

- | | | | |
|----|---|---|-------|
| 1. | Los Hermanos De Bop © <i>Obrasso-Verlag</i>
<i>Cory Band, Conductor Philip Harper</i> | Mark Taylor arr. Smith | 2.25 |
| 2. | A Malvern Suite* © <i>Studio Music</i>
<i>Ebbw Valley Brass, Conductor Gareth Ritter, Winners – Fourth section</i> | Philip Sparke | 10.51 |
| 3. | Penlee* © <i>Faber Music Ltd.</i>
<i>LGB Brass, Conductor Ian Stewart, Winners – Third Section</i> | Simon Dobson | 14.50 |
| 4. | Londonderry Air © <i>Abbott Music</i>
<i>Trombone Soloist Chris Thomas</i>
<i>Cory Band, Conductor Philip Harper</i> | Traditional arr. Iveson | 3.01 |
| 5. | Purcell Variations* © <i>Egon Publishers Ltd.</i>
<i>Goodwick Brass, Conductor Matthew Jenkins, Winners – Second Section</i> | Kenneth Downie | 13.53 |
| 6. | La Fiesta © <i>Wright & Round</i>
<i>Cory Band, Conductor Philip Harper</i> | Chick Corea arr. Harper | 3.38 |
| 7. | Fanfares and Love Songs* © <i>Faber Music Ltd.</i>
<i>Tylorstown Band, Conductor Gary Davies, Winners – First section</i> | Gavin Higgins | 13.30 |
| 8. | My Way © <i>Jeune Musique and Warner Chappell Music</i>
<i>Vocal Soloist Dave Mitchell</i>
<i>Cory Band, Conductor Philip Harper</i> | Claude François and Jacques Revaux, arr. Harper | 2.31 |
| 9. | Of Distant Memories (Music in an Olden Style) © <i>Novello & Co. Ltd.</i>
<i>Cory Band, Conductor Philip Harper, Winners – Championship section</i> | Edward Gregson | 15.11 |

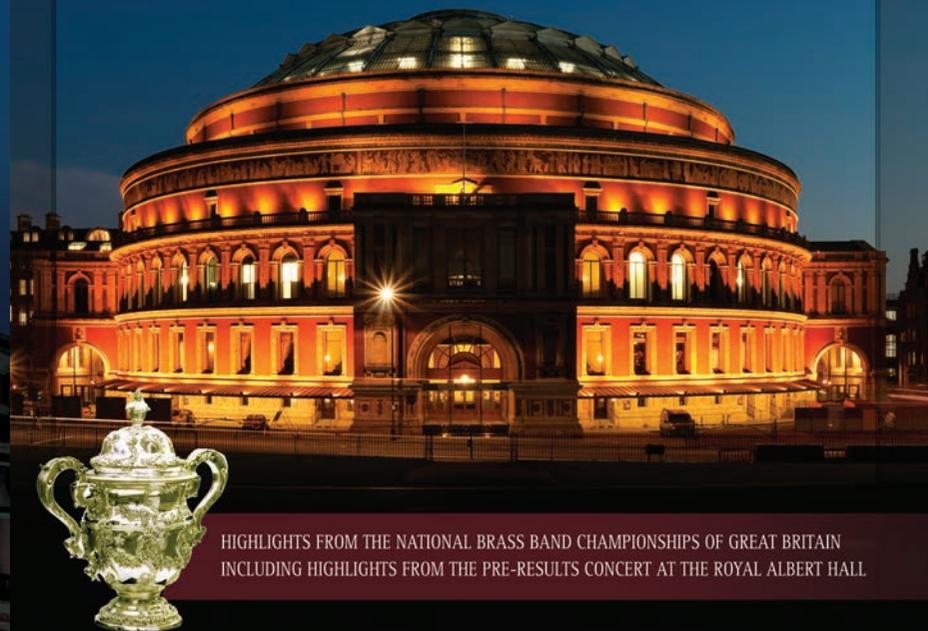
Total CD Playing Time 79.57

Recorded at *The Centaur Conference Centre, Cheltenham** and *The Royal Albert Hall, London*

