



ELGAR HOWARTH – THE COMPLETE MUSICIAN

ELGAR HOWARTH IS A FIGURE WHO HAS QUITE SIMPLY CHANGED THE FACE OF BANDING. FROM HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH GRIMETHORPE COLLIERY BAND TO HIS INNOVATIVE ARRANGEMENTS WHICH TRANSFORMED BRASS BAND ENTERTAINMENT, THE RENOWNED MUSICIAN HAS MADE AN INDELIBLE MARK ON THE BANDING SCENE. HIS COMPOSITIONS WERE BOLD AND SOMETIMES ATTRACTED CONTROVERSY – BUT WERE ALWAYS FINELY CRAFTED.

AS ‘GARY’ PREPARES TO CELEBRATE HIS 85TH BIRTHDAY, PAUL HINDMARSH REFLECTS ON A MUSICAL LIFE WELL LIVED.

It hardly seems like five years since I was writing in *British Bandsman* about Elgar Howarth's rich and varied, not to say transformative contribution to the brass band community since the early 1970s as conductor, composer, arranger and 'encourager'. He celebrates his 85th birthday on November 4.

During these unprecedented times, when the collective engagement with live music making – as performer or audience member – seems almost out of reach, many of us are now relying on our record and CD collections for our musical 'fix'. It's been a particular pleasure to turn the clock back and listen, with a mixture of nostalgia and satisfaction, to some of Elgar Howarth's orchestral and brass recordings. These days Gary, as he is affectionately known in the profession, lives in quiet retirement with Mary, his wife of 62 years, in the Suffolk town of Beccles and it's unlikely that we'll have any more recordings to enjoy – but what a legacy of landmark recordings he has given us.

We can still relish his brilliant trumpet playing with the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble. There are landmark interpretations of the music of his friend Harrison Birtwistle to admire. The clarity of vision in the premiere recording of *Grimethorpe Aria* still astonishes. The controlled power and virtuosity of the trumpet concerto *Endless Parade* keeps me on the edge of my chair. Finest of all, the four opera recordings, *The Mask of Orpheus* (ENO, 1986) and *Yan Tan Tethera* (Opera Factory, 1986), *Gawain* (Covent Garden, 1991) and *The Second Mrs Kong* (Glyndebourne, 1994) are testament both to his genius at revealing the most complex of contemporary music with total authority, commitment and, most importantly, enthusiasm. "Harry and I were friends from college days in the 1950s," he recalled when we spoke last week, "and he trusted me to get his music right. His stuff was right up my street, of course."

Elgar Howarth is one of the finest musicians it has been my pleasure to know and work with over my musical career. The way he could unpick a contemporary score was uncanny. Whether he was in front of Grimethorpe Colliery Band, Eikanger-Bjørsvik Musikklag, the National Youth Brass band of Great Britain, the BBC Symphony and Philharmonic, or in the pit at Covent Garden, the London Colosseum or the Grand Theatre in Leeds, the method seemed so simple: lay down a clear beat with the right hand, supply all the necessary information with left hand and the face, then give the musicians space to understand and deliver. It seems obvious doesn't it, but in presenting difficult and novel contemporary music calmness and clarity are prerequisites, along with complete understanding of the score. Gary possesses both qualities in spades.

He came to conducting in his 30s and never experienced the rigours of a conservatoire conducting course. He learned by example, sitting in the trumpet sections of the Royal Opera for four years and as principal trumpet of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. There was one maestro above all from whom he drew most in terms of manner and technique, the German conductor Rudolf Kempe (1910-1976). Admired for his interpretations of the great romantic symphonies and operas – Wagner and Richard Strauss in particular – Kempe was a regular guest conductor at Covent Garden and later became the chief conductor of the RPO, as Gary fondly recalled: "I was so impressed with what he was able to do. He could make a whole orchestra concentrate. He was the epitome of the perfect German conductor. The right hand gave an unmistakable clarity of beat. We knew exactly where we were in the bar but he was also very expressive with his left hand. It was poetry. Of course, he was very demanding, not verbally, but by facial expression and the degree of information about how he

wanted you to play. There was never any showing off. I played for him in Wagner's *Ring*, Richard Strauss operas and even Puccini, which was wonderful, not Italian in technique but certainly in style; free, lyrical, unfettered. It was an absolute delight. I got to know him very well because I became the chairman of the RPO. He was lovely to talk to, with a great sense of humour."

