural range and resourcefulness comparable to that found in an orchestra – not least in the central *Andante cantabile*, whose solo and ensemble passages dovetail with imaginative restraint.

Music for brass band (along with brass ensemble and symphonic wind band) was to dominate Gregson's composing across several decades, resulting in an output scarcely less notable for its reappraisal of the genre than those by Robert Simpson or John Pickard. A ready source of commissions were several test-pieces written for the national championships – among which his 'symphonic study' *The Plantagenets* (1973) stands out for its virtuosity combined with a keen sense of



Best known for brass, Gregson's enjoyable music spans almost all major genres

atmosphere and a thematically integrated structure, while the more abstractly conceived *Connotations* (1976) embeds its lucid interplay of variations with solo passages in a cumulatively evolving format that provided the template for future such endeavours. Most durable has been the *Tuba Concerto* (1976) written for John Fletcher, which – with the deadpan humour of its outer movements and its haunting chorale-pervaded central *Lento e mesto* – is Gregson's most played work, with a number of commercial recordings and arrangements for orchestra or wind band.

Subsequent works have seen Gregson expanding on the brass band's formal and expressive potential. Written for the Netherlands Brass Band Championships, *Of Men and Mountains* (1990) takes a rail journey through the Rocky Mountains as inspiration for a wide-ranging sequence with its elements of variation and sonata design purposefully elided, while *The Trumpets of the Angels* (2000) marked the centenary of the Fodens Band with its visceral display of apocalyptic imagery and antiphonal exchanges. Commissioned by the national youth brass bands of Great Britain and Wales, *Symphony in Two Movements* (2012) is abstract music with a vengeance, its tersely argued Toccata being followed by Variations whose stark emotional contrasts resolve into a defiant peroration. Among Gregson's most recent compositions, *The World Rejoicing* (2020) is subtitled 'Symphonic Variations on a Lutheran Chorale', *Nun danket alle Gott* duly intoned as the apotheosis of a journey whereby allusions to earlier works for brass band are wholly apt in a piece marking his 75th birthday.

Although music for orchestra has never been absent from Gregson's output, it is only latterly that he has tackled the

medium extensively. A notable marker is *Metamorphoses* (1979), which, by bridging any overt divide between brass band and wind ensemble, pursues a resourceful interplay (redolent of Lutosławski) between ideas of greater or lesser fluidity defined by their rhythmic focus. It was *Contrasts* (1983), or rather, its later version titled *Concerto for Orchestra* (revised 1989 and 2001), that gave notice of an engaging large-scale characterisation: the opening combative Intrada is followed by a searching Elegy with passacaglia on a 12-note theme, leading finally to intensive syncopation in a Toccata that ends in uninhibited resolve. The mini-concerto that is *Blazon* (1992) makes for a vivid pendant, while *Dream Song* (2009) draws on Mahler's Sixth Symphony in an ingenious design whereby impulsive scherzos enclose a genial trio and are themselves framed by sections whose initial restlessness has been effectively transmuted into limpid fulfilment by the close.

Gregson's *concertante* works have often been written with specific soloists in mind. Hence the concise Trombone Concerto (1979) for Michael Hext, or the Trumpet Concerto (1983) for James Watson in which the influence of Shostakovich is conveyed by its scoring for strings and timpani then made explicit with the spectral homage of its central *Mesto*. The Clarinet Concerto (1994) for Michael Collins unfolds over two large parts in what is among Gregson's most original designs, while the Violin Concerto (1999) for Lyn Fletcher is a productive take on the formal archetype in its expressive subtlety and inscriptions from Oscar Wilde, Paul Verlaine and WB Yeats that set the tone of each movement. More recent instances often blur formal boundaries – whether in the arch-shaped trajectory towards dynamism then hard-won poise of the cello concerto *A Song for Chris* (2007), in the pithy emotional contrasts of the Moctezuma-inspired flute concerto *Aztec Dances* (2013), or in the Euphonium Concerto (2018) for David Childs with its edgy interplay and restive ruminations before the unbridled effervescence of 'A Celtic Bacchanal'.

