

The still vital voice of Edward Gregson

One of the most significant composing voices of the last 45 years, Edward Gregson, celebrates his 70th birthday on 23 July. Christopher Thomas surveys his impact on the repertoire and probes his concerns about the regression of the brass band

It seems hard to believe that, on July 23rd Edward Gregson - a composer whose creative voice has arguably been the most significant in brass banding over the last 45 years - will celebrate his 70th birthday.

From the early concert pieces to his concertos, test-pieces and the dramatic substance of large-scale works such as *An Age of Kings* and *The Trumpets of the Angels*, Edward Gregson's work has touched every corner of the repertoire, whilst almost single-handedly driving the brass band into a new and musically stimulating era during the 1970s.

For those of us that cut our banding teeth during the '70s and '80s (myself included), there were surely very few who did not grow up on a staple diet of Edward Gregson's music. For me that experience remains particularly vivid as I still clearly remember the very first brass band rehearsal I attended at the age of 14, when the music facing me on the music stand was Gregson's early *March Prelude*.

Even at that early age, I sensed that there was something new and dynamic about Gregson's music - a feeling that was shortly to be reinforced through playing pieces such as *Essay* and *Connotations*. Exciting and often gritty harmonies and melodies, allied with driving energetic rhythms, seemed to coalesce entirely naturally with passages of serene beauty. All of this was underpinned (as it still is to this day) by a deft and often 'classicalised' sense of formal rigour, whilst there was always the reassurance of feeling that here was a composer with an innate

understanding of how to draw the very best from the instruments and players that he was writing for.

Yet as the years have gone by, Gregson's vital work as a composer has proved to be just one strand of his immensely important contribution to brass bands.

As an educationalist and an administrator during his period as Principal of the Royal Northern College of Music, Gregson's financial support for what was to become the RNCM Festival of Brass, following its abandonment by the BBC, was to not only save a crucial event in the banding calendar, but also to secure its future. Moreover, his links with the outside musical world, both creatively and through his involvement with organisations such as the Performing Rights Society (PRS), have shown him to be both a passionate and influential spokesperson for brass bands at a time when the need for artistic support has never been greater. Such ambassadors are both rare and vital to our movement in the 21st Century.

If evidence of the energy that Edward Gregson still devotes to bands was needed, it came as my interview with him was conducted via a telephone call to his hotel room in Toronto, where he was spending a week in close collaboration with Hannaford Street Silver Band and the young players of Hannaford's Academy organisation - such is his still packed schedule.

Taking up the story, Edward Gregson told me: "Canada is not essentially a brass band country, but Ray Tizzard, who founded what has become

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the Hannaford organisation, has developed a quite extraordinary event in the Hannaford Festival of Brass. The programme in the main concert is incredibly demanding, even for the professional musicians who make up the main band, but there is also a day when the community bands play, which I'll be adjudicating and I'll also be leading a read through of *Of Distant Memories* amongst other things. The last few days of my stay are pretty full on!"

The conversation turned to Eddie's own music (featured prominently in the recent RNCM Festival of Brass) and, in particular, to the continuity of the creative path he has followed over the last four decades.

"As a young composer you are always open to influences of course, but even in my early works such as my *First Brass Quintet*, written whilst I was still a student at the Royal Academy, I think there



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are elements of my style that have remained continuous throughout my career. Those fingerprints exist mainly in terms of what I would describe as melodicism and a strong rhythmic intensity. From a formal point of view I was also lucky to have a teacher at the Academy in Alan Bush, who was very rigorous in such matters. Ideas of structure and the vessel into which you put your ideas have always interested me and, for me, this is ultimately one of the most important things. I've always tried to deal with different kinds of formal issues however, from suites to something like *The Plantagenets* (which is really a kind of symphonic tone poem) to *Of Distant Memories* and the *Symphony in Two Movements*, both of which are very different structurally, but also in terms of idiom."

Talk of the recent *Symphony in Two Movements* takes us neatly on to Eddie's recent music and, in particular, a piece that is amongst its creator's most powerful musical statements.

