

## Settling Old Scores

Stephen Dodgson

*A leading British composer reflects on his output for wind instruments, paralleling the development of the wind ensemble over the past 30-odd years, revealing fascinating insights into the process of composition and orchestration.*

Habits die hard they say. My instinct has always been to finish one thing as best as I could and then go straight on to something new. Obvious errors apart, I'm resistant to go looking for possible improvements without incentive; the commonest being some eager enquiry about a piece I've neglected. This immediately puts me into self-questioning mode. If in addition there's a threat to print and publish, the reason becomes imperative.

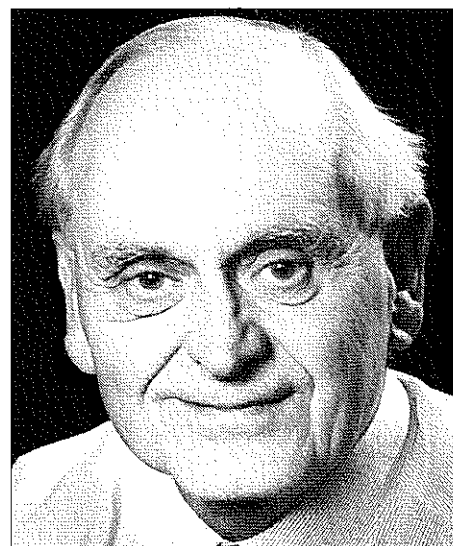
Curiously, I find this is particularly so in the case of wind band repertory. Only recently have I become aware of practical limitations which somehow didn't apply when I wrote the music in the first place, or that I was simply too inexperienced to know about. Moreover, in the 30 years since my initiation (*Wind Symphony* in 1972) the complement of wind band/orchestra has moved decisively toward standardisation. The way I wrote, and was encouraged to write in the 1970's, now looks - even to me, who cheerfully scored as I did - a bit offbeat and eccentric.

Apropos *Wind Symphony*, use of saxophones or not was left entirely to me. Keen to preserve the central register in clearest primary colours, I preferred not. And, for some reason which I now forget, I wrote the horns in six parts. Interestingly, in no early performance (and there were quite a few) were these things ever questioned.

One of those earlier performances was at the Guildhall School of Music with conductor Denis Wick. By this time it lodged in an orchestral hire library, gently languishing, while I busily pursued other things. And Denis Wick, as ever, had more projects on the go than any musician I can readily think of. But it was he who remembered it a few years back when launching Denis Wick Publications. I recalled my one unavailing attempt to rescue my old score from the half-light, but he achieved it immediately with one swift phone call. Change was in the air...

The actual beginning can be pinpointed; a summer's day, 1972, in Bromley; a large school hall and a rehearsal by the British Youth Wind Orchestra in progress. BYWO had been founded four years earlier at the inspiration of Eric McGavin, and was administered by the Schools Music Association, recognition of a populous rising generation of exceptional wind instrument talent in need of a challenging orchestral environment for its development. I was present because its conductor, Harry Legge, told me to come. The contagion spread, hence my vivid memory of the occasion.

The following summer, my *Prologue and Scherzo* featured in the BYWO end-of-course concert at the Dorking Halls. And so I believe was a work by Leonard



to change! And how readily the advancing orchestral standard kept pace! Eric McGavin had been right about this too. New repertoire, well conceived, for the orchestra of winds he had in mind, was a vital aspect of his vision.