Executive Producer: Trevor Caffull
 Engineer and Post-Production: Richard Scott
 Production Manager: Nicki Tonge

Project Co-ordinator: Neil Brownless
 Artwork and Design: GK Graphic Design
 Programme Notes: Paul Hindmarsh

THE NATIONALS 2013



HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE NATIONAL BRASS BAND CHAMPIONSHIPS OF GREAT BRITAIN
 INCLUDING HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE PRE-RESULTS CONCERT AT THE ROYAL ALBERT HALL

Cory Band has held the position of the number one ranked brass band, in the World of Brass – British Bandsman rankings, for some six years by virtue of its remarkable consistency in the contest field and a succession of notable victories; yet, the last time the band proudly raised the magnificent national trophy was in 2000. This fine win, 13 years later, was also Philip Harper's first as a conductor. Between the day's play and the announcement of results, band and conductor returned with what felt, to this listener at least, rather like a pre-victory lap of honour. They entertained the audience with some of the items that propelled them to the Brass in Concert title in November 2012, including Sandy Smith's sizzling arrangement of Mark Taylor's *Los Hermanos de Bop* and Philip Harper's arrangement of *La Fiesta*. There were also some fresh additions, including John Iveson's smoothly sophisticated treatment of the *Londonderry Air*, beautifully played by principal trombone Chris Thomas; and what an encore the band provided. As Philip Harper announced from the stage before we heard the fine voice of Dave Mitchell in *My Way*, "This one is for the judges!"

Quality music enjoyed at the Cheltenham Finals for Sections 1 to 4

Welsh bands also dominated the top prizes in the Centaur Conference Centre, at The Cheltenham Racecourse in September. Only LGB Brass from Lewes, the Third Section Champions, denied bands from the west of Offa's Dyke a clean sweep of wins this year. This year's interesting choice of test-pieces for sections one to four paired works from two much admired composers, Kenneth Downie and Philip Sparke, with two exciting works from younger 'voices', Simon Dobson and Gavin Higgins. All four pieces proved their worth in Cheltenham, with more than enough in the writing to provide a technical challenge, but also plenty to reveal a band's musicality and lyricism.

A Malvern Suite by Philip Sparke

Philip Sparke was in his early 30s, around the same age as Dobson and Higgins, when he composed *A Malvern Suite* in 1984. It was published especially for the Fourth Section finalists of 1985 and has remained a popular and appropriate challenge for that section and for youth bands ever since. Given that the home of the National Brass Band Championships for the First to Fourth sections is in Cheltenham, Philip Sparke's attractive *A Malvern Suite* proved



Cory Band, National Champions 2013



Cory Band on stage at the Royal Albert Hall

pieces themselves, summoned up from the composer's 'memory bank' and the emotions, especially nostalgia, that these memories will evoke. *Of Distant Memories* loosely follows an episodic framework of the kind that Percy Fletcher and Cyril Jenkins adopted in their pioneering works, within an expansive ternary (fast-slow-fast) arch, and is framed by the work's principal lyrical theme as introduction, short developing transitions and a triumphant climax.

There are only two brief note-for-note quotes: one is a bass line from *Labour and Love* and the other the chord that opens Alban Berg's *Violin Concerto* of 1935, a Gregson favourite and included here as a means of placing the brass band 'olden style' into a wider context. Elsewhere, the dramatic rhetoric of the trombones sounds like *Life Divine* and parts of Gregson's march episode sound a bit like *Heroic March* from *An Epic Symphony* - but not quite. The modality and scoring of the slow music is intended to evoke Holst's *A Moorside Suite*, while the declamatory fanfares in the march are a response to the style of Arthur Bliss and his suite *Kenilworth*.

