



SISI BURN/ARENAPAL

Tonight conductor Vernon Handley will collect a prestigious BRIT award. Geoffrey Norris met him

Why Tod got the nod

Tonight at the Classical BRITs ceremony in the Albert Hall, one of the heroes of British music is being honoured with a lifetime achievement award. For the past four decades, the conductor Vernon Handley, now 76, has been championing works by composers who have not perhaps enjoyed the lasting public recognition of the Elgars, Vaughan Williamses and Holsts of this world, but who nevertheless can make the ears prick up when you hear them.

Handley's milieu is that of E J Moeran, Malcolm Arnold, Arnold Bax, Robert Simpson, CV Stanford and, most recently, Granville Bantock and York Bowen. "It started out as a moral thing with me," Handley says. "I thought I ought to do it. But then I did it because I loved to."

Everybody calls Vernon Handley "Tod", without perhaps knowing why. "I was born with my feet turned in", he says. "I'm pigeon-toed. So is my elder brother, and my father said, 'They toddle.' We were both nicknamed Tod. He's Tod Senior, and I'm Tod Junior. I'm one of those conductors who's tripped up more than most on the way to the rostrum."

Handley currently walks with the aid of two sticks, the

outcome of a serious car crash in Munich, in which his taxi-driver was killed. Handley has just undergone three further operations, but, as he says, "I'm doing all my work. It just means that I get around a little slower."

Self-effacingly, he maintains that he "wanted to champion British music from the standpoint of an established conductor, rather than being a freak", but even the most cursory glance at his concert repertoire shows that his reputation is based on far more than an advocacy of the British byways.

"I came up in the normal way," he says, "through my Bach, Haydn and Mozart and all the other classics, and, in fact, I came to British music rather late, in my mid-teens."

He went up to Oxford to read English philology, but "read more English music than I did philology, as is quite evident from the level of my degree. We won't talk about that, but suffice it to say I did get one, if only just." He conducted the university orchestra - "I did eight concerts even in my finals term: not the best time" - and later came to the attention of that magisterial figure of conducting, Sir Adrian Boult.

Boult was legendary for his composure on the rostrum

Vernon 'Tod' Handley: passionate champion of underrated British composers. 'I thought I ought to do it,' he says. 'But then I did it because I loved to'

and his economy of gesture, but "everything that man did", enthuses Handley, "I could hear coming out in the orchestral sound. Nowadays, I see a number of conductors who are doing a theatrical mime to the music."

But Handley's view, like Boult's, is that less is more. "You can demonstrate something to an orchestra without being theatrical. Boult's personality, through the eyes and by the intensity of movement of the stick, produced a tremendous passion and impact on the orchestra. The little that you do will be seen by the players. They notice everything."

"Boult believed in technique - 'The eyes of your orchestra and the ears of your audience,' as he used to say. And that holds true for me today."

Boult himself was a supreme interpreter of Elgar, and so is Handley, as audiences will be able to appreciate later this month in concerts with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra (May 16, 17, 24 and 26). But can Bantock, for example, cut the mustard in the same way? Boult, after all, rather damned him with faint praise as a "marvellous chap, wonderful fellow to meet - good cook, too".

But Handley considers

Bantock "a gigantic figure. I remember recording his big tone poem, *Fifine at the Fair*, with the RPO, and the orchestra to a man took it to their hearts and said it was terrific music. Recently, I've been recording his [choral epic] *Omar Khayyam* with BBC forces, and they all said what beautiful music it was to perform. Bantock is as resourceful with the orchestra as Richard Strauss, and *Fifine at the Fair* plumbs the soul - a very worrying piece."

The chief hurdle that Bantock and others have had to surmount is that their music has been unfamiliar to a wide audience, but Handley's many recordings - nearly 100 of British music alone - have opened up the field, and he aims to include a British piece in all his concerts.

"I hope", he says, "that those records will find the ears and souls of younger conductors. If my belief in these works is justified, then somebody is going to hear those discs and say, 'Come on, we've got to do this stuff.'"

"One man can't put it right, but I've done as much as I could, and I'm going to keep trying."

The Classical BRIT Awards take place at the Albert Hall tonight and will be broadcast on ITV1 at 11pm on May 13.

LISTEN



Vernon Handley conducts the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra
telegraph.co.uk/listen