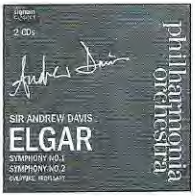


Signum Classics
SIGCD179
(2 CD set)

Symphony No. 1, Symphony No. 2, Froissart
Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Andrew Davis

Those of us seeking major Elgar performances in London in 2007 found the Royal Festival Hall closed for much of the year for the extravagant renovations that have rendered a modest improvement in sound for £120m (another example of profligacy with public money), with the London Philharmonic and Philharmonia Orchestras decamping to its smaller neighbour. With this set of recordings from that Elgar year, I have, sadly, to advise that the Queen Elizabeth Hall is not the place to record an Elgarian Orchestra.[1] Sitting there for one of the concerts recorded here proved acceptable, for the eye helps to trick the ear; but now I am under-whelmed by this reproduced aural experience.

The performances themselves are fine: the orchestra plays well and Davis understands the music as well as anyone. However, their joint efforts are undermined at crucial points. Listen, for example, to the Second Symphony. In my view there are two points which should engulf the listener. First, in the *Larghetto* Elgar gives us a Mahlerian moment of soul-searching agony (4 bars after fig. 86). This self-awareness is quickly diminished in a very English but, thankfully, unembarrassed way – a wondrous moment indeed. The strings should soar and pierce the heart. In this recording they do not, despite the best efforts of the performers. The sound *seems* un-constricted but is strangely dull. In the Scherzo, those bars of pure terror (fig. 120 to 6 bars before 122) should pound in the head: but they do not.

Today there are many exciting Elgar recordings, with fine performances from the past suddenly exposed to daylight (Vernon Handley on the LPO label) and refreshingly new ones, as when Vladimir Ashkenazy's devotion to Elgar (so obvious in John Bridcut's new film) is made manifest in his recordings with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. For this Philharmonia set the reader will not unreasonably ask if other recordings in the set suffer in the same way as the E flat Symphony. *Froissart* begins vibrantly and vitally but then sags somewhat. In the First Symphony, we come back to the sound and balance. Two examples will suffice. In the *Allegro molto* the orchestral balance seems strange between figs 90 and 92, with strings dominating; and in the *Adagio* the wonderful clarinet solo (2 before fig. 106) disappears after starting

1 Recorded live in the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, 12 April & 20 May 2007.

well. However, all is redeemed at the end of the movement and the clarinet brings it to an end perfectly. Thus I can recommend these performances, but I was disappointed by the sound and would suggest listeners look out Sir Andrew's earlier versions of the Symphonies on the Telarc label with the BBC Symphony Orchestra.

Andrew Neill

Symphony No. 1
Symphony No. 2
Variations ('Enigma'); *In the South*
Pomp and Circumstance* Marches; *Serenade for Strings
Sydney Symphony Orchestra
Vladimir Ashkenazy

Exton
EXCL00027

Exton
EXCL00028

Exton
EXCL00029

Exton
EXCL00030

Over three weeks in late October and November 2008 the Sydney Symphony gave an Elgar Festival in the Concert Hall of the Sydney Opera House under the baton of their then principal conductor designate, Vladimir Ashkenazy. The four programmes, each given twice, covered many of the major orchestral works. James Ehnes played the Violin Concerto, Jian Wang the Cello Concerto, and Lilli Paasikivi sang *Sea Pictures*. The Festival concluded with *The Dream of Gerontius* with Lilli Paasikivi, Mark Tucker, David Wilson-Johnson and the Sydney Philharmonia Choirs.

As with their Rachmaninov Festival the previous year, the concerts were recorded by Exton, with contemporaneous studio sessions to produce these four discs, making the fascinating prospect of a festival of English music recorded by a Japanese company with a Russian conductor and an Australian orchestra.

In an article in *The Australian* before the Festival, Ashkenazy said that Elgar's music touched him very deeply. And so it proves, as these are thoroughly idiomatic performances, strikingly realised by an orchestra on top of its considerable form. As recorded by Exton in the clear and open acoustic of Sydney Opera House they can be heard to advantage.

