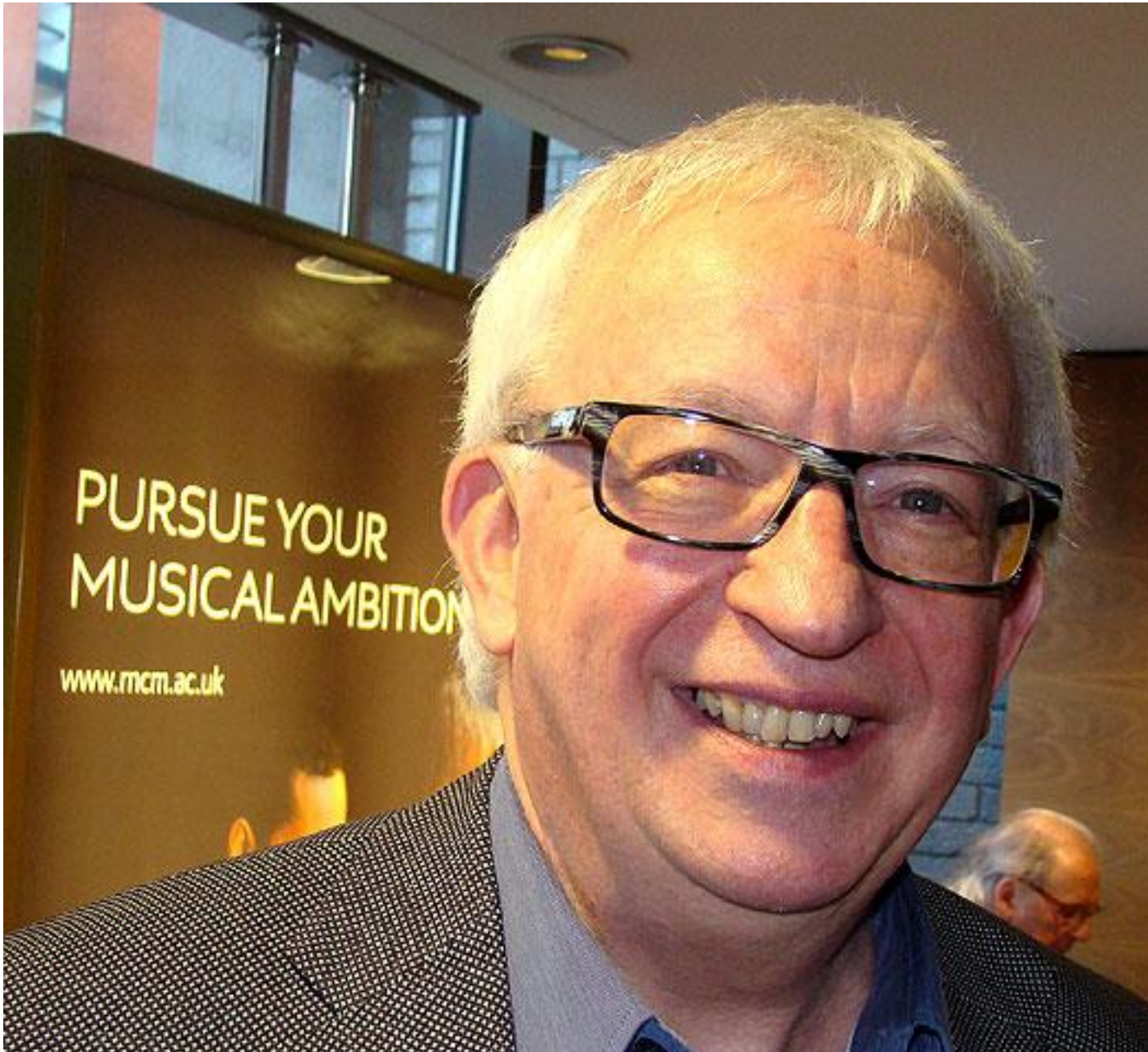


2013 National Championship of Great Britain - Test piece review

10-Oct-2013

4BR Editor Iwan Fox takes a look at a masterful piece of facadism from the pen of Edward Gregson.



Memory Man: Edward Gregson

Edward Gregson's elegiac tribute to the architectural bedrock of our banding repertoire provides the 2013 National Championship with a perfectly balanced test piece that expertly separates homage from pastiche. 'Of Distant Memories' is a unique, masterfully created tone poem of adaptive test piece facadism.

