

Hymns and Memories: The Brass Music of Elgar Howarth

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THE SECOND EDITION of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music* makes full mention of Elgar Howarth's distinguished career as a trumpeter and international conductor, but little is made of his substantial contribution as composer and arranger to the British brass band movement. His compositions for brass band are both a personal musical journey and a crusade. Banding is in his blood. His father Oliver was conductor of the Barton Hall Works Band in Eccles, along the ship canal west of Manchester. Elgar became the principal cornet at 14 and his brother Stanford was the principal trombone. The diet of operatic selections, marches, solos and novelty items remains a lasting memory. There was singing in the Howarth household too. Howarth senior, an ex-Salvation Army Bandmaster, loved opera and conducted a local amateur group. But, as Elgar Howarth has observed, brass bands came first: 'He was an absolute brass band addict and was crazy about hymn tunes. I suppose that was the SA influence.'¹ It is not surprising then that throughout his distinguished career as trumpet player and conductor, Elgar Howarth has retained a strong emotional and professional attachment both to banding and to the opera.

Three years of study in Manchester during the mid-1950s also opened his ears to the latest contemporary sounds and techniques. The music of composers such as Hindemith, Stravinsky and Schoenberg was a revelation. The company of fellow students such as Harrison Birtwistle, Alexander Goehr and Peter Maxwell Davies was an inspiration. New musical horizons were opened up, and he was impressed by the ways in which these composers exploited and controlled non-tonal harmony (i.e. dissonance) and irregular rhythms: 'I was fascinated by that kind of thing, like Charles Ives, who was interested in juxtaposing different layers of music and tempos against one another [...]. Part of my brief I've always thought was to try to show people interested in bands what other possibilities exist as well as what is good in the mainstream.'²

Although Elgar Howarth has composed since his teens, his creative talents were largely unsuspected by the musical profession as a whole. During the 1960s he was a leading trumpeter in London, first at the Royal Opera House,

¹ Elgar Howarth, 'Portraits in Brass', BBC Radio 3, 1992, produced by Paul Hindmarsh.

² Elgar Howarth, 'Portraits in Brass'.

then as principal trumpet with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. His work with the London Sinfonietta and the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble brought him into close contact with the cream of contemporary composers and gave him his first conducting opportunities.

However, composing was just as important to him. At the age of 22, he had completed a Trombone Concerto with orchestra, inspired by his brother's playing which he considered was of professional standard. Howarth set out deliberately to

go against what was the norm. On parks and bandstands my brother used to play *The Joker*, *The Acrobat*, and a dreadful piece called *Barnacle Bill*. It was full of glissandi and rather silly effects and was supposed to amuse people. Tommy Dorsey showed what could be done with a trombone in a very lyrical way. But it seemed to me that the trombone was a very noble instrument and rather serious, and it was that aspect which I wanted to reflect.³

The work is subtitled *Concerto Allegorical*, referring to Elgar Howarth's musical journey towards a personal style. This is not pastiche of the kind he was to use later in *In Memoriam RK* or *The Bandsman's Tale*, but an exploration of his own musical ideas through borrowed techniques.

So it started with Hindemith. His Trumpet Sonata was one of the first pieces I ever played as a student. [...] that kind of harmony – in fourths – and those rather four-square rhythms. I joined the first and second movements together and then I went on to Stravinsky, using the same melodic material – the Stravinsky of the neo-classical period, rather lyrical. The last movement becomes 12-tone and it shows a little bit of Schoenberg. There are even a few moments of what I fondly imagined Webern was doing. And that's about as far as I had got.⁴

Towards the end of the 1960s he wrote a Trumpet Concerto for himself to play. It came about almost by accident. Sir Robert Mayer, the promoter of concerts for young people, wanted to feature the brass of the orchestra across a whole Royal Festival Hall series. Barry Tuckwell played a horn concerto, Dennis Wick featured the Gordon Jacob Trombone Concerto and the late John Fletcher

³ Elgar Howarth, 'Portraits in Brass'.