In summer 1974, I heard the BYWO again. By this time, *Interlude and Procession* had been added to complete the projected *Symphony*. There were plenty of minor accidents along the way in BYWO's performance at the Harrogate Festival, but nothing got in the way of the more elemental contrasts I'd aimed at. I was particularly proud of *Procession*, set in motion by a solo bassoon introducing a pattern of abrupt contrasts of slender and massive scoring:



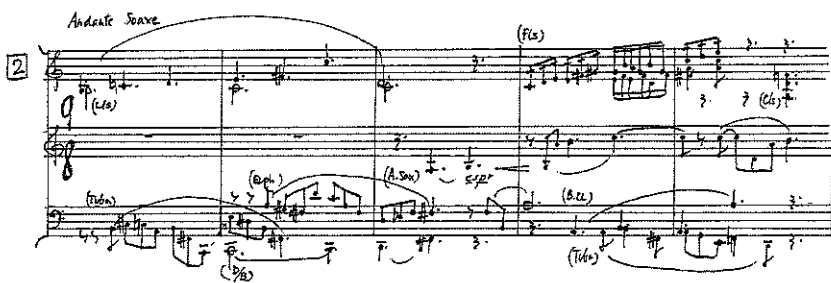
Salzedo, another composer more than once encouraged by Harry Legge to write for a medium actually rather little explored at that date. How soon was this

The players' confidence had grown. But so had mine, and along with it a heightened taste for the dramatic power

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lying in wait in the wind orchestra. It was this which, shortly afterwards, led me straight to *The Eagle*, when invited to provide a 10-minute work for the National Youth Wind Band of Scotland Col Rodney Bashford, its conductor, took an instant shine to the piece, enjoying its drama and even relishing its considerable difficulties, and proved it by writing out the parts in his own meticulous hand. This task, I noticed, had prompted his wise addition of the single saxophone in the tutti immediately preceding its sudden exposure in a long plaintive solo, almost naked above a weaving dialogue for two equally naked tubas. This choice alone perhaps reveals me as more an orchestral than a band composer.

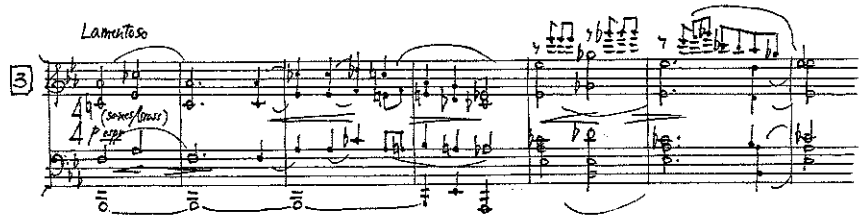
In an extensive revision of *The Eagle* last year, I believe I found ways to preserve the stark character of the three twisting lines but with a thin veil surrounding them to enhance the expressive reward for the players. I could not and would not have countenanced such a thing in 1976:



*The Eagle* comprises a severe and ominous theme as prelude to six compact variations, each an illustration of one line of a cryptic 6-line verse by Tennyson; five lines of solitary vigil on high, followed by the eagle's terrifying dive to its prey, the only all-out climax in the piece.

The following summer, Bashford and the Band visited Bergen, taking *The Eagle* (and me) with them. There was also a specially commissioned new piece of similar duration, purpose-built as a tribute to the host city. Inevitably, perhaps, I thought of Grieg and a mischievous streak in my nature led me to *Sailor's Song*, one of the Lyric Pieces, Op. 68; to me, a band piece somewhat lost on the piano, and in any case too short for straight arrangement. But what an invitation for variation and development! Remembering my own

days in the Navy, I leapt on board Grieg's well-disciplined Sailor became my Matelot enjoying a wild night ashore:



All this music derives directly from Grieg, some harmonies admittedly turning a profounder shade of blue as my Matelot sways and collapses nursing a sore head. This score has also undergone some recent revision, but to a much lesser extent, and mainly to remedy a few anxious spots where the thin scoring I so often prefer had proved risky; evidence that's to say of my general motto already declared; only revise if a good reason appears

