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**WHEN THE
WORLD
CAN
REJOICE**

**EDWARD GREGSON
ON HIS NEW CD
AND FIVE-NATION
COMMISSION**

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The BBW Interview

WHEN THE WORLD CAN REJOICE AGAIN!

If it makes its planned September British Open Championships première, composer **Edward Gregson's** test-piece, *The World Rejoicing*, may be the perfect antidote to Covid-19 that has brought the World some of its darkest days. **Christopher Thomas** caught up with the composer, whose towering creative oeuvre shows no signs of diminishing with age in his 75th birthday year and whose latest CD, *Music of the Angels*, has just been released on the Chandos label



This is a remarkably individual composer who writes in the mainstream of 20th Century English music... He proves a superb craftsman, with great orchestral flair and genuine melodic gifts
– Ivan March, Gramophone, November 2003

Many of us will remember the first time that we heard a work by Edward Gregson. For me, it was the pieces that I played - *Essay*, *Prelude for an Occasion* and *The Plantagenets* — during some of my very first band rehearsals, later followed by *Connotations*, a work that remains seminal to the repertoire since Black Dyke's famous National Championships victory on the piece in 1977. *Connotations* proved to herald the dawn of a new era in brass band music, yet 43 years on it is testimony to Gregson's towering creative intellect that the work gleams as brightly as ever in its vitality and life-affirming radiance.

Since then, and in addition to his distinguished career in academia, along with his significant output of literature for the orchestral, chamber, instrumental choral and wind genres, Edward Gregson has written a steady, but thoughtfully measured flow of major works for the brass band and instrumental genre, for which his music provides a rich seam through the core of the brass repertoire of the last 50 years. His works represent a contemporary backbone to the oeuvre that spans every sub-genre of music for brass, including brass band, symphonic ensemble, concerti and chamber music. Moreover, Edward Gregson's sheer passion and indomitable support of brass bands, through his roles in academia, have formed a hugely important additional element to his contribution, which sits proudly alongside his immeasurable importance globally as a composer.

Celebrating his 75th birthday in July, Edward Gregson's creative energies burn as powerfully as ever and his latest work for brass band, *The World Rejoicing*, *Symphonic Variations on a Lutheran Chorale*, is due to be unveiled at the British Open in September as part of a five-nation, cross-collaborative test-piece commission. It is the source of that energy and inspiration that I put to the composer as we opened what proved to be a fascinating, enlightening and in-depth conversation.

"I've always been fortunate in having a lot of energy and I think it probably comes from doing a cross-section of things. Given that it's impossible to



Edward Gregson

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Inspiration is a difficult word for composers to make sense of. For me, inspiration is an inner urge to create – Edward Gregson

support oneself purely from writing classical music, for the most of my life I've had two jobs. For some, like Malcolm Arnold and Richard Rodney Bennett, who combined writing film music alongside art music; others have been performers and a few conductors. For me, it was academia, initially in London and latterly, from 1996, in Manchester when I was appointed as the Principal of the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM). However, having a split role in life has never diminished my urge to write music and although you have to sacrifice a lot to keep the two things going, not a year has gone by when I haven't written at least one major piece."

As Edward points out, his retirement from the RNCM in 2008 was something of a watershed, in

journey through life might take us to far away countries and to witness inspirational sights, but it is always that inner urge that burns and that is what keeps me writing."

In terms of his music for symphonic brass and chamber forces, that inner urge is magnificently encapsulated in *Music of the Angels*, the most recently minted CD of Edward Gregson's music on the Chandos label and a disc that is not only a glorious retrospective of music spanning a period of exactly 50 years, but one that also reads like a 'who's who' in terms of the performers. It's an aspect about which Edward exudes enthusiasm. "Even for a hardened old 'pro' like me, that really was quite extraordinary. Simply to have a team of mainly London professionals of that quality,



Recording his latest CD, *Music of the Angels - Works for Symphonic Brass and Percussion*, performed by London Brass and guests directed by Rumon Gamba, out now on the Chandos label!

terms of gaining more personal time that allowed him to focus on composition more fully alongside continuing roles with organisations such as the Performing Rights Society (PRS). His creative inspiration seems greater than ever and major works have continued to flow, recent months having brought the première of his *Oboe Concerto* by the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra.

