

# THE GOLDEN ERA OF BRASS BAND MUSIC

The period from the late 1920s until the outbreak of World War II has often been described as 'The golden era' for brass band music when Gustav Holst, Sir Edward Elgar and others provided many of the masterworks for brass band. How did this music come to be written and who else had a hand in supporting these composers who were unfamiliar with scoring for the genre? British Bandsman historian **Tim Mutum** has delved into the history and here are his findings.



Several months ago, I started to research the composer Henry Geehl, ostensibly for an article for British Bandsman on his music and his contribution to the compositions of the period from 1928 to 1936 which is often referred to as 'The golden era'. Two things quickly became apparent; firstly, that Geehl had exaggerated his involvement with some of this great music and secondly, that the various accounts published in books and periodicals about this music were not consistent, not least concerning *The Severn Suite* by Sir Edward Elgar. Consequently, I changed direction and I have tried to put together what I think actually happened over that period. Whilst it may put the record straight, thankfully it won't change the music which remains one of the cornerstones of the brass band repertoire to this day.

The story starts with John Henry Iles who, with the help of Sir Arthur Sullivan, a director of the Crystal Palace, established the National Brass Band Championships at that iconic venue in 1900. The test piece was a 'pot pourri' of Sullivan's operas and in the succeeding years operatic selections and *Gems of Schubert* etc. became the staple diet for the top section bands. Writing in the *Musical Progress and Mail* in April 1946, John Henry Iles said, "It was about 1910 that I felt something drastic would have to be done concerning the type and character of test pieces, particularly for the Championship Class. I came to the conclusion that the best way to carry out the new idea was to have special pieces of original music written and arranged thoroughly to try out every section of the band. Having thus made up my mind, I was determined, irrespective of cost, that such music should be provided solely by British composers." He went on to say, "No one knew better than I that this new publishing policy was not a commercial proposition, but I was happy to be able to ignore this side of the question."

This last part is fanciful to say the least. Iles was a businessman and would know that controlling all aspects of a contest of that magnitude, at that time would be financially lucrative - he owned the National, British Bandsman and R. Smith and Co., the music publisher. It took another three years for his idea to come to fruition,

however. In May 1913 the British Bandsman announced that the test piece for the National that year would be 'a modern work, specially written for brass band by a composer of note.' The commission was, of course, Percy Fletcher's *Labour and Love*. Further commissions were impossible as the following year war broke out and the National was cancelled for the duration.

After World War I, Iles ensured the Crystal Palace event was resurrected. It was also the start of an era of British composers writing for brass band, with the richest period being between 1928 and 1936, although there were further major contributions in the late 1950s and early 1960s. How much credit Iles should get for this is open to question. As owner of the contest he controlled the purse strings, so he would have paid for the commissions. However, under Iles was Herbert Whiteley, the Editor of British Bandsman from 1906 - 1930, and it was he, through the columns of the paper and his influence with Iles, that really saw the development of original music, and especially that from the great English composers of the time.

This is borne out by Whiteley's daughter, Marjory Nicholas, who told Arthur Taylor in *Labour and Love: An Oral History of the Brass Band Movement* (Elm Tree Books, 1983), that "it was my father who chose all the test pieces by people like Cyril Jenkins, Henry Geehl, Hubert Bath, Dr Denis Wright and Sir Edward Elgar." Whiteley spent years begging and pleading with Elgar to write a piece for brass band. She added, "I didn't know John Henry Iles as well as these other people - the composers - but I got the impression that he wasn't really all that interested in music. He was interested in what you might call the ballyhoo - he was a showman, not a musician."

This was a view shared by Harry Mortimer who said this of Iles: "According to my information, he used to hire the Crystal Palace, lock stock and barrel, for the day's contesting, for £1,000. There were lots of contests going on during the day - six or seven sections. All the results used to be kept secret until the interval of the evening concert. He used to do a lot of the announcing himself. A great showman, he was."

It was in late 1927 or early 1928 that the BBC and the National Brass Band Festival, as it became known, commissioned Gustav Holst. In an article titled *Symphony Within: Rehearing Holst's A Moorside Suite* which Professor Stephen Allen of the Rider University, USA wrote for *The Musical Times* of Winter 2017, he refers to Holst's original sketches of *A Moorside Suite* which are housed at the Holst Archive in the Britten-Pears Library at Aldeburgh, Suffolk. Here there is confirmation that all essential musical ideas for the work, if not its full outline, were completed by Holst by mid-March 1928. There is further evidence to confirm this from Henry Geehl, who took the credit, or has been credited, over the years with undertaking the scoring and preparation of the parts for much of the 'golden era' music from sketches or piano scores.

