North West Branch
NEWSLETTER
Summer 2020

This edition of the NWB newsletter is coming to you earlier than usual this year. Unfortunately, our current season came to an untimely end as a result of this dreadful Coronavirus pandemic and our scheduled meetings in April and May had to be cancelled. However, you may have noticed that the newsletter is somewhat larger than usual. Our meeting in November 2019 was held in Liverpool and for unavoidable reasons the audience attendance was lower than usual, which means that some regular members missed out on what turned out to be an interesting meeting in which Geoff Scargill skilfully drew out a lot of detail from Darren Niman in his 'Desert Island Discs' style of interview. For our meeting in March 2020, our speaker was David Owen Norris, the distinguished pianist, composer, academic and broadcaster, who presented a detailed analysis of Elgar's obsession with the note A flat. I feel that a short summary of both these meetings would fail to convey the impact that they had on the audience and, having recorded these meetings, I decided that an edited transcript of the two full recordings would be of interest to our readers. That is not to say, of course, that our other speakers did not deliver fascinating accounts of their subject but, obviously, I had to draw a line somewhere on the size of this edition.

Geoff Scargill, our illustrious programme secretary, has produced a full and exciting series of meetings for our 2020-2021 season, which are scheduled to begin in October. But, it is uncertain, at this time, if and when our normal branch meetings can be resumed. I am not therefore producing the usual A4-trifold colour printed programme at the moment and, instead, you will receive a simple printed list of our proposed meetings with some details of dates, venues, speakers and topics. We shall, of course, inform you of any developments when things become clearer.

Meanwhile, the parent Society, in collaboration with some of the branches, is exploring the possibility of a series of video-conference style meetings to compensate for the uncertainty of being able to hold normal branch meetings. Two such meetings have already been held as trials and the detail of the format and content of additional meetings is currently being addressed. There are obviously many technical details to sort out. All Society members with an email address are to be kept posted by notices to be circulated by the parent Society. ***[David L Jones, editor]***

Barry Collett: Elgar before the Enigma Variations – the forging of a style (October 2019)

A report by John Knowles

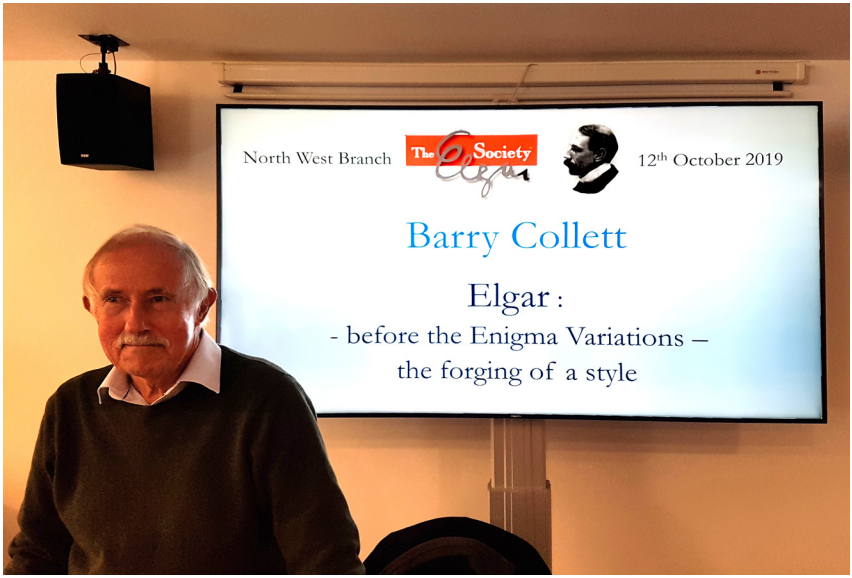
Not that many decades ago, the general critical view seemed to be that Elgar wrote nothing of any consequence outside the first 20 years of the 20th Century, beginning with the *Enigma Variations* and ending with the 'Cello Concerto. Times have changed, due in part to the widespread availability of recordings of virtually all of Elgar's music. Our first speaker in the 2019/2020 season was someone who has been personally responsible for unearthing and recording significant amounts of previously unknown Elgar such as the Powick Asylum music and the pieces written during the Great War as well as numerous songs and choral pieces.

Barry Collett's opening assertion was that "Elgar's genius was flourishing before the *Enigma Variations"* and that the music he wrote in the 19th Century gives evidence of a composer finding his voice. The early music of a composer is bound to be influenced by what he heard in his formative years, but a great composer then develops a distinctive voice that becomes instantly recognisable. Barry illustrated this by playing an extract from Elgar's only ballet music *The Sanguine Fan*, virtually unknown until Adrian Boult recorded it in the early 1970s, yet even on a first hearing immediately revealing all the features that we now think of as quintessentially Elgarian. He then identified a handful of those characteristics – melodies that contained big leaps (especially falling 7ths), compound rhythms such as 12/8, sequences coupled with colourful shifting textures, interesting parts for all players [a consequence of Elgar's experience as a practising musician.] We were reminded that Elgar was self-taught and that maybe a college education would have washed out the very things that we enjoy most in his music!

To illustrate how these traits emerged and developed in the music written before the *Enigma Variations*, we then listened to a variety of extracts, many of which are less than widely familiar. The Andante and Allegro for Oboe & String Trio written for his oboist brother Frank , an astonishing composition for a teenager and already indicating a composer who has remarkable mastery of instruments and what they can do. The Powick Asylum pieces clearly showed a young composer learning his craft and the anthems for St George's church further indicated an emerging style. Barry was enthusiastic about *Ecce sacerdos magnus*, particularly in the later version with its added orchestral accompaniment, hailing it as a "miniature masterpiece".

But the major pre-Enigma music was the big choral works. Elgar was writing for what was a ready market. They allowed him to develop his large palette orchestral style and although they used to be written off, have become much more widely performed and appreciated of late. The love duet from *Caractacus* was chosen to illustrate the scope of these large works.

To his musing as to why we hear so little Elgar piano music, Barry gave his own reply: he didn't write much. And some were little scraps that he gave away to friends such as the waltz *Laura*, owned by Steve Race, which has a very typical Elgar melancholy mood that is moving and touching in its simplicity. Some of these such as the 1880s *Griffinesque* and *Presto* could perhaps have been developed into concert works but remained tiny nuggets which as Barry said still emerge as "charming and beautifully written".



Barry Collett delivering his presentation to the North West Branch in October 2019

Sursum Corda with its unusual orchestration is very typical Elgar in sound and style, yet was written a full dozen years before '*Enigma'* and could claim to be the first 'nobilmente' work, although not marked so. And to finish a wonderfully engaging and stimulating afternoon, a rare song *The Mill Wheel* and then the wonderful final part of *King Olaf* which develops material implicit in the song. As Barry commented: "Great music can lift second rate words". In the 1890s, nobody else was writing the sort of orchestral music we find in the big choral works. And so the mastery of the *Enigma Variations* should hardly have come as a big surprise! By 1899 then, the roots of what are now widely acclaimed were already firmly planted.