Gary's *In Memoriam RK* (1976) for brass band is a heartfelt, deeply emotional tribute, recalling with affection favourite moments he had experienced under Kempe's direction by Wagner, Strauss and Mahler, fused together by the little four note signature motif that finds its way into all his most personal works, as if to say, this is my tribute to you.... Of Kempe's passing, Gary reflected: "He was very special. When I heard on the radio that he had died, I burst into tears and cried for a week."

Gary's first opportunity to try his hand at conducting came via the London Sinfonietta, the contemporary music specialist ensemble of which he was a founding member. He said: "The Sinfonietta was a great thing for me because I was playing all the music I loved and dearly wished I knew how to write. I mentioned to the clarinettist Anthony Pay one day in the car that I wanted to try conducting and he must have spoken to our conductor David Atherton, who encouraged me from the word go. I modelled myself on Rudolf and made that technique work for modern music. One thing I could always do was conduct different times independently with each hand, like a party trick, and it came in very useful. I didn't mind being type-cast as a contemporary music specialist because I enjoyed the music and the work came in."

Within no time, Gary's flair and skill with new music was being noticed. As his diary began to fill up with conducting engagements at the BBC, the Proms and throughout Europe, his trumpet playing took an increasing back-seat. By 1976 he had put his trumpets away in their cases for good.

One day in 1972, out of the blue, he received a phone call from Ken Hirst, the long-serving secretary of Grimethorpe Colliery Band. Gary recalled: "Ken rang me and said in his typical manner something like: 'We need a conductor. We've heard you are OK. Can you give me a reference?' I replied that I'd never been asked for one. Actually, I was quite keen to do it; the fulfilment of a boyhood dream, really, to conduct a top band, but I wasn't going to tell him that, so I said it's obvious you don't know anything about me and I don't know the band, why don't I come up and spend the day with the band to see how we get on. 'How about next Wednesday?' Ken said and that was it."

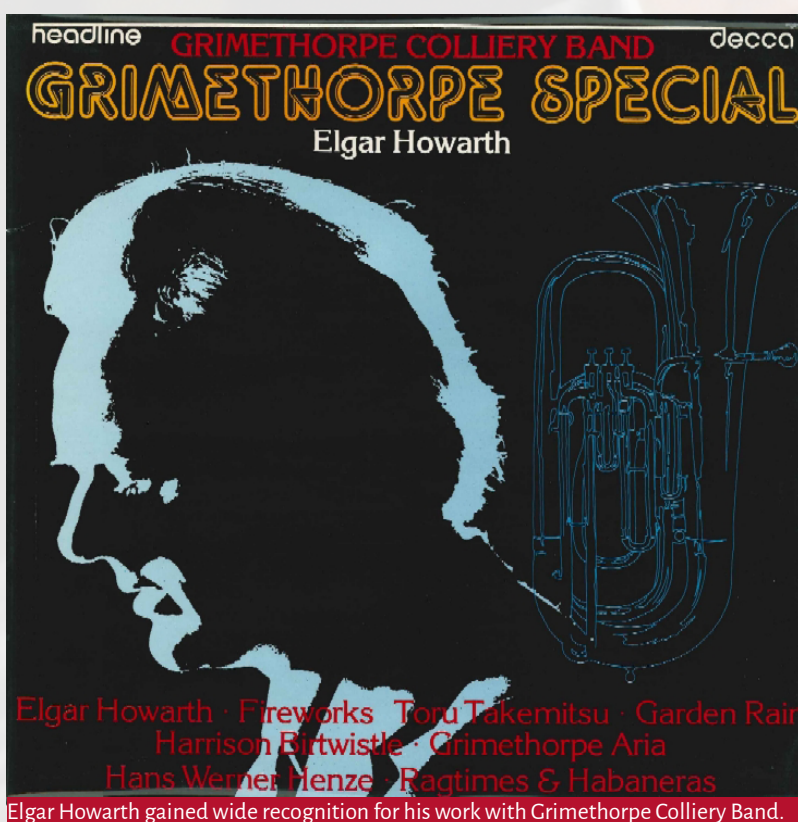
Thus began a 35 year association between Grimethorpe and Mr Howarth, as he was always known, that changed the face of banding. There were two sides to the association, one appreciated by the banding community and the other more by the wider musical and cultural scene. Not having been part of the band scene since his teenage years, Gary wasn't familiar with the current concert favourites so he wrote his own and with that demonstrated that a brass band doesn't need simply to play

arrangements and transpirations to be entertaining.