Instrumental music has an incidental role in Gregson's output, but the Piano Sonata (1983) is significant in the way it takes up where Tippett left off (with his Second Piano Sonata),

GREGSON FACTS

1945 Born Sunderland, July 23

1963-67 Royal Academy of Music, London: composition with Alan Bush; piano with Russell Chester

1965 Composes Oboe Sonata: later regards it as 'Op 1'

1967 Wins Frederick Corder prize for Brass Quintet (first recorded work, released 1968)

1976 Appointed lecturer at Goldsmiths College, London. Rehearsal for April 24 Tuba Concerto premiere filmed for André Previn's BBC TV *Omibus* documentary on the English brass band tradition

1988 Music for RSC Shakespeare History Play cycle *The Plantagenets*. Title music for BBC *Young Musician of the Year* nominated for Ivor Novello award

1996 Appointed Principal of Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester (until 2008)

1999 Violin Concerto: Hallé Concerts Society commission, premiered February 2000

2002 Major retrospective of his music held in Manchester

2003 Chandos releases first volume of orchestral works

2010 *Dream Song* commission for Manchester's Mahler festival: premiered March 27

2017 Composer-in-residence at Presteigne Festival, where Second String Quartet is premiered on August 26

2019 Children's choral work *The Salamander and the Moonraker* (2018) wins Ivors Composer Award (Amateur or Young Performers category)

being in a single movement whose contrasting musical 'types' are juxtaposed over the course of what becomes a forcefully cumulative design. Gregson has yet to return to this genre but has more recently twice tackled that of the string quartet. The First Quartet (2014) faces its challenge head on. The first movement abounds in jagged and dislocated gestures, with a wistful secondary theme whose belated return makes for an affecting close. Utilising aspects of march and burlesque before its closing lullaby, the second-movement 'Fantasia on a Chorale' provides the ideal foil to a bracing final rondo that builds intently to its ultimate affirmation. The Second Quartet (2017) is a very different proposition. At the centre of this engrossing single movement is an apex of sustained passion, framed by martial and scherzo episodes whose acerbic harmonies and refractory textures are thrown into relief by a final Siciliana whose transformation ensures a close of ethereal poise.

Such pieces make one hope that Gregson may yet write the large-scale orchestral symphony to which he is so well suited, though a recent 'adventure story' for narrators, children's choir and orchestra (with its libretto by his wife, Susan), *The Salamander and the Moonraker* (2018), suggests a dramatic bent similarly to be fulfilled. What is certain is the intrinsic worth of an output that seeks not to 'change the world' but surely to make it just a little more pleasurable to be in. The broad range of works featured here amply confirms his having done so. **G**

GREGSON ON RECORD

Enrich your listening with a range of his music



Blazon. Clarinet Concerto. Stepping Out. Violin Concerto

Michael Collin *cl* Olivier Charlier *vn* BBC Philharmonic / Martyn Brabbins
Chandos (11/03)

Initiating wider interest in Gregson's orchestral output, this release features two of his most substantial and engrossing concertos alongside two scintillating shorter pieces.



Aztec Dances. Concerto for Orchestra. Dream Song.

Horn Concerto

Wissam Boustany *fl* Richard Watkins *hn* BBC Philharmonic / Bramwell Tovey
Chandos (9/14)

Chandos's fourth release devoted to Gregson's orchestral music features two of his most appealing concertos (including the flute concerto version of *Aztec Dances*), plus two works that find him at his most searching and imaginative.

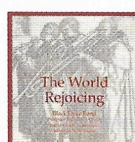


String Quartets - No 1; No 2. Benedictus.

Le jardin à Giverny. Triptych

Alison Teale *cor ang* Rob Buckland *alto sax* Navarra Quartet
Naxos (7/22)

Collating his major works for chamber ensemble, this release is dominated by the string quartets from Gregson's recent years that find him at his most exploratory and challenging.



Concertante for piano and brass band.

Euphonium Concerto. Fanfare for a New Era.

Variations on Laudate Dominum. The World Rejoicing

David Childs *euph* Jonathan Scott *pf*
Black Dyke Band / Nicholas J Childs

Doyen

An A to Z of Gregson's music for brass band, this latest release (2022) in Doyen's series features one of his earliest pieces (*Concertante*) as well as his latest and most wide-ranging work for the medium (*The World Rejoicing*).