

IN LEAGUE WITH EXTRAORDINARY GENTLEMEN
Concerto for Alto Saxophone and Wind Band by
PETER GRAHAM

World premiere of the version for Alto Saxophone and Wind Band
St. Mary's Church, Fratton, February 25th 2010

Tim Watson (Alto Saxophone), The Band of Her Majesty's Marines, Collingwood,
conductor Lt Col Nick Grace

Review by Tim Reynish

In League with Extraordinary Gentlemen exists in no less than four versions; the first was scored for Euphonium and Piano, first performed and recorded by Steven Mead, who also gave the world premiere of the wind band version with the Municipal Symphonic Band, conductor Kazuhiko Komatsu, in The Symphony Hall Osaka, Japan, on June 6, 2008. It was first performed in the brass band version by David Thornton and the Black Dyke Band, conductor Nicholas Childs, at the RNCM Concert Hall Manchester on January 30, 2009.

The version for Saxophone and Wind was commissioned by Tim Watson, who gave the world premiere at St. Mary's Church, Fratton, accompanied by the Band of Her Majesty's Marines, Collingwood, conducted by the Principal Director of Music Royal Marines, Lt Col Nick Grace on February 25th 2010.

Time Traveller
The Adventure of the Final Problem
The Great Race

HG Wells
Conan Doyle
Jules Verne

Peter Graham writes:

Playing the euphonium was something of a family tradition in the Graham household. With my father (Peter) and late grandfather (Thomas) active in their respective local Salvation Army Brass Bands, my uncle Tommy solo euphonium with the mighty Tullis Russell Mills Band and my school brass teacher Robert Sands also an aficionado of the instrument, hardly a day passed when performances and recordings by the "greats", Clough, Groom, Sullivan et al were being discussed and appraised. And so when one of the greats of today, Steven Mead, asked me to write a concerto, it was with this background in mind that I set to the task. The concerto is dedicated to the aforementioned family members, three "extraordinary gentlemen", P.G. Graham, T.H.Stewart and T. Stewart.

In League with Extraordinary Gentlemen combines two of composer Peter Graham's life interests - composition and 19th century popular fiction. Each of the concerto's three movements takes its musical inspiration from extraordinary characters who have transcended the original genre and have subsequently found mass audiences through film, television and comic book adaptations.

The structure of the Time Traveller is fascinating - as Peter Graham says
The composer writes:

The first movement follows a traditional sonata form outline with one slight modification. The order of themes in the recapitulation is reversed, mirroring a plot climax in the H.G. Wells novella The Time Machine (where the protagonist, known

only as The Time Traveller, puts his machine into reverse bringing the story back full circle).

The Adventure of the Final Problem is the title of a short story published in The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes by Arthur Conan Doyle. This is an account of the great detective's final struggle with his long-time adversary Professor Moriarty at the Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland . The music takes the form of a slowed down ländler (a Swiss/Austrian folk dance) and various acoustic and electronic echo effects call to mind the alpine landscape. The final bars pose a question paralleling that of Conan Doyle in the story - have we really seen the last of Sherlock Holmes?

The final movement, The Great Race, follows Phileas Fogg on the last stage of his epic journey "Around the World in Eighty Days" (from the novel by Jules Verne). The moto perpetuo nature of the music gives full rein to the soloist's technical virtuosity. As the work draws to a conclusion, the frantic scramble by Fogg to meet his deadline at the Reform Club in Pall Mall, London , is echoed by the soloist's increasingly demanding ascending figuration, set against the background of Big Ben clock chimes.

I found myself completely swept along by the narrative of this work. Cast in three movements, the traditional fast - slow - fast, there are passages of sentiment, but these are carefully controlled, often with surprising harmonic twists or unexpected phrase lengths, they never outstay their welcome, and they provide welcome contrast to the bustling quasi-minimalist first movement and the virtuoso flow of the third.

The Time Traveller begins with the steady ostinato pulse of a clock, against which soloist and orchestra compete with tiny motivic phrases, eventually extended until breaking out into a more lyrical, romantic section, with contrasting fast moving mixed metres before a return to a more grandiose version of the slower music. There is quite an extensive cadenza, exploiting some multiphonics and the whole range of the saxophone before a brief coda with a return to the opening ostinato figures which die away to nothing.

The Adventure of the Final Problem introduces echo effects with a tape delay, controlled by the soloist, so that the gentle harmonic phrases are heard as if thrown back from the mountains surrounding the Reichenbach Falls . Before the performance, one of the Student Bandmasters said to me that he knew what I was going to say, "Too sentimental"! I must confess to loving sentiment and feeling in my music, but getting uncomfortable when it becomes sentimental. A harmonic sequence which is Rakhmaninov is perfectly acceptable, if its period, for me when it appears in a contemporary work of the 21st or late 20th century often jars. However, there is a touching simplicity in this movement which works well, and the melodic and harmonic of what is basically a very beautiful ballad, work well, with an end of great poignancy.

Think Flight of the Bumblebee if you want to get an idea of the energy and brilliance of the finale, The Great Race. This is a tour de force, the headlong rush to get back to the Pall Mall only slightly arrested by the return of the slow tune from the first movement, accompanied here by a ceaseless pattern of ostinato figures, giving the work a welcome cohesive structure. There is a final brief cadenza, with a glissando in alt before the final exciting and very brief codetta.

At just over twenty minutes in length, with a number of taxing technical problems for both soloist and band, this work is a wonderful addition to the repertoire, a major

saxophone (or euphonium) concerto, fully exploiting the technical possibilities of the instrument within a strong programme and a musical language easily approached by an audience, however unsophisticated.

Band Colour Sergeant Tim Watson gave an authoritative performance, technical problems dismissed with ease, lyrical potential fully realised, splendidly backed by the HMS Collingwood and Nick Grace. I thoroughly enjoyed the work and its performance, though I am not sure I want to hear it played on Euphonium.

There are plenty of good euphonium concertos; saxophone players, claim this for the single reeds.

Tim Reynish

Peter Graham is Professor of Composition at the University of Salford , Greater Manchester, England

For more information about Peter Graham and his music for Wind or Brass Band, contact:

Gramercy Music (UK)
PO Box 41
Cheadle Hulme
Cheshire SK8 5HF
Tel./Fax: + 44 (0) 161-486 1959
info@gramercymusic.com
www.gramercymusic.com