A few years after this, David Hamilton directed my gaze toward the Surrey County Wind Orchestra, of which he was founding conductor, and whose reputation had risen to a prize-winning peak in the early 80's. Indeed, he assured me that it was the SCWO's performance of *Wind Symphony* which had pulled it off. And it was this, presumably, that prompted the invitation to provide a showpiece for Michael Collins, then on the threshold of a brilliant career, but only a short time previously a youthful star of the SCWO. My response was *Capriccio Concertante*, a wild piece, obliquely related to the *Fantastic Symphony*, complete with a witches' ride, strokes of midnight embedded in a twofold frenzy, and even a snatch of the Dies Irae to bring it to a shuddering halt; thereafter a prayerful, flute-rich peace for

the dawn of All Saints' Day. Here again, there's been some revision in the light of experience, preparing for publication and

a recent revival by NYWO under James Gourlay, with Gervase de Peyer as soloist. By 1984, with ten years experience to build upon, I'd become a more reliable score-builder and a more resourceful judge of the holes, gaps and hollows which vary the densities and which are indeed the lungs of the wind sound-fabric. At the height of the frenzy, solo clarinet and piccolo cavort almost alone. It needs to sound as if the whole thing is about to fall apart. Elsewhere this sensation is less desirable, and I'd become aware that some splutterings were too disjointed for comfort - offbeat activity in excess. I was delighted to discover tiny adjustments which not only do wonders for safety but actually generate a still more impetuous rhythm.

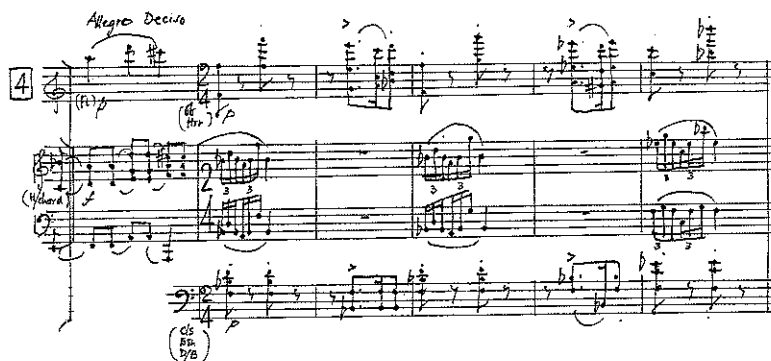
It's not difficult to tell that I'm a great seeker after a generally more open-textured approach to wind-band scoring. I often seem to hear scores, new and old, which cry out for the pruning-knife. Because it's a tutti and loud should not mean that everyone should play all the time. Holes have a way of getting automatically filled as the fair-copy score nears completion; doubling and re-doubling and not a rest in sight. If that's one extreme, you'll tend to find me at the opposite pole, a bit of a chill in the air but no risk of suffocation.

This must have been apparent to American musician friends working in the University of Texas at Arlington, who alarmed me one day in late 1986 with an urgent commission for a *Concerto for Harpsichord* with a sizeable wind ensemble, including percussion. If I'd been given time to think I'd have said a definite NO, on the grounds that such a combination simply couldn't work. But there was no time; performance already scheduled in under three months. Faced with a double impossibility, we rang off with peals of laughter and I said YES.

Arlington Concertante was a challenge

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indeed This began with thematic character, which had to be 'friendly' to both camps; only the harpsichord allowed to make a speech, otherwise a conversation-piece but, importantly, able to build into a cohesive tutti sound now and then, thanks to the inbuilt staccato nature of the principal theme:



Elsewhere, light percussion provide an intriguing link between the largely incompatible contestants. For me, it's a fascinating hybrid

Linton Powell, with the 14-strong student band conducted by Ray Lichtenwalter, gave a number of performances at Arlington and nearby in Texas, one of which was heard by Richard Strange, an important figure in the College Band Directors National Association. This resulted in a commission for the 1991 50th anniversary celebration of CBDNA in Kansas City. My *Flowers of London Town* didn't go down too well I felt, being, as someone remarked, "too like chamber music". This was in fact what I meant it to be, though deep down I suspect the recent experience of *Arlington Concertante*, which I'd so much enjoyed, had left its imprint. Neither of these two works has yet been performed outside the USA.