Darren Niman: A 'Desert-Island-Discs' Style of Interview
November 2019, Liverpool (Interviewer: Geoff Scargill)

A report by David L Jones (from an edited transcript of my full recording)

Darren started by telling us that he was born on 19th May 1966, at Crossley's Maternity Hospital, Ancoats, Manchester, and that he was "a big baby" - weighing in at over nine pounds. His first childhood memories were of him riding around on a three-wheeled bicycle. He was a member of a Jewish family of Polish or Middle-European origin. His mother and father were members of strict orthodox families. Both are still alive. His mother worked until a late age, first in secretarial jobs and later as an accounts manager. She studied languages and social skills at a college in her 70's. He described her as a fiery character who wore the trousers in the family household. His father, by contrast, was much more taciturn. He worked as an electrician and retired at the age of 78. Darren revealed that his father does not say very much, and was not as emotionally open as his mother, especially in family affairs. Darren described himself as much more like his mother in this respect. He described his maternal grandmother as a very sweet lady and that her house was always a focal point for family affairs in the orthodox Jewish tradition, and that grandmother's advice always took precedence over that of his mother. He had vivid memories of an established traditional Jewish 'candle and feather' technique - for clearing away breadcrumbs during meals at Passover.

Darren remembered his first association with classical music as being related to his father's original Garrard record turntable and the first LP which attracted his attention was Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture in a recording including the Coldstream Guards.

1 Tchaikovsky: 1812 Overture
St. Petersburg Orchestra (and a Brass Band) conducted by Vladimir Ashkenazy.

In response to a query from Geoff Scargill about how he perceived his childhood, he replied with a single-word answer, "troubled!" He explained that he thought he suffered as a child from attention deficit and perhaps a degree of autism – he remembered throwing things around and annoying his teachers. He feels he had a bad time and there were a series of psychiatric consultations. He first attended a playschool and then a Jewish primary school in Salford during unhappy years in which he made very few friends in school. He later went to King David's High School where, with a good and sympathetic, gentile headmaster, in a secular type of establishment, he started to enjoy school. He was much influenced by a German-born deputy headmaster called Werner Meier who took an interest in Darren. Darren admitted that he scraped by with just two GCSE passes (out of eight) and that he had only managed to obtain an unclassified result (U) for Hebrew.

He also admitted that he had no interest in music whilst at school and thought it was boring, and that he was indifferent to it in those days but acknowledged that he is now passionate about classical music, though other types of music do also appeal to him, and he is particularly fond of one popular piece and wished to play for us part of a famous recording of it:

2 Freddie Mercury: Bohemian Rhapsody - performed by the rock band, Queen. We heard an extract - starting with the words "Is this the real life?"

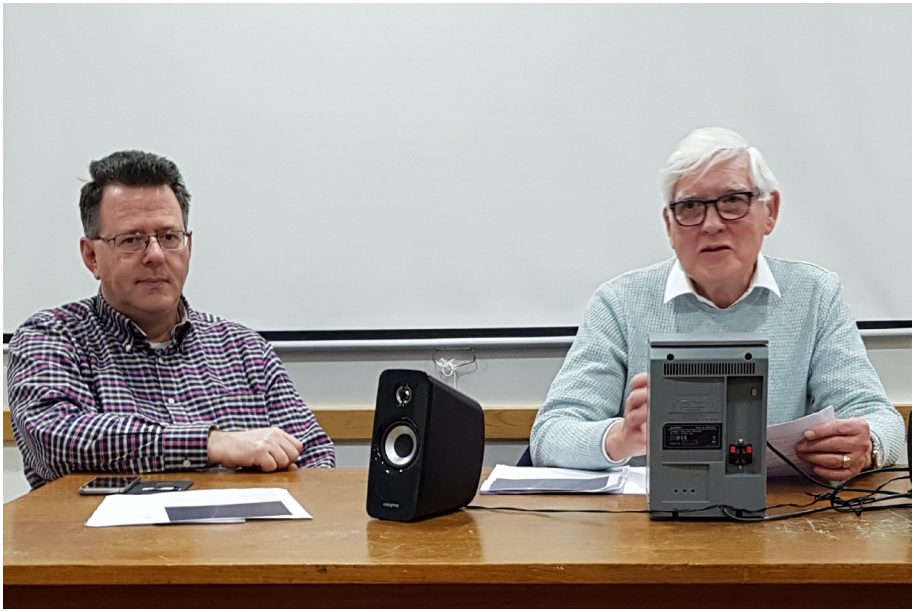
Darren admitted that he suffered from loneliness in childhood and, apart from his own personal problems, he attributed some of it to being "Jewish in a big wide world." He felt this was reflected in his affinity for the music of Mahler (although none of Mahler's' music appeared in this afternoon programme) and he quoted words spoken by Mahler:
"I am thrice homeless: as a native Bohemian in Austria, as an Austrian among Germans, and as a Jew throughout the world. Everywhere as an intruder. Never welcome."
There was no sixth-form level at King David's High School and, as he was expected to follow in his brother's footsteps and go to university, he elected to undertake A-level studies at Stand College in Whitefield. He also re-took some of his GCSE O-levels to improve his grades. His self-confidence now improved under the guidance of a tutor who inspired him, and from individual attention. He went on to A-level studies at Peel College, Bury, but as there was no music course there, he also went to Holy Cross Sixth-Form College to study A-Level Music (history, harmony, composition, and a viva voce exam.) He found it very complicated but achieved an A-level pass of which he was very proud. One of his music teachers there (a serious character, called Wendy Aitken) was an inspirational influence. The next two pieces of music we were to hear were played in respect for Wendy. Both items were set works for the Joint Matriculation Board's A-Level course at that time: Brahms' Symphony No. 4 and Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*. Darren described Brahms' Fourth as a synthesis of classicism and romanticism, and he was bowled over by the impact that Elgar's 'Praise to The Holiest' had on him. He described listening to it once whilst driving his car and that he was so emotionally affected by it that he had to stop his car and get out whilst he calmed down and could then resume his journey.

3 Brahms: Sym. No. 4 (Finale) Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Carlos Kleiber
4 Elgar: The Dream of Gerontius (excerpt) Hallé Orchestra conducted by Sir John Barbirolli.

Asked by Geoff where he thought his love of music came from (apart from Werner Meier and Wendy Aitken) Darren replied – from his grandfather, Julian Niman, who was a dance-band leader in the 1930's-1940's. The band was called 'Julian Niman and the Scarlets' or 'Julian Niman and the Boys'.

At the time of his developing interest in music, Darren had an opportunity to play in an amateur orchestra in Bury, under the baton of George Hadjinikos, when one of the items which they played was Bruckner's mighty Eighth Symphony. He described Bruckner's symphonies as 'very much an acquired taste' and mentioned that Bruckner was a devout Catholic and somewhat underrated. He also mentioned that someone had once said that Bruckner wrote the same symphony eight times. Darren's favourites are the 7th and 8th Symphonies. We listened to part of the Scherzo from No. 8.

5 Bruckner: Symphony No. 8 - Scherzo
Munich Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Serge Celibidache.



Darren Niman is seen here being interviewed by Geoff Scargill at our November 2019 meeting

……. Interval …….

