

TUBA CONCERTO - EDWARD GREGSON

An article by the composer on his most performed concerto

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, many solo performers, particularly students preparing for an exam, recital or concerto performance, have written to me or my publisher asking for more information about my Tuba Concerto; and so I have at last decided to write this article in the hope that it will provide a comprehensive resource for anyone wishing to learn more about the work's background, history, premiere performances and recordings, the four versions, together with a programme note and further additional information.

BACKGROUND

Although I have written over a dozen concertos, including those for orchestral instruments (violin, cello, flute, oboe, clarinet, horn, trumpet and trombone), my Tuba Concerto remains my most performed one to this day. It regularly receives multiple annual performances in many countries of the world and has had numerous broadcasts and recordings in its three main versions. It has become a 'go-to' work for most lower brass departments in music conservatoires and universities and has become a set work by many international exam boards. I am of course very grateful that this particular concerto has received so much attention and has brought so much pleasure to performers and audiences alike over the years.

HISTORY

Sometime in 1975 I was approached by the horn player Ifor James (1931-2004), a soloist of renown, a member of the legendary Philip Jones Brass Ensemble (PJBE), and a leading pedagogue who taught future generations of horn players, many of whom became principal players in UK orchestras. I had known Ifor since 1967, when the PJBE gave the first professional performances and broadcast of my Brass Quintet, written earlier in 1967 as a graduation piece when I was a student at the Royal Academy of Music (RAM) in London. Indeed, a little later, I was commissioned to write my first brass concerto specially for Ifor - a Concerto for French Horn and Brass Band, funded by the Arts Council of Great Britain and premiered in 1971. He later recorded the concerto, alongside John Fletcher's performance of the Tuba Concerto, for Chandos Records (still available on CD)

In the early '70s, Ifor had taken on the role of professional conductor of one of the oldest, if not the oldest brass band in the world, the famous Besses o'th'Barn Band. One of the first things he did was to implement a policy of commissioning contemporary composers to write for the medium. among them John McCabe and Paul Patterson. Remembering the concerto I had written for him in 1971, he asked if I would be interested in writing a tuba concerto for his friend and colleague in the PJBE, John Fletcher, who was then principal tuba in the London Symphony Orchestra (LSO) as well as being a soloist of international repute.

I accepted the invitation with some trepidation as there were no models to draw upon, certainly not in the brass band repertoire (although of course there was the 'classic' orchestral Vaughan Williams Tuba Concerto of 1954, written for Philip Catelinet, the then principal tuba of the LSO). As with my Horn Concerto, pitting a brass instrument against an 'orchestra' of brass instruments posed a problem, not least in the matter of balance, that was tricky to overcome. There was also the important issue of getting to know more about the tuba and its capabilities.

During my student days at the RAM, I was fortunate in having as one of my good friends a principal study tuba player (and a rather good one at that); and so I was able to learn a lot about the capabilities of the instrument, as well as experimenting with new techniques. For example, in my Brass Quintet of 1967, I use a double octave flutter-tongue glissandi passage,

something that would have been impossible to imagine except by face-to-face conversations and try-outs. I had also written an earlier work for tuba and piano, and so in setting out to write the new concerto I felt more confident in having already written for the tuba, albeit within a chamber music context.

REHEARSALS AND PREMIERE

When I completed the concerto, John Fletcher and I met up to go through the solo part. I can't remember if he made any suggestions for changes, but we soon arrived at a version ready for rehearsals with the band. I was asked to conduct the premiere, due to take place at a concert at Middleton Town Hall, North Manchester, England, on 24 April 1976.

However, before the final rehearsal took place, a rather strange but serendipitous thing happened: Ian Engelmann, a BBC TV producer for a long-running series of arts documentaries with the title of 'Omnibus', had the idea to ask André Previn, recently appointed principal conductor of the LSO, to head North (ie to the North of England) in order to learn more about the British amateur music tradition and phenomenon of the 'brass band', something which had its roots in the middle of the 19th century and had grown to be an important part of British musical life, which indeed it still is today. I don't know how Engelmann or Previn learnt that the premiere of my concerto was soon to take place, but I suspect that as John Fletcher was the tuba player in the LSO, he must have slipped the information to Previn – and so the idea to include it in the television documentary was born.

When the time came and I arrived at the Besses o' th' Barn band room for the final rehearsal, a camera crew was already in place, together with Maestro Previn who was about to listen to the rehearsal of my new concerto and to interview me and John Fletcher about it. Obviously, for a young 'unknown' composer this was to be a wonderful opportunity. The final rehearsal went very well and Previn even asked me for some lessons in brass band scoring, but sadly that never materialised – a missed opportunity as Previn, undoubtedly being the fine composer he was, would I'm sure have produced a stunning work for brass band. Previn stayed on for the concert the next evening and in due course the programme was broadcast on national television. Thus, the concerto was born!

PROGRAMME NOTE

The concerto is in three movements, following the usual quick-slow-quick pattern: *Allegro deciso, Lento e mesto, Allegro giocoso*.

The first movement is cast in a sonata form shell with two contrasting themes, the first rhythmic in character, the second lyrical, exploiting the tenor register of the instrument. The introductory fanfare-like *leitmotif* and Stravinskian block chords recur in various guises throughout the concerto and return at the end to bring the work full circle. In the development section, where both themes are juxtaposed, there is a passing reference to the opening of Vaughan Williams's Tuba Concerto in a quasi 'homage'. The opening returns in a somewhat contracted form, this time leading to a brief tuba cadenza, heard against held chords in the band/orchestra. A brief reference to the opening *leitmotif* brings the movement to a close with a downward sweep from the soloist.