³ Elgar Howarth, 'Portraits in Brass'.

played a tuba concerto. Would Elgar Howarth, as principal trumpet of the RPO, play a trumpet concerto? At first he declined the offer, suggesting that John Wilbraham, the co-principal, should take his place. Robert Mayer was insistent. 'Okay then, as long as I can compose the piece I play' was Howarth's response. This was intended to put Sir Robert off altogether, but he rose to the bait, and the Trumpet Concerto was the result. He transcribed the light-hearted finale for cornet and brass band in the 1970s for Grimethorpe Colliery Band, and he recorded it with them at that time. This is Howarth in light music mode, with colourful parodies of fanfares, patrols and marches. He completed the version for cornet and band in 1998.

In 1969 Howarth made his conducting debut with the London Sinfonietta. Three years later, he was invited to become music adviser to Grimethorpe Colliery Band – an association which has proved one of the most imaginative, far reaching and long-lived in the history of the brass band movement. During the 1970s Howarth created in Grimethorpe a band renowned for its adventurous spirit. He encouraged fine composers without experience of the idiosyncracies of writing for brass bands to write works of substance for the medium. The Howarth-Grimethorpe partnership took the musical world by storm when it played *Grimethorpe Aria* by Howarth's friend and long-standing colleague, Harrison Birtwistle. *Grimethorpe Aria* has been followed by an even more challenging and complex sequel, *Salford Toccata*. Anthony Payne's uncompromising *Fire on Whaleness* is an essay in atonality for brass band. Derek Bourgeois composed four technically demanding concertos for band in the 1970s. Sir William Walton, with Howarth's help, rescored a short C. B. Cochran revue-ballet from 1936, *The First Shoot*. Without any preconceptions about what brass band players traditionally were capable of doing, all these composers created some startlingly novel, sometimes electrifying sounds. The prodigious youthful talents of the teenage George Benjamin were revealed first through the brass band in his beautifully crafted work *Altitude*. Hans Werner Henze's *Ragtimes and Habaneras* demonstrated that a great international composer was willing to write music of great sophistication and still provide exuberant entertainment.

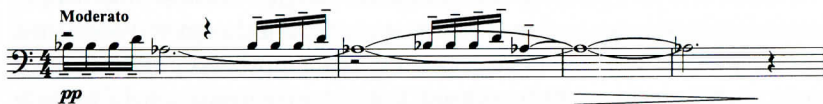
Elgar Howarth provided *Fireworks* of his own for the 1975 Open Championship. During its historic Belle Vue days, the Open Brass Band Championship steadfastly maintained a traditional approach to the choice of test pieces. The reputation for musical innovation rested in London with the National Championships. In 1975, however, it was the Manchester bands

cluding Elgar Howarth, felt they had lost one of their most inspiring colleagues. *In Memoriam RK* is Howarth's substantial musical valediction.

The composer seeks to reconcile the styles of Strauss and Mahler, 'whose music he revealed in performances of unforgettable intensity and passion'.⁶

Ascendit in Coeli is a memorial for Elgar Howarth's own father, who loved hymn-tunes. In this touching work, Howarth attempts to reconcile the musical traditions of the brass band and the musical procedures of twentieth century. At the start, a distant cornet accompanied by 'heavenly' bells plays a modern sounding hymn-tune. In the foreground all the bass instruments intone a low dissonant dirge. When the modal tune is taken up by the whole band, it is harmonised in a series of chord clusters – parallel harmonies of the kind the Olivier Messiaen made very much his own. As the soloist 'ascends to heaven', he is welcomed by three herald cornets, also off-stage. At the end of the second phrase of the hymn, Howarth introduces a smoothed out version of a motif from a much earlier composition – *Mosaic*, written in 1957, while Howarth was on National Service with the Central Band of the RAF. *Mosaic* is a fresh sounding miniature, full of life and energy, not in itself an important work, but significant in what it tells us about the music that matters most to him. The little five-note motif with which it begins, and on which the whole piece is founded, reappears in all of Howarth's most personal works – *In Memoriam RK*, and *Songs for BL*, as well as *Ascendit in Coeli*. It is his musical signature.

