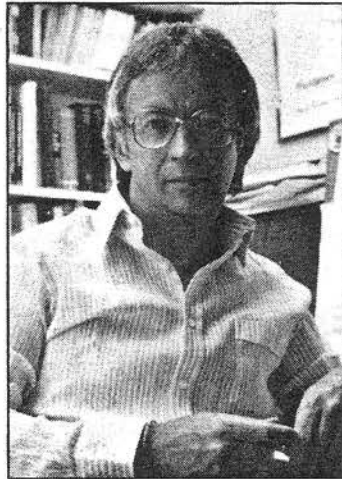




HIS HOUR UPON THE STAGE

Last July, Edward Gregson took on the daunting task of writing music for the RSC's nine-hour blockbuster *The Plantagenets*. He talks to Richard Fawkes about the unique challenge of composing for the theatre



Edward Gregson:
'It's like a mini Ring cycle'

Guy Woolfenden, head of music at the Royal Shakespeare Company, had been wanting to invite Edward Gregson to compose for the company for some time. Earlier this year he phoned to say he had just the thing. Just the thing turned out to be the biggest RSC undertaking of the last ten years: Adrian Noble's three-play epic, *The Plantagenets*.

It was a daunting task for a composer of limited theatrical experience. Gregson had written the music for the 1976 York Cycle of Mystery Plays and for the 1980 Greenwich Theatre production of *All Together Now*, but essentially he is a concert composer. So, how did he cope with being part of a theatrical team?

'You have to realise very quickly that music is only one part of the production,' he says, 'and one that is sometimes treated as a disposable commodity. When you've spent two or three hours working on a couple of cues and the director says the following morning he doesn't like them, you can argue the point but in the end you've got to rewrite them. That's very different from being a concert composer where you're in charge of your own destiny.'

He arrived in Stratford in July, nine weeks into rehearsals. The scripts, adapted from *Henry VI* Parts I, II and III, and from *Richard III*, were still not finalised. All that Adrian Noble knew was that he wanted the final plays, presented as *Henry VI, The Rise of Edward IV* and *Richard III, His Death*, to con-

tain a lot of music.

'They rehearsed each play for a few weeks then did a run,' Gregson explains. 'The whole thing then contracted so there was only a week's rehearsal followed by a run. I suppose I had seen two run-throughs of each play before I started to write the music. Once the whole thing had been formulated in Adrian's mind we sat down and worked out where the music cues were going to come. When you have a trilogy like *The Plantagenets*, lasting nine hours, you have to think where you're going philosophically with the production and also where the music is going.'

The music, almost an hour of it when all added together, is an integral part of the production and echoes the drama, moving from the mediæval grandeur of Henry V's funeral to Richard III's world of sinister intrigue, blackness, and shadows. Gregson did some research on mediæval music but soon realised that it was not going to be a period production. 'I've made hardly any attempt to use mediæval instrumentation, rhythmic or melodic frameworks. It's more trying to create that world with modern sounds. By the time we reach Richard III the music has become quite abstract.'

Gregson's most difficult challenge was lack of time to develop his ideas. 'A 30-second music cue is quite a long one and in that time you're expected to create a certain atmosphere. But all a composer has time to do is make a statement; you can't develop it. What you have to do is use developmental procedures

throughout the play and indeed throughout the cycle. It's rather like a mini *Ring* cycle in that you use certain ideas — call them leitmotifs if you want — certain tunes or cells for individual characters which develop along with the drama. It's a question of trying to get a structure to the music through the play so that although you may only have ten seconds here, 20 seconds there, there is an overall growth to the music.'

For a composer used to developing his ideas in concert form, it was a straitjacket that Gregson, who teaches composition at the Royal Academy and is principal lecturer in music at Goldsmith's College, found hard to come to terms with at first. Another problem was the length of the cues; by the time of the technical rehearsals, many cues covering scene changes were either too short or too long. 'The problem for the director is simple: he says he needs ten seconds more or ten seconds less, but you can't just chop off a bar if you've got a phrase structure or a rhythmic ostinato. It means a complete rewrite.'

In spite of such problems, Gregson found working with the RSC a rewarding experience. 'There has been a strong sense of company and of togetherness, something a composer doesn't normally get. It's been very exciting to be part of, and has given me an insight into all sorts of things, such as structure, space and time, which will, hopefully, help me as a composer.'

He was also able to contribute to

the actual production. It was his idea to open the cycle with two trumpeters front of house and then to go into a Requiem for Henry V's funeral (recorded at Lichfield Cathedral) in which the company joins. The Requiem is mock-mediæval. 'I have tried to avoid cliché. It is easy to get wrapped up with fanfares and drums but I have tried to give the music shape by moving towards abstraction.'

At the end of *Edward*, the inside of the piano is being hit and scraped, there are DX7 sounds which are very abstract and by the time we get to *Richard* a 12-note row is incorporated into the music.' The end result is quite different from Gregson's concert music, because of the element of pastiche. 'I was not trying to write in the style of other composers but to create certain dramatic effects. Because of that one uses a certain musical vocabulary which is immediate to the audience. There are places where people might say that's Penderecki, Stravinsky, or Bartók, but hopefully those who know my music will recognise it as mine because there's enough of my own personality as a composer to come through.'

After a long time in the critical doldrums, the RSC needed a blockbuster like *The Plantagenets*. Critical reaction when the plays opened in October was almost entirely favourable. It must have been galling to Gregson though, after all the time, energy, and late nights, that not one major review mentioned the music. □



Richard III, His Death: Anton Lesser as Richard, and Penny Downie as Margaret