At two key points, in the central slow section and the syncopated surge towards the resplendent close, Gregson deliberately

dispenses with the stylistic mask. The rushing cornet scales, which you will hear in the final climax might bring back memories of Gregson's *Connotations* for some seasoned players and listeners and, for me, the way he manoeuvres his chords and textures in preparation for the return in triumph of the big tune at the end, is as strong a memory of his own *Variations on Laudate Dominum* or Ray Steadman-Allen's *The Holy War*, as it is of the big finish in *Life Divine* or *Freedom* (Hubert Bath).

The fascination with the 'retro-styling' in *Of Distant Memories* lies in the way the composer has invaded earlier musical worlds, while remaining true to himself in his musical processes and musical values. "I have the highest regard for the British band tradition and this is a sincere tribute," Gregson says. "I'm proud of the piece in the sense that I know it works and it's got strong ideas, albeit that they are suggestive of another era. It's not totally written within that world, because there are many small harmonic and rhythmic things that would never have been written in brass band music 100 years ago. To that extent it takes on perhaps a veneer of an old style. With the craft that I have, I hope that I have been able to make it into a convincing structure."

to be an apt choice. The adjudicators had a straightforward task of awarding the first place this year to another emergent band from Wales, Ebbw Valley, and its insightful and busy conductor Gareth Ritter, who is also the driving force behind the revival of the City of Cardiff (Mellingriffith) bands. Dedicated to the memory of the eminent composer and teacher Gordon Jacob (1895–1984), Sparke's suite was written following a visit to the Cathedral cities of Hereford and Worcester, with its three contrasting movements named after the locations of the famous Three Choirs Festival – Worcester, Hereford and Gloucester.

The first movement, *Worcester Cathedral*, opens with majestic fanfares that might suggest some kind of ceremony or pageant is in progress. The fanfare character eventually gives way to a lighter syncopated dance pulse in the central section. A broader tune on horns, baritones and euphoniums is set against distant recollections of the fanfare style on muted solo cornets, cleverly reflecting syncopations we heard in the basses right at the start. The whole band soon joins in the dance, with a heavy off-beat tread providing the high point of the movement. After that the various fanfare ideas secrete themselves back in, double piano, as if heard from a great distance perhaps. They soon

assert their presence before fading away to a delicate close. The hints of a modal style in this movement suggest a link, albeit a tenuous one, to the English style of Holst, who was born in Cheltenham, and his great friend Ralph Vaughan Williams, who was also a Gloucestershire man.

Worcester was the birthplace of Edward Elgar, who would often go walking or cycling on the Malvern Hills in search of inspiration or simply for relaxation. Many of his greatest works were composed in the various houses in which he and his wife Alice lived. After her death, Elgar retired to Hereford and liked nothing better than entertaining old friends during the Three Choirs Festival or going for drives along the country lanes. The Malverns and the surrounding country were his most powerful inspiration.

Whether by accident or design, the beautiful melodies that Sparke introduces into the slow movement, *The Wye at Hereford*, contain some Elgarian characteristics – in their wistful, even nostalgic tone, in some of the interval shapes, especially in the rise and fall of widely spaced intervals, sixths and sevenths in particular, and in the harmonic sequences that sustain momentum. The River Wye is broad but still unpredictable as

it flows in a series of long meanders through Hereford. Perhaps this is the image we should have in our minds as the movement unfolds. Sparke crafts his transitions very skilfully in this movement, quietly anticipating the new rhythm at the start of the more animated middle section. In a reflective coda, a delicate echo of the dancing rhythms leads into the finale.

Philip Sparke describes the opening section of *Gloucester Market* as 'bright and breezy'. The extended, free-flowing middle section begins with a playful bright passage, light and effervescent at the start and growing more assertive in its cross rhythms as the whole band enters. The movement winds back on itself to a reprise of the opening paragraph and the briefest of 'throw away' endings.

