

BRITISH

# Bandsman

the leading international brass magazine

• issue 5883 • 18 July 2015 •

## EDWARD GREGSON AT 70

PROMINENT COMPOSER REFLECTS  
ON A LIFETIME CONNECTED TO BANDING

FUN IN THE SUN AT PERSHORE



# EDWARD GREGSON AT 70

👉 **In the first of two conversations, Paul Hindmarsh looks back to the 1970s and '80s, when Edward Gregson became established as a major new voice for brass bands as well as an influential presence in the music life of the Capital.**

Edward Gregson celebrates his 70th birthday on Thursday 23 July. Born in Sunderland, his parents were full-time ministers in The Salvation Army (SA). Edward's childhood was a nomadic one as his parents' appointments transplanted the family to different centres at two-yearly intervals. As peripatetic child, as it were, he had to become self-reliant, a quality that prepared him early for a 50-year creative journey that began with youthful musical passions - classical romantic piano music and SA brass band music - and has embraced many musical worlds, with 12 years as Principal of one of the country's leading music conservatoires, the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, as his most significant and influential position in the world of music education. Although he retired from the RNCM

in 2008, Professor Gregson's creative journey shows no signs of slowing down. As we sit in his study overlooking the picturesque Cheshire Hills with Pott Shigley's village cricket ground just over the road, my eyes turn to his desk, over which are strewn pages of manuscript sketches of his latest commissions. Since his retirement, Eddie (as he is affectionately known throughout the brass band and the wider musical worlds) has been busier than ever with a series of major projects, including his first String Quartet, which I commissioned for the centenary season of the Manchester Midday Concerts Society at the Bridgewater Hall, a Flute Concerto (2013), the haunting Mahler tribute *Dream Song* (2010) and two major (and very different) brass band works, *Symphony in two movements* and *Of Distant Memories*. That work takes a nostalgic look back to the brass band language of a century ago. Our conversation begins just over 50 years ago, when young Eddie Gregson took up a place at the Royal Academy of Music (RAM) in London to study piano and composition. Although music was

his passion and he was developing into a fine pianist, he was all set to go to university to study English literature - another life-long passion - until the arrival at Manchester Central School of a new young music teacher Glyn Davies, who coaxed him through A Level music and set him on the professional music path. I hesitate to use the word 'career'. "To be honest I've never thought in terms of career," Eddie says as we settle down to our conversation, "and if I look back, nothing has really ever been planned as composer or in my academic life." In his teens, Eddie describes his musical experiences in terms of parallel worlds, "on one hand playing music by some fine brass band composers in The Salvation Army and on the other being absorbed in the classical music world of Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Rachmaninov and, later, Bartok, Hindemith and Stravinsky." Although he played euphonium in Tottenham Citadel Band as a student in London, writing for brass bands was not a priority. "When I think about the non-brass music I was writing at the time," he comments, "it was so much

more adventurous. I wrote all kinds of things - songs, piano and chamber pieces, including serial music."

Eddie pays fulsome tribute to his teacher, composer (and communist) Alan Bush (1900-1995): "Bush was a serious-minded teacher and quite a hard task master about being self-critical, about questioning every note. For example, in my piano writing, I would write octaves in the bass all the time, which is a very different tone colour than a single note. He made me strip out a lot of unnecessary things, he developed my counterpoint a lot and I also got to know his music, which I think is so underrated. It's such a pity. *Dialectic* is a phenomenal string quartet. Composed in 1929, it's the most modernist of English quartets, along with those of Frank Bridge. He was way ahead of composers like Bliss and Walton. I admired the abstraction of it. Although he was a political composer, this doesn't invade his concert music and his pure music is the best of him." Listening to student works like his Oboe Sonata ("probably my Op. 1 - I still like it"), it's possible to hear the roots of the Gregson style - a dual musical worlds of assertive, dramatic gestures often based on 'Hindemith' fourths and structured in a way which Beethoven and Bartok would acknowledge, contrasting with a more lyrical, modal landscape that springs from an English sensibility - from Vaughan Williams especially.