"I didn't know the repertoire but I could see that they wanted something that could win them competitions so I wrote *Pel Mel* for my first Granada Band of the Year and we went from there. I made things that were light, fizzy, technically quite demanding but also melodically sympathetic in a variety of styles. They suited the original band in the '70s. They were a good lot and very funny. I loved their humour."

The other aspect was at the cutting edge, bringing something of the contemporary world in which he was entirely comfortable to the brass band, using his connections and friendships to enable Grimethorpe to commission new work, just as the London Sinfonietta did.

"It had to be Harry Birtwistle first. When I asked him if he would write something for Grimethorpe he agreed as long as he didn't



have to compromise. He stuck to his guns and that was just what I wanted."

Grimethorpe Aria (1972) opened up a new world of modern music to the brass band. It's a moot point how much Gary's vision impacted on the mass of the banding community but without question, the commissions he curated and the performance opportunities he enabled for Grimethorpe and others transformed the perception of what a brass band was capable of achieving in the wider cultural frame – and it still resonates today.

In the wake of *Grimethorpe Aria* came Henze's brilliant *Ragtimes and Habaneras* for a famous BBC Prom, the first performance of Heaton's *Contest Music*, *The First Shoot* by William Walton and new pieces by Michael Blake-Watkins and Anthony Payne. There were



Elgar Howarth, front, centre, with Grimethorpe Colliery Band in 2003. His connections spawned a range of new commissions for the band.

concerts in university environments, landmark BBC broadcasts and hugely successful international tours, including to Australia and the USA. Grimethorpe Colliery Band's resident musical director during the later years of the Howarth era as the band's musical advisor was Garry Cutt, who said: "From 1991 we became close friends during our time together at Grimethorpe. It was a huge thrill to share the concert platform with him but maybe the most significant thing we did together was when he was artistic director to the NYBBGB and he appointed myself and Nicholas Childs as his associates. He said from the outset he would only do five years and before he'd even started in the role, he had mapped out all ten programmes and guest soloists for each concert. I'm honoured that he wrote a work to celebrate my 15th year as conductor to The Marple Band, *Crystal for GC* which was given its first performance in Uppermill Civic Hall, with Howarth conducting."

Conducting the world premiere production of György Ligeti's theatrical extravaganza *Le Grand Macabre* at the Royal Swedish Opera in 1978, Gary sealed his international reputation as an outstanding interpreter of complex, new opera. On a return visit to Sweden three years later Gary conducted the Malmö Symphony Orchestra in a concert featuring the concerto debut of a young trumpeter who has since gone on to become one of the international superstars of the instrument, Håkan Hardenberger, who said: "Having admired him as a member of Philip Jones Brass Ensemble I soon found a true mentor and friend. He introduced me to British brass bands, but also to institutions such as BBC Proms, the RPO and most importantly composers such as Birtwistle, Ligeti, Henze, Takemitsu, Gruber and many more. All life changing. Gary's importance to my career and life cannot be overestimated and he remains one of the most well-

read, civilised and kind people I have ever met. A great friend."

'During an interval at a Grimethorpe rehearsal he enquired about what I would do once I finished playing the euphonium. I was initially shocked as I thought he was guiding me to my resignation... He wanted a group to stay behind as he was going to give me a conducting lesson.'

Another high achiever in the brass world who can call Mr Howarth both mentor and friend is Black Dyke Band's music director, Nicholas Childs, who reminisced: "During an interval at a Grimethorpe rehearsal he enquired about what I would do once I finished playing the euphonium. I was initially shocked as I

thought he was guiding me to my resignation. Following further discussion, he asked if I had a conducting teacher. I said I didn't have one. He explained to the band that rehearsal was over but that he wanted a group to stay behind as he was going to give me a conducting lesson. The lesson wasn't on contemporary music but hymn tunes. He suggested I should take a postgraduate degree and during my studies at Salford he was my conducting teacher. I recall he quoted Rudolf Kempe on more than one occasion: 'Remember Mr Childs there is only one downbeat in every bar.'

