

Craft, Narrative & the Brass Band Tradition



Edward Gregson is widely regarded as one of the leading composers of the past half-century, with a career spanning orchestral, chamber and brass band music, as well as theatre music. His works have been performed, broadcast and recorded worldwide, including commissions for the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, BBC Philharmonic and Hallé orchestras.

For brass bands in particular, he has become a defining voice, creating major works such as *Connotations*, *Dances and Arias*, *Of Men and Mountains*, *The Trumpets of the Angels*, *Symphony in Two Movements* and *The World Rejoicing*. His theatre music work, *An Age of Kings*, continues this tradition, combining narrative drive with the powerful sonic palette of the brass band.

In 2025, Edward Gregson's 80th birthday was celebrated at the UK National Brass Band Championship, where his *Symphony* was the chosen set work, while The Netherlands selected his music for all sections in their National Championship. In 2019 he received an Ivors Academy Composer's Award for *The Salamander and the Moonraker*, and more recently he has been featured on BBC Radio 3's *Composer of the Week*. Alongside his compositional achievements, Edward has enjoyed a distinguished academic career, serving as Principal of the Royal Northern College of Music (1996–2008), where he remains a Companion and Emeritus Professor.

The National Youth Brass Band of Great Britain is proud to present Edward Gregson's *An Age of Kings* as the culmination of this evening's concert. While the accompanying programme note explores the origins and structure of the work, this conversation offers a more personal insight into the composer himself—his musical voice, his creative process and the ideas that continue to shape his music.

Defining a Musical Voice

When asked about his musical voice, Edward Gregson reflects on the evolution of his style over a lifetime of composition. "Most composers go through different periods," he says. "It's the same with a writer or an artist. If you look at Picasso, for example, you see an evolution from the Blue Period to Cubism and later to a new form of representational work. Composers are the same: early works often reflect the influences of teachers or prevailing styles, middle periods explore new ideas, and later work tends to integrate all that experience into a mature voice."

He compares this to Beethoven, whose early works echo Haydn, whose middle symphonies push boundaries, and whose late quartets challenge listeners with their chromatic and abstract qualities. "My early music sounded a bit like my influences," Edward admits, "but over time I experimented, became more dissonant and exploratory, and then returned to ideas of traditional form and structure, now enriched by decades of experience."

Structure remains central to his compositional philosophy. "Structure is like architecture. Without a solid foundation, nothing stands. Music needs that technical backbone for ideas to make sense."

Principles and Hallmarks

Edward Gregson identifies craft as the foundation of his approach: harmony, counterpoint and rhythm form the tools through which musical ideas can be expressed. He draws a parallel with painting: "If Picasso hadn't mastered technique, he couldn't have projected his ideas forward meaningfully. With music, the same principle applies: traditional compositional craft underpins all creative work."

What is quintessentially Gregson? "People say, 'As soon as I hear some of your music, I know it's Gregson,'" he says. "I think that comes from strong melodicism and a sense of narrative. My music has tonal centres and a drive towards a goal. Even though I don't adhere strictly to key signatures, my pieces still have a direction, a sense of journey."

This narrative dimension is particularly evident in his later work. "Music is abstract, but it needs to take an audience on a journey. It should engage both performers and listeners, giving a sense of going from darkness to light, from tension to resolution. If you achieve that, you've communicated something meaningful."

The Allure of Brass Bands

Brass bands have been central to Edward Gregson's output, both professionally and personally. Growing up in the Salvation Army exposed him to brass bands from an early age, and his teenage experiences as a player left a lasting impression. "Had my childhood been in a different tradition, I might have focused on choral music instead," he reflects.

A pivotal moment came when he met Geoffrey Brand after studying at the Royal Academy of Music. Brand, a former director of The National Youth Brass Band of Great Britain, recognised Edward's talent and offered him a publishing contract for brass band music. This early support allowed him to develop a body of work that would define his career.

"The top brass bands are technically amateur but perform at a professional level," he notes. "That gives you the freedom to be daring, to write big canvases, to explore sound in ways that orchestral writing sometimes constrains. And though I write less for brass bands now, I still return to the medium because of its unique tonal qualities and expressive possibilities."



Writing for Brass Bands: Challenges and Opportunities

Composing for brass bands presents both limitations and creative opportunities. "The range is narrower than an orchestra," he explains. "Soprano instruments only go so high, and the ensemble is all brass, so you work with a more restricted palette. In *An Age of Kings*, I expanded that slightly by including piano, harp and voice, which is unusual for a brass band, but it allowed additional colours."