Ashkenazy's view of the First Symphony is on the leisurely side, allowing it to unfold rather than propelling it forward. Overall, it's a beautiful reading, excitingly played, with a close attention to dynamics. The Second Symphony similarly rises to great heights, with thrilling playing by the orchestra matched by the recording. Throughout the symphony, but especially in the slow movement, the string articulation is something to be admired. But where, come the hammering climax of the Rondo, are the ***fff*** cymbals? They can be heard at the end of the movement, but somehow they are lost at the climax. The trumpet and horn triplet, usually

obscured, dominates instead. In the finale the first trumpet does not extend his thrilling top B over a second bar.

The *Enigma Variations* receive a warm, loving reading, with again much detail revealed. In Variation 3, for example, the oboe is marked *scherzando* and here gives a jocular feel to the opening of the variation that I had never appreciated before. In the Finale Ashkenazy does pass by the trumpets' ***pp*** interjections after figure 73, but that is a tiny shortcoming in the context of the whole.

Ashkenazy launches into *In the South* with great panache. However when the 'drums and tramplings' of the Roman legions make their appearance they march at almost a third of Elgar's marking, dotted minim equals 56. The effect is certainly *Grandioso* and rather sinister, but nowhere near Elgar's metronome mark. This also means he has to slow down later when the legions reappear, and then accelerate. The *Canto populare* is beautifully played by the principal viola but recorded rather close, making it matter of fact rather than the poetic interlude it should be. Compared with the pianissimos achieved elsewhere, in Ysobel for example, this is just too loud.

Which brings us to the final disc, the first complete set of the (now) six *Pomp and Circumstance* Marches and the *Serenade for Strings*. Nos. 3 to 6 are studio recordings, as they were not included in the concert programmes. March No. 3 is outstanding with its atmosphere of suppressed energy. The recording allows us to hear the trumpets and horns ***fff*** semiquavers in the bar before the trio, and later, completing a perfect arch of sound that is usually obscured, with stunning playing from the brass. No. 6, played a touch quicker than at its premiere, is heard in the context of the other Marches, for the first time on disc, and belongs there, a tribute to Anthony Payne's realisation. The *Serenade*, played by a reduced string section, is beautifully done, the outer movements framing an exquisite *Larghetto*, truly ***pp*** and ***ppp***.

I thoroughly enjoyed these performances. Occasionally details of articulation or phrasing emerged that had me leaping to the score, only to find they were what Elgar wrote rather than what tradition had led my ear to expect. It is a great pity, though, that Ashkenazy does not place his second violins on his right. When you compare him with Vernon Handley or Mark Elder and others who do adopt this authentic placement, you feel the shortcoming. The other regret is that each disc only contains around 50 minutes of music. It would have been very easy to re-arrange the contents to produce three well filled discs. As a result of the Sydney Symphony's recent European tour these performances are now more readily available than before. *The Dream of Gerontius* is due to be released by ABC Classics later in the year. I look forward to it.

Robin Moore

***Sea Pictures*, Symphony No. 1**
Janet Baker
London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Vernon Handley

LPO-0046

These performances come from the concert at the Royal Festival Hall on 23 February 1984, presented in association with the Elgar Society, to mark the 50th anniversary of Elgar's death. The concert was broadcast by Capital Radio, and was recorded off air. With two of the Society's vice-presidents as the main protagonists, the CD is self-recommending to members, and so this review might as well end here ... but it's not going to.

This Symphony was the work that first convinced me that life without Elgar was not a viable option, and I well remember sitting down with all the available recordings and a score from Fulham Library trying to decide, which to spend my birthday money on. As 'all the available recordings' comprised the Hallé with Barbirolli and the LPO with Boult, it was not a lengthy exercise. In the end I bought Barbirolli's (it had just come out on Pye's bargain label), and a little time later was overjoyed when the school secretary gave me her set of 78s with Elgar conducting. These days there are not only multiple versions available, but more than one by Vernon Handley, and more than one by Janet Baker of *Sea Pictures*.

To attempt to find a 'best buy' is, ultimately, futile, but I have been fascinated by the differences between Handley's two recordings with the LPO and, indeed, with the differences in performing style between his conducting of the two items at this concert. In *Sea Pictures* Janet Baker is – well – Janet Baker. The singing is warm, honeyed, voluptuous, as on her well-known recording with Barbirolli and the LSO, and Handley provides an accompaniment to match. This is a relaxed reading. It is certainly not the only way to perform *Sea Pictures*, but there is none better. The symphony, in total contrast, is given an energetic and vital reading – driven, even. To hear this performance and Handley's 'Classics for Pleasure' version in succession brings total disbelief that the same man could be responsible for both. The latter is far more – well – relaxed, warm, honeyed and voluptuous. Pity the unsuspecting teenager who sits down with a score and these two interpretations to decide the best! I may prefer the 'Classics for Pleasure' version, but I would not wish to be without the present issue and its sense of occasion.