"It is in some ways the most abstract of my pieces," said Eddie, continuing: "but I think it also perhaps my most complete piece in that I

tried to bring to the work all kinds of technical and musical thoughts, and tried to encapsulate them in a work that is quite different for me. It's interesting that I decided to call it a 'symphony', although it is undoubtedly symphonic, and it's also interesting that I effectively wrote what is my first symphony for brass band. Originally for the National Youth Brass Band of Great Britain, I really wanted to give the band a work that challenged its players, both technically and musically, and which is (I hope) also a strong piece of music.

"In contrast, *Of Distant Memories* was intended as a summing up of the last 100 years or so, but also as a summing up for me. It was both a celebration, a piece for an occasion and a return to the music of my earlier years, but it certainly isn't the kind of piece that I would have written if I had been asked to write a work in the normal way."

Gregson has never shied away from speaking his mind on the quality of new music in the brass band world in recent years, a point on which he still has forthright views and probing him for his thoughts on the stylistic pluralism of much new music elicits a typically thought-provoking response. "The younger generation is not at all bothered by crossover. It will happily introduce elements of jazz fusion or rock fusion with no hangs-up at all, which is something I see as a good thing. It's very eclectic. I do, however, think it's a shame that some younger composers haven't gone through the kind of rigorous technical training that I did as a youngster. Having said all that, however, I can't say I feel entirely at ease with where we stand on the modern musical journey. The European Championship Own-choice contest is a case in point. Not all of the music is bad, but too many bands just go for pieces that are ridiculously virtuoso and which leave a lot to be desired musically."

I asked Eddie if he consequently feels that

brass bands have further isolated themselves from the wider musical world, both musically and socially? He responded: "People that stride both musical worlds can, I think, see that the brass band has regressed, not only in its appeal to a wider cultural audience, but also in terms of the musicians themselves having moved further away from being in touch with the serious musical world, and that's a great shame.

"Grimethorpe used to play so many festivals under Garry Howarth and so did Black Dyke under Geoffrey Brand. For instance, I remember my music being played at the Cheltenham Festival, but that happens so rarely now. We have so few people who are able to do what Elgar Howarth did and that is a very real problem. And, of course, there has always been what, in my view, is the banding obsession with contesting. It's not without its good sides, but the irony for me is that the European banding scene has grown and has, in many ways, now overtaken the UK when looking at events in countries such as Norway, Holland and Switzerland. The contests are structured differently, are often funded centrally and consequently are able to be much bolder in the way in which they interact with other musical elements in their respective countries.

"This could partly be due to the fact that, without the weight of tradition that we carry in the UK, there simply aren't as many barriers overseas. In the UK, the choice of repertoire for contests has all too often been disappointing, whilst the repertoire for concerts is immensely disappointing. The European Championships have become the flagship contest and European banding is so remarkably strong, so where does that leave the UK?" The European Championships have essentially fuelled our obsession with contesting, both for the European bands as well as our own, hence contesting appears to remain the 'be all and end all' when it just doesn't interest the rest of the musical world."

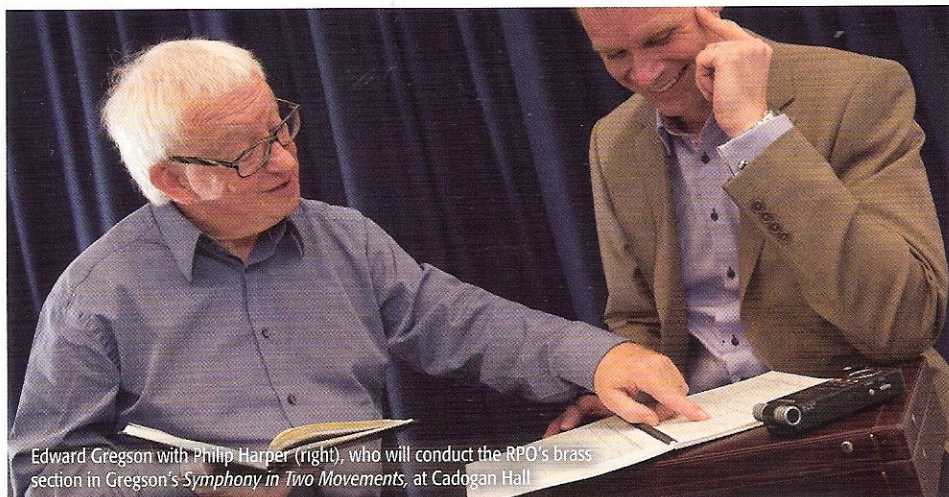
I observe that, along with falling BBC coverage, the lack of participation in major music festivals these days could be cited as the single most significant contributory factor to the erosion of banding's reputation in the world of serious music.

