

# Commissions: a forty year journey, 1963-2003

Tim Reynish

When twenty years ago I helped to host the first International Conference of Wind Bands at the Royal Northern College of Music, I certainly did not think that the focus of my musical life would change quite as dramatically as it has. Now working hard on retirement is as good a time as any to look at the commissioning programme of the College and BASBWE.

My own first commission was nearly forty years ago, when as a music teacher in Minehead I commissioned Elizabeth Maconchy to write a *Quintet for Clarinet and Strings*, premiered in the school hall by Gervase de Peyer and the Dartington Quartet. It has been recorded by Thea King, and it was good to hear it played recently at the RNCM by a group who later took it to Israel for performances in Jerusalem. My other Minehead commission was *The Fall of the Leaf* by Elizabeth Lutyens, a gritty pithy piece which I have never heard since that premiere by Leon Goossens. Later it was fun to re-discover another piece by Maconchy from that same year, *Music for Winds and Brass*, which she had forgotten about. This made me determine to make sure that any future commissions were played and played again, so that performers and audience could get to know them.

## Greendragon

After four years of school teaching, I returned to the music profession as a horn player with the CBSO, and soon after that began conducting. I was lucky enough to be offered the post of conductor of the Warwickshire Symphony, and in 1967 commissioned Derek Bourgeois to write an overture *Greendragon*. This is very much in his own inimitable style, with its slight reminiscences of Bernstein in the little fanfare gestures, Malcolm Arnold in the cheeky first subject and Shostakovich in the march-like second, and it always occurred to me that it would transcribe brilliantly for wind band but I never got around to suggesting it. I was delighted to see that

Derek has recently arranged the piece, (published by Hafabra) and even more so when I found that he has dedicated it to me, thirty years after the premiere. We shall open the 2001 BASBWE Conference with this, and I believe that it will be an extremely popular addition to the small repertoire of successful concert overtures for band.

It was another sixteen years before I started commissioning again. In 1981, the First International Conference of Wind Bands and Ensembles for Conductors, Composers and Publishers, held in Manchester, opened our eyes and ears to the potential of the medium; WASBE AND BASBWE were both founded, and we commissioned a *Symphony of Winds* by Derek Bourgeois, a vast romantic piece in a populist mode, which made considerable impact at the time.

**All we can do is to make it better for the next generation**  
H Robert Reynolds

## Two Decades of RNCM and BASBWE Commissions

The sessions of the first BASBWE Conference held in Oxford in 1982, were full of American literature and urgently demonstrated that we needed to create our own repertoire at all levels. For the second Conference, I commissioned Guy Woolfenden and Philip Wilby to write for the College wind orchestra. On September 24th 1983 we premiered both works and they were instant successes. Philip's work *Firestar* is the more contemporary, a brilliant scherzo, with an all-too-short central moment of repose before a headlong accelerando into a coda which is based on the harmonic series, a rare passage of harmonic stability. *Firestar* is on hire from Chesters, not on sale, and this must be one reason why it has not had the wider currency it deserves.

Guy's *Galimaufry* was prepared immediately by his own publishing house Ariel, and it is estimated that it has received over 2,000 performances, a good return on the commissioning fee provided by North West Arts. As Robert Maycock wrote in *The Independent*:

*In so far as music criticism deals seriously with radio at all, it tends to concentrate on Radio 3,*

*such are the cultural blinkers most critics wear. At the least, this means that good things on the other networks get missed - such as the Royal Northern College of Music Wind Orchestra playing Guy Woolfenden last Friday, again on Radio 2. If you're in the new-music business and smirking, ask yourself if typecasting someone as a theatre composer isn't another case of cultural blinkers. A piece like Galimaufry, with its witty ingenuities, expert layout, and a tune that stays with you as long as Carousel's, has helped thousands of players to cut their musical teeth and stirred thousands more with the adventure of living music. Yet how many 'contemporary' specialists have heard a note of it?*

BASBWE had the bit between its teeth. For the first Conference at Warwick Tony Veal commissioned Guy to write *Illyrian Dances* while David Bedford wrote *Sea and Sky and Golden Hill* (Novello) for the Bristol Conference. Meanwhile in Manchester we began on our series of commissions, helped over the years by the Arts Council, the Holst Foundation, the Foundation for Sport and the Arts and by our own efforts, usually in conjunction with Conferences or tours abroad.

We started with chamber ensemble works; Philip Wilby wrote *and I walk around the Cross* (Chester) and *Leçons*, two works with ingenious rhythmic problems to solve. Later we concentrated on the wind ensemble because many chamber works have been restored to the repertoire from earlier centuries, and the development of this genre did not seem such a high priority. However in recent years programmes have been enriched by Adam Gorb's witty *Symphony no 1* (Maecenas), based on melodic material from Beethoven's *Symphony no 1*, and the *Reflections on a Sixteenth Century Theme* (Novello) by Richard Rodney Bennett with wind detet. This was not the result of a commission, and was in fact originally for string orchestra, but we had discussed a double quintet many times.

