



# GILBERT VINTER REMEMBERED

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Fifty years ago today on 10 October 1969 the celebrated composer Gilbert Vinter died after suffering with cancer. His legacy lives on as **Tim Mutum** recalls in this tribute to one of brass banding's finest composers.

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As the years pass by it is no surprise that musical tastes change and, of course, new composers come along bringing their creative ideas to the table. And as players and conductors retire the music they 'grew up with' is not always recognised by those who follow. For example, in my early playing days I was brought up on a diet of Eric Ball - *In Switzerland, Impromptu, Quartet for Tubas* - and I can still recall *The Lonely Mill Overture!* It's music you seldom, if ever, hear today, much in the same way that Denis Wright and Frank Wright have largely disappeared into the mists of musical time and, sadly, even a lot of Gordon Langford, replaced by younger composers and arrangers providing music more prevalent of our time.

Some music has remained constant in our sights, particularly that of the so-called Golden Era - the Holst, Ireland, Elgar pieces etc. and the same largely applies to composers like Philip Sparke and Edward Gregson - both currently writing significant competition pieces for 2020. And it was Edward Gregson who became part of a new era of composing in the 70s. The bridge to this era from that of Eric Ball, who openly admitted that "my music is a bit old fashioned", and other composers of that time, was Gilbert Vinter, who exploded onto the brass band scene in the early 1960s. Within that 60s decade he moved brass band composition from the 'old' to the 'new'. He wrote a handful of significant pieces of brass band music that changed the way banding approached composition, not least his almost final work for the genre, *Spectrum*. It is testament to the impact his music made that half a century later it has not been forgotten.

Born in Lincoln in 1909, Vinter quickly entered into the musical life of the city, becoming head chorister of the cathedral. In 1926, he attended a pupil's course at the Royal Military School of Music at Kneller Hall. He was an ideal recruit both musically and physically, being six foot four inches tall. Vinter became part of the 1st Battalion, Lincolnshire Regiment as a bassoonist. He won a scholarship to the

Royal Academy of Music for three years in 1927 and was earmarked to return to Kneller Hall (after graduating) as a student bandsman. But, in 1930, Vinter decided on a musical career as a civilian; a decade that saw him relying on bassoon playing for a living, especially with the BBC.

The BBC also employed him as a soloist and a member of the BBC Wireless Military Band, which he joined in 1930; it was with this group that he did much of his early conducting. This period also saw the beginnings of a composing career encroaching into his life. With war declared in 1939, Vinter was conscripted into the RAF at Whetton, Thetford in Norfolk and much of his time was spent as either musical director or bandsman of a number of units. After the war he conducted a concert with the International Light Orchestra (which evidence suggests he formed) and this brought him to the attention of the BBC again. One A. Lewis of the BBC wrote, 'On the basis of this programme (it was South American music), I feel that Vinter might well be considered for a placing as a conductor of light orchestral and theatre repertoire.' Indeed, opportunities for conducting gradually increased and in 1946 Vinter worked with the Midland Light Orchestra and the International Light Orchestra.

Also becoming an increasingly important part of Vinter's post-war life was his composing. But he had difficulties with the BBC, which had first surfaced in the 1930s, and the corporation seemed only interested in his arrangements rather than his original works. With the continuing frustrations at the BBC over his compositions, it is not surprising that when Vinter had the chance to enter a different field of music he immediately took it.

Edwin Vaughan Morris, the administrator for the National Brass Band Championships, came across Gilbert Vinter in 1960 following a recommendation by Douglas Foss of Paxton Music, a publisher heavily