After the interval, Geoff mentioned that people had asked what instrument Darren played in the orchestra. Darren replied, timpani (also called kettle drums) and percussion, on occasion, if required. Geoff then commented, "You were a failure at university". This produced a gasp from the audience until Geoff explained that during his preparatory interviews with Darren, that is exactly what Darren had told him and he knew that this topic would be introduced by Geoff. Darren then went on to say, "Seriously, this was not a good time for me. I only completed two years of my three-year course in computer science. At the end of the second year, I performed very badly which meant that I could only go back to London as an external student and,

by that time, my motivation was at rock bottom. I had been attempting to study computer science (actually, on the honours degree course!) to try to follow in my brother's footsteps because it was expected of me, because I was told, 'If you get a degree, you can get any job you want' ", which, said Darren, "may have been true thirty-odd years ago, but certainly not today." It was a very bad time for him, with nothing to show for his two years' study. His parents were not impressed. His Dad kept quiet, as usual, but his mother was very critical of him and called him "a failure" and she said that he would never achieve anything in life. Darren commented that, to be honest, he felt that was true. There was not a lot of hope and he needed a new strategy. One of his options was to go to night school. He had been prepared to do that as an alternative to going to university but was persuaded by his mother to go to university instead.

Geoff came in at this point with the comment, "But you did actually go on to work at Manchester Airport and it was the perfect job for you. What was it and why was it so satisfactory?" Darren explained that, after a number of previous jobs, he did end up doing what he does now, using his computing skills as a technical controller, and that those skills combined with a love of aviation (he is very passionate about flying) was the perfect job for him - but it lasted just six months. His employer was Thomas Cook! Everyone in the audience realised immediately what that meant – the firm had recently gone into liquidation almost overnight. The good news was that after a temporary job, which lasted for just two weeks, he secured a new one. Darren admitted that losing the job he really loved resulted in a kind of bereavement and that disbelief turned to anger before he came to accept what had happened, and securing the new job was obviously a great relief. He then pointed out that the next piece of music we were to hear was from the finale of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony - chosen because of its sheer sense of optimism – the symphony opens with "fate knocking at the door" and in the finale, ends "in a glorious fanfare which represents hope for the future." He then commented, "I strongly believe in hope for the future because if you lose hope, you lose everything".

6 Beethoven: Symphony No. 5 (the final section)
Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Carlos Kleiber

Geoff then observed that the next piece of music that Darren had chosen to play for us was by Wagner and that was a difficult choice which needed some explanation. Darren commented, "I have very mixed views about performing and listening to it [Wagner]." He went on to explain that he had performed music by Wagner with the Manchester Beethoven Orchestra (of which he is a member) and that, because of Wagner's political views, he has to try to dissociate the music from the man – because the music is such an amazingly powerful and emotional thing in itself and it had a major influence on 19th and 20th century classical composers. Elgar was influenced by him. Bruckner (a devout Catholic) admired him.

He went on to say, “If I, as a Jewish person, were to exclude myself from that music, I think Wagner and his ideology would have won. So, because now I want to embrace that music and include it within my [sphere of interest] I think that Wagner did not get what he wanted. So, I look at this music and treat it as absolute music and try to dissociate it from the other aspects.” He then described his emotional response to listening to a recording of the Immolation Scene in the finale of *Götterdämmerung* and admitted that he gets emotional when thinking about that exalting experience. “It’s a huge [emotional] mish-mash, but I can’t ignore it.”

7 Wagner: Götterdämmerung – Immolation Scene (the final section)
Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Georg Solti

Geoff explained: We now come to a piece of music which you have played with the Manchester Beethoven Orchestra and which you described to me as ‘Thinking outside the box’. Darren then described how he was influenced by the conductor of the MBO, Frank Lennon, who introduced new music to the orchestra’s repertoire and, on hearing Boughton’s Third Symphony, Darren fell in love with it. It became an obsession and he listened to a recording of it on CD over and over again. He regards it as “a little gem of English music … with a big romantic scene at the end.” He also admitted that he much admired Frank Lennon, the MBO conductor, who brings out the best in the amateur orchestral members, taking an interest in them as individuals, understanding their strengths and weaknesses, and always finding time to talk to individuals about details in the score and the various ways of interpretation of the score.

8 Boughton: Symphony No. 3 (Finale)
Royal Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Vernon Handley

We were then given a handout about Karl Sagan, an American professor who wrote and lectured about our place in the world, as humans. Darren mentioned the amazing image of planet earth taken from a spacecraft in the vast voids of space and revealing our planet as ‘a pale blue dot’ and quoted Sagan’s words, “The earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena” and he mentioned how Sagan talked about rivers of blood, world conflict, conquering dictators, etc., and just how that ‘pale blue dot’, in a vast cosmos, reminds us of our place and our significance in the universe.

Geoff then asked Darren if he had any regrets and mentioned his poor relationships at school which touched upon the issues of mental and physical health. Darren responded by saying that he had a good upbringing and was very close to his parents (which is a good thing) but felt that perhaps he was “too wrapped up in cotton wool” and was not good at making friends at school. He was very shy and didn’t mix well and those formative years would have been different if he had learned to socialise

more and thus be more confident at college and university. So, his only real regret was not growing up fast enough as a child.

Geoff then observed: I am thinking at this point that you had a very difficult journey but I was pleased that after the real dip with Thomas Cook, you now feel that you are a happy person. Darren responded: "Yes, but mental health is something which I think does still affect me." He went on to talk about issues of mental health in men, and how we need to avoid hiding things and talk about them more openly, and how getting some help would be a good thing. He explained how Pat Hurst [NWB Hon. Sec.] was "the big sister I never had" and how she helped him by talking to him; and how she (and everyone else) welcomed him into the North West Branch of the Elgar Society and helped him to feel a valued member (which no society had ever done for him before). Geoff noted that they had discussed the question of Darren's thoughts about organised religion and that he had concluded that Darren was not in favour of tightly organised religion. Darren agreed and explained that his upbringing was traditionally orthodox but that, as he gets older, he looks at what is going on in the world and he does now question what religion is actually doing for society and whether he can look upon God as something which solves all the world problems. So, from an orthodox beginning, he has become more questioning and does not any longer place a big emphasis on God and organised religion. He has now joined a more reformed congregation, which is more inclusive, and "a breath of fresh air - because we are not inward looking, we look at environmental issues, homelessness, LGBT connections, everyone is involved and welcomed into the congregation." He then commented that he respects people who have strong religious views, and is moved by that, and commented "For example, *Gerontius* makes me feel very emotional". His final comment on the subject was this: "Religion is something which some people can hold on to, but it is also something which others can question as well."
Asked about his final choice of music and why he had chosen it [Elgar's First symphony] his reply was, "Not just because it is by Elgar, but because Elgar has said, "It holds a massive hope for the future", and I have always felt that there is always hope and, in my difficult personal journey, I feel that if hope can be maintained, you will get there in the end."

