## The Salamander and the Moonraker

### An Adventure Story in Music

# Programme Note

**Story and text by Susan Gregson Music by Edward Gregson**

Legend, mythology, and magic, have always been strong themes in stories for children (all the way from Grimms’ Fairey Tales and *Alice in Wonderland*, to *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter).* Children, and indeed some adults, find it relatively easy to suspend reality and enter a world of make-believe, where they are both the chief participants and action heroes and heroines. *The Salamander and the Moonraker* continues this tradition.

The story tells of the adventures of some children caught up in the magical realms beyond Earth, and begins when they encounter a ‘strange’ voice echoing from a gigantic balloon telling them of the plight of the Moonraker, held captive by the god Thor. The children are told that without the Moonraker there would be no more moonlight on earth. They are transported into space, and with the help of an amazing Salamander, are carried through Thor's ring of fire to rescue the Moonraker.

But then, Thor unleashes the mightiest of storms to try and stop them escaping. Will they succeed in their mission?

The music is laid out on a large canvas, and is scored for children’s choir, two narrators (male and female), and symphony orchestra (with important parts for piano, harp, and percussion). It lasts for some 35 minutes. The narrative unfolds through a mixture of free ‘recitative’ sections (both accompanied and unaccompanied), where the narrators and choir take it in turn, but sometimes together, to tell the story. The set songs, some ‘popular’ in style and idiom, comment on the story through a variety of musical means – here a waltz or march, there a gallop or rumba. As we know, children like nothing better than to sing a good tune, and that was uppermost in our minds when we set out on the creative process. The songs are ‘popular’ in idiom but also quite challenging, with the choir split into two groups and often having to maintain independent melodic lines with a wide compass of notes.

The work falls into eight main sections:

Introduction

The Salamander’s Song

Glittering Galaxy

The Moonraker’s Song

Thor’s Song

We want the Moonraker

Storm Music

Going Home

The music is unified by the use of leitmotifs, representing the various characters in the story – so, for example, Thor’s motif is a frenetic timpani solo encompassing the notes of a diminished 7th (F, A flat, B natural and D), whilst the Moonraker’s Song is accompanied mainly by harp and strings in a slow and gentle waltz. The Introduction uses a four-note ‘cell’ (C, C sharp, F sharp, G) that makes various appearances throughout the work. This rather ominous sounding set of notes also encompasses the interval of the tritone (C to F sharp), the interval of fate and foreboding. There is even a quotation from the fate motif in Wagner’s Ring Cycle.

Indeed, quotation also plays a part in the big climax to the work, the *Storm Music*, with fleeting references to some other well-known musical ‘storms’. This dramatic musical sequence, scored for orchestra alone, uses a whole variety of percussion instruments, including a wind machine, thunder sheet, timpani, drums and tam-tam; but choir also participates here in ways other than singing, as if they are themselves experiencing Thor’s menacing storm!

*The Salamander and the Moonraker* was commissioned by the Hallé Concerts Society especially for the Hallé Children’s Choir and Hallé orchestra to premiere in its 2018 Summer Concert Season. It is loosely based on a work originally commissioned by the Croydon Schools’ Music Association in 1980, but has been extensively revised and orchestrated in its new guise.

© Edward Gregson, Susan Gregson