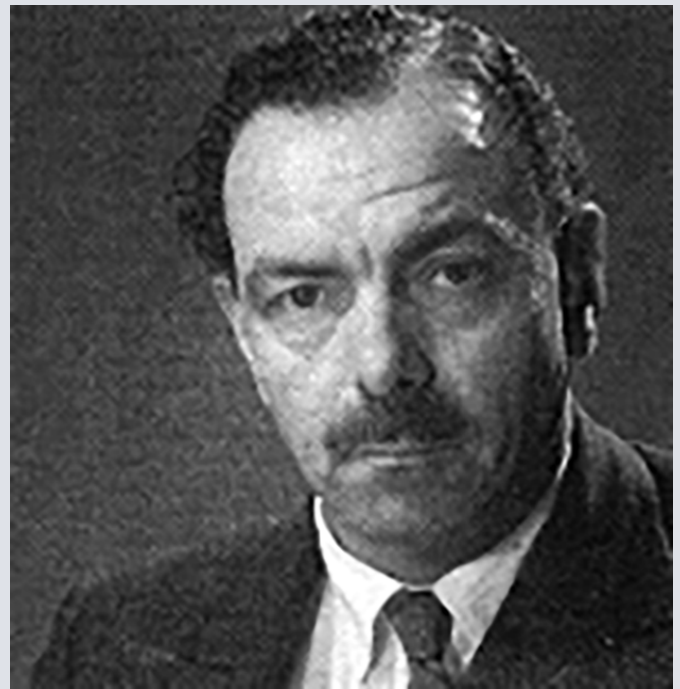
involved in band music at the time. "I met Gilbert at the Connaught Rooms for lunch", Vaughan Morris later related. "He agreed to provide me with a sketch of a work. I took advice on the sketch, and that turned out to be *Salute to Youth*." It became the Championship area test piece for 1962 and has been used as a top-level piece on a fairly regular basis ever since, including in the Elite Division of the Swedish National Championships next month.

It must have seemed to Vinter that he could achieve with this type of composing what had eluded him in the past; regular publishing, broadcasting and possible recording. The success of *Salute to Youth* was not surprising. Banding was experiencing a lack of popularity at the beginning of this decade. The decline was mainly due to the movement itself. It not only lacked a sparkle and enthusiasm, but was isolated stylistically from mainstream music. *Salute to Youth's* fresh rhythmic and harmonic ideas appealed to an audience who had grown weary of traditional, unenterprising pieces. As if by fate, Vinter and the brass band movement had stumbled upon each other when each needed the other most. From these beginnings, a fruitful partnership was guaranteed.

Geoffrey Brand had met Gilbert Vinter at the BBC when he was a radio producer and they became friends. As Geoffrey told the author Arthur Taylor in *Labour and Love: An Oral History of the Brass Band Movement* (Elm Tree Books, 1983), "From the word go, it seemed to me, he had a feeling for the band scene. His greatest contribution was in his scoring for bands - he produced different sounds from the same instruments; his layers, his textures and his thoughts were different. He used a very vivid palette, especially in his introduction of percussion."

Another close friend was David Read who played front row cornet, eventually principal, at the GUS (Footwear) Band during the 1960s. "He visited our house when we lived in Godmanchester", David told me, "and do you know what, he wanted to hear some brass band recordings. We sat and listened to some, mainly of Carlton Main Frickley (taken from broadcasts in the time of Jack Atherton in the 50s). Gilbert really fell in love with the brass band movement. I think he felt he was accepted by them and accepted as a serious composer, particularly his test pieces, whereas in the orchestral world he was only accepted as a light music person."

After *Salute to Youth*, Vinter's major works came in two tranches, a period around 1964/65 and then towards the end of his life in 1968/69. The first period was dominated by music for the National Brass Band Championships and a choral work. *Symphony of Marches* was the area test piece in 1964 for the Championship Section and



*Variations on a Ninth* commissioned for the finals in the Royal Albert Hall in the October. The variations were a turning point in Vinter's career and he wrote: 'Until 1962 I had not thought much about brass bands, other branches claiming my full attention. Then I heard in that year Alex Mortimer's recording of *Salute to Youth*... (it) filled me with admiration. I felt a new interest in the medium. Any doubts that may have lingered were finally dispelled by the tremendous performance at the Albert Hall of the *Variations on a Ninth* (by GUS). Here was a rare fusion of sensitive musicianship and masterly technique. The band worked together in perfect unity, and with that vast and enthusiastic audience I was entranced by the truly inspired performance.' *Variations on a Ninth* established Vinter beyond doubt as one of the leading composers of his generation, being second only to Eric Ball.