9 Elgar: Symphony No. 1 in A flat (Movt. 4 - final section)
Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Sir John Barbirolli

Geoff then asked him to make the usual difficult decisions about his choices:

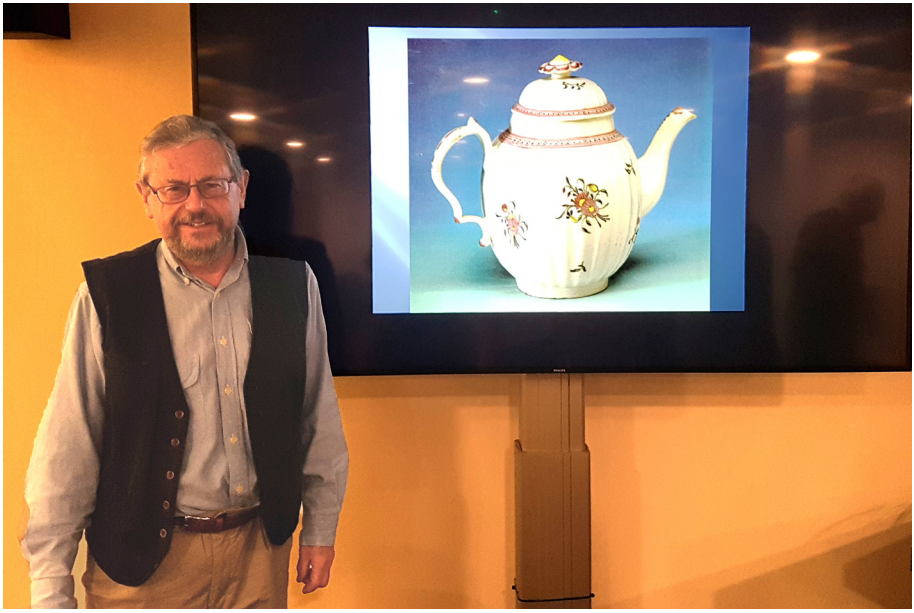
His choice of just one recording: Elgar's First Symphony
His favourite book: A Portrait of Elgar by Michael Kennedy
His luxury item: A comfy armchair!

Chris Wiltshire: Elgar as we knew him - Part Two (December 2019)

A report by Geoff Hill

Branch members with a good memory may recall Chris Wiltshire coming to talk to us in December 2016 about "Elgar as we knew him". Those with even better memories will remember that an article was written for the branch magazine by myself! Here I am writing an article about Part 2 of Chris's series. There is a Part 3 so I wonder who will write that!! Chris started by reminding us that he was not a musician but someone who is fascinated with the music and personality of Edward Elgar. He has accumulated recorded material from the 1960s and 1970s and digitalised it to make the recordings clearer. In his talk Chris played extracts from a variety of people who knew Elgar and supplemented these with some pictures/photographs. The first photo was from 1924 and showed Elgar with a chicken on his head!

Sir Adrian Boult first met Elgar when he was a boy of 14 through the aunt of Frank Shuster. Chris played a recording of Boult speaking in about 1957 recalling this first meeting. "He was of medium height and robust build – more like a colonel than a musician!" Boult remembers Elgar showing him a score of *In The South*. He said that Elgar "didn't have a lot of time for those who had no substance to them – he could be defensive and aggressive at times but was relaxed around people who were no threat to him or his music."



Chris Wiltshire standing before an on-screen image of his valuable antique teapot

From the same year (1957) Chris played a recording of Boult and Carice Elgar speaking, one of the few recordings of Carice. She recalled that her father wrote *The Enigma Variations* in 14 days and that it had its first performance at St James Hall, London, in June 1899. Elgar was by now living in London although he was never really comfortable in the capital but He and Alice lived in style later at Severn House, Hampstead which belonged to the artist Edward Long. Sadly the property was demolished in 1939.

A recording from 1993 revealed the memories of Louise Chapman who looked after the Elgars at Severn House. She was a housemaid at first and then parlour maid responsible for the silver, arranging flowers, setting the table etc. Elgar moved in to Severn House on 1st January 1912. She said she had "a very happy and enjoyable life meeting nice people. There were always people coming and going. Edward Elgar's friends contributed a lot to the furnishings and Elgar even sold a violin to buy a billiard table!" Dame Clara Butt was a neighbour and she often heard her singing. "After breakfast Elgar would go to the music room/ library to compose. Alice spent hours working with him when he had finished a composition." "Carice was sweet but appeared to be lonely. When his wife died Sir Edward was very lonely – he only had his dogs – but he was a very nice man, always so thoughtful."

Sir Arthur Bliss recalled that he "visited the Elgars at Severn House during the War. The first time I met him he was aloof, shy, with a soft Worcestershire voice. He later became more friendly and he gave me a score of *Cockaigne*. His style influenced me. He was a sensitive, imaginative human being. Whenever I hear the slow movement of the first symphony I see the man."

Ralph Vaughan Williams speaking in the early 1950s – "The first knowledge I had of Elgar's music was of the *Enigma Variations* just before 1900. I heard the first part of *The Dream of Gerontius* in Birmingham – I was bitterly disappointed but I now know I was wrong to be. It greatly influenced my *Sea Symphony*."

In a talk from 1981, Martin Grafton, the grandson of Polly Grafton, described how Elgar spent a lot of time with the Graftons at Bromsgrove. Polly was very kind to Elgar especially after Alice's death. "Edward Elgar was a complex character. He was a man of paradox and a man of panache. He loved the high life and he was a man with extraordinary taste. He had a vast fund of knowledge. But we never discussed music; that was reserved for Willy Read and Jaeger. Golf was one of his favourite leisure pastimes." Martin Grafton then went on to tell an amusing and long story about Elgar buying some peashooters and shooting them at a neighbour!

Wulstan Atkins was the son of Ivor Atkins (organist of Worcester Cathedral for many years) and he tells how his father "worked with Elgar from the 1890s onwards. They met every week on Fridays. They would take a short walk and then Elgar would show the compositions he had written during the week and play them as well. He then got my father to play them because he said he could then detach himself from them and hear them as a listener." "Elgar never conducted *Gerontius* the same each time. Why?

Elgar gave four reasons. 1) depended on the mood he was in, 2) he was building the performance, 3) depended on how well the orchestra and chorus knew the work and the building they were in (much easier in a cathedral), 4) the audience and how they responded to the work." He went on to describe the first time he sang under Elgar's conducting. "It was in *For the Fallen*. There was no money for an orchestra so my father provided the accompaniment on the organ. It was the finest performance of all time! Elgar was not the best conductor but in his own works he was brilliant. It was his eyes – he could communicate with them!"
Wulstan Atkins finished by saying that Elgar was a fine chemist, knew much literature but he was first and foremost a great musician. He was modest though at times had an air of pomposity! "He loved nature. The whole world became brighter when you were with him."
The Branch thoroughly enjoyed Chris's presentation with the fascinating recordings of people who knew the great man – Sir Edward Elgar.

Elgar Society, North West Branch, AGM (Royal Northern College of Music - 18 January 2020)

Our Annual General Meeting was held immediately after the excellent PowerPoint presentation which was given by Andrew Neill. It was a relatively short and formal meeting during which the essential business was conducted and was well attended.

The minutes of the meeting will be produced and distributed, as usual, prior to the next AGM, but here is a list of the branch officers who were elected or re-elected:

Chairman: John Knowles (re-elected)
Honorary Secretary: David L Jones (re-elected)
Treasurer: Brain Walker (newly elected - and we welcome him in his new post)
Programme Secretary: Geoff Scargill (re-elected)
Minutes Secretary: Richard Hall

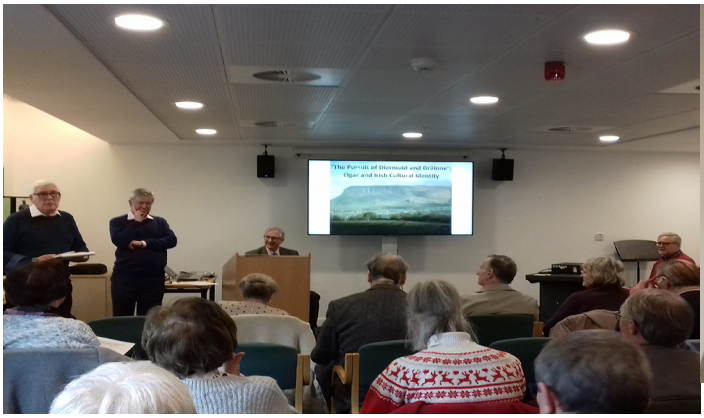
Geoff Hill, our NW Branch Treasurer for the past two years, had notified us prior to the AGM of his attention to stand down and was thus not available for re-election. We wish to express our thanks to him for his valuable services to the branch over the past two years, and we are pleased that he agreed to stand for re-election to serve on the committee.