He elaborates: "Inspiration is a difficult word for composers to make sense of. For me, inspiration is an inner urge to create. When I taught composition at Goldsmith's College in London, I always told my students that composers are born and not made. And that inner urge has always been with me. I've heard many clichéd comments over the years about composers being inspired by the countryside, or by sitting in front of a Norwegian fjord, but that kind of thing doesn't make any difference. The

together in one place and at one time, was remarkable. The horn section alone featured the finest players in Britain, including Michael Thompson, who recorded my *Horn Concerto* many years ago, and Richard Watkins who has also recorded the Concerto in its orchestral version. The connections run deep; for instance, Richard Watkins studied with Ifor James, who had a strong connection with Besses o' th' barn Band. Add to that stunning trombone and trumpet sections, and when they started playing we simply thought 'Wow, we've never heard symphonic brass playing like this'. With the players of London Brass, one can still sense that legacy and tradition passed down from the days of the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble." Indeed, there is a direct link to the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble in the form of Eddie's 1967 *Quintet for Brass*, written as the composer's



Receiving an Ivors Composer Award in 2019 for *The Salamander and the Moonraker*

graduation piece at the Royal Academy of Music and dedicated to the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble, about which he observed: "I was always proud of the fact that the '*Quintet*' won the Frederick Corder Memorial Prize for the Best Piece by a Graduating Composer, up against the likes of Paul Patterson, Brian Ferneyhough and John Tavener. Tavener was two years older than me and, by that point, already a prodigiously talented composer."

That early '*Quintet*' is given a reading of invigorating energy and atmosphere on the new CD, and although written at the age of just 22, the harmony, thematic invention and intervallic structure are recognisably Gregson's, so I was keen to discover if he had been aware that he found his personal style and language so early in his creative life. "I think people talk about style and language together, when they are actually quite separate entities. For me, style is what makes a particular composer recognisable. Language is the technical means by which we get there; for instance the 12-tone system or aleatoricism. I was actually quite influenced by Hindemith and Bartok, and I think that in the '*Quintet*', Hindemith is particularly evident in my use of quartal harmony, which I was heavily into at the time. However, my style was emerging at that point and I think you can still hear traces of the '*Quintet*' in my music today."

One also senses that there has been an ever-evolving sophistication of Gregson's essential style — a further refinement of the core compositional elements that, allied to the use of self-quotation and, to some degree, stylistic cross-referencing have further defined a composer whose music has always been immediately recognisable. He commented: "Self-quotation is something that has come along in more recent years. In my early

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Tuba Concerto, I quote the Vaughan Williams *Tuba Concerto*, but that seemed an obvious thing to do, given that there were so few tuba concertos around at that point. Later, I used both self-quotation and what I would call style conversion in pieces such as *Of Distant Memories*, in which I'm not writing in my own style, or even my own language. From the point of view of language, I've dabbled in serialism, aleatoric techniques and minimalism over the years, but if you compare that to Stravinsky, for instance; his language changed radically over time, but it was still clearly Stravinsky. So although my language has varied, I don't feel that my style has really changed since those early years. That said; it's probably for other people to judge because, as a composer, it's hard to see what one's own style really is."

Our conversation turns to the *Symphony in Two Movements* — a work with a gritty, astringent edge that is as rigorous in its intellect, as it is in its formidable architectural structure. It is a tour-de-force of a piece and is brilliantly performed on the CD by the augmented forces of London Brass. I put it to Edward that I regard it as his 'magnum opus' for the genre — a point on which he mused with interest: "I have to make a distinction here between my writing for brass bands and my writing for other forces. I still think that, throughout my career, I've softened my language when I've written for brass bands. For instance, I wrote my *Concerto for Orchestra* in 1983, around the same time as *Dances and Arias*. There are elements of *Dances and Arias* in



Edward at the 2020 RNCM Brass Band Festival reception to launch the five-nation collaborative commission of *The World Rejoicing* – set for the September British Open Championship and the test-piece for the National Championships in The Netherlands, Switzerland, Belgium (all later this year) and Norway (2021)

the '*Concerto*', but the orchestral work is tougher; more astringent in its language than *Dances and Arias*." He elaborated: "It's something that I once discussed with John McCabe, who had been quite upset and, at the same time, somewhat amused by the furore surrounding the use of his *Images* at the Regional Championships in 1983. The consequence is that he deliberately softened his style considerably when he came to write *Cloudcatcher Falls* some years later. Much the same can be said for very different reasons about Shostakovich, and his fourth and fifth symphonies. But my own personal journey was really the reverse of that. I wanted to write something that was uncompromising, but which would be challenging for the National Youth Brass Bands of Great Britain and Wales, both technically and intellectually. So I thought of it as an extremely challenging concert piece and, in that respect, it is much more in line with my natural symphonic style. I do regard it as my best piece for brass and yet it is also the least played!"