Vinter wrote *Triumphant Rhapsody* for the 1965 National Finals at the Royal Albert Hall. It was originally to be titled *A Matter of Seconds* because it is really an exploration of the musical interval of a second. However, it was suggested to the composer that such a title would give the impression it was not a serious work. Hence the change of name which is appropriate for the excitement and refreshing atmosphere the music creates. The composer's son, Dr Andrew Vinter, saw the piece as the point at which Vinter progressed from writing 'orchestral music for brass' to writing 'music for brass, as only brass can.' He said, "All the elements of father's early influence are there - the rapid mood changes, the diminished note drop, the spine-tingling bits that maddeningly never reoccur, the power, the tears and, above all, the humour are all bundled into a few bars."

In that same period Vinter composed his cantata *The Trumpets*.

Written in 1964 as the result of a commission from the BBC, there is an interesting story to *The Trumpets*. The Royal Festival Hall, London, was to be reopened in 1965 after extensive alterations and a celebratory series of concerts were to be given. The Saturday night of the opening week was vacant and as a result of a discussion between Gilbert Vinter and Geoffrey Brand the appropriate powers within the BBC were approached and they agreed to the idea of a large-scale work being used for the Saturday night concert. Vinter went away to think about this great work, but its format eluded him.

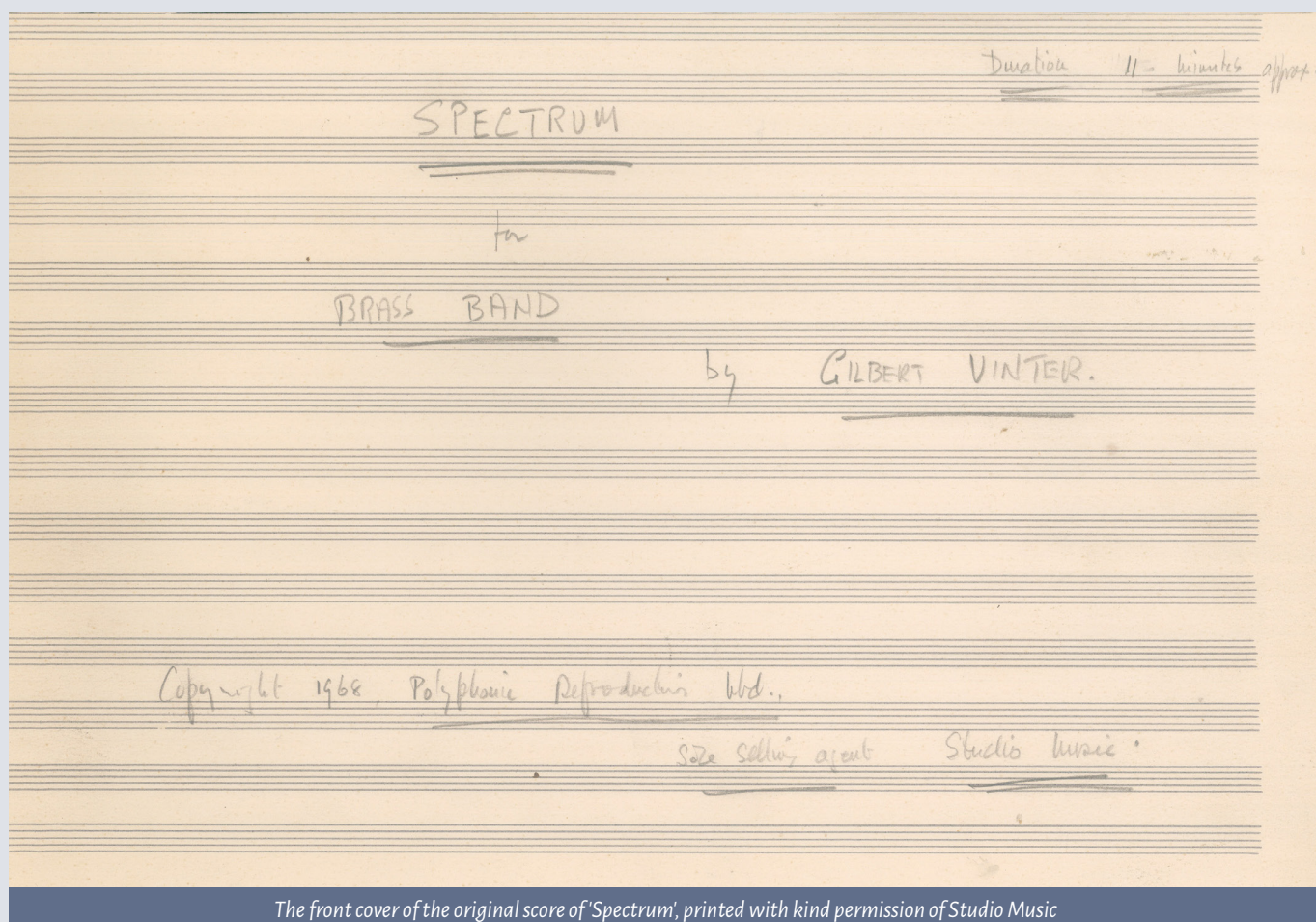
However, we hear of how the idea for *The Trumpets* came about because in the foreword to the work the composer wrote, 'It occurred to me that there was a need for a work which would combine the two great amateur movements in music making; the choir and the brass band. For some time a suitable subject eluded me until one day, opening my Bible at random, I read the words 'and the Lord spake unto Moses make me two trumpets of silver.' So, this work was born!' *The Trumpets* employs a large band (38) needing four percussionists, organ, chorus and solo bass voice.

