



# *Gilbert Vinter*

the man and his music

2009 marks the centenary of the birth of Gilbert Vinter, an occasion that brass bands will mark with contest and concert performances, as well as recordings, throughout the year, beginning this weekend at the RNCM Festival of Brass in Manchester. Tim Mutum looks back at his life and music.

It is now almost 40 years since Gilbert Vinter died and 2009 marks the centenary of his birth. His death, in 1969, took from brass bands a most prolific and active composer whose output of compositions successfully opened new avenues of sound and style to the brass band. Indeed, there is much in the argument that his arrival on the scene was a watershed for brass band music. In less than ten years, he not only wrote a series of band pieces that revolutionised the way brass bands played, but also paved the way for the next generation of composers to express themselves in new musical languages that otherwise would almost certainly have been unthinkable.

Gilbert Vinter was born on 4 May 1909 to Arthur and Harriet Emily Vinter, at 12 Walnut Place, Lincoln. The son of an iron moulder, he quickly entered into the musical life of Lincoln, 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 tall. Vinter joined the 1st Battalion, Lincolnshire Regiment as a bassoonist. In 1927, he won a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music for three years and was earmarked to return to Kneller Hall (after graduating) as a student bandsman. But, in 1930, he decided to enter a musical career as a civilian. This decade 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, and it was with this group that he did much of his early conducting.

This period also saw the beginnings of his career as a composer. 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 that 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 BBC Midland Light Orchestra and the International Light Orchestra.

Composition also became an increasingly important part of Vinter's post-war life. However, he had difficulties with the BBC, as he had in the 1930s, and the Corporation seemed only interested in his arrangements rather than his original works. This problem continued and it was during this period that he made his first venture into brass banding when he was asked to adjudicate at the Edinburgh Festival

Contest in 1956. He repeated this again in 1957 and conducted the British Concert Band on the BBC's *Bandstand*. 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. He was invited to adjudicate at the Daily Herald National Brass Band Championship Finals in 1960 and 1961. He was ideal for this job. 'Forthright in his opinions, but still willing to discuss the merits and demerits of each performance,' wrote T.F. Atkinson in *British Bandsman*. It was in 1960 that the Daily Herald contest commissioned Vinter to write his first major brass work for the regional qualifying rounds the following year. Wholly delighted, he composed *Salute to Youth*. Although impossible to discover which brass band works Vinter had studied before writing this, the music does not rely too heavily on traditional elements. Alex Mortimer conducted it in a massed band concert in Huddersfield Town Hall in March 1962 and, such was the impression it made on the audience, that A. Atkinson wrote in *British Bandsman*: 'Let us have more music like that we heard at Huddersfield.'

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, which 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 brass bands had stumbled upon each other when each needed the other most. From these beginnings, a fruitful partnership was guaranteed. Alex Mortimer was partly responsible for Vinter's second work, written in 1963. Following the success of *Salute to Youth*, Mortimer asked him for a further work and, within two weeks, he produced the score and parts of *Simon Called Peter*, and CWS (Manchester) recorded it a week later. Vinter described his second work as a 'musical picture of the well-loved disciple - a rhapsody on Negro spirituals'. The rapidity with which the music was composed demonstrates Vinter's enthusiasm at the time. Unlike his years at the BBC, he now found himself being specifically requested to write. The greater significance of *Simon Called Peter* was that it demonstrated that *Salute to Youth* was not a one-off achievement. Vinter's success with further commissions also illustrates this. These included one for the BBC radio programme, *Challenging Brass*, in 1963, and further contest works in 1964 and 1965.

The first of these competition pieces was *Challenging Brass*. This was typical of the mainly

lightweight compositions Vinter was producing in the early 1960s. They can be regarded as transitional pieces from what he had produced orchestrally at the BBC to the more substantial music that followed in 1964; *Symphony of Marches* and *Variations on a Ninth*, both written for the National Brass Band Championships. The former was the 'Area' test-piece for that year's Championship Section and the latter used at the Final 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 brass band composers of his generation, being second only to Eric Ball. The 1964 'National' also saw him participating in other aspects of the banding world. He was one of three adjudicators for the Championship Section and assistant conductor in the traditional massed bands concerts in the evening. This gave him the opportunity to conduct many of the top bands of the country and, commenting on the occasion, *British Bandsman* remarked: 'Mr Gilbert Vinter drew many "sparks" from his own *Dover Coach...* his tall, commanding figure was a rightly proper one on this occasion.'