Ex. 2 Elgar Howarth, *In Memoriam RK*, opening [Tenor and Baritone Horns]



Publisher: J & W Chester, 1982

Cantabile for John Fletcher is another memorial piece, for the tuba virtuoso, who was a friend and fellow member of the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble. It is a duet without words, with two euphonium soloists taking the leading role – the work was written for Robert and Nicholas Childs – and their opening duet is a tender, hymn-like lament, in which the major second and the major seventh are treated almost as consonant rather than dissonant

⁶ Quoted in CD Note for Doyen CD110.

intervals. That equality is also reflected in the writing for the soloists and in the non-tonal but haunting character of the accompanying textures, which eventually come to rest on a multi-layered chord of great beauty.

Mortimer's Dream was written at the suggestion of Howard Snell for the Britannia Building Society Band (now restored to its former name, Fodens) to include in an 80th birthday concert for Harry Mortimer in the Free Trade Hall, Manchester. It was one of a number of musical birthday cards heard on that occasion and is an affectionate tribute to the great man – cornetist and conductor. Against a background of gently shifting chords, and semi-improvised textures and muted effects, snatches of half-remembered marches and tunes weave delicately in and out of focus: for example, 'Happy Birthday to You' emerges from the depths, on the basses, and 'Alpine Echoes', a HM favourite, echoes amongst the cornets. *Five Fanfares for Philip Jones* is Howarth's latest memorial piece, composed for the ten-piece brass ensemble.

There were just two major works for brass band in the 1980s – a decade when Howarth's conducting career was taking him all over the world. *The Bandsman's Tale* (1983) is his most sophisticated pastiche. Taking an obvious and audible cue from Stravinsky's *A Soldier's Tale*, Howarth portrays the experiences of a Salvation Army soldier and bandsman, whom we hear tempted and led astray by the devil's music (in dance band style, including a 'seedy' electric piano). However, the strains of the Founder's Hymn, 'O boundless salvation, deep ocean of love', bring him back on the 'straight and narrow' and the work ends in general rejoicing for the return of the 38 lost sheep.

Five Pieces for Spielberg is an altogether tougher musical proposition, exploring, in uncompromising fashion, some of the techniques of controlled chance invented by the Polish composer Witold Lutosławski, and rethought by Howarth in terms of the brass band. It is the sort of music which Howarth felt might complement the fantastic, other-worldly images of a Spielberg movie. The five movements are framed by a short prelude and epilogue, in which the main musical idea for the piece – based on the notes in German notation DESF, the first four letters of the Desford Colliery Band, who commissioned it – is announced against a background of percussion. The first two pieces are exploratory in character. The band is muted for much of the time. Ideas are hinted at and touched upon rather than fully developed. The third and fourth movements are much more complex, dissonant and unpredictable. Textures are layered in unmeasured blocks. Tempos and

rhythms flow independently. Stability returns in the powerful and aggressive fifth piece, which eventually dissolves, returning to the elusive atmosphere of the opening.

During the mid-1990s Howarth returned to composition on a larger scale, for the first time in over a decade. *Songs for BL* – a BBC Commission – created something of a sensation when it was chosen as the Test Piece for the 1995 National Brass Band Championships. It proved to be as controversial and unconventional a choice as *Fireworks* had been twenty years earlier. Admired by many for its musical qualities, it was misunderstood by many more at the time. Yet it remains one of his finest and most personal inspirations, with a musical impulse springing from his love of the orchestral music of Messiaen and the string quartets, particularly the second one, *Intimate Letters*, of Janáček. The composer conducted the first performance at the 1995 BBC Festival of Brass in Manchester with the Eikanger-Bjørsvik Band from Norway. There are many personal allusions and references enshrined in the music, not least the enigmatic title, which Elgar Howarth refuses to explain. As he said at the time of the première:

I wanted to write portraits – musical portraits of my own family. The piece is in seven sections, and starts with a Euphonium *amoroso*, which is joined by the cornets in a kind of love duet, if you like. Then there's a fleet-footed, initially quite good tempered scherzo, which gets a little angry towards the end. It is interrupted by a little motif which I have used in one or two other pieces and which comes occasionally throughout the piece. The third movement, a *Ballade*, is quite sad. Towards the end we hear a rather ominous bass drum in the distance. That leads to an eccentric *March*. It is meant to portray groups of friends of mine who are rather eccentric. Another 6/8 *Scherzo* follows – rather violent, slightly macabre in mood, and the end of that is interrupted by a return of the original *Romanza*, which then leads into a triumphant coda.⁷

Just as one might describe *Five Pieces for Spielberg* as Lutosławski on the brass band, so *Hymns at Heaven's Gate* is Howarth's attempt to bring to the brass band something of the style and technique of Olivier Messiaen. It was commissioned jointly by the Swiss Brass Band Association, the Netherlands Brass Band Championships and the Norwegian Band

⁷ Elgar Howarth, 'BBC Festival of Brass', BBC Radio 3, 1992.

Federation. It presents perhaps an even greater musical challenge than *Songs for BL*. Drawing on the example of Messiaen, Howarth separates the full band into many smaller chamber-like groups; the fragmentary, kaleidoscopic approach to texture, rhythm and metre; the general absence of a conventional bass line (the basses play in their upper register for much of the work); and the sparing but telling use of the full band. *Hymns at Heaven's Gate* is the latest in the series of tribute works, uncompromising in musical language, but strongly programmatic and touchingly personal in imagery.

A crowd assembles at the gate of Heaven – saints and sinners. As in a film, the immensity of the crowd is illustrated, and the camera zooms to focus on particular groups and individuals. Monks sing a medieval hymn, interrupted by fanfares of mischievous seraphim. Gradually the whole crowd joins in. The fanfares grow wilder. Excited children enter, singing mock fanfares, making jazzy gestures and trying to sing 'All things bright and beautiful', which they cannot remember correctly. They all dance, but suddenly the camera zooms once more at the entrance of Jesus.

Then, as the whole panorama explodes in sound, William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, approaches to the sound of the founder's hymn, which is referred to in my piece *The Bandsman's Tale*. Then the third hymn – a version of the tune from my piece *Ascendit in Coeli*, first on a solo cornet and eventually tutti.

Ex. 3 Elgar Howarth, *Hymns at Heaven's Gate*, letter J [Solo Cornet]

Andante

p cantabile, serene

Publisher: Rosehill Music, 1997

The words are by Cardinal Newman, 'Praise to the holiest in the height'. Finally, an ecstatic climax is interrupted by three quiet Alleluias and the crowd exits into Heaven to the music of the monks, re-harmonised and transformed. At the end, the camera shots extend to the heavens and to the stars. *Hymns at Heaven's Gate* is dedicated to the memory of Harry Mortimer, the greatest band personality of modern times, the most famous cornet player and conductor. In my imagination I hear him playing the solo from *Ascendit in Coeli*.⁸

⁸ From the composer's programme note, Rosehill Music.

Not all his brass band activities are at the cutting edge. Together with a number of other leading lights of the band movement, Elgar Howarth is taking a fresh look at its musical heritage. He was the first to record complete the huge selections from the operas of Wagner prepared at the end of the nineteenth century for the Besses o'th' Barn Band by the great cornetist and conductor from Stalybridge, Alexander Owen. He has also begun a revival of interest in the music of another past-master, William Rimmer, probably the finest and certainly the most prolific composer of brass band marches. Now at the start of the twenty-first century, Elgar Howarth has taken up a new challenge as Musical Director of the National Youth Brass Band of Great Britain, in succession to Roy Newsome. Reconciling his inherited love of brass band tradition and his acknowledged modernist, reforming crusade has not been without its tensions and controversies over the years; but it is wholly to the benefit of the brass band movement that his enthusiasm remains undiminished, and that he continues to concentrate so much of his creative energies in the medium of brass.