It is in four movements with two interludes which Vinter added shortly before his death. Placed between the second and third, and third and fourth movements to create a better balance, their addition

was prompted by a performance in Huddersfield Town Hall in early 1968 conducted by Geoffrey Brand. It is believed to be the last music he wrote, handing them over to Geoffrey Brand in September 1969 when he was seriously ill.

The second tranche was towards the end of his life in 1968/69. The concert overture *John O'Gaunt* was written for the 1968 British Open and employs a programme as a means of defining a musical structure. With an interest in history, Vinter based the music on the 13th century figure John O'Gaunt. Originally envisaged as an opera, it was never realised and instead, the material was reused for this concert overture. It must have impressed as Vinter was then invited to write the piece for the 1969 Belle Vue contest.

At this point events took a more dramatic turn. By then Vinter had already written *Spectrum*, which was earmarked for the 1968 Championship Section Final of the National. Vinter was deeply upset, however, that the National organiser, Edwin Vaughan Morris, had accused him of being unprofessional in making *John O'Gaunt* available for the 1968 British Open. Hurt by the unfounded accusation - "You're my composer", Vaughan Morris had allegedly told him - Vinter withdrew the work and proceeded to offer it to Harry Mortimer for the Open in 1969.



The front cover of the original score of 'Spectrum', printed with kind permission of Studio Music

SHORT SCORE IN Bb. SPECTRUM GILBERT VINTER

Begin slowly ... accelerate ... to ...

Bass, Euph. Bass

Trumpets

Horns

Allegro molto - ff

ff Perc. Cts.

all Str. Cts.

ff Horn Bass

10

19

20

B B C PAPER  
MUSIC  
12 Stave  
Plain

*The short score to 'Spectrum', printed with kind permission of Studio Music*

chosen him as 1st trumpet with the BBC Midland Light Orchestra. This is what Ray had to say about *Spectrum*: "Occasionally, I remember, we used to talk to Gilbert Vinter about his brass band compositions and I remember he showed me the score of *Spectrum* before it was played - he asked me what I thought and I said, 'Bongos? Claves? You'll never get brass bands to play with those instruments.' When I heard it, I thought it was terrific - a wonderful piece."

*Spectrum* has been used as a set test in nearly 60 contests, although it is now often seen at a level lower than Championship. As an own choice work in competition it has notched up nearly 150 performances and was used by the first and second placed bands in the Challenge Section at this year's European Championship. It has also been recorded many times.

Between those two periods Vinter wrote little for band. However, two significant quartets emerged, written for the GUS (Footwear) Band Quartet: *Elegy and Rondo* (1966) and *Fancy's Knell* (1967). The quartet won the National Quartet Championship with these two pieces in those years and went on to win the hat-trick in 1968 with Vinter's *Alla Burlesque*. David Read recalls how these quartets came about. "Stanley Boddington had developed a problem with his neck and was advised to rest from conducting", he said. "The band had a number of important engagements to fulfil and Gilbert Vinter (a friend of Boddington's) took over the baton for a short period."