"As MD of Doyen Recordings, I released a number of projects with Howarth as the maestro, including a series of his own music with Eikanger and featuring fantastic soloists including Håkan Hardenberger. One of my fondest memories was sharing the podium in a performance of *Asendit in Coeli* which required two conductors. My score was signed by him: 'To the sorcerer's apprentice!' Happy birthday Mr Howarth – a great musician, conductor, composer who I'm honoured to call a friend."

Mention of *Asendit in Coeli* brings to mind Gary's father Oliver Howarth, to whose memory this evocative work is dedicated. It is essentially a contemporary take on the hymn tune. Howarth



Barton Hall Works Band. Elgar is back row, first left; brother Stan centre, fourth left; dad Oliver with baton.

senior adored them, as he did grand opera. Largely self-taught, Oliver Howarth was a true inspiration to his gifted son, when it came to making the most of his talent on the cornet and his gift for composing and arranging.

As our conversation drew to a close, Gary mentioned that when he was about 16, the period when he won the Alexander Owen Prize on the cornet, he composed a suite for brass band which his father let him conduct. It was full of 5/4 and 7/4 bars inspired by hearing *Mars* (from *The Planets*) and *The Rite of Spring* played by the Hallé under John Barbirolli at schools' concerts. Mastering the fiendish *Trumpet Sonata Op. 1* which Manchester University student and friend Peter Maxwell Davies composed for him and the eccentric genius of the piano John Ogdon, was Gary's first taste of truly



Elgar Howarth, Edward Gregson and Nicholas Childs during a rehearsal at the Royal Northern College of Music Brass Band Festival in 2015.



Elgar Howarth's connection with the brass band world has seen him compose, arrange and conduct leading bands like Black Dyke, above.

modern music. "I was hooked", he said.

On a personal note, I first heard his brilliant technical playing in the late 1960s when the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble (PJBE) gave the first professional performance in 1968 of the early *Brass Quintet* by Edward Gregson. "We have remained friends and colleagues ever since," Gregson said, "even sharing notable birthday celebrations at various RNCM Brass Band festivals. Happy birthday Gary – and many more of them."

Once established as a producer at the BBC in the 1980s recordings of his PJBE arrangements, not least the classic ensemble version of *Pictures at an Exhibition*, provided much listening pleasure for myself and I hope *Radio 3's* drive-time audience when I was producing.

By the time I came to work on the BBC (later RNCM) Festival of Brass, I had got to know Gary professionally and personally. *In Memoriam RK* had become one of my all-time favourite brass band scores. I still admire the ingenuity, energy and skill of *Fireworks* (1975, British Open) and his gift for high-class pastiche in *The Bandsman's Tale*.

It was a privilege, while I was at the BBC, to provide a platform for some of his most personal inspirations, including the brass band versions of the early *Trombone Concerto* (1958) composed for his brother Stanford, the *Trumpet Concerto*, which he wrote for himself to play originally with orchestra and *Stories for Saroyan*, a collection of family portraits for euphonium and band which he wrote for Robert Childs. Perhaps the best of all is the hugely underrated *Songs for BL* (1995), a BBC commission that Gary considers, with ample justification, to be one of his finest works.

More recently, his presence has lit up the RNCM Brass Band Festival, as conductor of Grimethorpe or the RNCM Brass Ensemble



The acclaimed musician will soon celebrate his 85th birthday.

or composer of some new treasures, such as *Sonatina* for cornet and band which he prepared for one of his favourite cornet players of the present time, Richard Marshall, who stated: "Mr Howarth, for many years you have been a real inspirational figure. Whether it's your musical genius or your witty remarks I can honestly say that being in your company meant a great deal and something I will always cherish."

A final greeting from Garry Cutt: "We in the banding community are indebted and privileged to have had such an influential and complete musician involved with the brass band movement."

And so say all of us. Happy birthday, maestro.