

## New opera to celebrate Pole's secret war service

SHÂN ROSS

A SCOTS composer who tracked down the grandson of a Polish freedom fighter who undertook secret scientific research in Edinburgh during the Second World War has turned the memories into an opera to be premiered in the city next month.

Julian Wagstaff's *Breathe Freely* was commissioned by the University of Edinburgh's school of chemistry to celebrate its 300th anniversary. The 40-minute work will be performed at the Assembly Rooms in Edinburgh on 24 October.

The opera tells the story of Lieutenant Stanisław Hempel, independence fighter, socialist activist and chemist, who arrived Edinburgh in 1943 to undertake secret scientific work in support of the Polish Armed Forces in the West.

He was given a laboratory by Professor James Kendall, head of chemistry at university, who also features in the opera. The line-up of characters is completed by Dr Chrissie Miller, the first female chemist to be inducted as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

The opera's title is borrowed from the book *Breathe Freely* written by Prof Kendall, an expert in gas warfare, in 1938 to reassure the British public that the dangers of a threatened poison gas attack from Nazi Germany had been greatly exaggerated.

The opera will be performed by world-class musicians and singers and conducted by Derek Clark, Scottish Opera's head of music.

Wagstaff, composer in residence at the university, who traced Hempel's eldest grand-

son, Wojciech Hempel, in Łódź, Poland via the internet, said: "He described his grandfather's personality as being that of a 'romantic pragmatist'. For example Hempel joined the Communist Party after the war, not through conviction but because he knew if he wanted to progress in his career he would have to do so."



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With this in mind, Din and  
Babych's new take on *To Sir,  
With Love* is more faithful to the

*To Sir With Love, King's  
Theatre, Edinburgh,  
October 29-November 2  
www.edtheatres.com*

## X Opera is full of chemistry

COMPOSER Julian Wagstaff has written a new opera to celebrate 300 years of chemistry at Edinburgh University. The first performance will be on October 24 in the Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh.

The opera tells of the wartime mission of Polish chemist and revolutionary Stanislaw Hempel, who came to Edinburgh in 1943.

The 40-minute opera for three singers and three musicians is entitled *Breathe Freely*. It will be conducted by Derek Clark, Scottish Opera's Head of Music.

● [chemistryopera.co.uk](http://chemistryopera.co.uk)

# s Focus of awards



Jacqui Dankworth helped provide the entertainment.

Duffy by Neil Murray, executive producer of the National Theatre of Scotland, and, like Loxam, a member of the board of Glasgow Jazz Festival.

The International Award was won this year by Dutch violinist Tim Kliphuis, who has been a familiar figure at festivals and jazz clubs in Scotland since his student days at the end of the last century, playing in the style of Stephane Grappelli and Django Reinhardt's Hot Club of France with Belgian guitarist Fapy Lafertin, and who has more recently appeared at Celtic Connections in Glasgow.

The Live Jazz Experience category, which pitted drummer Bill Kyle's Jazz Bar in Edinburgh's Chamber Street against Wiszniewski and Stevenson's New Focus group and the Scottish National Jazz Orchestra's concerts revisiting the Ellington catalogue was won by the SNJO's *In The Spirit of Duke*, which features last night's house band leader Brain Kellock at the piano.

It receives a further performance at London's Queen Elizabeth Hall on Saturday November 23, when the big band will also be at the end of its next run of dates in Scotland, which feature Jacqui Dankworth.

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Jazz by BBC producer Keith Loxam was recognised by an award presented by Ian Smith of Creative Scotland.

Alison Affleck, whose first album with her band *Vieux Carre, Le Debut*, was on the album of the year shortlist, was named Vocalist of the Year, presented to her by Jacqui Dankworth, and BBC Radio Scotland's Jazz House won the Jazz in the Media Award, awarded to the show's presenter — and the master of ceremonies at last night's event — Stephen

## Song to cash in for homeless

A GROUP of singers, musicians and a local record producer have come together to write, perform and release a song to raise funds for Shelter Scotland, the housing and homelessness charity.

Produced by Andy Haldane, a music producer from Cambuslang, the song '(All I Need Is) A Little Shelter' features 25 musicians and vocalists.

The song will be released on October 28 and is available to download on iTunes, Amazon and Spotify.

● [shelterscotland.org](http://shelterscotland.org)

**ANNIVERSARY**

# Opera tribute to war hero chemist

**Jack Mathieson**

**PARTY-goers will celebrate 300 years of chemistry at Edinburgh University with a night at the opera and a tale of war-time heroism.**

Capital-based composer Julian Wagstaff was commissioned to write a new work to mark the landmark anniversary.

And he built his musical around the story of Polish revolutionary Stanislaw Hempel, who came to Edinburgh during World War Two.

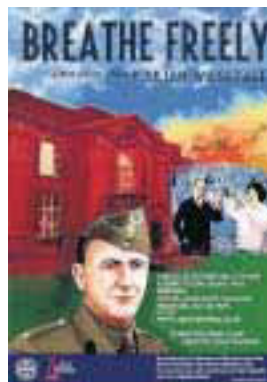
The 40-minute opera, *Breathe Freely*, will now be performed for the first time at the Assembly Rooms tomorrow night.

University staff and students - who helped Wagstaff with the project - are eagerly looking forward to the concert, which aims to bring both classical music and science to new audiences.

The work features three singers and three musicians and will be conducted by Derek Clark, Scottish Opera's head of music.

Wagstaff said: "It has been a real privilege to work on this project.

"I have met some fascinating

**New work** *Breathe Freely*

people, and greatly enjoyed getting to grips with the science, and of course the history of this fascinating department.

