

## In Search of the Authentic Alford

It is just 50 years since Major Frederick Joseph Ricketts retired as the long-serving Director of Music of the Plymouth Division, Royal Marines. The marches he wrote under the pseudonym Kenneth J. Alford had already made him a legend and, in preparing a Golden Jubilee Tribute with the Band of HM Royal Marines, Commandos, JOHN PERKINS tells of his research into Ricketts' personal interpretations of his own music.

Anyone who has served as Director of Music of the Plymouth Division Band or its successor bands over the past 50 years could not have failed in some way to have been fascinated by the music and career of Major Ricketts (alias Kenneth J Alford); I as his successor 50 years on am afflicted with the same fascination. Surely unparalleled in military music for the quality and imagination of his music written for military bands, particularly his quick marches and one slow march, Ricketts created an instantly recognisable style of writing which has immediate appeal, yet unlike many popular pieces, seems to improve with subsequent listenings and never loses its charm.

The comparison between Sousa and Alford will continue to provide a stimulating topic of conversation in the future as it has in the past. My only comment on this particular subjective point is to make a similar comparison between the work of Verdi and Puccini. As a violinist with a penchant for operatic music I am always deeply affected by the experience of playing a Puccini score with its artistry of scoring and intensity of emotion, whereas with Verdi I am entertained, but find myself watching the clock after several performances of the same opera. I would not argue that Alford is a second Puccini but I do believe he wrote music of greater substance which has more enduring innate quality in the field of military march writing for which he is best remembered.

Since the publication of John Trendell's excellent biography of Alford, *Colonel Bogey to the Fore* in 1990, I have been keen to draw together all his march music on one digital recording, and with the help of Clovelly Recordings Ltd, the Abbey Road Studios, John Trendell who wrote the accompanying booklet and The Band of HM Royal Marines, Commandos, the direct successor of Alford's band, we have released a 'Golden Jubilee Tribute' to 'The British March King'. The album is recorded in chronological order with amplifying notes in the accompanying booklet leading the listener through.

In researching the Alford style in order to record his music as authentically as possible, new copies of the Boosey & Hawkes published marches were obtained, together with recordings made by Alford with his Plymouth band over a period of years. We as a band were surprised to find quite so many discrepancies in the published music with phrasing and dynamics

as well as an alarming number of wrong notes! An extreme example being the flute and oboe parts to the trio of *Cavalry of the Clouds* which differ in rhythm and pitch from each other and neither match the score! In this instance and others I consulted with Alford's flautist Harry Eden who still lives in Deal, Kent, and although his memory is vague on some of the specifics, he was able to fill in many blanks and give a good insight into the recordings made by Alford which also caused me much 'head scratching'.

Harry Eden confirmed that the Alford recordings, albeit an historical account of Alford playing Alford, were not a fair reflection on the standard of the band at the time which captivated live (and radio) audiences with its flair and precision. This was due in large measure to the haste in which the recordings were made and venues used. Quite often the Officers' Mess at Stonehouse Barracks acted as a make-do studio with an assortment of mattresses and other household items used to adjust the acoustic. Another confusion of the recordings is the variety of tempos used by Alford. Clearly tempo was affected by his prevailing mood and his particular way of playing his Poetic March *The Vanished Army* was unique, causing me to make the judgment that the traditional slowing of the trio would not be emulated in the opening phrase which Alford was given to do, as Harry says 'only he could'. Again his sedate tempo in *Colonel Bogey* on one recording is in marked contrast to the brighter speeds that are more usual.

The characteristics which I could readily draw upon were good intonation, good ensemble playing, a wide variety in

dynamic, vitality in the music created in no small way by a staccato style of playing and a general flamboyance about the sound of the band. It was more general for Alford to chose a lively march tempo, again adding to the vitality of the music.