While some principles remain constant across genres, the instrument dictates aspects of the approach. "You have to understand what the ensemble can do technically and sonically, and then use that knowledge to shape the music. Brass bands reward careful writing: you can create textures and dynamics that are thrilling for both players and listeners."

Theatre and Musical Storytelling

Edward Gregson's experience with the Royal Shakespeare Company profoundly shaped his understanding of musical narrative. The music contained in *An Age of Kings* was originally commissioned in 1988 for a new RSC production, *The Plantagenets*, directed by Adrian Noble. This trilogy was an ambitious adaptation of four of Shakespeare's history plays—*Henry VI* Parts 1, 2 and 3, and *Richard III*—condensed into three interconnected works tracing one of the most turbulent periods in English history.

Writing for theatre requires immediacy. "In a play, you might have only 20 seconds before a new scene," Edward explains. "You need to set the mood instantly. That urgency influences my approach to narrative in concert works as well: ideas must be direct, clear and compelling."

He also highlights the collaborative nature of theatre. "You work closely with directors, who may not read music but know instinctively what they want. For example, in *An Age of Kings*, Adrian Noble wanted the English and French armies to be represented musically with contrasting identities—solidly English versus flamboyant French—and I had to translate those ideas into musical reality."

Original theatre poster for RSC's production 'The Plantagenets', 1988

An Age of Kings: Structure and Story

An Age of Kings distills these experiences into a concert suite for brass band. Originally written as theatre music, Edward repurposed it into a three-movement work, each with its own narrative focus:

1. Church and State: Establishes the political and religious framework of the era, introducing musical themes that recur throughout the suite.

2. At the Welsh Court: A reflective movement, featuring a love song sung by Glendower's wife to him before the impending battle. The music balances intimacy and tenderness with the distant sound of fanfares, foreshadowing the conflict to come.

3. Battle Music and Hymn of Thanksgiving: Explores the intensity of battle scenes before resolving in a hymn, transforming earlier thematic material into a moment of triumph and reflection.

"The suite is cohesive through leitmotifs, like in opera," Edward explains. "Certain themes represent characters or ideas, returning in different contexts. Even though it's not strictly programmatic, it tells a story, providing a journey from tension to resolution."

Balancing Craft and Expression

A central concern in Edward Gregson's work is balancing technical rigour with expressivity. "I wrote many short cues for the theatre, some only 30 seconds, others three or four minutes," he recalls. "Rather than letting those ideas go to waste, I reworked them into a concert suite. The challenge was to maintain structural integrity while ensuring each section was immediately engaging."

He emphasises narrative cohesion: "Each movement, each scene, has to make sense on its own and within the suite. The audience, and the performers, should feel the journey. That's the hallmark of a successful piece."

The Performer's Perspective

Edward values the performer's experience as much as the listener's. "It's gratifying when musicians tell you they enjoy playing a piece, or actors respond to your music in rehearsal. That engagement is crucial. If the performers are invested, it comes across in the performance."

He describes the live ensemble for the RSC production: 12 musicians, each doubling on percussion, performing amid theatrical effects like dry ice. "It was terrifying and wonderful—a spectacle that tested the music and the performers alike. That kind of collaboration informs how I write for brass bands today, where I imagine the players as fully engaged professionals."

Reflection and Legacy

When asked whether any musical moments in *An Age of Kings* are particularly personal, Edward humbly deflects. "The commission's purpose was to enhance the plays and serve the performers and audience. I respond professionally to that need. If I achieve that, I'm satisfied."

Yet his reflections on narrative, craft and audience engagement reveal the depth behind his work. "Music is an abstract art, but it communicates. It can transport, uplift and connect. Whether writing for orchestra, chamber or brass band, my goal remains to create a journey that resonates, challenges and ultimately satisfies both the performer and the listener."

Bringing the Music to Life

An Age of Kings exemplifies Edward Gregson's enduring strengths as a composer: clarity of structure, melodic invention and narrative drive, combined with a deep understanding of the brass band tradition. Its performance by The National Youth Brass Band of Great Britain offers young musicians and audiences alike a chance to experience the journey, drama and spectacle of his music. Through this work, and across a lifetime of composition, Edward Gregson continues to demonstrate how brass band music can illuminate history, character and human emotion with clarity, power and expressive richness.