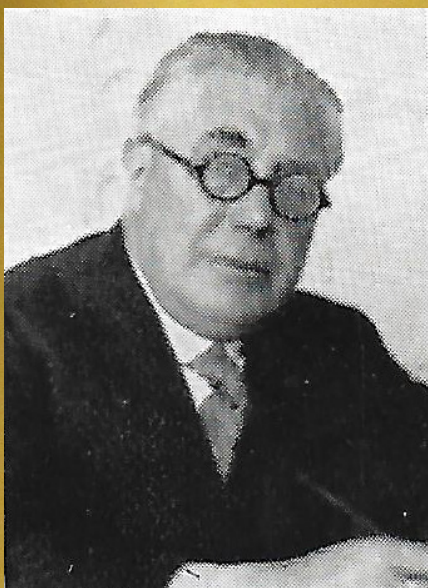
Before turning to that evidence, it is pertinent to introduce Geehl as he is a key player in the story. Henry Geehl (pronounced 'Gale') was an English pianist, conductor, composer and arranger. Born in London on 28 September 1881, Geehl studied piano with Benno Schönberger and R.O. Morgan in London, and with Anton Schlieber in Vienna. He toured as a pianist - a career as a concert pianist never materialised - and theatre conductor, and in 1919 joined the Trinity College of Music as a teacher, where he remained until a year before his death on 14 January 1961.

Geehl arrived on the brass band scene in 1923 as a composer and adjudicator, the former probably as a result of a commission from John Henry Iles to write *Oliver Cromwell* for the Crystal Palace Championship. This concert overture is regarded as his best piece for brass band, and quite possibly the most musically mature music written for brass band by minor composers of that era. *On The Cornish Coast* (for the 1924 Crystal Palace) was much less successful, although one H. Gordon Tidey, writing in the *British Bandsman* shortly after

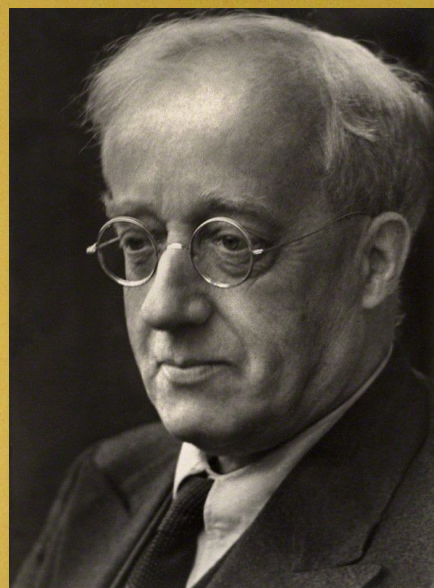
the contest, described it as "a veritable triumph of really clever brass band writing." Perhaps its greatest strength is that it was in the form of a rhapsody, and therefore a welcome change from the operatic selections and tone poems that had preceded it? Geehl was employed as a music editor by several publishers, including R. Smith and Co.

Henry Geehl wrote an article for *The Conductor* magazine in April 1960, titled 'The Unrecognised Arranger'. Here, as the *British Bandsman* described it in 1989, a slight 'chip on the shoulder' could clearly be detected! Holst it would seem did consult Geehl on *A Moorside Suite* as he himself admitted in *The Conductor* article: 'Holst (in addition to Elgar, but unlike Ireland) was another composer who proved very difficult. I visited him several times in connection with *A Moorside Suite*, and, when he asked my opinion about a bit of the scoring he was working on, I ventured to remark that I thought the passage in question needed more filling in - the middle especially - and mentioned a similar part in Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*. At this innocent remark he flew into a temper, telling me that Tchaikovsky's music was banal, his scoring 'circussy' and his craftsmanship beneath contempt! Such presumption rather nettled me, and I suppose I was somewhat rude when I told him "that it did not interest me one little bit what he thought of Tchaikovsky, but it would interest me greatly to know what Tchaikovsky thought of him!" I am sorry to say that we did not part the best of friends - and I never met him again.'

