

Edward Gregson interview/article, written in 2010 for 4barsrest, the online magazine for brass bands. The questions were formulated by Christopher Thomas. It was written in response to the release of a double CD on the Doyen label, entitled 'The Gregson Collection', released to celebrate the composer's 65th birthday.

What guided you in your choice of music to be included on the two discs?

Well, I wanted it to represent my output chronologically. It was fortunate that Black Dyke had just recorded my first piece for brass band, the march *Dalarö*, which I wrote in 1964 at the tender age of 19. So I was able to include that and then make the choices about my most important works from then until the present time.

Of all the featured recordings, it was only Desford that you conducted yourself on the very first volume that Doyen devoted to your music. Do you still relish the opportunity of conducting your own music?

That first volume with Desford was a bit special and that is why I've included two works from it. You will remember it Chris just as well as I do as you were playing on the sessions! It may have aged a bit in terms of the recording quality, but I believe it still stands up pretty well. There is some wonderful solo playing – Linda Nicholson was principal cornet and to my mind she was one of the best. Her phrasing is so musical and she varies her tone colours so imaginatively. Then, in the Horn Concerto I asked the band to play in a quasi-orchestral manner, and they responded to that very well. Of course Frank Lloyd (French horn) is a star, but overall that is actually the best playing on the disc. Yes, I still conduct my music (not as much as I once did) and enjoy doing so. It's more important for me to keep fit these days so I need to conduct more. Offers on a postcard please!

You mention in your sleeve note that your early music for brass bands was very different to the other music that you were writing at the time. Could you elaborate on that point?

Well, I had written a work in 1968 called *Music for Chamber Orchestra*, which interestingly has just been recorded by Chandos and will be coming

out in January along with my trombone and cello concertos. That work is very symphonic in style and language (influenced by Shostakovich) and lasts over 22 minutes. The harmonic language is more complex than the band works I wrote around that time, but it is still a very melodic work. It is probably closer to the Horn Concerto in its style than any other of my band works of that period (ie the early '70s). I think I subconsciously mellowed my language when I wrote for band – whether that was right or not I don't really know, but it's a fact. When I was at the Royal Academy of Music in the middle of the 1960s I didn't write any brass band music apart from *Dalarö*. I was writing songs, chamber music, piano music, and starting orchestral pieces. If Geoffrey Brand hadn't offered me an exclusive contract in 1967 to write 4 works a year for his newly acquired publishing company R.Smith (beginning with *Voices of Youth* and *Prelude for an Occasion*) I doubt whether I would have written much at all for bands; but I was straight out of college, with a wife and a new baby and we needed to earn a living! Nevertheless, I'm pleased that I did write all that band music over that ten-year period (1967-77). The brass band is still one of the most exciting mediums to compose for.

Your early admiration of Heaton, Steadman-Allen and Leidzen was later acknowledged in Rococo Variations when you paid musical tribute to Heaton and Steadman-Allen, alongside Eric Ball, John McCabe, Elgar Howarth and Philip Wilby. What did you draw from Heaton and Steadman-Allen in particular during your early years as a brass band composer?

The inventiveness of their creative process and the manner in which they presented and developed their material. Also, the freshness of their harmonic writing and their contrapuntal craftsmanship. For me they stood head and shoulders above any of the other 'brass band' composers of that time, although I also admired Eric Ball for his formal structures and his 'symphonic' thinking; also Gilbert Vinter for his refreshingly novel approach to scoring. You must remember that I was a teenager playing in an SA band, so I mainly came across band composers writing SA music, hence Heaton, Steadman-Allen and Ball. But as I've said elsewhere I was living in a parallel universe where my other passions were for the music of Bartok, Stravinsky and Hindemith.

Many composers turn their backs on their early music. Do you still look back on works such as the March: *Dalarö*, *Voices of Youth* and *March Prelude* with affection?

Yes I do! After all I gave birth to them just as I did to my more recent music. I wouldn't write in that style any more but then neither would any composer who looks back on their early music. Those works still have a freshness and honesty about them and I'm fond of them for those qualities alone.

The majority of your brass band works (*Of Men and Mountains* being a notable exception) carry purely abstract titles. Could you explain what might be seen as your predilection for non-programmatic works?