This duality in Eddie's early musical voice provides, for me, the tension in the music, the idea of drama and conflict leading to ultimate resolution that is played out in so many of his mature concert works, especially the series of concertos and brass band pieces. Eddie identifies three key works from these early years, Brass Quintet (1967), *Music for Chamber Orchestra* (1968) and Horn Concerto (1971). "Most of the music I wrote as a student had nothing to do with brass, apart from the Brass Quintet, the *Concertante* for piano and the march *Dalaro*. Philip Jones came to hear the first performance of the Quintet. Afterwards he said he really liked it and asked if he could take it on tour the next season with his brass ensemble. It was a big success. Hallé Brass recorded it and then, probably most important of all, it was my first publication with Novello, which is still my publisher." The Quintet won a BBC prize in 1968, but any ambition Eddie may

have had to move into the contemporary classical sphere as a professional composer took a severe knock soon afterwards.

"It was very unfortunate. I'd just left the academy. Philip's wife, Ursula, was General manager of the English Chamber Orchestra (ECO), which had just appointed Daniel Barenboim as conductor. The ECO was going on tour and wanted a new British piece. As the Quintet seemed quite accessible, Ursula asked me to write something and not to make it too modern! I wrote a 22-minute piece called *Music for Chamber Orchestra* - like a mini symphony. I went to Barenboim's mansion flat and I read it through on the piano with him. He was incredible, of course, and just sight read it! But then I had a phone call from Ursula a few days later saying that he didn't want to take it after all. I'm not the only composer that this has happened to (far from it!) but it did have a pretty bad effect on me. It was my first proper orchestral piece. I thought it was total rubbish and lost all confidence in my ability to write what I thought was proper music, so I put in a bottom drawer and forgot about it." There it remained until 2010, when it received its first performance (and recording) with the BBC Concerto Orchestra and Bramwell Tovey (Chandos 10627). Listening too it now, one can hear that the influences of Shostakovich (Symphony No. 5), Bartok and Hindemith were very close to the surface, but it is nevertheless a remarkable achievement in terms of its cohesive structure and above all orchestration that any 23 year-old composer would be proud to put his or her name to, especially its haunting slow movement. "It showed this kind of serious intent which my brass music didn't have in one sense," Eddie observes. However, as one door appeared to close, another opened courtesy of the foresight of Geoffrey Brand: "In 1966, I played my *Concertante* for piano and brass band) with the International Staff Band (ISB) at its 75th anniversary concert at the Royal Festival Hall. I was really chuffed to be asked. It was a great concert and a lot of people 'from the outside' were there, including Geoffrey. He must have liked what he heard - a young composer writing modern but accessible music - that he offered me a contract with R. Smith and I jumped at the chance. I'd just got married to Sue. We didn't have much money although Sue was working. I started

teaching as a peripatetic primary school music specialist to earn some dosh in the hope of getting some commissions. I was getting a few. Geoffrey gave me a small retainer and I was contracted to write four pieces a year. I don't think I quite managed that, but there was quite a bit of brass band music from 1969 to 1975. The Horn Concerto (1971), written for Lfor James, is probably the most important of them. I'm still very fond of that piece, because it's more adventurous in its tonal and harmonic workings. Geoffrey also asked me to write test-pieces and that's when *Essay*, *The Plantagenets* and those lower section and youth pieces were composed."

This period with R. Smith was Eddie's 'finishing school' as a composer. He was able to refine his language and technique within the contained brass band environment. Was it a bit too safe? "It probably was," Eddie confesses, "but I'm not saying that I took the easy option. If you call it fate, fate goes in a certain direction and you either follow it or not. I could have said that even if no one performs my music I'm still going to write a piano trio and another symphony, but at that stage all kinds of circumstances dictated the route I took. The brass band is a terrific medium. We know it is an amateur culture, but nevertheless a lot of bands were being broadcast on the BBC Third Programme and my music was being published and recorded. What's not to like about that as a young composer and I was earning with PRS as well!"

What has always drawn me to Eddie's music since I first heard him play the *Piano Concertante* as a teenager in 1968 is its communicative quality and over the decades Eddie has never lost touch with his audience and with his performers. There is a connection here, it seems to me, with his 'parallel' journey as an educator. Not for Gregson the life of the 'ivory tower' university composer: "I started off as a peripatetic music specialist in the post-Plowden Report world, where government recognised that the creative arts were beneficial to youngsters. Then I was invited to teach music part-time in Rachel Macmillan College of Education to non-specialists training to be primary school teachers. This was a challenge because there were many mature students in their 30s and 40s who had missed out on careers earlier on and were now wanting to

become trained or re-trained as teachers. I remember going to these groups and telling them that we were going to make music together and that they were going to compose. We had a lot of fun and did many creative things. The head of department, who is still alive at 92, offered me a full-time post and within three years I was promoted to senior lecturer."