There is little doubt that Gilbert Vinter's most acclaimed work is his cantata, *The Trumpets*, written in 1964 as the result of a commission from the BBC. There is an interesting story to the piece. 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 agreed to the idea of a large-scale work being used for the Saturday night concert. Vinter went away to think about this major work but its format eluded him.

However, we hear of how the idea for *The Trumpets* came about in the foreword printed in the score, in which 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), and needs four percussionists, organ, chorus and solo bass voice. It is in four movements with two interludes, which Vinter added shortly before his death and are believed to be the last music he wrote. He handed them over to Geoffrey Brand in September 1969, by which time he was seriously ill.

The first movement is entitled *Blazon*, in which only the cornets of the band are used, and is in the form of an extended fanfare. Next is *Destruction* - the demise of the walls of Jericho through the powers of blazing trumpets. The first interlude - *Consolation* - follows. The third movement is called *Dedication* in which the bass soloist depicts the Lord's command to Moses to make two silver trumpets. The second interlude follows - *Felicitation*. The final movement, *Revelation*, which last some 22 minutes, starts with the solo bass singing, "Then was silence in Heaven and seven Angels, who had seven trumpets, prepared themselves to sound." The sopranos and altos take up the story, "And the first trumpet sounded and there followed hail and fire, and trees were burnt up." The narrative progresses as each of the seven angels sound their silver trumpets, and the work ends in glorious triumph. *The Trumpets* requires considerable rehearsal prior to performance and this is perhaps a contributory factor as to why it is seldom heard. Vinter had deep ideas for a second work and much thought went into the project. Alas the work never came to fruition.

Harry Mortimer, who regarded *The Trumpets* as Vinter's greatest work for bands, once said: "I had a holiday caravan quite near to where he lived when he was writing *The Trumpets*; I used to go over there and play some of the fanfares for him, as he was writing it."

Vinter next completed *Triumphant Rhapsody* for the 1965 National Championships. 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 that 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, sees 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."

1966 and 1967 saw Vinter undertake few composing projects. Only two quartets for the GUS Quartet emerged, *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 *Alla Burlesca*. Around this time, he also arranged a Concerto Grosso for the GUS Quartet and band. Conducting now occupied a substantial proportion of his time, and this included working with GUS (Footwear) Band. His close association came about because of his friendship with its conductor, Stanley Boddington. Bert Sullivan, the famous euphonium player at GUS, asked Vinter how he wrote his brass band pieces, and recalled, "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.'"

Vinter's output increased considerably in 1968 with three major band pieces, a march and the aforementioned quartet. In June, Vinter was requested to write a work for the public celebrations of the TUC centenary. The response was the *TUC Centenary March*. *Vizcaya* was the composer's first attempt at writing for the 'National' 2nd Section and was one of his less successful pieces. More successful was his first contribution to the Belle Vue contest.

Uncharacteristically, *John O' Gaunt* 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, and although he originally envisaged it as an opera, it was never realised, so the material was reused for this concert overture. It must have impressed, as Vinter was invited to write the test-piece for the 1969 Belle Vue contest as well. However, writing was not required, as the piece, *Spectrum*, was already available, having been written for the 1968 National Finals, but it was acrimoniously withdrawn when it was learnt that *John O' Gaunt* was to be used at Belle Vue that year.

It is unlikely that Vinter could have realised the far-reaching effects this piece 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. However, the brass fraternity, traditionalists at heart, found its modernistic, innovative nature difficult to accept, which, one has to say, is typical of the genre's narrow-minded character. 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 chosen him as 1st trumpet with the BBC Midland Light Orchestra. Ray said 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."

After receiving hospital treatment early in 1969, Vinter continued working. However, before this, he had completed a brass band arrangement of *Entertainments*, which had started life as an orchestral work. Although there are only three movements in the published version, Vinter wrote a fourth - *Taproom Ballade* - which was omitted so that the work was of conventional length for contest purposes.

*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 the composer's death. The music depicts the story of the sea-faring explorer 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.

Because of his state of health, Vinter could not attend *Spectrum's* premier at the 1969 Belle Vue competition. After being taken ill again at Easter, the composer's condition worsened rapidly and he died in the October. British Bandsman spoke for the whole of banding: "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.