

Gregson remembers

Edward Gregson wrote *Connotations* for the 1977 top section British National Final, after which he pursued wider musical avenues. Twenty-six years on, he has again been invited to write for the UK's top bands competing in the Royal Albert Hall Final. Editor, Philip Harper, talks to this significant composer about his homage to original brass band composition

In the year where the brass band movement celebrates 100 years of original creative compositional thinking after the commissioning of *Labour and Love* by Percy Fletcher as the first original piece for band at the National contest of 1913, it is only right to look back at some of great achievements and high watermarks of that period - a process that, in turn, brings several pioneering names to mind. Just as the classical world had Bach, Mozart and Beethoven, who were all 'game-changers' when it came to defining the landscape of composition, in our world we can read off a list that might contain names such as Herbert Howells, John Ireland, Eric Ball, and Gilbert Vinter. In the 1970s, the new kid on the block, whose name is now unarguably part of this landmark list, was one Edward Gregson. In 1977, he became the youngest ever composer to be commissioned to provide a work for the National Final at the Royal Albert Hall and one could argue that, with the resultant *Connotations*, and its angular harmonies and integral percussion writing, the brass band musical landscape changed forever.

In 2013 Gregson's work will again be played by the competing bands at the Albert Hall Final, and his new piece - *Of Distant Memories (Music in an Olden Style)*, subtitled a *Tone Poem for Brass Band*, is very much a celebration of the important centenary of original creative thought for brass band.

When we met recently at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, Gregson was keen to point out that his new piece should in no way be considered a pastiche of the old style. The composer explained: "That label's not helpful, as it's not in any particular definable style. I prefer the term 'style conversion' and, although much of it is in the territory of the general musical vernacular of some of those old pieces by

composers like Cyril Jenkins, Percy Fletcher and Gustav Holst, there are also musical devices such as tone clusters, a more advanced harmonic framework and a greater range of 'modern' instrumental colours. What I've done is to bind it all together with what I hope is my own intrinsic style in the background, whilst very much in the foreground are allusions to many of those other pieces from the past."

The first performance of the new work was given by the Black Dyke Band, conducted by Nicholas Childs, at the RNCM Festival of Brass in January and, upon listening, these references to particular pieces from our history were immediately apparent - for example a heraldic unison trombone phrase similar to that in Jenkins's *Life Divine*, or a muted triplet counterpoint in the style of the *March* from Fletcher's *Epic Symphony* - although the composer told me: "There are no direct quotations from other works, just a small and hidden



four-bar quote from *Labour and Love* itself, as well as a more curious quote that people will have to discover for themselves!

I asked Gregson about the inspiration behind writing a piece such as this. He illuminated: "The brass band tradition owes a great deal to its early composers and, through their music, they established the famous 'British brass band sound', which has spread throughout many parts of the world. That tradition remains important for today's composers like me, even if our musical language is far removed from that of our predecessors. This new work is my way of repaying that gratitude really. As far as listeners are concerned, I hope that the piece will summon up a subconscious memory bank to which they can refer."

Gregson has defined his work as a 'tone poem' - a form that has found much favour with brass band audiences in years gone by. "But I don't usually write tone poems!" he protested. "However in this case I felt that, in the spirit of tribute, it would be appropriate. Eric Ball of course wrote the most marvellous tone poems in the Fifties and Sixties - *Resurgam*, *Journey into Freedom* and *High Peak* to name just three of the best. But back in 1913 *Labour and Love*, although by definition an original composition breaking new ground, was really just a re-working of the old operatic selection, consisting of a few themes patched together. *Life Divine* was another work full of operatic gestures. This was mainly due to the expectations of the early 20th Century brass band audience, until that point fed a diet of opera and classical favourites, but composers such as Percy Fletcher and Cyril Jenkins then went on to develop their own concept of a tone poem as they began to glue the ideas together better from a symphonic standpoint, and this paved the way for the later Eric Ball works. I'm happy to class my new piece as a tone poem because I have tried to follow the idea of symphonic development within a prescribed theme - evoking a past world and one that takes the listener back in time."