David took the opportunity to ask Vinter if he had ever thought about writing for a brass quartet. Vinter had no idea about conventional quartets and asked David what was involved. Having explained it, and shown Vinter a quartet called *Euranthe*, the composer told David that if he were to

It is unlikely that Vinter could have realised the far-reaching effects *Spectrum* was to have on brass bands. It was his most adventurous offering yet, drawing on years of experience with this genre, and his own unique musical style. The brass fraternity though, traditionalists at heart, found its modernistic, innovative nature difficult to accept. Yet, as a sympathetic fellow composer remarked, long after the earthquake of 1969, it wasn't so much that Vinter was ahead of his time, it was just that brass bands were so far behind. In the music the various episodes of the work are each named after a colour from the spectrum - red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and purple (changed from violet when Vinter

became conscious of his ailing health). It is a piece of violent mood swings and deals more in (musical) colour than melody.

The criticism *Spectrum* received came at an unfortunate time as Vinter was diagnosed as suffering from cancer. Dr Andrew Vinter remembers that the piece "devastated me and left me speechless. He (Gilbert) was surprised by my reaction because that was the one piece over which he had received the most criticism. We agreed that it must have been the result of our common genes, allowing me an insight when others failed."

Ray Farr met Gilbert Vinter when he had

write something it would be quite different. He agreed to go away and think about it. The following Monday, Vinter rang the GUS factory to say he had written it and would attend the following night's rehearsal bringing the music with him. He told David, "This is the score of your new quartet, write out your own individual parts. I hope that you will enjoy playing it." He had not named it so David asked him. "He replied that he had not thought of that but added that it was in the form of an elegy and rondo," said David, adding: "I suggested we call it just that and he agreed. Asking for a pencil he scribbled 'Elegy and Rondo' on the front cover."

Bert Sullivan, the famous euphonium player at GUS, asked Vinter how he wrote his brass band pieces. "He said he'd have an idea, coming home in the car. He'd shut himself up in his room, sometimes till four o'clock the next morning, then emerge with it. 'What, one part? I asked. 'No', he said. 'the whole lot.'"

*James Cook - Circumnavigator* was Vinter's last work for brass band (other than the previously referred to interludes for *The Trumpets*).

It was completed in June 1969, barely four months before Vinter's death. The music depicts the story of the circumnavigator on his long journey to New Zealand and his feelings upon arrival at the 'promised land'. Vinter never heard the work performed, it being a commission for the New Zealand Brass Band Association, by the Pat Nicholson Band Trust, Wellington, for the brass band championships of 1970. Used at the Open at Belle Vue in 1974, it is still featured in contests and will be the test in the Excellence Division of the French National Brass Band Championships in 2020.

Because of his state of health, Vinter could not attend *Spectrum's* premier at the 1969 Belle Vue competition. After being taken ill again in Easter, the composer's condition worsened rapidly and he died in the October. The British Bandsman spoke for the whole movement: "It is with great sadness that we announce the death of Gilbert Vinter on Friday 10 October in Cornwall. Our thoughts and sincere wishes go out to them (his family) at this time. His music will sound throughout the world for years to come." And so, thankfully, it has proved to be! ■

## GILBERT VINTER'S MUSIC FOR BRASS BAND

1961 Salute to Youth

1963 Simon Called Peter  
Challenging Brass

1964 Symphony of Marches  
Variations on a Ninth  
Cantata: The Trumpets

1965 Triumphant Rhapsody

1966 Elegy and Rondo (quartet)

1967 Fancy's Knell (quartet)

1968 Alla Burlesque (quartet)  
TUC Centenary March  
Vizcaya

Concert Overture: John O'Gaunt  
*Spectrum*

1969 Entertainments  
James Cook – Circumnavigator  
Two Interludes for The Trumpets

### Arrangements:

Lisbon Carnival

Concerto Grosso (for the GUS (Footwear) Quartet and Band)

Cornet Solo: Mattheson's Air

Cornet Trio: The Dover Coach

Euphonium Solo: Cavatina

Hunter's Moon for French horn and piano was arranged for Eb tenor horn and brass band by Tommy Dodd.

Portuguese Party was arranged for brass band by Roger Barsotti.