Penlee by Simon Dobson

All 17 finalists in the Third Section seemed to relish playing Simon Dobson's *Penlee*. Composed as a heart-felt tribute to all those on the RNLI Lifeboat Solomon Browne and the cargo vessel Union Star who lost their lives in the storm off the Cornish coast on 9 December 1989, this vivid and moving piece is packed with colour, drama, moments of overwhelming power and strong emotion. The work begins and ends quietly. It was a

measure of both the power of the music and the manner in which all the band engaged with it, that the silence at the close was rarely broken by inappropriate applause. Watching the players of the winners, LGB Brass (Ian Stewart) from Sussex, bow their heads at the end added to the emotion of the moment, but of course that could not be appreciated by the judges Simone Rebello and Steve Pritchard-Jones.

Cornish composer Simon Dobson was born some ten days after the Penlee Lifeboat disaster. He says, "I was so inspired by the bravery accounted in the story that I knew that at some point I wanted to pay my own musical homage to the bravery of the souls involved in a true story of heroism and sadness, a story that has passed almost into Cornish legend." The opportunity arose in 2008, when he received a commission from the Cornwall Youth Brass Band, of which he had been a member and tutor. He was 27 and beginning to make his mark on the brass band scene as an innovative composer. A number of high-profile commissions have followed and in 2012, he gained a prestigious British Composer Award for *Symphony of Colours*, which was composed for Fairey Band to play at the European Championships in Montreux.

Cory Band, had to return to the stage to take a second bow, such was the ovation that greeted the great performance we hear on this highlights album. Its supreme quality was not lost on the adjudicators either. "It was fantastic," said David Read. "They did everything that was written on the score with some great playing." Alan Morrison agreed: "Cory got so much drama and clarity out of the music."

Speaking on stage afterwards, Edward Gregson was full of praise for all the bands that put their heart and souls into delivering their performances. Make no mistake, Gregson's tribute to brass band test piece pioneers of the early 20th century is very tough to bring off. The familiar style might lull the unsuspecting listener into imagining that the music is as straightforward to play as it is to engage with, but as adjudicator Alan Morrison remarked at the end of the day, "While the style looks so innocuous on the paper, it is quite treacherous in places." There are many exposed and wide-ranging solos for the 'corner' players embedded in the musical fabric.

Gregson began work on *Of Distant Memories*, shortly after completing his *Symphony in two movements* for the National Youth Brass Bands of Great Britain and

Wales, to a commission secured jointly from the Worshipful Company of Musicians and Black Dyke Band, who gave the première performance at the 2013 RNCM Festival of Brass. The score is dedicated to Nicholas and Robert Childs. Throughout his career, Gregson has enjoyed working tributes or acts of homage into his music. These have taken many forms, from respectful quotations, as in his British Open Championship test of 2008, *Rococo Variations*, to an applied stylistic veneer as in *Trumpets of the Angels* (Messiaen) or the re-imagining of existing material in the orchestral work *Dream Song* (which is a commentary on Mahler's *Symphony No. 6*). The initial stimulus for writing *Of Distant Memories* was the centenary in 2013 of Percy Fletcher's landmark work *Labour and Love*, but as Gregson explains, "I wanted to pay tribute to all those early composers who did so much for the earlier brass band repertoire; so here's me in 2013 saying 'hats off' gentlemen for writing music that started to make a real impression, not only on the brass band community but in the wider musical world."

Gregson gives *Of Distant Memories (Music in an Olden Style)*, his third 'Nationals' test, a 'retro' description of Tone Poem, but there isn't a narrative or story-line for the music to hang onto. The subjects are the old

brass band itself, contrasting the extrovert and lyrical characteristics of the British band tradition, in which Gavin Higgins was brought up. Having played tenor horn in Lydbrook Town Band, before moving to French horn, Higgins knows the brass band from the inside and, as Tylorstown's confident winning performance reveals, writes with a keen ear for colour, balance and texture.