I've never been a 'programmatic' composer in the way say Liszt, Richard Strauss or Mahler were. You could add Eric Ball to that list as his works nearly always had extra-musical associations, mainly religious or spiritual. Of late I have gone down that road a little more with *The Trumpets of the Angels* and my last orchestral work *Dream Song*. I suppose I have always had formalist tendencies so it's a good job I wasn't a composer in the old Soviet Union! I like the abstract notion of music being 'powerless to express anything but itself' to paraphrase Stravinsky. It's also more of a challenge to write 'pure' music and I like that tension, compositionally speaking. By way of interest, even those early works of mine for band that have programmatic titles came about not through my original thoughts. For example, *The Plantagenets* was originally just called a 'Symphonic Study' but Geoffrey Brand (my then brass band publisher) suggested that bands liked a title more than just an abstract one as it suggested an exciting story behind the music! He may have been right! But it wasn't part of the original intention. The same is true of *The Pacemakers* which was originally just called a 'Concert Overture', but in that particular case Geoffrey was swayed by commercial considerations as 'The Pacemakers' was the slogan of WD Wills, the cigarette manufacturer who commissioned the work for their contest. How times have changed!

***Of Men and Mountains* is not only your most strongly programmatic brass band work but arguably also your most atmospheric. Did the music suggest itself right away during the course of your train journey through the Rockies?**

Well it's true that it is programmatic but not in a literal sense. In other words there aren't musical passages that try to represent a train or mountains etc. But what it does attempt to do is to give the feelings of the grandeur of nature – hence those huge granite-like chords that appear throughout the work. The slow movement represents the frailty of humanity but also the life-enhancing qualities of human beings when confronted with the enormous power of nature. I'm glad you find it atmospheric because that is an important element of the work – namely a new approach to scoring and texture that I attempted in its composition.

Several of your works, to a greater or lesser degree, augment the instrumentation of the brass band in various ways, most famously perhaps with the inclusion of the second flugel horn in *Dances and Arias*. Have you found the rigid instrumentation of the contesting brass band to be a frustration in the past?

Well, that question follows on from my last answer really. I would say that from *Dances and Arias* onwards I tried to augment the band through sonic means. Without going into too many technicalities, I used new scoring methods that enhanced the feeling that a band sounded 'different'. The matter of the rather rigid standard band instrumentation came about through contesting and is almost an historical accident. There are additions I would make if I could and in some of my non-contest works I have done that.

***Dances and Arias* stands out as one of the milestones in your brass band music on account of its adoption of a somewhat tougher musical language. Are there any other works that you look on as particular milestones in your music for brass band?**

Well, the other obvious work is *The Trumpets of the Angels*. I regard that as the most adventurous and ground-breaking work I have written for band. The work starts with off stage horns and baritones, and requires the

addition of a (virtuoso) solo trumpet (as well as band solo trumpets/cornets antiphonally placed around the band), and an organ, which all adds to the drama of the work; and through this enhanced scoring I have achieved what I set out to do – namely to take the brass band into a new sonic sphere. The work also has a much more complex musical language with aleatoric passages sitting alongside conventional time signature music.

Your concertos form something of a backbone to your music for brass. Although they have been performed by many soloists over the years, to what degree did you originally tailor them for the players you initially wrote them for?

When you write for a particular performer it does shape the way you conceive the music. In the case of my Trumpet Concerto (written for James Watson) he was one of the most lyrical players imaginable – wow, can he play a tune well! – so there are many long-phrased melodic lines in that concerto which suited him very well.

Stylistically and technically, how do you feel that your music for band has changed over the years?

Inevitably a composer's style and languages changes and develops over a lifetime. In my case it has become, I think, deeper in its emotional utterances. The harmonic writing has become more sophisticated and the structures longer and more complex. But I haven't lost my penchant for writing melodies and I hope I never will!

Paul Hindmarsh talks of “life affirming resolution” in your music. Do you see composition as a fundamentally celebratory art and do you feel that this can be traced back to your Salvationist roots?

No, I don't think that I regard it as a mainly celebratory art form. As a temporal art form, unlike say visual art or sculpture, it has the power to move us through its drama and emotion. Of course, I regard it as the greatest of the art forms as I know no other medium through which people can be 'moved' en masse. A great performance of a great work of musical art is the most sublime experience for many of us. Thus, such an experience (say of Bach's B minor Mass, a late Mozart piano concerto, or

any of the Brahms symphonies) can change our lives for the better. What other art form (apart perhaps from the theatre) can achieve that?

In some ways, *Rococo Variations* seems like a summation of both your own creative journey with brass bands and those who have inspired you in that journey. What specifically did you set out to convey when you first contemplated the work?

To some extent it was another challenge. As I've said before I approach every new work with the same intention of exploring new avenues; thus, *Rococo Variations* is different in my band output to other works. I don't like to repeat myself; maybe that's one of the reasons why I've only written a handful of works for brass band in the last twenty-five years. But it won't be the last work I write for band, that's for sure!

And finally, with brass band music having been such a vital part of your output over the last forty-five years, do you still have the appetite to write for band again in the coming years?

Bearing in mind what I've just said the answer is a qualified 'Yes'!

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