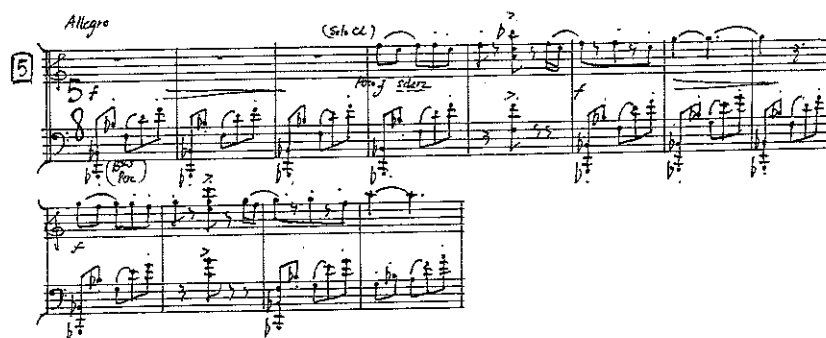
Action and reaction. Each thing breeds its opposite. Following one actual chamber concerto, and then a chamber-like work for a substantial American wind band (university of Kansas, conducted by Robert Foster), I changed course to follow my own urge. I had several times written sets of *Five Occasional Pieces*, individual character movements, for various duo combinations. This time I raised the stakes, opting for the grand palate of a large wind orchestra; a contrasted display of colour, energy, humour, beauty and tunefulness. Essentially, it was an entertainment, for players and

audience alike, with the overall title of *Bandwagon*, written for and premiered by the National Youth Wind Orchestra, conducted by Adrian Brown in Salisbury Cathedral and the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, on successive days in August 1992.

NYWO had by this date grown up in

an impressive ten years following its transformation from BYWO, independently managed and with expanded courses running parallel with the main orchestra. Through inescapable involvement as its willing chairman for 15 years, I got to know it well, not just its troubles and triumphs, but musically too, marvelling at its unstoppable advance, rapidly making sense of complex new scores, with steadily diminishing tuning troubles and ever increasing accuracy of notes and ensemble. *Bandwagon* reflected what I'd absorbed over the years and had that happiest of feelings - knowing just who you were writing for.

Only two of the five movements employ the entire orchestra. Omitting horns, tuba and timpani, the second, *Plaything; All the Fives* is in a snappy 5/8, every phrase five bars long, and five phrases marking off the five constituent paragraphs. No interruptions permitted. So it stops punctually on the last quaver of its 125th bar. Leaping bassoons provide the kick-start, instantly defining the musical character:



At this point I was beginning to tire of poring over many-staved scores of far too many transposing instruments, and turned to smaller ensembles: a *Partita for 10 Winds* (1994); *Pieces of Eight* (1997) for the classic paired windharmonic; *Rendezvous* (1997) including trumpets and double bass; but then reacting once again in 1998 for *St Elmo's Fire*, in effect an atmospheric tone-poem in miniature based on an episode in *Moby Dick*. By the time of its première (RNCM Wind Band, conducted by Gourlay in November 2001) association with Denis Wick Publishing was firmly established, with some of the revisions I have described already accomplished. *St Elmo's Fire*, proof-read but still gently flickering on the computer screen, was able to undergo a little on-the-spot surgery to its final bars which had proved too abrupt dramatically.

The ball had started rolling with Denis Wick's rescue of the *Wind Symphony* in 1999, a detailed restoration which took some months. It wasn't long before I recognised this as a watershed. *Capriccio Concertante* and *The Eagle* proved readily extractable from another dimly-lit hire library. It turned out that the contractual agreement was already several years lapsed - the firm still less aware than was I.