The short first movement presents the work's exuberant fanfare material, with the most bold opening gesture on unison cornets setting us on our way in majestic style, like the introduction to a ceremony or a pageant. After the excitement of the fanfare prelude, we reach the romantic heart of the work. This substantial second movement is cast as a series of songs without words, featuring solo cornet, flugel and solo horn, in a fluid ternary form (A – B – modified A). The forthright character of the fanfare's fourths and fifths are softened with 'sweeter' melodic intervals and long lines; the precise patterning of fanfare triplets and snapped rhythms make way for fluid textures and richer, at times rather elusive harmonies. The subtle blending of 'voices' is beautifully understated before opening out into a resplendent and emotional climax, only to fall quickly back to a distant pianissimo close. The substantial and energetic finale

provides the sternest technical and rhythmic challenge. An extrovert fanfare, full of rapid flourishes, dancing semi-quaver figures and dramatic interjections from trombones (with glissandi!), introduces a bright, spritely dance measure, which becomes increasingly frenetic as the movement unfolds. Order is eventually restored with the return of the first love song transformed to provide an exultant finish as the music drives towards a triumphant final fanfare and breathless close.

Distant Memories revived in style at the Royal Albert Hall

The 2013 National Championship Section Final was one of the most memorable and emotional of recent years, thanks to some impressive performances of Edward Gregson's Tone Poem *Of Distant Memories (Music in an Olden Style)*, which players, adjudicators as well as the large audience clearly enjoyed, given the enthusiasm with which all 20 performances were received. The positive atmosphere even penetrated the adjudicators box. "I've never experienced audience receptions to the performances like we heard today," Derek Broadbent commented afterwards. "All the bands had terrific support. It didn't let up all day." I can't recall a National Championship Section Final when a conductor, Philip Harper of

Penlee is direct in impact, dramatic in its gestures and above all personal in expressive intent, as his note on the work makes clear: '*Penlee* is the result of my feelings regarding the events, and is dedicated to all the souls who lost their lives in Cornwall's treacherous waters, those on the lifeboat, and the crew and passengers of the Union Star. I felt that I had very specific things that I wanted to say and specific emotions to convey. Some kind of generalised impressions wouldn't have worked for me. I have tried to tell the story in clear sections, depicting either how I felt about the tragedy or how it is perceived.'

The work opens in positive mood, as the Union Star makes her way through the straits of Dover bound for a port in Ireland, and reaches the tricky waters of Cornwall's southern coast. The work's catchy, hornpipe-like main tune seems to indicate that all is calm and relaxed. However, an alarm call transforms the atmosphere. The captain of the Union Star radios for assistance. As the mood and atmosphere darkens, the jaunty tune dissolves into fragments conveying the growing tension in the captain and crew. The captain orders the Union Star's engines to stop. The musical momentum comes to an abrupt halt, with sonorous chords from the middle of the band and ominous washes

of timpani glissandi supporting brief solos on cornet and euphonium. The atmosphere has become very threatening and suddenly the full power of the storm is unleashed in crashing percussion and fierce, dissonant chords and trills.

The coast guard's warning blares out. A Sea King helicopter takes off into the teeth of the storm, but fails in its rescue attempt. You'll hear surging seas in the basses and increasingly panic-stricken fragments of the Union Star's 'jaunty' theme and alarm calls set against each other. With more than a little apprehension, the brave crew of the Solomon Browne launches into a near force ten storm. The lifeboat can be heard battling against extreme weather as it begins its rescue attempts, but to no avail. The moment of loss is conveyed in dramatic and highly emotional terms. As Dobson observes, "What happened next can only be imagined". After the storm there is an uneasy lull, before a heart-felt lament ends the work. We hear the tolling of the ship's bell in memory of those who were drowned. Each cornet player also offers his or her own independent tribute, cleverly referring back to earlier themes but collectively providing a haunting backdrop for a quotation from Eric Ball's Tone Poem *Resurgam*, 'the Souls of the Righteous are

in the hands of God'. "I am not a religious person," Simon concludes, "but I couldn't think of a better way of portraying my feelings than to use Eric Ball's tune, which has these words associated with it. I was trying to convey the over-whelming sadness that I and many others have felt about the Penlee disaster."