In what promises to be a bumper year of celebration, 2020 will also bring the release of several further new recordings of Eddie's music, which might now be delayed due to Coronavirus. He explained: "We've already recorded a disc of solo piano music with Murray McLachlan, which I'm doing the final edits on, and we have a recording of my string quartets booked in July at Stoller Hall in Chetham's School of Music. There's also a recording of instrumental music by members of the BBC Philharmonic and Hallé orchestras and a further instalment of my brass band music by Black Dyke, including the brass band version of my *Euphonium Concerto* with David Childs. So there's a huge amount going on that could, sadly, now be in jeopardy whilst the current restrictions remain in place."

Given that Edward mentioned his *Euphonium Concerto*, I couldn't help but

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At the 2020 RNCM Festival of Brass for his *A Symphony in Two Movements* and magnificent concert work, *An Age of Kings*, inspired by Shakespeare's Henry VI and performed by Black Dyke Band with mezzo-soprano, directed by Professor Nicholas Childs

ask him his thoughts on last year's sensational recording of the piece on the Chandos label by David Childs and he responded: "David's playing was fantastic. I can only describe him as a phenomenon. As a musician, he is the complete article and one would have thought that he'd been playing amongst the players of the BBC Philharmonic for years. He has no problem, whatsoever, with adapting to a symphonic sound and every phrase is so beautifully shaped. He was also very clear that he wanted a symphonic work from me and not simply a virtuosi showpiece, so that is what I wrote."

Discussion of the *Euphonium Concerto* brought us neatly to the work that will be unveiled at the British Open in September, *The World Rejoicing*. Explaining how he arrived at the Lutheran chorale that forms the central thread through the work, the composer explained: "When I was commissioned to write the piece, my first preoccupation was to write a piece of music and I was also very conscious of the fact that it will be played at five major contests, so audiences would hear the work many times in succession. I therefore wanted to write a proper symphonic piece, but one that people would also enjoy. Brass bands have always played hymn tunes and it is something that unites us all, so I chose a hymn tune that I thought would be well known in all of the countries involved."

The structure of the piece is, however, not a straightforward set of variations in the traditional sense and Edward revealed: "It's a symphonic process, but



Receiving The Queen's Anniversary Prize for Higher Education in 2000 with Timothy Reynish, RNCM Head of Wind and Percussion. The Prize was awarded to the RNCM for its innovative programme of commissioning, performing and recording by its Symphonic Wind Ensemble

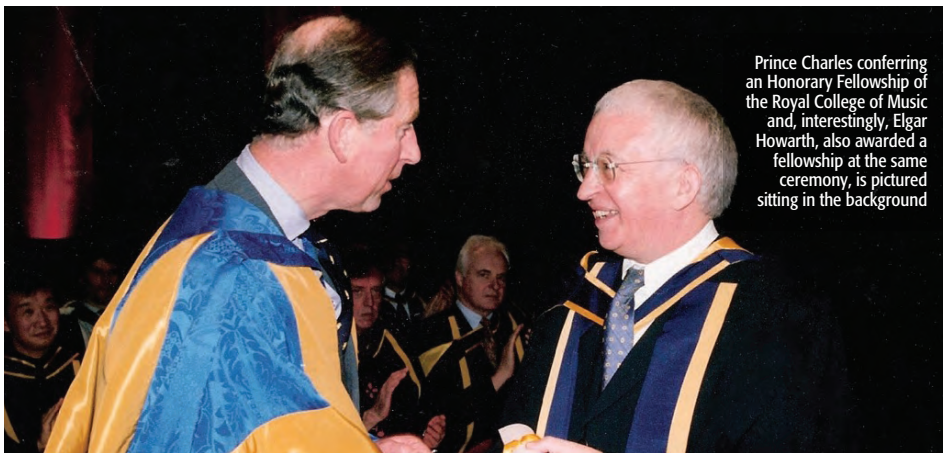


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I have no hesitation in declaring Gregson to be one of the most significant British composers currently active in this country