"Absolutely", agreed Eddie, "and on a number of occasions I have tried to suggest to certain bands and individuals that bands need to be involved in major festivals once again, but it never seems to happen and that is a great shame. For me, this is all an integral part of my emotional involvement in brass banding."

Gregson does, however, speak in glowing terms of some of the younger talent that we are thankfully hearing more of in the UK,



Edward Gregson and André Previn outside Bessemer's Barn's band room during rehearsals for the premiere of his *Tuba Concerto* in 1976



Edward Gregson with Philip Harper (right), who will conduct the RPO's brass section in Gregson's *Symphony in Two Movements*, at Cadogan Hall



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commenting: "We are truly blessed to have composers of the talent of Gavin Higgins, Simon Dobson, Paul McGhee and Lucy Pankhurst, to name a few and fortunately their voices are starting to be heard more, as indeed they should be."

Given that he is a statesman amongst the brass band hierarchy, I'm keen to find out if Eddie realises the importance of the ambassadorial status that he has acquired, albeit perhaps unintentionally. "There are a number of people who could be seen in this light of course, but in many ways leadership has to come from within and that is one thing that we lack. It is leadership that needs conductors to be adventurous; to look at concerts in a different way and to not pander to what it thinks an audience wants. We need new, younger audiences and that has to come from the music. Secondly, contest organisers need to think carefully about what music is being set. Credit is due here to the British National Championships, which is trying to forge ahead, notably in the Lower Sections."

A number of events and performances will mark and celebrate Eddie's 70th birthday, although the composer was keen to point out that he also has a busy composition schedule, which

will continue to keep him occupied. "There are numerous performances taking place, such as the first performance of the newly-scored version of *Symphony in Two Movements* for orchestral brass, which will be heard in America in July and which will then be played at Cadogan Hall in September by the brass section of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra under Philip Harper. My String Quartet, premièred at the Manchester Mid-day Concerts, will also be played at the Presteigne Festival, but in many ways this year is really about writing as much as anything else."

And so we moved full circle to Eddie's recent work and his future diary. Five years after retiring as Principal of the RNCM, Gregson's seemingly never-failing creativity appears to be finding an ever-deeper seam of inspiration. I therefore ask whether this is simply a question of time, or whether there are ideas that he is still keen to express. "Well I've never really used the word retirement - although I no longer have the day job, composers never really retire. The job at the RNCM was very demanding 24/7 and I therefore had to fit writing around vacation times, which was something of a challenge. That said, I do miss the contact with students and professional colleagues. What it has done, though, is give me more time and space to think things through and that has certainly helped with major works such as *Symphony in Two Movements* and my recent String Quartet.

"I'm about to start on a new Euphonium Concerto for David Childs and there is also a Cornet Concerto for brass band, which is in the planning stages. The Euphonium Concerto will be with orchestra initially, but a brass band version will follow."

As our conversation nears its natural end I asked Eddie if, notwithstanding the issues that we had discussed, he remains optimistic about the



Edward Gregson at work

future for brass bands. "Yes, I certainly do because it is such a wonderful medium," he replies. "I really want to be constructive and not critical in my opinions, but we have to remain musically open-minded. It's a 'tough ask' in the modern age and live music faces so many challenges these days, but fundamentally the brass band is a fantastic form of music-making. Having just spent a week working in Canada, where there is no inherent brass band culture and where I heard three different youth bands play in one concert, it is impossible not to be optimistic."

It's a telling note on which to end our conversation and one that emphasises, yet again, the vital role Edward Gregson has played in our musical lives for well over 40 years now.

As he celebrates his milestone birthday, few would argue against the assertion that brass bands need his passion and influence as never before! ■