"I am thrilled that a conductor of such experience and renown as Derek Clark has come on board for the project, along with absolutely first-rate musicians and singers."

The opera tells the story of Polish independence fighter and chemist Hempel, who came to Edinburgh in 1943 to carry out scientific work in support of the Polish armed forces.

He was given a laboratory by Professor James Kendall, head of chemistry at Edinburgh University at the time.

In preparation for writing the piece, the composer researched the history of chemistry at Edinburgh, and interviewed present and former students and members of staff.

He even tracked down a grandson of Stanislaw Hempel in Łódź in Poland, to get insights into the life of his opera's central character.

Prof Eleanor Campbell, head of the school of chemistry at Edinburgh University, said: "It has been a great experience for students and staff within the School of Chemistry to interact with Julian on this project.

"It will be a unique legacy of our Tercentenary year and I am delighted that Scottish Opera has been so generous with their support."

Alex Reedijk, general director at Scottish Opera, said: "It's common knowledge that I am very keen on the development and commissioning of new opera in Scotland and I'm pleased that Scottish Opera has been able to provide support to Julian and The University of Edinburgh in delivering the performance aspect of such an interesting project."



It has been a real privilege to work on this project





# Weapons of mass discussion

30 November 2015 Philip Ball

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'Chemical warfare is the most humane method of warfare yet devised by man.' That opinion, voiced in 1937 by Augustin Prentiss, a lieutenant colonel in the US chemical corps, sounds shocking today. We might not be too surprised to find Fritz Haber held a similar view of poison gas in 1919, describing it (during his Nobel prize presentation, no less) as a 'higher form of killing'. But it was also endorsed in 1938 by James Kendall, then professor of chemistry at the University of Edinburgh, who had served in the US navy as liaison officer with the Allied services on chemical warfare during the first world war. Kendall was arguably the leading British expert on the subject, and his book *Breathe freely!*, published just as Europe seemed to be sliding inexorably towards a new international conflict, sought to dispel what he regarded as hysterical myths about such agents.

'The general public,' Kendall wrote, 'has been systematically taught ever since the introduction of gas warfare in 1915 to regard poison gas as the most diabolical and detestable invention ever made – a weapon of war which is so horrible as to make all other weapons kindly in contrast.' But in terms of both the casualties inflicted and the nature of the deaths or injuries, Kendall argued, poison gas in the first world war was far less horrible than conventional armaments.

## The evils of war

In the event – which Kendall considered likely – that Germany went to war with the UK and launched airborne gas attacks on civilians, there was really little to fear. 'Don't play into the enemy's hands by indulging in foolish and unnecessary panic,' he warned. For 'ultra-pacifists' and other alarmists, among whom he counted H G Wells, Kendall had harsh, even contemptuous words. His book is fascinating reading, both as a counterpoint to the almost universal abhorrence of chemical weapons today and as an indication of the state of mind that existed in Britain on the eve of the second world war.

Was Kendall right? Despite the general issue of gas masks to civilians, gas attacks did not play a significant role in the war – largely, it seems, because of fears of retaliation. But Kendall doesn't appear to have anticipated the development of agents much more fearsome than chlorine and mustard gas, especially the nerve gases tabun, soman and sarin that were stockpiled by the Germans. Of course, they used deadly gases to terrible effect in the concentration camps, but perhaps one can forgive Kendall for not imagining the barbarity of which governments are capable. And of course, the reputation of poison gas as the most horrible weapon ever devised was eclipsed anyway by the use of atomic bombs against Japan at the end of the war.

Nevertheless, there's some resonance in Kendall's implications of hypocrisy, in the way that chemical warfare is now subject to bans and general condemnation while nuclear weapons are defended as a necessary evil; and, perhaps worse still, while the devastation and slaughter caused by conventional arms is seen as no impediment to glitzy arms fairs smiled upon by democratic governments.

## Phantoms in the opera

The debate around chemical warfare is just one reason to welcome a new exploration of Kendall's milieu in the chamber opera *Breathe freely* by Scottish composer Julian Wagstaff. The opera was commissioned by the University of Edinburgh's chemistry department in 2013 as part of their tercentenary celebrations of the first professorship in chemistry at the university. Wagstaff had previously collaborated with the department on his piano trio *A persistent illusion* for the International Year of Chemistry in 2011.

The latest commission shows what unexpected harvests may come from such collaborations. Kendall's work was well known to the department, but in digging into the archives Wagstaff discovered that he had been assisted during wartime by the Polish chemist Stanislaw Hempel, a military officer with a colourful past. Before fleeing from the Nazis, Hempel had been a socialist activist and freedom fighter who opposed the Russian invasion of Poland and took part in a political assassination. In Wagstaff's opera, Hempel claims that there is no such thing as purely defensive wartime science: it is all aimed at killing the enemy. Such views and actions shock the third character in the scenario, the chemist Chrissie Miller, whose skill at analytical chemistry and patient teaching are both still fondly remembered at Edinburgh (Miller died at the age of 101 in 2001).

Wagstaff's is certainly not the first opera in which, in truth, nothing much happens: Hempel arrives in Edinburgh, chats with Kendall and Miller, they carry on their work, then the war ends with their classified research inconclusive and liable to be buried. That isn't the point. By turns witty and sombre, tonal and atonal, the music is engaging in its own right – as you can now hear for yourself following the launch of the CD at the Royal Society of Chemistry in October. But *Breathe freely* also opens up questions about the responsibilities of scientists in wartime, and why it is that we choose to deplore and prohibit some weapons while tolerating or even condoning others.

*Philip Ball is a science writer based in London, UK*



James Kendall warned against 'foolish and unnecessary panic' over gas attacks © Bettmann/Corbis