Speaking in general terms about the new piece, Gregson told me: "There's a simple,

attractive theme, based on falling thirds, which begins the work. (Those wanting a tune to whistle in the corridors of the Albert Hall will be satisfied within the first 20 seconds of the piece!). It's essentially symmetrical, but this main theme is the basis of the piece, which also goes back to the fact that a big tune was extremely important in those early works. There is a march section reminiscent of Arthur Bliss's *Kenilworth*, or

'Connotations altered the landscape forever'

PHILIP HARPER

that from *An Epic Symphony*, and a slow section with demanding solos for all the key corner players before the return of the theme and that big finish. One of the things that I regard as of paramount importance in composition is structure and this piece is, of course, structured very carefully."

I pursue this point with the composer because the composition, *Of Distant Memories*, followed on immediately from the composition of his *Symphony in Two Movements*, commissioned jointly by the national youth brass bands of Britain and Wales, and premièred in 2012. Edward Gregson explained: "There is a strong element of variation form in *Of Distant Memories*, with one musical theme dominating the work, whereas the *Symphony* takes the idea of large-scale dramatic contrast of different themes."

"One of the challenges of writing a 'serious' brass band work that, almost by definition, will be a 15-minute plus piece is that you want to try not to repeat yourself if you can help it. *Connotations* and *Rococo Variations* both followed a symphonic variation form. *Dances and Arias* was the juxtaposition of two different types of music. *Of Men and Mountains* is a tone poem, but the structure is very different from *Of Distant Memories* as it has an emerging theme, which you don't hear complete until the end (as in my

Variations on Laudate Dominum). So I always try to challenge myself to do something different - once you start repeating yourself and become formulaic, you're doomed!"

"Regarding the two most recent works; I've never written back-to-back brass band pieces before. Even in the Seventies, when I was writing a lot of music for band bands, I would usually go off and compose an orchestral concerto, or some chamber or instrumental music. However, in this case I composed the two one after the other, but they couldn't be more different - stylistically they are worlds apart. The *Symphony* is more about me as an 'abstract' composer and it took me nearly a year to complete, whereas *Of Distant Memories* took only six weeks, and is really a romantically-tinged piece."

I asked Gregson how he would look back and assess 100 years of brass band composition. "Well, this is a significant year - and I enjoyed watching the countdown to it through the pages of BBW in 2012! It took John Henry Iles, the owner of the 'National' in 1913, to have the forward-thinking incentive to commission the first original work for brass band. I'm sure, by the way, that there were not just musical motivations to this; commercially, he realised that just playing old pieces would eventually lead to copyright problems, so he knew that commissioning original pieces meant he could publish them himself and benefit from owning the copyright. He was a businessman after all, but he did have the foresight to commission some very bold things."

"Looking at way the repertoire has developed, the earliest pieces were by 'B' list composers if you like, but then you go on to the great works by composers such as Holst, Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Bliss, Ireland and Howells. They provided the bedrock to the repertoire and their music is still played today because it's quality writing. Look at the dividing line between the Fifties and Sixties, and you have someone like Gilbert Vinter who, you have to remember, was essentially a light music composer;



1984 *Dances and Arias* - National Final test-piece)



1988 Nominated for an Ivor Novello Award for his title music to the BBC Young Musician of the Year TV programmes



1963-1967 Studied composition with Alan Bush and piano at the Royal Academy of Music

1970 Composed *Partita and Essay*

1971 British Federation of Brass Bands commissioned his *Horn Concerto* for Ifor James and Black Dyke Mills Band

1977 Became the youngest composer commissioned to write the test-piece for the Championship Section National Final - *Connotations*. Also wrote his *Tuba Concerto* for the late legendary tubist, John Fletcher. (Pictured: Edward Gregson with André Previn (centre) and John Fletcher (right) take a break during rehearsals for the premièred of the *Tuba Concerto* in the band room of Besses o' th' Barn Band.)

1945 Born in Sunderland, England

1964 Composed first work for brass band, the march *Dalarö*, followed shortly after by *Voices of Youth* and *Prelude for an Occasion*

1973 Composed *The Plantagenets* for the Championship Section Regional contests

1976 Commenced academic teaching career at Goldsmiths College, University of London

1979 *Trombone Concerto* and *Metamorphoses*, regarded by Gregson as a turning point in his compositional output

but he realised that his style, with a bit more dissonance and edge put in, was taken as serious music by the brass band world. So he then wrote a significant amount of music in the next ten years or so. He clearly enjoyed the exposure and made a really important contribution to the brass band repertoire. Through what Gilbert achieved I, for example, was able to come along and write in a much more contemporary style and still be accepted by the brass band world at large."