Remarkable achievement

It is a remarkable achievement; a familiar, yet distinctive recall of reminiscences from the mid-20th century of contesting time, written in a contemporary musical language firmly linked in context to its inspiration.

Gregson presents the listener with an outward valence of familiarity; subconscious memories of binding structures which in turn hold together an inner amalgamation of modern configurations.

His inherent skill in preserving the 'olden style' of writing is obvious on first hearing - yet as he himself says, it is a latent form of recall; the synapses triggered by ciphers of Fletcher, Holst, Elgar, Ireland, Bliss, Howells and Vaughan Williams, rather than through direct quotation.

Supporting pillars

However, these post Victorian giants are certainly the supporting pillars from which his contemporary internal material, made up of modern melodic, harmonic and textural balances, develops.

His 'contemporary colouristic terms' (as he states in his own notes to the score) are certainly far removed from the original palette shadings of '*Epic Symphony*', '*Severn Suite*', '*Moorside Suite*' and '*Kenilworth*', but they are never garish, or disrespectful.

Tradition is retained, but not at the expense of flexibility.

As a result, percussion requirements are modest by modern day standards, yet Gregson is still able to add just the right touch of effect to allow it to sit comfortably within his 21st century outlook.

Peaceful opening

The peaceful opening middle band statements have a welcoming carillon effect, but it is one that also builds in tension and complexity before settling into an energetic allegro.

This has a historical sense of drive and purpose, coupled with a great deal of modern transparency - the recall mechanism set out with an expertly realised sense of counterbalance.

Engrossing feature

It is such an engrossing feature throughout: The most celebrated architectural facadism balances tradition with innovation – and Gregson is a wonderful exponent of both.

The aching falls of the main melodic lines contrast with the more acerbic rhythmic patterns (especially the razor sharp triplets).

Nod of appreciation

There is an affectionate nod of appreciation to the likes of '*Labour and Love*'

amongst others, but Gregson also reveals elements of sublime detail too - little motifs and interventions that add a spark of ingenuity that lifts the music from the page and further add to the sharply focused, intellectual wit – from a little snippet of Alban Berg to a touch of Leonard Bernstein.

Tasteful demands

Solo demands are tastefully demanding – as we have come to expect of the composer over the years.

You can imagine the likes of Bliss or Howells just wondering if they could have got away with a principal cornet sailing up to a top D, followed by an answering baritone, or an Eb and Bb tuba tackling lyricism at oxygen deprived levels above the stave.

You suspect they would have been delighted given the chance.

No circus act

However, there are no technical hoops to jump through like a circus act here – just demanding tests of musical character. It all ends on a big fat, juicy applause enhancing chord.

What will test though are the subtle changes in dynamic and tempi – and the inherent need to play with a defined sense of style – from the noble and nubile to the beautiful and bombastic.

Majesty and mystery sit hand in hand with empathy and emotion.

Heart strings

That said, the MDs will also have to set out their poetic inclinations without recourse to lachrymose sentimentality.

Overdo the pull on the heart strings and the lack of pulse will kill off any sense of intuitive lyrical beauty.

The expression is governed by the composer's clear instructions: At no point does he ask for anything to be covered in musical syrup.

Wind up the motor too far though and the clarity required to make the music bubble with mature verve will be lost amid the acoustic mushrooms that hang from the ceiling of the old cake tin auditorium.

Balance right

Get that balance right, and this is music that will spark tears to form in the coldest of gimlet eyes and send a shudder down to straightest of emotional backbones:

Nothing Gregson writes in this work is imprisoned by a technical cage marked 'trick or treat'.

Old trombone players of a certain vintage will love his appreciation of commanding trio writing, whilst the high wire soprano players are tested in their ability to create vibrant colour rather than vacuous volume (or their ability to communicate at a pitch only audible to any guide dogs in the hall).

Heroic nobility

The final ride for home has a fitting sense of heroic nobility about it – a last recall from the memory banks of when Britain ruled the waves in more ways than one. It all adds up to a wonderful test piece – one fitting of both the occasion and of the homage it pays to the composers who inspired Edward Gregson to write it in the first place.

Generosity of spirit

As a result there is an immense generosity of spirit about '*Of Distant Memories*' (*Music in an Olden Style*) that captures the very essence of what great brass band writing is all about.

The composer has repaid his personal debt of gratitude to the giants of our musical past with a work that places him firmly in their historic company.

Iwan Fox

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