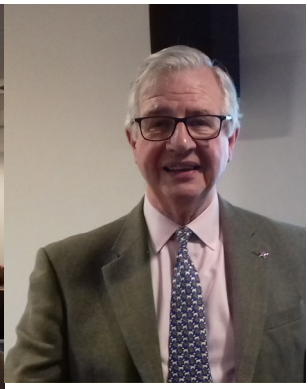
The Committee Officers who were elected (or re-elected) were: John Knowles, David Jones, Geoff Scargill, Brian Walker, Michael Derbyshire, Richard Hall and Geoff Hill. David Dickman was re-elected as the external examiner of the branch accounts.

Andrew Neill: Elgar's Celtic Heroes – Grania & Diarmid (January 2020)

A report by John Knowles

Of all the cited quotes, "Choosing an English composer for an Irish play was controversial", was perhaps the understatement of the afternoon but formed an apt part of Andrew Neill's very thorough examination of Elgar's contribution to Moore's and Yeats' 1901 play "*Grania and Diarmid*" (or arguably "*Diarmuid and Grania*"?).
Just 15 minutes of music which, I suspect, was hardly known before Charles Groves pioneering recording of the Funeral March appeared in 1970 but which is now widely regarded as top flight Elgar, coupled to the story of the background to its composition and fraught first performances, gave plenty of surprising detail for this very rewarding presentation of music, words and pictures, meticulously researched and vividly presented. The play was a big project and the invitation to Elgar to write some music for it was to "exalt the end of the play". Expectations were high – it was premiered in Dublin in native language, but London was always the target audience, yet that never transpired. The spelling of the names of the chief characters was a point of tension between the writers and the inconsistent pronunciation and English accents of the cast hardly endeared it to the first audience.





Andrew Neill

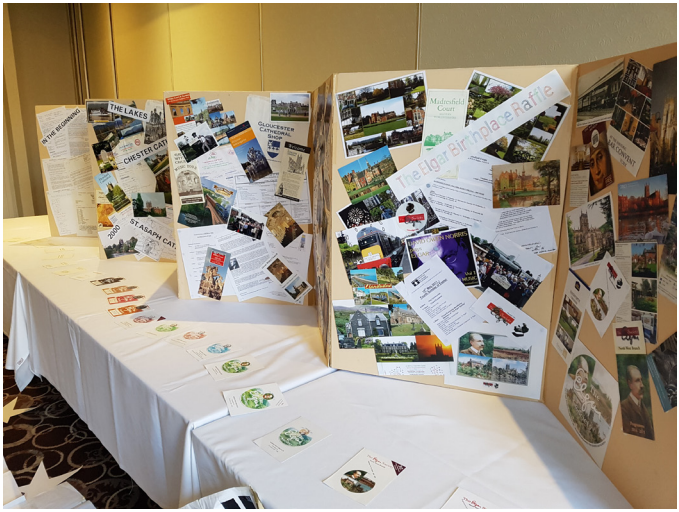
Drawing on a wealth of contemporary materials and with some rare musical illustrations, Andrew speculated as to whether various other composers with stronger Irish connections might not have fitted the bill rather better for a play based around a classic and widely known Irish legend. But it was Elgar! And it drew some fine music from him! "Big and weird" was how the composer described the Funeral March to his friend Jaeger. And, ironically, in the end - a century after its premiere, it's the music rather than the play that is now remembered!
A most stimulating and fascinating afternoon from Andrew Neill.

North West Branch Annual Luncheon (February 2020)

A report by David L Jones

Our meeting on 16th February was our annual branch luncheon, which was held at the Alma Lodge Hotel, Stockport - a venue which we have used on several occasions in recent years. Some forty members and friends were in attendance. After an excellent lunch, entertainment was provided by two branch members, in a format which has proved popular in the past, in which they talked about (and played) a piece of recorded music which was not necessarily their favourite piece, but which held a special significance for them.

Pam Scargill told us that she didn't come from a musical family but that her grandfather had served as a band boy aboard a training ship, the *Exmouth*, on the Thames, and he played the French horn. On service with the Border Regiment for 12 years, he played in various countries and when he left the Army, he joined the Manchester City Police and played regularly in Police Band concerts in the Manchester Parks. It was Pam's friends at Northenden Methodist Church who introduced her to classical music (especially Geoff Scargill and John Kelly) and Geoff took her to her first Hallé concert at The Free Trade Hall, where the conductor was Sir John Barbirolli. It was John Kelly who introduced her to the music of Edward Elgar and the Elgar Society. At this point, she related a rather amusing incident which involved some advice from John Kelly. In earlier years, she had a strong fear of flying and was dreading the thought of a planned journey by air. John advised her that listening to music on a Walkman-style cassette player would be a good idea. He gave her a tape of Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*. She took his advice and whilst the aircraft was taxing for take-off, was listening to the Prelude. Just as the plane was lifting off from the main runway, the Prelude came to an end and she heard the tenor's opening words: "Jesu Maria, I am near to death, and Thou art calling me" – It was not exactly what she wanted to hear! Pam then explained how she had come to an appreciation of Elgar's music over a number of years through contact with various members of the Elgar Society, through visits to the Three Choirs Festival. Further afield, during regular trips to Germany with Geoff and Elgar Society friends, she heard the music of Elgar played on a number of occasions and, in Trier, in the Moselle Valley, there was a memorable performance of *The Dream of Gerontius*, and of Parry's *Jerusalem* sung in English by the German audience. It was an eerie experience which gave her goose pimples. She mentioned the development of an affinity with one piece in particular, following the purchase of an HMV CD entitled *Nobilmente*, in which there was a recording of the Prelude to *The Kingdom*. One day, she was listening to this recording whilst ironing and was immediately enthralled by it. We then listened to some of the recording of the Prelude to *The Kingdom* which had so fascinated her.



John Mawbey provided his usual display of our many NW Branch outings which have taken place during the summertime in many bygone years

David Jones then talked about, not one, but two short pieces of music - vastly different in character, which demonstrated both the wide-ranging repertoire and the amazing versatility of one of this country's most distinguished and beloved musicians. It was not music by Elgar and not performed by his idol, Sir John, Barbirolli, but by another great musician whose initials just happen to be 'JB' – he was referring, of course, to Janet Baker – another of his idols! In the mid-1960's, Saga Classics label issued an LP of Janet Baker singing lieder by Brahms, Schubert and Schumann. At its initial release, the LP cost just ten shillings and he certainly got his money's worth out of it. He played it so often, in an evening, that eventually it began to show signs of wear and tear and it was then replaced by the newly released stereo version at twelve shillings and six pence! In later years, he bought the CD of it. All fourteen of the items on this record are a sheer delight, but David chose to play for us Brahms' *Die Mainacht* – a delightful interpretation of a most relaxing piece of music which depicts an evening scene. So, that was something quiet and relaxing which was an ideal choice before settling down to sleep. And, it was better than taking sleeping pills or drinking Horlicks at bedtime!