The second movement opens with a ritornello, a chorale-like idea which returns twice more in the movement, acting as structural pillars. The soloist enters thoughtfully before unfolding an expressive *cantabile* melody, accompanied by punctuated chords. The ritornello returns before a new idea is introduced which eventually gathers in intensity and leads to the climax of the movement, triumphantly heralding the return of the main theme from both soloist and ensemble. A final reprise of the ritornello ends the movement quietly.

The last movement is in rondo form, alternating a breezy main theme with two episodes. The first of these is a broad sweeping tune, announced initially by the soloist but then with the full ensemble joyfully joining in. The second episode, languorous in mood with something of the 'blues' about it, has prominent solos for various instruments alongside the tuba. The music eventually winds down, leaving the tuba to offer a parting cadenza after which the breezy main theme returns, this time leading to a reprise of the very opening of the concerto before ending with a triumphal flourish.

THE FOUR VERSIONS

Brass Band

as above

Orchestra

After the first performance of the original version for brass band in 1976, John Fletcher asked me to consider writing a version with orchestra, something I had in fact thought about undertaking for a while. The opportunity came for the premiere of that version at the Scottish Proms in 1983, with two performances in Glasgow and Edinburgh by the Scottish National Orchestra, conducted by Alexander Gibson. I remember the occasion well as I travelled up to Scotland by car with 'Fletch' for the performances, which went very well. Anecdotally, on the journey home to London, 'Fletch' insisted on stopping off at a railway heritage site in Yorkshire in order to take measurements for a scale model locomotive he was making!

Wind Band

Following on from the orchestral version it was suggested that I might consider undertaking a version for Wind Band, as such a version would be a necessity for the European, North American, and Japanese markets. I wasn't too keen on the idea as it struck me as being a commercial decision rather than an artistic one; but I was persuaded otherwise, and although I didn't have the time to undertake the task myself the new score was written to great effect, and with my approval it must be said, by Glyn Bragg. This version has since been widely performed around the world.

Piano

The piano reduction version is the most performed for obvious reasons, mainly by students in graded exams, or in exams and recitals at universities and conservatoires. This piano reduction version was made by the composer, with the piano part specially designed to have the 'feel' of a substantial recital repertoire piece.

THE NEW CADENZA

In early 1993 James Gourlay informed me that he was about to record the concerto in its original brass band version; and he had one request: to extend the cadenza in the final movement and make it more 'difficult'. I duly undertook the task with enthusiasm, bringing back a reference to the earlier 'blues' theme, which now soars to a high A flat, and slightly extending the other material. JG plays it magnificently on that recording, and on his subsequent orchestral version recording, as one would expect from one of the world's leading tuba soloists. **Any tuba players wishing to play this revised version of the cadenza can obtain a copy from the publisher.**

THE INSTRUMENT DEBATE

The VW concerto was written for an F Tuba, the instrument used widely in orchestras in the earlier part of the 20th century. However, by the time I wrote my concerto most tuba players, at least in UK orchestras, were playing the E flat tuba. These days I believe my concerto is played on the F tuba, the E flat, and even the C Tuba – so take your pick!

PUBLICATION

Original version for brass band, initially available for hire only (1976).

Published version for brass band, for sale (1997)

Piano Reduction (tuba and piano), for sale (1978)

Orchestral version, for hire only (1978)

Wind Band version, for sale (1986)

SELECTED RECORDINGS

There are numerous videos of live performances of the concerto on YouTube, some of dubious quality it must be said. Nevertheless, there are also commercial recordings of the three main versions, including the ‘classic’ account by the dedicatee, John Fletcher.

Here are some of the best recordings:

Orchestra

British Tuba Concertos – Naxos 8.557754

James Gourlay (tuba), Royal Ballet Sinfonia, cond. Gavin Sutherland

canTUBAllada – Valve-Hearts 3102

Hans Nickel (tuba), Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra, cond. Jan van der Roost

Brass Band

Concertos for Brass – Chandos 4526

John Fletcher (tuba), Besses o’th’ Barn Band, cond. Roy Newsome

Gourlay plays Tuba - Doyen DOY 028

James Gourlay (tuba), Britannia Building Society (Fodens), Band, cond. Howard Snell

The Trumpets of the Angels – Doyen DOY 185

Joseph Cook (tuba), Black Dyke Band, cond. Nicholas Childs

Symphonic Wind Band

Stockholm Wind Orchestra – Caprice CAP 21414

Michael Lind (tuba), Stockholm Symphonic Wind Orchestra, cond. Martin Turnovsky

DePaul University Wind Ensemble – Albany Records TROY 501

Floyd Cooley (tuba), DePaul University Wind Ensemble, cond. Donald DeRoche

SUMMARY

After its premiere in 1976, my concerto was thought to be too difficult for students to play. How times have changed! It is now used as an audition piece for would-be undergraduate students entering university or conservatoires. However, I believe it is still a test for the best of tuba players, or so I’ve been told. I composed my concerto for one of the ‘godfathers’ of the instrument, John Fletcher - a musician who happened to play the tuba, as I have always said. He could analyse a Mahler symphony as easily as he could discuss the latest mouthpiece on the market. He was a legend, and I’m proud to have written my concerto specially for him.

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For further information, including details about hiring or purchasing the concerto:

Composer's website: www.edwardgregson.com

Publisher's details: Novello & Co Ltd (part of the Wise Music Group)

Edward Gregson's main publisher since 1968 has been Novello and Co. Ltd, now one of the publishing companies within 'Wise Music Classical'.

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The historic 1976 programme from the première of the Tuba Concerto, signed by John Fletcher, Ifor James, Andre Previn, Ian Engelmann (BBC Producer), and Frank Bryce (composer and resident conductor of Beses o'th' Barn Band)