– Robert Matthew-Walker,

International Record Review, January 2011



Prince Charles conferring an Honorary Fellowship of the Royal College of Music and, interestingly, Elgar Howarth, also awarded a fellowship at the same ceremony, is pictured sitting in the background

one in which you hear fragments of the tune throughout, leading to a final statement of the melody in all of its glory. It was great fun to write and has many traces of earlier works, such as *Rococo Variations* and *Of Men and Mountains*. It's a difficult piece and will test bands, conductors and soloists, and I hope I've found the right balance between those things, but most of all I hope that everyone will enjoy it."

Remarking that when he wrote a piece as full of joyous optimism as *The World Rejoicing*, he could not have known that COVID-19 was about to cause such devastation to the World, but the work will surely reflect the mood of the nation when restrictions are lifted and the British Open takes place in September, as planned. Edward reflected: "It wasn't until after I wrote the work it was brought to my attention that the words were written as a thanks to God following the plague subsiding in Germany. It was a very strange thing – almost eerie in a way. You are right in that it's a joyous piece, but also one that exists on several levels, with lots of things going on. At its heart there is a long, slow variation and, I have to be honest and say, it was written because I knew I was writing a test-piece. It exposes virtually every single player in the band, with no prisoners taken. That said, I hate the box-ticking mentality of writing a test-piece. It has to be a piece of music first and foremost. Most of the bands will play the fast music well, but it is the slow variation that will divide them."

It's no secret that Edward Gregson has been vocal about the lack of quality composers from outside who write for the brass band, so I was keen to hear his thoughts on whether the five-country collaborative commissioning policy for *The World Rejoicing* could be the way forward. He responded:

"I really think it's the only way forward. To be realistic, on a financial level one can't expect composers to write major pieces for nothing. A commission for, say, James MacMillan to write the 'National' test-piece in five years time would be financially challenging, but if that investment was shared, then suddenly it becomes possible. It opens doors and, therefore, I really think the way forward is to work with other countries or partners. It's very concerning that the problem has worsened over the last 20 years or so and, arguably, the last test-piece of real note by a non-brass band composer was John Pickard's *Eden*, although I hold Torstein Aagaard-Nilsen in high regard as a composer who is uncompromising, but who has risen within the movement, and has broad musical and creative horizons."

As our conversation draws towards a natural close, Edward talks with warmth about his long-standing role with the PRS and what it has meant to him: "I've been involved with the PRS as a Director for 25 years and, although I retire from the role next year, I've enjoyed it tremendously. It brings a sense of realism. You are mixing with songwriters, film and TV composers; they are hard-edged about the business, in that there is nothing of the 'ivory tower' mentality about them. They simply want to be paid for the next song or theme that they write, even though they take great pride in the music they produce. I really do admire them for that."

It seemed an entirely fitting conclusion to our enjoyable interview to turn to the future and it's pleasing to know that Edward Gregson's abundant creative seam seems set to continue. He revealed: "I haven't taken on any commissions for this year because I knew that I was going to be very busy, but next year I'll be writing a *Viola Concerto* for the

Presteigne Festival and I also want to write more chamber music. In terms of brass band pieces, I really don't know whether I'll write another piece, but I have stated in the note within the score of *The World Rejoicing* that, if it turned out to be my last piece for band, I would be proud to call it my swansong, and I really do mean that"

In the sincere hope that his next test-piece opus is not his last, it just remains to wish Edward Gregson happy birthday and to look forward with eagerness to the joy and positivity that *The World Rejoicing* promises at, hopefully, just the right time! ■



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– Edward Gregson

Funding for the new Chandos CD – *Music of the Angels*

Although various Trusts have contributed substantial funding towards the artistic and production costs of the new CD, the rest of the costs have been borne by the composer himself. He would be delighted if anyone is interested in offering support by contributing £25.00, for which a complimentary copy of the CD will be sent to you. Support can be offered at email: edward@edwardgregson.com