But what about something bright and cheerful to start the day? By complete contrast, and as a demonstration of her amazing vocal versality and wide-ranging interpretative skills, David chose a recording of Janet Baker's dazzling performance of the aria 'Dopo Notte' from Handel's *Ariodante*. This was on another original LP of arias from Handel's Italian Operas and his cantata *Lucrezia* (but again, it was eventually replaced by the later CD version). This is a magnificent 1972 recording on the Philips label (in which she is very sensitively accompanied by the English Chamber Orchestra conducted by Raymond Leppard.) This performance was nothing shorty of vocal fireworks and David was left quite speechless at the end of a delightful afternoon!

David Owen Norris: Elgar in A Flat
(March 2020)

A report by David L Jones (from an edited transcript of my full recording)

Thank you [for inviting me] It is lovely to be here. I am in Manchester quite frequently, but it is a long time since I have done anything particularly Elgarian here. And I thought I would mention very briefly something which I have been doing instead because it links up with today's topic. During the past ten years, I have been looking into Mendelssohn, and I have been playing Mendelssohn, not on black pianos but on brown ones, and I have found out about all sorts of things about Mendelssohn, but especially the way that Mendelssohn and his contemporaries tuned their pianos, and you will see how that fits in with today's topic – Elgar and the note A flat.

Elgar in A Flat is an investigation that I have wanted to develop for some time but, until your invitation, I have never got round to doing it properly, and I have now found that it's very deep and interesting. It is the first time that any of this information has been put forth in public. I will start by mentioning something about:

In The South In Elgar's concert overture, *In The South*, there is a very extraordinary moment in the double bassoon [a.k.a. contrabassoon] where suddenly it plays a top A flat. [David points to the orchestral score which is projected on screen and he says:] It's leaping about and then suddenly there's this great woosh and the contrabassoon comes in scordato on a pretty high A flat along with the double bass, and this A flat is held for a whole bar and then the first bassoon comes in high on a top A flat and four horns and a lot of strings, on A flat, and they hang on and the double bassoon is added, and the second bassoon, two octaves higher. So, a very important A flat. And then, in the recapitulation, you see that the very important two bars of the top A flat have gone – completely omitted – I found myself wondering why? [David plays lots of illustrations on the piano to illustrate these various points.]

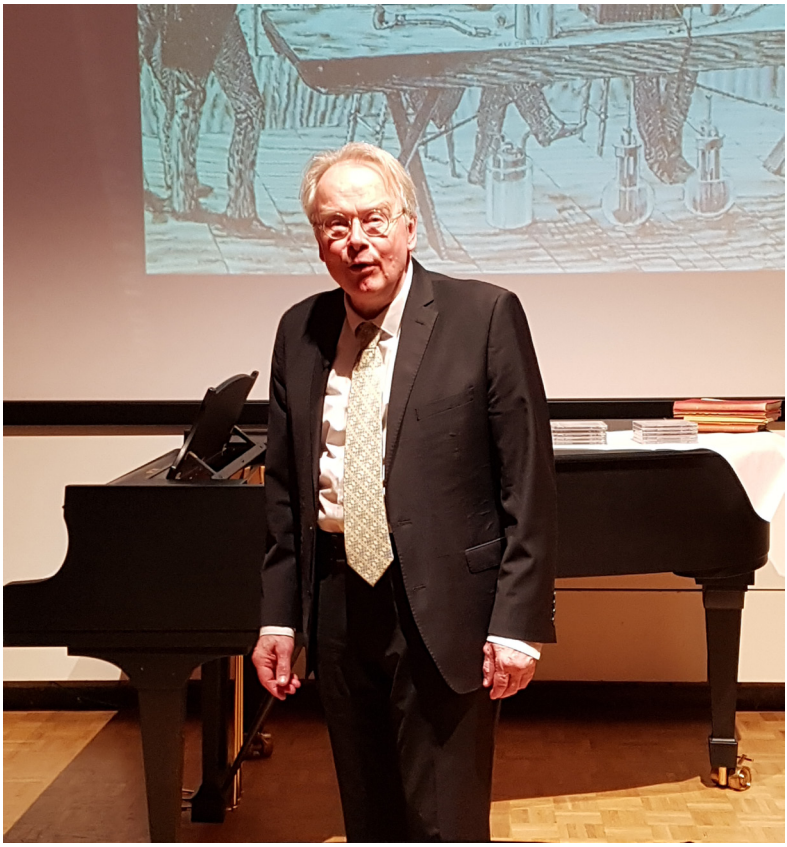
Concert Allegro At a certain point in the Concert Allegro, during the recapitulation, the original manuscript score has the bottom A flat added in pencil. So, Elgar had obviously thought about that A flat. And here, you will notice, there is a pause on a G sharp. (Remember that A flat and G sharp are the same piece of wood on the keyboard). At two different places in the score (at different places in the same tune), Elgar thins the texture to reveal either the A flat or the G sharp. So, once again, we see that A flat and G sharp must be significant. [DLJ - The significance of the difference is revealed later.]

Piano Concerto Here is the opening chord of the Piano Concerto. This is Robert Walker's manuscript – he put the bits together to form '*Fragments of Elgar'* and this is the first chord, [he plays it] which has two A flats in it, and then the cellos begin on an A flat.
So, to summarise, we have had an orchestral piece [*In the South*] with no organ (although it does have harps) and then we have had a piano piece, and now we have had a piano concerto. The significance of this will become apparent as we move on.

The Apostles The next interesting thing that I want to draw your attention to is that lovely "blue chord" in *The Apostles* (which any Jazzer would recognise). It is always associated with an A flat or a G sharp in Elgar's mind. And the first time it occurs, one of the two discordant notes is the A flat at the top and the B double flat (in the tenor line) is the note that makes the discord. The next time it appears we get these wonderful "tritone chords" coming in (and tritones are where we are this peculiar distance apart), so the top note of the discord is an A flat and, the next time, it is a G sharp which makes the discord in the tenor (lower) part – so in this very characteristic sound we are centring around A flat and G sharp.

The Kingdom In *The Kingdom*, we hear it at the same pitch (G and G sharp) and later, the discord does not involve an A flat progression, but the resolution of the discord does involve an A flat. So, we have got to the concord (that is to say the resolution – the cord at the end) and that is the one that has got an A flat in it. And then Elgar, of course, pulls a surprise for its next appearance – it resolves to G – but note, there is no pedal base and so, because we haven't got a G there rumbling away in the base, this one sounds very different.
So, Elgar having shown us how his progression can resolve on the note which is my burden this afternoon (the note A flat), he then shows that the progression could possibly work, even without an A flat in it, but at that point, he takes the stabilising base away, and I think there is a reason for that.
The Apostles does include a much more normal 'blue' chord, that any Jazzer would recognise and, bless my soul, it includes a G and a G sharp. And that chordal progression is repeated in *The Kingdom*, and this time, the other note is an A flat. So that is to say that in every case so far that we have looked at, they have all got a G sharp in them, except one which has an A flat. Now we looked briefly at those tritone progressions in *The Apostles*, but in these two other examples, we start with G flat - C, and then we get to A flat and D, and this is perhaps the moment to introduce you to one of my favourite books:

Sigfrid Karg-Elert's Piano Transcriptions of Elgar's Symphonies. David mentions that this is one of his favourite books (he came across a beautifully bound copy in second-hand bookshop) and it led him to a serious study of Elgar's music at the piano.