The story of Elgar's *The Severn Suite* has been murky to say the least, with various accounts written over the years as to how this classic brass band composition came about. Geehl's account in his article in *The Conductor* magazine now seems wide of the mark in its accuracy. He claimed to have arranged it, stating 'I was in continuous consultation with the composer, who provided me with a very sketchy piano part with figured bass and a kind of skeleton orchestral



Henry Geehl



Gustav Holst



John Henry Iles

score, mostly in two or three parts, with an indication of the sort of counterpoint he desired me to add; the rest of the score he left to my discretion.' Geehl went on to explain that Elgar was not an easy man to work with, having many pre-conceived ideas on brass treatment, usually unworkable, which Elgar tried very hard to get Geehl to adopt. Geehl wrote, 'and it took a great deal of argument on my part to convince him that his ideas were just not possible. I remember particularly a 'bad' afternoon when I endeavoured to persuade him to omit the mutes in the *Menuet*, well knowing that the sound would be entirely different from what he imagined. But all to no purpose!'

A far more likely and accurate account on *The Severn Suite* came from Robert Kay in a lengthy article he wrote for *The Elgar Society Journal* of December 2013. Robert Kay is a proprietor of Acuta Music, publishers of music from Elgar's last years. In *The Severn Suite: Manuscript, Music and Myths*, Kay refers to letters from Herbert Whiteley to Elgar dated 31 January and 7 February 1930, which make it clear that he was initially expecting Elgar to send him a short score, rather than an orchestrated full score, of the work. As Kay explained, 'the plan was for this short score to be handed to an expert in brass band scoring who would then do the work of orchestration. R. Smith and Co. had recently published competition test pieces by the brass band expert

Henry Geehl and it was intended that Geehl would create a brass band full score from Elgar's short score manuscript.' Kay goes into this in some depth in his article, but in summary he indicates there was no evidence that a short score was ever sent to R. Smith and Co. and, at some point, Elgar decided to bypass Henry Geehl and do the scoring off his own bat. Geehl did go on to arrange *The Severn Suite* for wind band, adding his own descriptive sub-titles to each of the movements.

That Geehl worked on the brass band scores of some of the greats is not in doubt. Eric Ball, writing in *British Bandsman* after Geehl's death in 1961 said, 'and it should not be forgotten that a number of the most famous original brass band works by celebrated composers were scored by him.' Geehl probably had a strong hand in the two later works from John Ireland - *A Downland Suite* and *Comedy Overture* - and certainly with Herbert Howells's *Pageantry* for the 1934 Belle Vue contest (also controlled by John Henry Iles!). The contract Herbert Howells signed with R. Smith and Co. (the original of which still rests with the current owners of that company, Salvation Army Trading Company Ltd. in Wellingborough), clearly states that the publisher has the right to make a brass band arrangement of *Pageantry*, strongly implying that the original rested in some form of piano score or sketches.

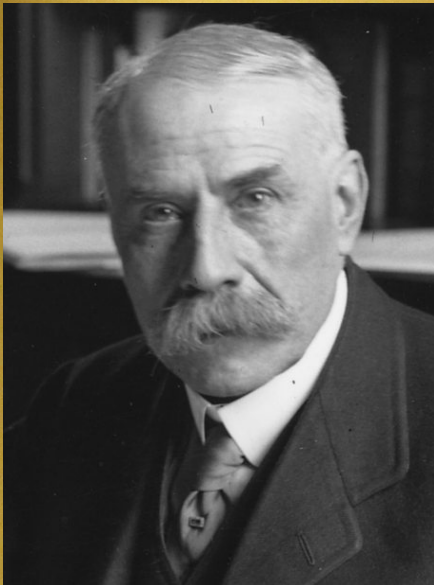
Facsimile of a page from Bantock's 'Prometheus Unbound'  
Reproduced by permission of Messrs. R. Smith & Co. Ltd., 210 Strand, W.C.2.