Richard was the first composer of international stature to respond to the request for wind ensemble works, and in 1987 I premiered his *Morning Music* in Boston at the WASBE Conference, a wonderfully descriptive piece in which the lyrical and the energetic are juxtaposed. This was followed by *Four Seasons* written also for WASBE in 1991 and premiered at the Cheltenham Festival, and the *Trumpet Concerto* written for the College in 1993, all three couched in a post-Schoenberg melodic and harmonic language which is basically tonal. I believe that these will emerge as

three of the strongest works of the latter part of the 20th century, hopefully to be joined by the *Trombone Concerto* which Richard has promised for WASBE in Sweden in 2003. These are all published by Novello

It is difficult to select the most important of our commissions; it could be argued that *Gallimaufry* and similar works are of the greatest importance as they provide 'real' music opportunities for school students and amateurs. However, works aimed at 'professional' performance are more likely to retain a long-lasting place in the international repertoire, and I would like to think that Sallinen's *The Palace Rhapsody* (Novello), Thea Musgrave's *Journey through a Japanese Landscape* (Chester) for Marimba solo (Evelyn Glennie), Nigel Clarke's *Samurai* (Maecenas) and Casken's *Distant Variations* (Schott) will grow in popularity. Also written for Evelyn Glennie, Adam Gorb's *Elements* (Maecenas) for percussion is very strong; Judith Bingham's *Three American Icons* and Anthony Gilbert's *Dream Carousels* will surely become increasingly well-known.

What is interesting is how composers, as ever, have led the groups forward technically. For the 1987 WASBE Conference, I commissioned a first work from Michael Ball, *Omaggio*, (Novello) a virtuoso piece which a major Washington wind band declined to play as too difficult to prepare. Last year it was given a stunning performance in the BBC Proms by the National Children's Wind Orchestra under Philip Scott.

For my 60th birthday, a number of composers kindly wrote pieces, all of which are useful, some of which have already reached an international market. Adam Gorb's *Yiddish Dances* (Maecenas) is one such work, now recorded by Eugene Corporon and North Texas, and played throughout the States, while Martin Ellerby's *New World Dances* (Studio) is attracting a growing public. For school bands, Michael Ball wrote *Three Processionals*, (Studio) which has a teasing finale in 7/8, Derek Bourgeois wrote *A Northern Lament*, (G&M Brand), Malcolm Binney a celebratory *Timpanaglia* (Maecenas) and Guy Woolfenden *A Birthday Treat* (Ariel).

Now without access to any help with funding, I have to indulge in "SKI", an acronym for "spending the kids inheritance", and this has resulted in a cutting back of the straight commissions but an increased activity through formation of consortia. Two joint commissions with Sefton Education Music Services have been extremely

productive, Philip Wilby's magnificent *A Passion for our Time* (Maecenas) premiered in Liverpool Cathedral in and last year's *Time's Harvest* (Maecenas) by Edwin Roxburgh. For the first conference of the Millennium, I financed a new piece by Stephen McNeff, *Wasteland Music* (Maecenas); this was ostensibly for school band, but as with so many works, the medium inspired a virtuoso approach and the piece proved to be much harder than was intended. For BASBWE 2001 Stephen is writing a school band version, as well as a brand new work, *Ghosts*.

## Commissions for 2001

This year's conference sees an extension of the consortia. The first Gala concert by the RNCM Wind Orchestra opens with a six minute work by the distinguished American composer, Joan Tower, for which I have joined thirty other University bands in the United States. *Fascinating Ribbons* was premiered at the CBDNA on February 22nd by the Keystone Winds under their conductor Jack Stamp. In the same concert, we shall give the European premiere of *Dream Dancer* by Michael Colgrass for Alto Saxophone and wind ensemble. This consortium has been put together by the World-Wide Concurrent Premieres and Commissioning Fund Inc, and 25 wind ensembles will give premieres between February 1st and November 5th, 2001 with Kenneth Radnowsky as soloist.

A third international consortium has been put together as a result of my travels last year to New Zealand. Whilst there, I heard a very attractive orchestral work, played by the New Zealand Broadcasting Orchestra as part of a competition, and after I came across the composer, Christopher Marshall, on the web, I contacted him with the idea of writing a work at Grade 3 level. He was delighted with winning a special audience prize, and with the idea of a commission for the wind ensemble, a medium he had come across seriously while a student at Eastman School of Music, and the result is that I financed the first half of the commission, joined by sixty college, school and community bands for the other 50%. Each band has put in \$30 and will receive a score and recording, together with an order form for the set of parts.

The work is *Aue*, (Maecenas) a six minute miniature tone-poem based on Samoan melodic material and it will be premiered on 7th April at the RNCM by John Dickinson, himself a New Zealander, conducting the Chethams Wind Orchestra. Chethams will also give the premiere performance of Paul

Patterson's *Little Red Riding Hood* (Weinberger) in its new wind band version which I commissioned last year.

It is great to hear works which I commissioned and introduce them to new audiences and players. Conducting Adam Gorb's *Awayday* (Maecenas) with the Marines in Washington was a thrill, as was working on *Gallimaufry* with a school band in Texas recently, or conducting the *Morning Music* and the Casken. *Distant Variations* in Zagreb and Warsaw, *Yiddish Dances* in Brazil and Argentina.

In the summer we will premiere a new work for small ensemble by Anthony Gilbert Unrise, (York University Press) to be played at the Spitalfield Festival on June 22nd, and the following week on Wednesday 27th June I shall conduct the premiere of *Blasket Dances* (Maecenas) by Matthew Taylor at my last concert on the staff of the Royal Northern College of Music.

## Commissions for 2003

In July I take over as President of WASBE, as Classical Music put it "the Bill Clinton of Wind Music", now I suppose the George Dubya Bush. The WASBE Conference in Jonkoping, Sweden, will feature Scandinavian and Nordic wind music, but we are also commissioning works world-wide. So far in place is a consortium commission between myself, and two Universities in Texas and Florida of a major work by David del Tredici, together with the Trombone Concerto for Christian Lindberg which I hope will be a consortium set up between WASBE and CBDNA members. I am also trying to put in place a consortium for a Symphony by Edward Gregson.

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you would  
like to air?**

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