David Owen Norris presenting his ideas on the topic of Elgar and A flat

Symphony No. 1 in A flat

This symphony starts in A flat and then moves to D minor. Whereas, *The Kingdom* starts in D and moves to A flat. In *The Apostles* (1903) the first note is an A flat – on an organ pedal with no hairpin dynamics [DLJ - this is significant] accompanied by double basses and kettle drums. The kettle drums and double basses both roll in A flat with carefully placed hairpin marks to denote a crescendo followed by a diminuendo. In the First Symphony (1908) the first note is again A flat (but note that there is no organ -so no organ pedals here). The drums are again marked with those hairpins (as in *The Apostles*) but the cellos and double basses which play the A flat here, DO NOT have hairpins – only the drums are left to do that. So, by now, Elgar had noticed that as the drums get louder on a note, the pitch of the note goes slightly sharper and the effect of this is that the A flat is therefore slightly unstable in pitch. By 1908, Elgar wanted the drum to be clear, so he did not want a crescendo in the bass strings to mask the fact that the drums were going sharp.

The Dream of Gerontius (David pronounces his with a soft initial G – i.e. 'Jerontius'.)
He says Elgar pronounced it this way as Elgar's nickname for it was 'Jerry's Nightmare'! Rather like his friend, Arthur Sullivan, in their church music, Elgar and Sullivan were very capable of suddenly reminding us that the ancient music of the church is chant. Lots of Sullivan's music does this and, surely, it cannot have escaped your notice that the *Lost Chord* is absolutely Evensong. (D.O.N. then plays a section of it and, and he does so, he sings out "and our lips shall show forth Thy praise.")
Elgar does the same thing in an A flat minor section in *Gerontius*, where the organ plays without an A flat. It is interesting that, in *Gerontius*, the organ part does not contain certain notes used in the orchestral parts [DLJ for this very same reason]. And Elgar does something of the same trick, here, in *Gerontius* (David plays an excerpt from *Gerontius* to demonstrate this.) It is in the key of A flat minor which is so rare a key that when Schubert wanted to write a piece in A flat minor, he wrote it in A flat major and then wrote in the C flats. So, here in *Gerontius,* we have the organ - which does not play the response - which has an F flat in it which is played by the cellos. At another moment, marked pppp, at an enharmonic change passage, the details of how Elgar achieves this are very interesting – he holds the G sharp and the B (which is the same as the A flat and the C flat, in the A flat minor chord) and then the other notes are added very low down in the harps and the bass stringed instruments, and with a pppp base drum, and then that becomes E major and the organ doesn't put the E in until it comes in after the change of key at the lento. So, the E flat is only heard right down there in the harps, cellos and bases. The organ does not play the E flat, but it does play the E (which is the same note as the F flat which it was not allowed to play previously.) At the magic moment of 'Take me away', the organ is not allowed to play the G sharp. It does not resolve. But the organ plays the C sharp in the pedals – very telling!

Mathematics
The ratio of an interval of a fifth is 3 to 2. So, if we were to tune down from A [= 440 vibrations per second] and go down the scale until, eventually, we get to an A flat, that would have 25.75 vibrations per second. Whereas, starting at A and tuning upwards we would eentually get to a G sharp (by the same ratio of 3 to 2) that would have 3,341.25 vibrations per second.
Now, of course, the ratio of an octave is 2:1. So, if we multiply the low note by two and divide the high note by two, we get this sort of thing … [he plays the notes]. These are the A flats on the way up [he quotes the frequencies at the sub octaves] until we get to here, and that is 412. But the G sharps - by the time we have brought the G sharps down to here … [he plays the note], that note is 417.66 vibrations per second, so they are different. The maths shows that moving by fifths in each direction is different. But it is more complicated than that because tuners do fifths up and fourths down (or vice versa) for instance, and the ratio of the fourth is 4 to 3, so it all gets very complicated.

In tuning a piano, therefore, A flat and G sharp are different pitches. That is why piano tuners call A flat or G sharp the 'wolf note'. When tuning a piano in equal temperament, where every semitone is the same size, then all the keys are equally out of tune. But, and this is the reason I mentioned Mendelssohn at the beginning, something that I have been spending a lot of time recently, is:

Thomas Young

There is a book about Thomas Young called 'The last man who knew everything'. Thomas Young, by the time he was 12, spoke 22 languages (or by the time he was 22, he spoke 12 languages – I can never remember which way round it is!) Young's modulus deals with the torsion of metal, and an understanding of this is vital in bridge construction. From dissecting [animal] eyes, he discovered the existence of 'rods and cones' which led to an understanding of colour vision. He helped to translate the Rosetta Stone and he invented the Rolls Royce of temperaments (i.e. piano tuning methods.) He dealt with it in such a way that every key worked, they all sounded different, and none of them were what we call 'bat keys'. So, the way that they used to tune keyboard instruments in the 17th century, was by a method called 'mean-tone temperament' – which were very good when playing in C major and G major and D minor, and keys with only one or two flats or sharps, but not very good at distant modulations and not at all good at A flat minor or G flat major, or anything like that.

Valotti's Temperament

Which was Invented in the 18th century, went a long way to making it possible for each key to be used and on the back of this, Thomas Young then finally tweaked this method to improve it and came up with his method of tuning the piano. I am convinced that those ways of piano tuning lasted much longer than we think. A lot of people think that Bach wrote *The Well-tempered Clavier* for equal temperament, but in which case he would have called it '*The Equally-tempered Clavier'.*

This is one of the reasons why different keys have different characteristics. This is the reason that Bach's Mass is in B minor. Because the interval of B to D, in an early temperament, is very narrow, and so B minor is particularly sad – because it has a very narrow minor third.

So, there were different ways of tuning instruments. Continuo instruments were used to help tuning in early orchestral practice. Orchestras are not bound to equal temperaments; thus, orchestral string players instinctively change their playing a little bit to compensate and make it sound better. Around 1800, orchestras without keyboard instruments tended to play in what we call 'just intonation', that is to say they would tune to make it sound good. In Beethoven's piano concertos, the key themes are more interesting and significant from a tuning point of view than are his symphonies.

Thus, the great significance of the role of the organ in various compositions, e.g., Elgar's *Gerontius*, is that organs have to be tuned in some sort of a temperament. [Equal temperament was established around 1880] Organs were tuned in mean-tone temperament much longer than pianos were and that's because organs 'grind on' with their notes - so the dreadful discords carry on. In Edinburgh, the Russell Collection has an impressive 18th century chamber organ which has a lever for switching according to whether you want sharps or flats, and the black notes have got different pipes. So, if you want to play in C minor, you turn to flats, and that's the pipe that plays the E flat, and if you want to play in E major, you turn to sharps and a different pipe plays D sharp. They were so sensitive to it. So, I thought you might like to know what singing in mean-tone temperament sounded like:

Crystal Palace

On 29th June 1888, a Handel Festival was held at the Crystal Place, in London, with August Manns conducting [David wonders if Elgar was there?] An early recording from this event exists, and despite the primitive sound quality, it was possible to hear that with an orchestra of 500 players and a choir of 4,000 voices, the participants were all singing in 'mean-tone temperament', hence the 'pure tone'. He commented that they were closer to Handel than we are today. As he attended concerts there, Elgar would have been used to hearing that mean-tone tuning when he went to the Crystal Palace.