This was the period when many colleges of education were being merged with universities, and Rachel MacMillan was absorbed into Goldsmith's College, University of London, in New Cross. Within no time, Eddie was also teaching composition on the undergraduate music courses and over a 20-year period rose to become a Reader and eventually Professor. I wondered how he reconciled the creative imperative and the day-to-day academic life: "I've always thought of myself as a composer first, so I'd often come home after teaching, have dinner etc and would go and write for a couple of hours just before midnight. Academic years are short and, especially now, you have to research or you're dead, so to speak, so the equivalent for a composer is to write. Particularly in my later years at Goldsmiths, the professorship was based on research equivalents as a composer - commissions, performances, recordings, broadcasts. How many contemporary classical composer are able to live form composing alone? I went into academic life and I don't regret that for one minute because it was extremely stimulating."

Many composers I have spoken to over the years have commented that teaching is often as beneficial for the teacher as the student. Eddie agrees: "You find out things about yourself when you are looking at other people's music. My approach was always to try to find what was the core in what a student was trying to say in their music and to be true to that. I don't think that you can ever teach someone to be a composer. You can help them along the way with skills, and techniques, but you've either got the ideas in your head or you haven't. I also enjoyed the intellectual stimulation of working with some great colleagues at Goldsmiths and I got a real buzz out of conducting the Symphony Orchestra and the new music ensemble. Goldsmiths was such a lively place. I had a great time and wrote a great deal of music while I was there."

Eddie arrived at Goldsmiths in 1976, which was also an auspicious time in his parallel 'life' as brass band composer. His popular Tuba Concerto had been commissioned by Besses o' th' Barn and I for James for John Fletcher to play, and the following year Eddie became to youngest composer, at 32, to receive a commission for a Royal Albert Hall brass band test-piece. *Connotations* remains his most popular competition piece and it proved another turning point. The stream of brass band pieces slowed as his 'order book' expanded in other directions. However, he remained a major influence on the direction that brass band competition pieces would take through the 1970s and 80s as the first conductor of London Collegiate Brass, with which he made a number of significant broadcasts, and as a National Championship test-piece selector alongside William Relton and Bram Gay.

"It was great being part of that. I was young and genuinely interested in the brass band medium. We were from the brass band tradition, but as professionals had gone outside the tradition and brought some of that back. It was another 'Golden Age' if you like, when external influences became absorbed and a truly contemporary repertoire was being commissioned and played. We brought back Heaton's *Contest Music* and introduced the likes of Derek Bourgeois and, through Bram's Novello connections, John McCabe. *Images* had originally been commissioned for Besses by I for, as John was his recital pianist. We got a lot of flack for choosing it. The brass band world moves slowly and many conductors and players are suspicious about anything that sounds new. *Images* is an abstract piece. I love it

and I can understand why people thought it was difficult. But many of those pieces are now classics. Where would we be now without the contribution of John McCabe? He wrote such fine music that will live on because of its inherent quality, its communicative powers and its stamp of originality."

Having spent so much time in education, Eddie speaks passionately about the challenges facing young composers in today's more fragmented musical environment: "There are always talented young composers. Young composers today are no less talented than when I was a student 50 years ago, but it is so much more difficult to find your feet. There are so many more of them because conservatoire training has just mushroomed. Once you reach the professional strata after studying, it's really tough. These days CD sales are so low that young composers are setting up their own internet sites. They do a lot of their own promotion through social media. In the brass band world, I was delighted that Peter Meechan's music was used at the National Final, but there needs to be more investment in the talented young composers to have exposure like that. Without it the brass band movement will just die. It's got to invest in the future as they invested in people like me."

Until 1996 Edward Gregson's professional life as composer and educator had been focussed on London. However, his journey was soon to take him away from the metropolis to the cultural powerhouse in the North West. Next week we find him in Manchester at the head of its world-class music conservatoire.

PH 

Edward Gregson, Ian Engelmann (BBC Producer), Frank Bryce (Besses MD) and Andre Previn join Besses o' th' Barn Chairman during a break in Tuba Concerto rehearsals, 1976.