I suggested, then, that Gregson himself became part of the story, to which he replied: "Yes, I was part of the story that culminated in *Connotations*. Then after me other composers like John McCabe and Philip Wilby, neither of whom was from a brass band background, came along and found a new way of writing for brass band."

'Once you start repeating yourself, you're doomed'

EDWARD GREGSON

"If I can make an analogy with football: If the Premier League only had British players in it, it wouldn't be what it is today. TV money has been able to attract the best foreign players and some clubs now put a team out with hardly any British players, but the general standard has improved massively and this has been caused by players coming from outside the UK. I believe that the way you get the healthiest contribution to a repertoire is for people who have no experience of brass bands to come in and create music in their own language, with no 'baggage'. However, it is true that John McCabe did adapt his style. His first work, *Images*, was panned because people didn't like it or understand it. So along came *Cloudcatcher Fells*, where he softened his language and, of course, it became one of the most important and best loved works of recent years. I am also heartened by what the new crop

of young generation composers are producing. Composers such as Gavin Higgins, Lucy Pankhurst, Simon Dobson and Paul McGhee are not afraid of expressing themselves in uncompromising terms. They have good compositional techniques, strong ideas, and bold attitudes towards instrumentation; but they must be given the chance to write for important occasions such as the major contests if they are to make an impact upon the mainstream brass band repertoire. Another slightly older member of this new generation and someone already with an impressive list of works - Peter Meehan - recently wrote a passionate article on this very subject. We must trust the new generation, just as I was trusted when I was young, to bring a fresh vision to the brass band repertoire."

We finally got on to one of Gregson's biggest bugbears about modern-day band composition. "One thing I can't abide is overwriting for percussion - it is becoming a real problem.

I know that might sound rich coming from

someone who has written for large percussion sections, but what is important is the way in which you write for them. For example, when you have timpani, bass drum, cymbals and tam tam all rolling 'ff' on the last chord of a piece, you can't even hear the brass anymore! *Of Distant Memories* doesn't have a percussion roll on the last chord! Indeed, I have returned to the sparse percussion sections of former years. Sorry to be a purist, but I think that these days some of the writing for percussion is over the top - it's a cheap thrill!"

How we might love to delve back in time to hear the views of John Ireland or Herbert Howells on brass band composition, and their advice for their successors. In Edward Gregson we are able to hear from another composer on that list of pioneers for brass band composition. Ultimately though, as all those involved with the National Final this year will discover, his music will speak most eloquently of all. ■



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1994 First major BBC commission - *Clarinet Concerto* for Michael Collins and the BBC Philharmonic

2000 Hallé orchestra commissioned his *Violin Concerto*; Foden's commissioned *The Trumpets of the Angels*

2003 Release of Chandos CD entitled Gregson (CHAN 10105), BBC Philharmonic, conducted by Martyn Brabbins, featuring Michael Collins, clarinet and Olivier Charlier, violin. Four premiere recordings for orchestra: *Blazon* (1992), *Clarinet Concerto* (1994), *Stepping Out* (1996) and *Violin Concerto* (1999, revised 2001). Gramophone Editor's Choice awardee



2010 Second major BBC commission - *Dream Song for Orchestra* for the Mahler in Manchester Festival - BBC Philharmonic, conducted by Gianandrea Noseda

2013 Championship Section National Final test-piece - *Of Distant Memories*

1996 Appointed Principal Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester

2002 Major retrospective of his music in Manchester to coincide with the release of a CD of his orchestral music by the BBC Philharmonic on the Chandos label - see 2003 on Timeline for details of the CD

2008 Release of Chandos CD (CHAN 10478) - BBC Philharmonic, conducted by Clark Rundell Three premiere recordings: *Trumpet Concerto* (1983) - Ole Edvard Antonsen, trumpet; *Concerto for Piano and Wind Homages* (1995, revised 1997) - Nelson Goerner, piano; *Saxophone Concerto* (2006) - Nobuya Sugawa, saxophone

2011 Release of Chandos CD, Gregson, (CHAN 10627), BBC Concert Orchestra, conducted by Bramwell Tovey. Premiere recordings (except for *Stepping Out*). CD features: *Music for Chamber Orchestra* (1968); *Concerto for Trombone and Orchestra* (1979) - Peter Moore, trombone; *Two Pictures for String Orchestra* (2009) - Timothy Welch, viola; *A Song for Chris* (2007) - Guy Johnston, cello