William Henry Elgar

Elgar's father tuned pianos in that way and Elgar would have used this means of tuning himself when he accompanied his father. [David says that many years ago, he read an article [he admits he couldn't remember where he had read it - possibly in the Times newspaper or somewhere like that] with an appreciation of the work of Elgar's father and that he was used to tuning 'in the old sweet way'. So, I think we have got to the bottom, therefore, of Elgar's obsession with the note of A flat!

And so, in a piece like *In The South*, which hasn't got a keyboard instrument in it, that's just Elgar thinking, "Oh, I remember A flat .. Ah! give it to the bassoon - the double-bassoon, I'll make it the top note that we have there, but, it's not part of my musical thought so I will not bother to put it in the recapitulation. I will just have a 'jape' of two bars of the top A flat for the double-bassoon near the beginning."

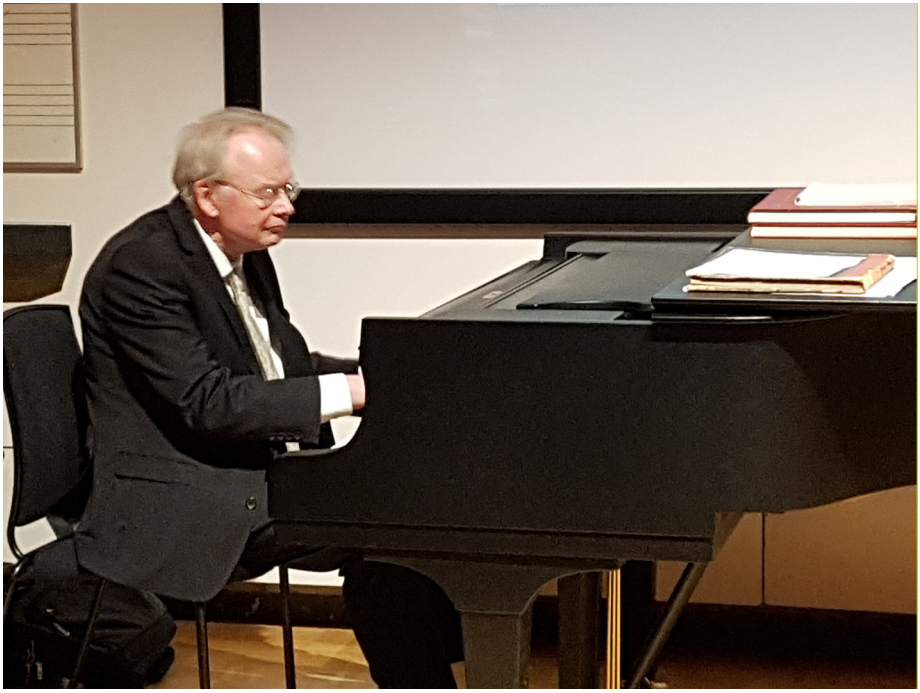
The example from the Concert Allegro, is much more interesting. It is obvious that this is music written by someone with a thorough appreciation of temperament. The various examples that I have shown you from *Gerontius* and kindred scores merely reinforce that Elgar was always very sensitive to the way that his orchestra needed to play in or out of tune, and that having the organ could prevent or help it doing that. Elgar is actually deploying the organ to help the orchestra play in tune.

Anyway, that's the end of my first spasm, and in Part Two, after tea, I thought that I would play the Improvisations which deal with A flat quite a bit, and the Concert Allegro - which we have already seen something of.

……. Interval …….

In Part Two, David Owen Norris gave a piano recital in which the two works performed were Elgar's Five Improvisations (1929) and the Concert Allegro.

He explained that for many years, he had not often played Elgar's Five Improvisations by ear. He also explained that, in 1929, Elgar went into the small studio at Abbey Road with Fred Gaisberg, the great recorder producer, and 'a bucket of hot wax' for recording purposes, and that Elgar recorded five improvisations, and in many of them you can subliminally hear Mr Gaisberg going mmm…. [and this put a limit on the extent of the improvisations] and so, from time to time, he allows himself to play what Elgar would have played 'had there been more wax'.



David Owen Norris playing his extended version of Elgar's Five Improvisations from memory

Afterwards, he gave the following brief explanations about the Five Variations:

No. 1 Was not actually by Elgar himself (although, it is!) but by Rossini, and it is a dance from William Tell – one of the ballets. It's extraordinary that Elgar is playing a dance from William Tell, but Elgar is interested in the lighter side of music, as we know, and what's particularly interesting is that Elgar spotted the killer fact (which Rossini had not spotted) which enabled him to turn it into a bit of absolute quintessential Elgar, and that is the turning of a minor chord into a major chord, so where you expect a major chord, Rossini has seen to it that there is in fact a minor chord, but it took Elgar to notice this.

No. 2 This has bits from *The Fringes of The Fleet* [He plays a fragment] – just that little snippet.

No. 3 Nothing of this has ever been found to have been written down anywhere by Elgar. It seems to have genuinely come out of his mind.

No. 4 Is the slow movement of the Piano Concerto. Elgar uses the D major section of this Improvisation in the slow movement of the Piano Concerto but, in the improvisation, there is an extension (a middle bit) and he then employs a repetition of the tune to give it the necessary length. Elgar, In the fourth Improvisation, was actually playing something which he had already composed. (It was found, by John Bridcut, in a misplaced manuscript file, in the British Library) which is perhaps why it sounds rather more coherent.

No. 5 This is absolutely out of his head. We have never found anything written down for it. It will not have escaped your notice that it begins in D and it ends in A flat!

The Concerto Allegro

David Owen Norris ended his recital with a performance of Elgar's Concerto Allegro.

A recording of David Owen Norris playing Elgar's Five Improvisations (1929) and the Concert Allegro (Op. 46, 1901) along with other items of Elgar's piano works, is available in the Elgar Editions Series (EECD02) (recorded Nov 2002) under the title:

DAVID OWEN NORRIS (piano) plays ELGAR - Vol 1 - SOLO PIANO MUSIC

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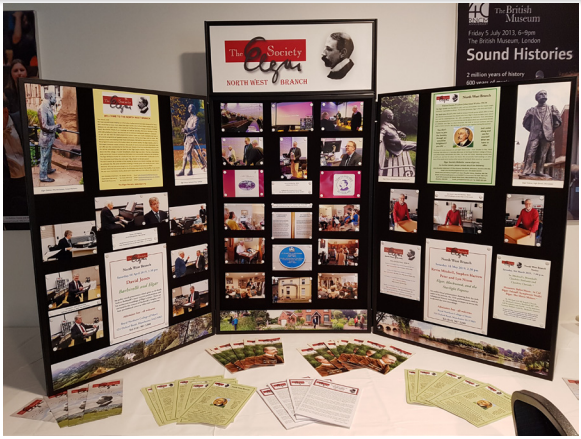

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