Purcell Variations by Kenneth Downie

Over the past three decades and more, Kenneth Downie's music has become a staple of the repertoire of Salvation Army bands. More recently his work has entered the wider brass band repertoire with similar success. *Purcell Variations*, composed in 1995, the year of the tercentenary of the death of the great English composer, was a watershed work in that it was his first extended composition to be published independently of The Salvation Army and intended for wider use. "I wrote it on spec as you might say," Dr Downie explained when we spoke about the piece recently. "I was looking to write more for contesting bands and chose Purcell because I love his music, especially the choral anthems and the string fantasias, and as it was his tercentenary I thought I might bring his music to the attention of the banding world". *Purcell Variations* has been selected as a First Section test-piece on a number of occasions in the past, but this was the first time it had

been chosen for a Second Section final, although listening to the outstanding reading by the young players (aged between 12 and 23) of Goodwick Brass and their talented conductor Matthew Jenkins, you might think that this was a First Section contest.

For his theme, Downie has chosen what has come down to us as the hymn tune *Westminster Abbey*, which is in fact an adaptation made in 1842 by Ernest Hawkins, who was a Canon of Westminster Abbey where Purcell himself had been organist. Purcell's original is actually the closing section of an anthem, *O God, Thou art my God*, where it provides the final paean of praise, sung to repeated 'Hallelujahs'. Purcell's tune, particularly the opening triadic gesture, is used as a source of thematic and harmonic material – a quarry for ideas if you like: "I was obsessed with the intervals of thirds in Purcell's tune, rather like Brahms in his Third Symphony", the composer says.

There are five variations, preceded by an extended introduction and theme. In the first variation, Purcell's lilting dance pulse has been transformed into a bright, playful sequence, in which each phrase of the melody is given its own transformation. In the second, Purcell's opening gambit is extended into a graceful, flowing waltz, featuring solo

and first horn at the top of the register. The composer offers a range of metronome speeds in this movement, in which he is emulating the wistful elegance of Erik Satie's famous *Gymnopedie*. We enter the world of big band jazz in variation three, where Purcell's tune strides along with added syncopation and bluesy major/minor thirds to the fore. After the breathless energy and blazing brass of the big band, Downie moves into his 'home territory' for a beautifully worked lyrical variation. There is an enhanced urgency about the final variation, which opens with an extended reprise of the work's introduction. Purcell's second and third phrases provide the preparation for the exuberant return, in customary triumph of Purcell's 'Hallelujah'.

Fanfares and Love Songs by Gavin Higgins

Last year, 2012, was an important one for Gloucestershire-born Gavin Higgins as he strove to build his composing career. As well as receiving his first BBC Proms commission, *Der Aufstand (Riot)* for the National Youth Wind Orchestra of Great Britain, he was also one of 20 composers commissioned to write a 12 minute work as part of the acclaimed Olympic year *New Music 20x12* project. The music, *What Wild Ecstasy*, was the major outcome of his residency with the Rambert Dance Company. Composing music with a

spring in its step, ideal for dance, and very direct in impact, has been part of his style from his student days at the RNCM in Manchester. He wrote a pair of solos in lighter vein for fellow students and friends: *Freaks*, a cartoon-like extravaganza for trombone and brass band, and *Tango* for trumpet (or trombone) and band. These two 'fun works', as Higgins calls them, and the slightly later 'youth' orientated *Forest Symphony* and *Fanfares and Love Songs* (2009) sound a world away from the high-impact works composed in 2012, but in no sense is Higgins 'writing down' to his players. "I don't think light music should mean bad music," Higgins said just after finishing *Fanfares and Love Songs* in 2009. "All music should be treated seriously irrespective of its character or function."

Fanfares and Love Songs was commissioned for the National Children's Brass Band of Great Britain. These young players gave a brilliant performance of the opening fanfare on 25 July 2009 at the Artrix Theatre Bromsgrove, conducted by Nicholas Childs. The first complete performance of this three movement suite was given on 23 January 2010 at the RNCM Festival of Brass by Leyland Band conducted by Jason Katsikaris. There isn't a story or pictorial context for *Fanfares and Love Songs*. It's all about the