These two scores passed over the revision-bench only recently. Ahead of them came *Marchrider*, my only work for wind band to be premiered at a BASBWE gathering (Glasgow 1990; the Lothian Region Schools Wind Band conducted by Brian Duguid; commissioned by the Lothian Region Council) - a latter-day extension of my first happy experience in Scotland with *The Eagle*. I had decided during the journey home from Glasgow that *Marchrider* was seriously weakened by a badly related central episode. I even knew the remedy, but lacked incentive until feeling Denis's pin-prick. I now

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need to hear this piece, in its new fully integrated shape, everything arising from its single-minded rhythmic engine:

Lastly, still in deep shadow, lies *Stanzas* (1980), commissioned by SE Arts for SCWO and David Hamilton, predecessor to *Capriccio Concertante*, and in itself virtually a compact concerto for orchestra. I remember it as a bit uncomfortable for all concerned with its too-constant exposure of antiphonal lines coupled with short-rationing of subordinate accompaniment. Neglect may not be forever however. The subtitle - *The Gathering Winds* (stolen from Shelley) - has acquired an ironic ring; echoing like a long-unkept promise.

Mending past errors is no doubt a worthy occupation for the elderly, but I also still need youthful refreshment with something totally new, spurred on by a very positive nudge from Denis Wick, I embarked on a classically-minded 3-movement *Trumpet Concerto*, completed last summer and dedicated to James Watson (we have been long associated through the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble) and premiered on 24th May 2003.

*For a review of the World première of the Trumpet Concerto, see page 29*



## Catalogue of Works for Wind

| Works for Wind Band/Orchestra |                               |         |    | Works for larger Wind Ensemble |  |            |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------|----|--------------------------------|--|------------|
| 1974                          | <i>Wind Symphony</i>          | 21 mins | DW | 1977                           | <i>Epigrams from 'a Garden'</i><br>(Song Cycle: Contralto and Clannet Choir) | 16 mins ms |
| 1975                          | <i>The Eagle</i>              | 9 mins  | DW | 1994                           | <i>Partita for 10 Wind Instruments</i>                                       | 16 mins ms |
| 1976                          | <i>Matelot</i>                | 8 mins  | DW | 1984                           | <i>Orion</i><br>(nonet: Clarinets and Brass)                                 | 10 mins ms |
| 1980                          | <i>Stanzas</i>                | 13 mins | ms | 2001                           | <i>Beyond Orion</i><br>(ditto: sequel)                                       | 6 mins ms  |
| 1984                          | <i>Capriccio Concertante</i>  | 13 mins | DW | 1997                           | <i>Pieces of Eight</i><br>(octet)  | 12 mins ms |
| 1985                          | <i>Arlington Concertante</i>  | 14 mins | ms | 1997                           | <i>Rendezvous</i>  | 8 mins ms  |
| 1990                          | <i>Marchrider</i>             | 8 mins  | DW |                                |  |            |
| 1991                          | <i>Flowers of London Town</i> | 21 mins | NV |                                |  |            |
| 1991                          | <i>Bandwagon</i>              | 22 mins | DW |                                |  |            |
| 1998                          | <i>St Elmo's Fire</i>         | 7 mins  | DW |                                |  |            |
| 2002                          | <i>Trumpet Concerto</i>       | 14 mins | DW |                                |  |            |

DW Denis Wick Publishing. NV Novello.

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Stephen Dodgson was born in London in 1924, and has lived there, with few interruptions, ever since. He received his musical training at the Royal College of Music, and was subsequently for many years a member of its teaching staff in theory and composition. In 1950 he was in Italy on a travelling scholarship. Through the next fifteen years he was part time teacher/lecturer in a succession of schools and colleges.

From this period on, he was much employed by the BBC; as a provider of incidental music for many major radio drama productions, as well as a frequent and familiar broadcaster of reviews and other musical topics.

Nowadays, ostensibly in retirement, he continues happily occupied in composition with the active stimulus of many musicians to keep it up.

Stephen Dodgson's compositions cover almost every genre, including opera (Margaret Catchpole, 1979); six piano sonatas; seven string quartets and much other chamber music. There is also a substantial body of music for orchestra, chorus and solo voices. He is however probably best known for his writing for guitar. His now numerous works for it - solo, in ensemble, chamber music and concertos - have brought him worldwide recognition.