



Treasures from the Golden Age

Several works for brass band are about to receive their first performances some 70 years after their composition. **Paul Hindmarsh** and **Christine Borthwick** discover the musical gems to be unearthed at the 2008 RNCM Festival of Brass

WHEN COMMENTATORS ON BRASS BAND MUSIC TALK OF THE Golden Age of the 1930s, they are referring to six, or perhaps eight works by leading British composers – Holst, Elgar, Ireland, Bliss, Howells and Bantock. While the ambition and quality of their work set the benchmark for the future, their contributions hardly constituted a repertoire. The names of Percy Fletcher, Henry Gheel, Thomas Keighley, Drake Rimmer, and Denis Wright were established in the contesting arenas and in the Salvation Army, the music of George Marshall and Eric Ball was beginning to make a mark. However, over the past few years there have been a number of significant discoveries that suggest a greater interest in the brass band culture among other notable composers than was previously thought to be the case.

In the 1930s, music of substance needed a major competition to break into the consciousness of the band community at large, otherwise it was in danger of being lost. Vaughan Williams, for example, wrote a bracing overture for a Shakespeare pageant in the early 1930s. Incorporating a number of French and English tradition tunes, *Henry V* was unperformed until unearthed from the British Library by Howard Snell and Roy Douglas in 1979. Grimethorpe Colliery Band's performance at the Proms – which will be reprised at the RNCM Festival – revealed what a strong work it is.

Denis Wright's long lost march

Denis Wright (1895–1967) was at the heart of the new wave of repertoire in his role as a music organiser with BBC radio from 1935. Brass bands were being broadcast regularly and although plans to start a BBC brass band came to nothing, one band from the south became the BBC's 'house' band. The Callender's Cable Works Band – often a rival to Foden's at the Crystal Palace contests – had in effect turned professional and developed its own style (with four saxophones) and its own repertoire, most of which was never published.

Today this unique collection resides with the Haydock Band in St. Helens – and what a treasure trove it is. There are arrangements and transcriptions from the classics and from opera, expertly arranged by the band's own resident music editor. The potential of the collection was hinted at when Granville Bantock's tone poem *King Lear* came to light in the 1990s. Among the works currently missing from the collection is a concert march by Percy Fletcher (there is a single cornet part in the file where the whole manuscript set should be) and *Prelude* by the communist composer Alan Bush. There is an original work (alas rather weak) by Josef Holbrooke, a number of 'light' works by Kenneth Wright (Denis Wright's BBC colleague – he was of no relation however) and the original manuscript

of one of Denis Wright's best original works, the suite *Tintagel*, a work composed for Callender's. This manuscript contains four movements *Tintagel*, *Elaine*, *Merlin* and *Arthur*. At some stage before it was performed, Wright wrote at the end of the third movement that the work should end after the *Merlin* scherzo. When it was eventually published for the National Championships, *Arthur* was nowhere to be seen. The first movement was renamed *King Arthur*.

The reasons for the omission seem clear from a reading of the score. *Arthur* is not as strong in its musical thinking or working out. It adds very little in terms of musical weight and variety that the *Merlin* movement has not already imparted, but when played by itself as a heroic march with central interlude, it has much to commend it. The Leyland Band will give a belated world premiere at the RNCM Festival on 27 January.

In the early 1980s, as part of my work as librarian of the Scottish Music Information Centre in Glasgow, I made an inventory of the vast collection of arrangements and compositions of William Gillies Whittaker (*pictured far left*), a former principal of what is now the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama. Among the manuscripts, there was a sketch for a brass band work entitled *Suite of North Country Folk Tunes II*. Not being involved in brass bands at that time, I thought little of it. However earlier this year, I was delighted to find out that Whittaker authority Christine Borthwick had come across it again and had persuaded her Durham University colleague Ray Farr to realise the sketches into full brass band score. Composed in 1933, the work will receive its world premiere on 26 January by the Brighouse & Rastrick Band conducted by Alan Morrison. PAUL HINDMARSH

Who was William Gillies Whittaker ?

William Gillies Whittaker (1876-1946) is perhaps best known today through his friendship and association with Gustav Holst (*pictured far right*), an impression supported by published correspondence between the two men. Whittaker has understandably been overshadowed by his friends Holst and Vaughan Williams and his activities have remained largely a mystery. However close investigation into his life and achievements reveals a man of enormous energy, vision, talent, versatility and productivity who also possessed a magnetic personality.