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• issue 5884 • 25 July 2015 •



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# EDWARD GREGSON

## THE MANCHESTER YEARS

In the second of two conversations marking his 70th birthday, Edward Gregson talks to Paul Hindmarsh about his time as RNCM Principal and the creative connections he has established in the North West

When Edward Gregson was appointed Principal of the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM) in 1996, I was not alone in wondering if such a demanding position would interrupt the steady stream of new works that had flowed from his pen during his years at Goldsmith's College, London. In fact, rather than stemming the flow, Gregson's move to Manchester and the heart of the city's musical life created fresh opportunities. Time was clearly at a premium, but what was available for composing was used wisely. The creative spine was provided by a continuing series of concertos and a productive return to the brass band medium after a number of years 'away'.

In 1994, as a serendipitous prelude to his Manchester years, Gregson received his first major commission from the BBC Philharmonic. Although he has since described the resulting Clarinet Concerto as a "breakthrough" piece, his lifelong fascination for the concerto form began in his youth: "Part of it was hearing those Leizden brass solos when I was a teenager, like *Songs in the Heart*, *Wondrous Day* and the trombone *Concertino*. This was the first time I'd heard a stand up solo that meant something musically. I was listening to the Brahms concertos at the same time and Shostakovich Piano Concerto No. 2. I was intrigued by the drama in pitting the soloist (or individual) against the power of an orchestra, as in a Shakespearean tragedy, and how the themes were shared and developed, often reaching a climax and resolution that no other musical form could achieve."

Gregson's first effort was a *Concertante* written in 1966 as an RAM student for

his own instrument, the piano, with brass band. Distant memory may lend enchantment, but I have a lingering impression of romantic melody and a level of enterprise and craftsmanship that one did not always encounter in Salvationist repertoire. Gregson's first 'Manchester' concerto was for piano and symphonic winds, revised in 1997. A Violin Concerto for the Hallé followed in 1999, then a jazzy Saxophone Concerto (2006) for BBC Philharmonic. An elegiac Cello Concerto (2007), dedicated to the memory of RNCM colleague Christopher Rowland, involved Manchester's third orchestra, the Camerata, and a Flute Concerto (*Aztec Dances*) was first heard as part of an RNCM student concert in 2013.

Eddie's 12 years as only the RNCM's second Principal were notable for an expansion in the institution's size and catchment. Two major extensions were completed and its international reach expanded exponentially. While there were many professional challenges to be worked through, Eddie retains mainly positive memories of this time at the head of this world-class conservatoire. "The biggest thrill of all was seeing students coming in as first year undergraduates and ten years later seeing them at the top of the profession," Eddie comments, "like the mezzo soprano Christine Rice, who sang Lucretia in Britten's opera in 1996. I had Dame Janet Baker sitting next to me and she said, 'That's quite a voice. It reminds me of a young Janet Baker!' Then there were pianists like Steven Osborne, all the string quartets and all the opera productions." Nurturing chamber ensembles became

one of the RNCM's most successful areas, "and you can't do that without great teaching," Eddie continues. "Chris Rowland was a great teacher and inspiration. When you are the Principal of a great college like the RNCM, your job is to motivate, to give people the freedom to explore new avenues both for the sake of the students and the institution, as the great cellist Ralph Kirshbaum did with the International Cello Festival, and Chris did with the Chamber Music Festival, which is still running. I remember asking him how he was going to start it and he said by playing all the Haydn string quartets over a single weekend. I said 'you're crazy, let's do it!' I had a tremendous time at the RNCM, surrounded by some wonderful staff and students. You have to have the leadership and vision, but you can't hold on to everything yourself. If you recognise say someone like you, Paul, when you came to talk about the RNCM taking on the Festival of Brass, I didn't say, brass bands in this college, I don't think so! I grabbed it with both hands, because you'd already proved it was successful and I knew it could be even more so in a venue that had things like the bar, cafe and the student input."

Over the years, Eddie has also become a significant presence in Manchester's musical life. He remains a governor of Chetham's Music School and has forged a strong creative partnership with the BBC Philharmonic, whose première of the Mahlerian *Dream Song* (2010) was a highlight of a Mahler symphony and related commissions series which involved all three Manchester orchestras: "The BBC Phil is a fabulous orchestra and they are lovely people. Their attitude is fantastic and to work with a group like



that wanting to get the music right for you, which means world class, and to have made three CDs with them, all with different conductors, has been a joy. I feel very fortunate that Ralph Couzens of Chandos Recordings has believed in me to enable this to happen."

