

# Gilbert Vinter - A Trailblazer

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In the 25<sup>th</sup> January 1945 issue of the *British Bandsman*, it was announced that following discussion with John Henry Iles, the *Daily Herald* newspaper would sponsor and organise the National Brass Band Championships of Great Britain. This proved to be a fruitful partnership until the newspaper ceased publication in 1964, when control transferred to another national newspaper, *The People*. Not only did the *Daily Herald* guide the National Championships successfully through two decades of some of its most illustrious history, but in 1960 commissioned a composer unknown to the brass band fraternity to write a major work. The music *Salute to Youth*, the composer Gilbert Vinter.

It was to be the first of many test pieces which Vinter composed during the following decade until his untimely death in October 1969 and unlike many composers from that era, Gilbert Vinter was an “outsider” to the brass band world, having been a choirboy at Lincoln Cathedral, later becoming Head Chorister. He was an accomplished bassoonist and in 1930 became a member of the BBC Military Band. It was during this time that he began composing and during World War II played with the Central Band of the Royal Air Force.

## BBC Midland Light Orchestra

His musical training was at the Royal Military School of Music (Kneller Hall) and the Royal Academy of Music; however, he later became well known as the conductor of the BBC Midland Light Orchestra when he replaced Rae Jenkins in 1943. His association with the BBC MLO was almost continuous, only interrupted by a one year spell in 1952-53 with the newly-formed BBC Concert Orchestra. His brief stay in London was due to being disenchanted with the orchestra, returning to Birmingham and his beloved BBC Midland Light Orchestra, which saw him through to the end of his career. He was succeeded by Charles Mackerras. In 1955, as a freelance, he established the British Concert Band, the International Players and the International Light Orchestra in London, becoming a familiar name on radio right up to his death.

My first meeting with Gilbert was in the mid-1960s in Studio 1, Broadcasting House, Belfast, during his visit as guest conductor with the BBC Northern Ireland Orchestra to record “Melody On The Move” and “Morning Music”. During rehearsal breaks, he was always eager to discuss with members of the brass section

his interest in the brass band movement and latest composition. He was a true professional and a perfect gentleman. He did his job, leaving the players in the orchestra to get on with theirs, making him greatly respected by the orchestra.



Gilbert Vinter.

## A Trailblazer

Vinter's introduction to the brass band scene in 1960 quickly gained universal acclaim, one of his admirers being Eric Ball, who wrote: “His adventurous scoring, coupled with his music's considerable technical demands and far from old-fashioned harmonic idiom, did much to prepare our bands for the even more “contemporary” sounds of later years.”

The *Daily Herald's* innovation in inviting Gilbert to write a new work for brass band paid off in 1962, when *Salute to Youth* was selected as the test piece for the Championship Section of the Regional Championships. Many years later, in 1985, it was chosen to test the bands again, this time at the British Open Brass Band Championships.

For the next decade, Vinter was to compose on a regular basis for the contest arena and in 1963 produced *Entertainments* and *Symphony of Marches*, the latter appearing the following year at the Regional Championships. This was to become one of Vinter's most productive years. Alex Mortimer, conductor of CWS (Manchester) Band was so impressed with his music that he asked him to write another work following the success of

*Salute to Youth*, the result being *Simon Called Peter*. Alex and the band recorded it two weeks

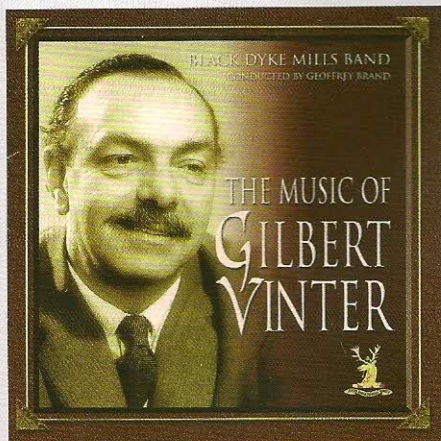
after receiving the score and parts, but sadly this work never fully captured the hearts of the banding fraternity, resulting in it becoming one of Vinter's least performed works.

## The Trumpets

Gilbert Vinter made an immense impact on the brass band repertoire in those early years, with 1964 being the year when he produced his finest work, *The Trumpets*, a Cantata commissioned by the BBC. This impressive work is scored for bass solo, mixed choir, augmented band and percussion, the text taken from the Old Testament. This major work has been recorded on two occasions, first by Men o' Brass, the other on a CD titled “The Music of Gilbert Vinter” featuring the Black Dyke Mills Band, conducted by Geoffrey Brand, with Maurice Murphy (trumpet), Michael Langdon (baritone) and an augmented choir. That same year *Variations on a Ninth* made a barnstorming appearance, again very much in the now familiar Vinter format, sidestepping traditional test pieces with the introduction of multi cadenzas for soprano cornet, tenor horn, baritone, euphonium and solo cornet; the nine contrasting variations challenging the elite soloists in 1964 when it was selected as the test piece for the National Brass Band Championships. The GUS (Footwear) Band, conducted by Stanley Boddington, captured the title on that occasion. However, *Variations on a Ninth* had to wait almost two decades before it appeared again at a major event, this time at the British Open Brass Band Championships.

The following year Vinter's music again proved a “winner” at the National Brass Band Championships, when *Triumphant Rhapsody* challenged the country's very best, the title going back to the North West, with the Fairey Band, conducted by Leonard Lamb, declared 1965 National Champions.

During the coming years Vinter's music gained further popularity as he continued to produce quality music with *John O'Gaunt* and *Vizcaya*, the former selected as the test piece for the 1968 British Open Championship, when Black Dyke Mills, directed by Geoffrey Brand, ended a somewhat lean period by their standards in claiming the prestigious British Open crown. It was to prove the start of further success for the famous Yorkshire band.