Select List of Works

1. Original music for brass band

Elegy (c.1952) for cornet and band	MS
Suite (1953)	Lost
Parade (last movement of suite)	Chester / Music Sales
Mosaic (1957)	Novello / Music Sales
Trombone Concerto (1960) (arr. of Concerto Allegorical)	MS
Cornet Concerto (1967/98) (arr. of Trumpet Concerto)	MS
Fireworks (1975)	Novello
Ascendit in Coeli (1975)	Rosehill
In Memoriam RK (1976)	Chester
Chatham Dances (1981)	MS
The Bandsman's Tale (1983)	Rosehill
Music for Spielberg (1986)	MS
Legends (1989)	MS
Canto (1990)	MS
Cantabile for John Fletcher	Rosehill

Songs for BL (1995)	Rosehill
Hymns at Heaven's Gate (1997)	Rosehill
Concerto for Euphonium 'Stories for Savoyan' (2000)	Rosehill

2. Original music for orchestra

Concerto Allegorical (1960)	MS
Trumpet Concerto (1967)	MS

3. Music for brass ensemble

Variations for brass quintet (c.1960)	Novello
Pasce Tuos (after Dufay) for brass quintet	Chester
Nodding Music (1975) for brass quintet	MS
The American (1983) for brass quintet	MS
Parodies and Pictures for brass quartet	MS
Palliacho for brass quintet and tape	MS
Little Suite	MS
Five Fanfares for Philip Jones for 10 piece brass ensemble (2000)	MS

4. Light music for brass band from the 1970s, composed under the pseudonym W. Hogarth Lear

All except Post-horn Nocturne published by Chester

American Dream
 Barney's Tune
 Chinese Take-away
 Cops and Robbers
 David of the White Rock (arr. flugel horn and band)
 Hogarth's Hoe-down
 I dream of Jeanie
 Mr. Lear's Carnival (for brass ensemble and for band)
 Paris-le-Soir

Pel Mel
Pop goes the post horn
Post-horn Nocturne (MS)
Red Sky at Night

5. Arrangements

Various	Music from the Elizabethan Court (band and brass ensemble)
William Byrd	Earl of Oxford's Marche (band and brass ensemble) The Battel (ensemble)
Duke Ellington	In a sentimental mood
Giles Farnaby	A Giles Farnaby Suite (band and ensemble)
Gershwin	Embraceable You (arr. 1955) (trombone solo)
Handel	Music for the Royal Fireworks (ensemble)
Mussorgsky	Pictures at an Exhibition (brass and ensemble) Songs and Dances of Death for bass singer and band 5 songs for bass singer and band
William Rimmer	Norwegian Song (cornet solo and band) The Flirt A Southern Sketch Wild Horses
Shostakovich	Piano Concerto No. 2 (band)
Walton	Spitfire Prelude and Fugue (ensemble)

Current discography

Pictures at an Exhibition (The Music of Elgar Howarth Vol.1)	Doyen CD011
Britannia Building Society Band/Howard Snell	
The Music of Elgar Howarth Vol.2	Doyen CD066
Eikanger-Bjørsvik Musikklag/Elgar Howarth	

- Fireworks (The Music of Elgar Howarth Vol.3) Doyen CD088
Eikanger-Bjørsvik Musikklag/Elgar Howarth
- Grimethorpe Colliery Band Karusell 450 023-2
Conducted by Elgar Howarth
- A Night at the Opera Doyen CD013
Grimethorpe Colliery Band/Elgar Howarth
- Wagner Doyen CD033
Grimethorpe Colliery Band/Elgar Howarth
- William Rimmer Doyen CD080
Fodens (Courtois) Band/Elgar Howarth
- Eric Ball – The Undaunted Doyen CD108
Grimethorpe Colliery RJB Band/Elgar Howarth