Over the past 12 years, Chandos has released four CDs of Eddie's orchestral music. Always astute in managing his career, Eddie engaged the on-going co-operation of the BBC and has sourced his own funding through trusts and foundations as well as some re-investment of his performance royalties. In taking advantage of the BBC orchestras' dual-purpose recording contract, which enables studio recordings to receive BBC Radio 3 broadcasts as well as CD production, he is following the example of many composer trusts and estates, such as the William Alwyn, Malcolm Arnold, Frank Bridge and Percy Grainger series on Chandos, all of which involved the BBC Orchestras. "The fact is composers want their music to be played and heard," says Eddie, "and I regard these like a calling card. For a composer to have a professional CD to give to a conductor or a promoter, and that ends up with a performance, it's worth it." In the brass band world, Eddie pays tribute to Nicholas Childs, who with Doyen Recordings and now Black Dyke Band is committed to recording all of his brass band music: "Back in the 1990s, Nick said he'd like to start a series recording all my band music. Doyen was a fledgling company then and for him to have faith in my music was fantastic. I've got nothing but praise and gratitude for this support of my music over so many years." Listening to all these CDs, as I have done when preparing to write the programme notes, I sense a drawing together of style

and approach. Eddie's orchestral music has grown in ambition and refinement during his Manchester years, exhibiting greater harmonic and textural freedom and above all superb orchestration. His brass band music, which during the 1970s and 80s lagged behind in terms of stylistic ambition and risk, no longer seems like the poor relation. His 2000 commission for Foden's and Nicholas Childs, *The Trumpets of the Angels*, was the defining work. Its origins as an orchestral overture (for the BBC Philharmonic once again) points perhaps to the reason for this stylistic confluence: "*Trumpets* is the piece where I didn't compromise at all. It's the piece I felt I always had in me. As I've got older I've been able to relax myself into what and how I want to say things in music. For instance, I'm not afraid anymore of writing a piece like *Of Distant Memories*, which is full of nostalgia. I really enjoyed writing it and I know why people love it. It was a valid proposition to write piece like that, although it isn't as important for me as the *Symphony in two movements* or *The Trumpets of the Angels*, which are the two brass band works I'm most proud of."

In many ways *Symphony in two movements* is a summation of Gregson's creative journey with bands. Structurally it's a personal take on the variation form, as *Connotations* was back in 1977. Those familiar with works like *Dances and Arias* (1984) will perhaps hear something of that work's incisive 'edge' in the *Symphony's* more dramatic moments. The warmth of the lyrical moments might bring to mind the evocative soundscape in *Of Men and Mountains* (1990). While so much contemporary music ends with questions marks - in uncertainty and negativity - Gregson remains essentially an optimistic composer, who likes the

drama and conflicts in his music to find resolution: "I am an optimist by nature, and not only in my brass band music. Some might say that the best artists are the tortured ones who never resolve anything because they are presenting the listener with the human dilemma, but as a composer, you can only express your own tensions and I like to have resolutions. It's a bitter one in *Dream Songs* and a nostalgic one in *Of Distant Memories*."

Both of these are tribute pieces. Gregson has written many 'hat tips' to composers he admires into his work over the years. Some of the references are deliberately clear, as in *Rococo Variations*. Some are stylistic echoes, as in the Violin Concerto or *The Trumpets of the Angels*. Others are like half-heard references, hidden in the musical fabric. I wondered why he has done this so often: "I'm not sure I can answer that. It just comes naturally. I like the references not to be too overt, but more like a distant memory. We all dream and I like references to be heard in that way. Hardly anyone has spotted the reference of Berg's Violin Concerto in *Of Distant Memories* for example."

As our conversation draws to an end, I cast my eye once again over the pencil sketches on his desk. I spot something for cornet in the making - the composer won't be drawn on that - but there is also another concerto in prospect, this time for euphonium and orchestra for David Childs: "David is doing wondrous things with the euphonium as an orchestral soloist, but even for someone like him the chances of playing it with orchestra are going to be few, so there will also be a brass band version in time." Always looking ahead rather than behind, Eddie has also got the string quartet bug having written his first for the Manchester Midday Concerts Society's centenary in his 70th birthday year. At his side for the Bridgewater Hall premiere in January was his wife Sue, to whom he pays loving tribute: "Sue has been so much a part of my life (and by that I mean my composing life) since I was 20, that I can't imagine my life without her. I think she has attended nearly every first performance of my compositions since 1965, when we first met, and I was student at the Royal Academy of Music. How time flies..." Happy 70th birthday Eddie!