Whittaker, who was born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1876, described himself of being 'launched into music' at the age of 11 when his father, a clerk and cashier in a local pottery store, bought him a piccolo. Father and son had attended the 1887 Jubilee Royal Mining, Engineering and Industrial Exhibition with daily concerts given by celebrated brass and military bands such as Black Dyke Mills and the Band of the 9th Queen's Royal Lancers. Whittaker Senior held ambitions for his son to become a scientist and in 1892 William enrolled on a science teachers' course at the College of Physical Science in Newcastle (a branch of Durham University). Yet the pull of music was stronger and Whittaker soon abandoned this path, financing his own musical education by maintaining an extensive teaching practice in piano and organ. Whittaker remained at the college (which became Armstrong College in 1904) as a teacher. He also held other teaching and conducting appointments and was much in demand as an adjudicator.

Whittaker became something of a specialist in choral music and founded his own Newcastle Bach Choir in 1915, which subsequently achieved great renown both in London and abroad. His performances of Bach's Cantatas with the choir and his able lecturing on the subject soon gained him a reputation as a revered Bach scholar.

Like Holst and Vaughan Williams, Whittaker's wider musical reputation

was gained in the field of folk song setting. He only collected a few folk songs himself, preferring to use published sources – such as the pioneering Northumbrian Minstrelsy assembled by J. Collingwood Bruce and J. Stokoe – for his arrangements. In 1913 and 1914, Stainer & Bell published 12 of Whittaker's four-part arrangements in the series *North Country Folk Tunes*. Several years later, in 1921, Whittaker's two volume collection of settings *North Country [sic] Ballads: Songs & Pipe Tunes For Use in Home and School* was published by J. Curwen.

Holst admired Whittaker's arranging skills and after a London performance of some of Whittaker's arrangements, Holst invited himself to Newcastle – ostensibly for a walking tour of Hadrian's Wall with Whittaker but in fact to encourage him to attempt original composition, believing that his friend had 'something to say'. There was indeed some justification for Holst's belief in Whittaker's powers as a composer – the works that he completed in the early 1920s show great readiness to experiment with new styles, sonorities and genres, sometimes revealing a surprising, audacious modernism.

Whittaker, like Holst, developed close musical contacts with the worlds of amateur music and education. From 1923 he was an editor in the educational music department of Oxford University Press. A year later he wrote to his friend about writing for brass bands and Holst suggested he might like to arrange the ballet music from *The Perfect Fool*. In 1933, Whittaker sketched the work of our current interest, *Suite of North Country Folk Tunes II*. In 1929, he had moved on to pastures new, taking up the joint posts of professor of music at Glasgow University and principal of the Scottish National Academy of Music. He continued to compose and arrange music during his summer vacations in Europe. By then, his musical style had mellowed and he relaxed by writing character pieces and suites.

The short score of *Suite of North Country Folk Tunes II* is preserved at the Scottish Music Centre in Glasgow. It was probably composed as a response to Holst's *A Moorside Suite*. Holst was a regular visitor to the Carlisle St. Stephen's Band and in January 1933 wrote to Whittaker: 'So you're writing a brass band piece – splendid! I wish you could come to Carlisle on 12 February and meet that nice band master. I fear I shall not be able to call on you in Glasgow this time.' This remark suggests that Whittaker's 15-minute suite was intended for the competition market rather than for a specific band.

However its composition would certainly have recalled for Whittaker his links with the famous St. Hilda Band of South Shields (champions at the Crystal Palace competitions in 1912, 1920, 1921 and 1924). The band's virtuoso soloist, Arthur Laycock, had played with Whittaker's Bach Choir orchestra from 1916, as did the brilliant Jack Mackintosh. The technical superiority of these cornet players enabled them to perform the extremely high clarino trumpet parts required in some of Bach's Cantatas. In September 1919 the band had taken part in a gigantic Peace Music Festival at St James' Park in Newcastle to celebrate the Armistice, at which Whittaker was principal conductor of the massed forces. He had dreaded rehearsing the bands' separate numbers, confessing that he 'would have rather faced the LSO' but was happily surprised saying that the band played 'as a first class orchestra'. A collaboration in similar concerts continued until 1924.

Whittaker's *Suite of North Country Folk Tunes II* symbolises its composer's northern roots both through its instrumentation and the north country folk tunes employed, including *Bobby Shaftoe* and *The Laidley Worm*. It is indeed exciting for those who know of Whittaker that this brass band work should achieve a first performance 64 years after his death. ■ CHRISTINE BORTHWICK