These were the areas we concentrated on for *THE COMPLETE MARCHES OF KENNETH ALFORD*. Where dynamics were non-existent in the published scores we made informed judgments. We chose 120 beats per minute as the characteristic tempo. We worked hard on achieving accurate percussion parts which have been altered greatly for use on parade over the years. We used bugles where bugles were intended in *HM Jollies* and *By Land and Sea* (together with the original coda) and we gave prominence to the interplay between the upper wind instruments which is not always noticed. We were conscious of not letting the first-time-through trio sections be less dynamic than the repeats and we resisted the temptation to alter tempo when the meter changed from simple to compound time. As for staccato playing and vitality of performance, this style continues to be characteristic of the Commandos Band. Finally we included the first and only recording of a new work released by Alford's children to John Trendell in 1990 when researching the biography. An organ part in one verse of a simple Hymn in four 'three bar phrases' with a title *Vesper Hymn*. I had the privilege to arrange this tune in three verses for band and this arrangement concludes the album. I hope listeners enjoy this unique tribute to a remarkable man.

**John Trendell**, Alford's biographer and the compiler of the cover notes for the



The Band of Her Majesty's Royal Marines Comandos (Captain J R Perkins, LRAM ARCM LGSMB, RM) recording Alford at the Abbey Road Studios, London

recordings, sent the composer's two sons copies of the tribute to their father. From their replies, the following extracts are made:

*Having listened to the tape more than once - with much joy - I am impressed by the genuine determination to be true to the original inspiration and interpretation 'in the style of FJR' as Captain Perkins puts it. It came through clearly to me and I am glad he concluded with 'The Vesper Hymn. John, I am most grateful to you for your part in all this. Thank you so much all round - Kenneth Ricketts, the 'Kenneth' of Kenneth J Alford.*

*Thank you so very much for this splendid example of the John Trendell skill and perception of the FJR genius. You have a genuine feeling of what he was on about in his life, from very humble beginnings, and I think this has rubbed off on John Perkins. He has shown great understanding and musicianship in this recording of which I feel sure FJR would heartily approve. - Leo Ricketts, the second son and the 'Leo' of 'Leo Stanley', the composer brother of FJR.*

**Captain John Perkins** LRAM ARCM LGSM RM joined the Royal Marines Band Service in 1965 at the age of 14 receiving many prizes including the Cassell Prize for violin. At 17, he became Leader of the orchestra in HM Yacht Britannia taking part in deployments to 28 different countries including three world tours. Many awards and honours followed so that, at 32 he was the youngest Warrant Officer Class 1 in the Band Service. Commissioned in 1984, he became Director of Music to the Flag Officer Plymouth for four years before a return to Deal where his many duties included the editorship of *The Blue Band*, the official publication of the RM Band Service. He was appointed Director of Music to the Band of HM Royal Marines Commandos in September 1992 and promoted to his present rank in October 1993. He has over 20 published compositions to



**CAPT. F. J. RICKETTS**

- As seen by Bardsley  
From *Colonel Bogey to the Fore*  
by John Trendell

date, some of which are featured in *Marches of the Sea*.

**The Band of HM Royal Marines, Commandos**, based in Plymouth, Devonshire, England, can trace its history through many name changes back to 1767. The players are among the most versatile in the world - from the visual splendour of their ceremonial uniforms with the distinctive white helmets to the superb musicianship which can be appreciated in these recordings. Nevertheless, they are still marine soldiers and, among many distinctions over so many years, their fine military role in the

*Falklands Campaign of 1982 is readily recalled with pride. 'Joe' Ricketts was in command of the Plymouth Division Band for 14 years from November 1930.*