14 *Piu animando* 25

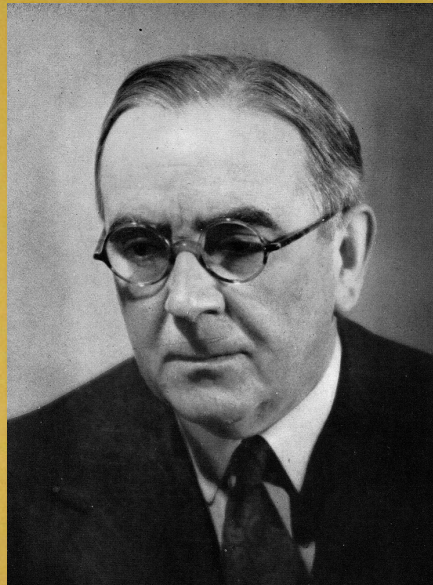
14 *Piu animando*

COMPOSERS  
  
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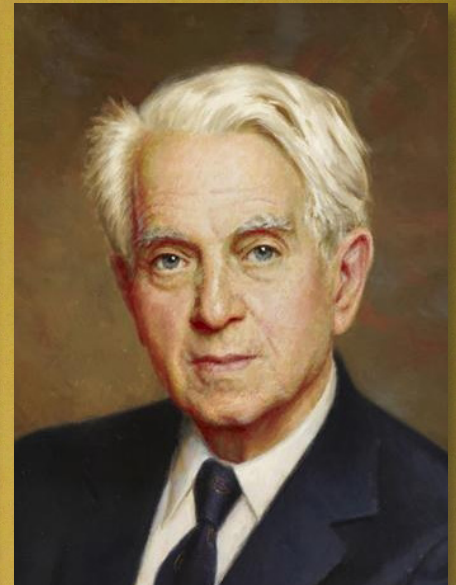
The original score of Granville Bantock's 'Prometheus Unbound'



Sir Edward Elgar



John Ireland



Herbert Howells

Insofar as the Ireland works are concerned Geehl wrote, 'With my dear friend John Ireland, both in his *A Downland Suite* and *Comedy Overture* which he afterwards, at my suggestion, scored for orchestra, entitled *A London Overture*, I worked always 'con amore'. He candidly agreed that he knew nothing about brass bands, and my many suggestions - even to form and modulation - were readily adopted.'

From this golden era this leaves *Prometheus Unbound* from Sir Granville Bantock (1933) and *Kenilworth* by Sir Arthur Bliss (1936). Writing in *Sounding Brass* magazine in 1972, Wesley Johnstone refers to Bantock's choral work of 1936 with the same title as the brass band work of three years earlier, *Prometheus Unbound*. Johnstone wrote, 'The brass band work may well have provided the seed for the more extensive composition three years later. One thing is certain. Bantock did not hand a skeleton score to an expert arranger. *Prometheus Unbound* was entirely his own work from first to last. Hinrichsen's *Oh, Listen to the Band* (Hinrichsen Edition Ltd., 1950) carries a facsimile of a page from the full score in Bantock's elegant calligraphy.' And, indeed it does!

Which leaves Sir Arthur Bliss and *Kenilworth*, written for what turned out to be the last National held at the Crystal Palace in 1936. I have been unable to ascertain how much help, if any, Bliss received. We know his second work, *The Belmont Variations*, for the National of 1963 was scored by Frank Wright as the music says so. That would suggest if help was needed for *Kenilworth*, then quite probably Geehl assisted with it. The other possibility is that Kenneth Wright (not to be confused with Denis Wright) who wrote the test piece for the 1935 National, *Pride of Race*, and who encouraged John Ireland was involved. Paul Hindmarsh, writing in *The British Brass Band* (OUP 2000) suggests that Bliss's experience of brass bands was limited, with the composer remarking much later, 'I have always thought that

the true home of brass bands is in the open air, where their power of conveying ceremony and pageantry, brilliant or solemn, is most finely felt.' Was there a touch of sarcasm there? And yet Bliss maintained an interest in brass bands conducting at the National Brass Band Festival concerts on more than one occasion.

Is it reasonable to conclude this was truly a golden era? Seven compositions from six great English composers over a period of eight years. I think it is; it represents the only period in the history of brass bands when a succession of the best English composers of the time committed themselves to the brass band genre over such a small, concentrated period. True, later in the 1950s and at the beginning of the 1960s, Edwin Vaughan Morris, as Organising Secretary of the Daily Herald National Brass Band Championships commissioned Granville Bantock, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Edmund Rubbra, Herbert Howells and Sir Arthur Bliss. And Eric Cundell was in there too, so it could be argued this was, as Paul Hindmarsh might call it, "a second harvest" but it was over a longer period. And only the Vaughan Williams *Variations for Brass Band* and, perhaps, the Bliss *Belmont Variations* would claim the same status alongside the Holst, Elgar, Ireland and Howells of the earlier period.

Certainly, since then no contest entrepreneur or any other commissioner of new music has been able to assemble such an array of music, although credit should be given to those who brought us music from Robert Simpson, Sir Malcolm Arnold, George Lloyd, John McCabe and maybe a few others. And as I said at the outset, the most important point is that this music exists and continues to be performed, although, I suspect, not as often as many of us would like.

*Author's note: With thanks to Bob Wray and Prof. Stephen Allen for their help with information for this article. ■*