Whilst producing groundbreaking music for the contest platform, Vinter never neglected the bigger musical picture, composing *Dover Coach*, *Lisbon Carnival*, *TUC Centenary March* and *Challenging Brass* - some of his lighter pieces - while at the same time writing for orchestral music, the medium he loved best, *Hunter's Moon*, *Portuguese Party* and *Waltzing with Sullivan*, all of which could be heard regularly on the radio played by the BBC's "house" orchestras. His symphonic orchestra output was also extensive: *Krakov Legend*, *Concertino for Clarinet and Orchestra*, *Concerto Burlando for Saxophone and Orchestra* and *Piaculum for Soprano and Orchestra* to name a few.

### GUS (Footwear) Band Connection

Though Gilbert Vinter's name was never directly linked to conducting brass bands, in the mid-60s The National Youth Brass Band of Great Britain invited him, along with other professional conductors from non-brass band spheres, to their annual courses. He also had a close relationship with the GUS (Footwear) Quartet, which consisted of John Berryman and David Read (cornets), John Cobley (tenor horn) and Trevor Groom (euphonium). Through this association Vinter composed three quartets: *Elegy and Rondo* in 1966 for use at the National Brass Quartet Championships, followed by *Fancy's Knell* in 1967 and *Alla Burlesque* in 1968, during which period the GUS (Footwear) Quarter became National Champions in 1967 and 1968.

Since that first 1960 *Daily Herald* commission, Gilbert Vinter had now become a firm favourite at major contests, his music taking on a whole new meaning with yet another descriptive work now having emerged, *James Cook - Circumnavigator*. However, this fine descriptive work was to be overshadowed by a further "blockbuster" from that same year, *Spectrum*.

When *Spectrum* first appeared in band rooms, it caused minor shock waves throughout the banding fraternity

with almost universal criticism from bands, players, the media and the "old brigade" - all finding it hard to accept the modernistic, colourful and innovative style of Vinter's latest work. It also came at a time when the composer's health was dramatically failing. Selected as the "controversial" test piece for the British Open Brass Band Championship in 1969, the writing was in Vinter's now familiar flamboyant style, *Spectrum* containing a format of rhythmical patterns featuring the colours red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and purple, plus the use of additional percussion instruments. On the day Grimethorpe Colliery Band (George Thompson) convinced the adjudicators and many of the audience in a packed King's Hall, Belle Vue, Manchester that their performance was the most colourful of the day, taking the title. Sadly, *Spectrum* was to be Vinter's final work. In October of that year the banding world lost a great servant when the news was announced that Gilbert Vinter had died at the age of 60.

### Spectrum Repeat Performance

Later, in 1976, with bands having come to terms with the "complexities" of *Spectrum*, it was chosen for the Regional Brass Band Championships, an occasion which brings back vivid memories for this writer.

I had been engaged to conduct York Railway Institute Band at the Yorkshire Regional Championships, the band having recently been promoted to the Championship Section. Understandably the band members appeared concerned about the challenge ahead, but were also thrilled at the prospect of competing at St. George's Hall, Bradford against Yorkshire's finest, sharing the same contest platform with the likes of Black Dyke, Brighouse & Rastrick, Yorkshire Imperial Metals and Grimethorpe Colliery. As the contest day loomed nearer, the thought of tackling Vinter's "notorious" *Spectrum* became a daunting prospect.

Contest day arrived, York Railway Institute having been drawn to play mid-way through the entry, so there

was plenty of time for the nerves to contemplate the challenge ahead. During the performance all was going fairly well when unexpectedly the hall's loud fire alarm system activated, causing confusion both on stage, in the audience and, no doubt, with the adjudicator. It continued for some time.

My first reaction was what should I do next? Should I stop the performance immediately and take the band off the stage (and maybe to safety) or see out the rest of the performance, hoping that it was a false alarm? I decided on the latter, the band completing their now alarm disrupted performance. The band left the stage in total confusion. This unusual situation now posed the organising committee with a major dilemma, knowing full well that for the duration of the loud and prolonged activated fire alarm the adjudicator's assessment of the band's performance would have been greatly impaired. So to be fair to all concerned and following a brief and rather hurried off-stage committee meeting, I was offered two options.

The band could accept an adjudication on their interrupted performance or play again immediately after all the bands had performed. I could have made a knee-jerk decision to play again, but being fully aware of the players' anxiety during rehearsals, I called a quick meeting with all the players, outlining the committee's two options. It was either live with the original performance or play again. To my surprise (and delight) the players unanimously decided to play again. Following the last band's performance an official announced from the stage that, due to the fire alarm being activated during their performance, York Railway Institute Band would play *Spectrum* for a second time, which bravely and remarkably they did. Needless to say, neither performance was ever likely to challenge Yorkshire's finest; however, it had been two performances, resulting in two remark sheets, the second deemed the adjudicator's valid version. York Railway's performances of *Spectrum* at St. George's Hall, Bradford became a topic of conversation in the band room for months to follow, but was it unique in the history of the National Brass Band Championships?

So what of Gilbert Vinter's legacy? He was a composer of the 60's who opened up new horizons for brass bands with his vibrant, colourful, innovative, trailblazing music. His contribution to the brass band movement, though relatively short (a decade) was immense.

Gilbert Vinter, born on 4<sup>th</sup> May 1909 in Lincoln, spent his last years at St. Mabyn, Trethevy, Tintagel, Cornwall where he died on 10<sup>th</sup> October 1969, aged 60.