**THE COMPLETE MARCHES OF KENNETH ALFORD**

A Golden Jubilee tribute to 'The British March King' The Band of HM Royal Marines Commandos (Captain J R Perkins) Clovelly CL CD102  
*The Thin Red Line (1908) Holyrood (1912), The Vedette (1912) Colonel Bogey (1914) The Great Little Army (1916), On the Quarter Deck (1917), The Middy (1917), The Voice of the Guns (1917), The Vanished Army (1919), The Mad Major (1921), Cavalry of the Clouds (1923) Dunedin (1928), Old Panama (1929) HM Jollies (1929), The Standard of St George (1930), By Land and Sea (1941) Army of the Nile (1941), Eagle Squadron (1942), Lilliburlero (1942 - trad arr Alford) A Life on the Ocean Wave (1944 - Russell arr Alford) Vesper Hymn (Alford arr Perkins)*

and a companion recording:

**MARCHES OF THE SEA**

A Tribute to the Royal National Lifeboat Institution The Band of HM Royal Marines Commandos (Captain J R Perkins) Clovelly CL CD101

*The Lifeboatmen (Broun) On the Quarterdeck (Alford) The Dunkirk Veterans (Perkins) Trafalgar (Zehle), In the Eye of the Storm (Yates) Warship (Isaac/Woodfield) Navy Blue (Broun), The Middy (Alford) HM Jollies (Alford), The Padstou Lifeboat (Arnold/Woodfield) The Mansfield Matelot (Perkins), Leviathan (Langford), Raleighing Cry (Broun) The Nelson Touch (Hood), Up Periscope (Baker) The Plymouth Sound March (Goodwin/Broun) Soldiers of the Sea (Dunn)*

Copies of the recordings are obtainable by cheque made payable to the **RM Band Fund**, The Band of HM Royal Marines, Commandos, CTCRM, Lymington, Devon EX8 5AR, England. Inclusive prices: CD £10.00; cassette £7.00 each

*Colonel Bogey to the Fore*, a biography of Kenneth J. Alford by John Trendell in paperback from **Egon Publishers Limited**, Royston Road Baldock, Herts SG7 6NW, England price £9.95 plus 80p p&p

## Commissions and Performances

In 1994, 'the Year of the Saxophone', **London Saxophonic** has an exciting schedule of performances throughout Europe. The 12 members cover nine saxophones: soprano, 2 soprano, alto, 2 tenor, 2 baritone and bass with two percussion and keyboards and the group's association with leading minimalist composers has resulted in a number of new works or re-scoring being written for it, a growing repertoire rapidly leading the way to establishing this instrumental format as an accepted configuration. During January and February, 'Minimalism

in the 90s' at RNCM Manchester, Hope Chapel Bristol, and Purcell Room London featured music by Moondog, John Adams - Music from 'Nixon in China', Michael Nyman - Music from 'The Fall of Icarus', Eddie Parker - *The Status Quo*, Graham Fitkin - *Stub* (sax quartet), Will Gregory *Hoe Down* and *Moscow Express*

Tim Reynish calls attention to two nicely balanced programmes from the Royal Scottish Academy of Music & Drama Wind Orchestra during the winter. On 2 December 1993: Malcolm Arnold: *Four Scottish Dances* John McLeod: *Dramatic Landscape* Richard Rodney Bennett: *The Four Seasons* Thea Musgrave: *Scottish Dance Suite* Martin Dalby: *A Plain Man's Hammer*. Malcolm Arnold: *Tam O'Shanter*. A concert on 3 March 1994 also featured the Bennett together with Patterson's *The Mighty Voice*, both

Holst Suites and Percy Grainger's *Molly on the Shore*, *Irish Tune* and *Shepherd's Hey*. On 12 March 1994, Glasgow Wind Band premiered works by Jeremy Randall and William Sweeney

Karel Husa's *Concerto for Alto Saxophone and Concert Band* was given its European premier by the Dutch saxophonist Jean Pennings and the Brabant Conservatory Wind Orchestra in Eindhoven, Holland on 28 January 1994. The composer lectured on his music in the Philips Hall and also conducted his *Smetana Fanfare*, *Serenade* and *Music for Prague 1968*. The last work was again performed in Utrecht along with the *American Te Deum*. Other notable performances have recently taken place at Cornell University (USA), Prague, Arnhem and the University of Calgary, Canada.

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