Martin Bird

West Hill Radio Archives
WHRA-6033

The Dream of Gerontius
Richard Lewis, tenor; Maureen Forrester, contralto; Morley Meredith, baritone; The Westminster Choir

Introduction and Allegro
Barbirolli: *An Elizabethan Suite*
Brahms: Violin Concerto
Berl Senofsky, violin

Haydn: Symphony No. 88 in G
Holst: *The Planets*
Mahler: Symphony No. 1
Vaughan Williams: Symphony No. 8
New York Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra conducted by John Barbirolli

In January 1959 Barbirolli was in New York to conduct a series of concerts with his old orchestra. It was the first time he had been back since 1943 when he left to resurrect the Hallé. More than 30 of his old players were still in the orchestra, and many old players turned up at the first rehearsal to greet him. He gave four programmes over fourteen concerts. The first opened with *Introduction and Allegro* – dedicated to a Yale Professor, but nevertheless rather a statement of intent by Barbirolli on behalf of British music – and continued with Brahms's second Piano Concerto and the Vaughan Williams Symphony. The second programme comprised his own *Elizabethan Suite*, and the Haydn and Mahler symphonies. Alma Mahler came to the concert, and Barbirolli wrote to his mother: 'His widow ... came to both rehearsal and concert and said: "It was just like seeing and hearing my great husband again". You can imagine how happy this made me'. The third programme contained the overture to *Der Freischütz* and the Brahms and Holst, and the final programme was devoted to *The Dream of Gerontius*. The present performance is the last, given on 25 January.

This is the umpteenth Barbirolli performance of *Introduction and Allegro* to find its way on to CD, and the third of *Gerontius*. His famous set with Richard Lewis and Janet Baker was recorded in 1964, and a performance in Rome with Jon Vickers in 1957. Richard Lewis had earlier recorded *Gerontius* with Sargent in 1954. The *Introduction and Allegro* has all the Barbirolli hallmarks: luxuriant string playing with a rich vibrato; indulgence over *largamente* and *nobilmente*; and a spontaneity which even in the third performance in the series catches the players out from time to time. The recorded sound is kinder to the lower strings than to the upper, and it is great to hear orchestral double

basses come across so strongly. Orchestral violins playing above the stave sound shrill and glassy in loud passages, but this quirk does not affect the solo quartet. The sound has its limitations, not least in dynamic range, but these are never sufficient to detract from the enjoyment and appreciation of the performance, which frequently had me smiling with sheer pleasure.

Gerontius, which filled Carnegie Hall on four consecutive evenings – shades of the 1916 Albert Hall performances – starts very slowly and devoutly, and the Prelude as a whole sounds disjointed. The entry of the chorus, too, is a bit of a shock, as all sections sing with a heavy vibrato. These may be young professionals from the Westminster Choir College, which has a great reputation, but the 1959 contingent sing as individuals rather than as a well blended choir. However, they are extremely well prepared and balanced, and their sound, in its way, is magnificent.

With *Sanctus fortis* the performance comes to life, and from that point to the end of Part One the music flows with a sense of direction and purpose. Richard Lewis is in excellent voice, though the recording seems to cut off the higher harmonics. His is a dramatic, even operatic, interpretation and, as anyone who knows his recording with Barbirolli of Puccini love duets will confirm, he does 'dramatic' and 'operatic' extremely well. The Canadian baritone Morley Meredith (still in his mid-30s at the time) is a throwback to an earlier age: an imposing voice, but produced rather far back in the throat, with the result that higher notes (including, crucially, his very first) sound to me a trifle flat. Others may react rather differently to this style of voice placement!

Part two opens with some magical string playing, and the calm and coolness of the whole first section sets the scene perfectly for the appearance of the Angel. Maureen Forrester's singing and interpretation of the role is simply stunning: a wonderful voice, perfectly even throughout its range, and used, to coin a favourite word of Elgar's, with 'brains'. She is balanced a little further back in the general mix than is Richard Lewis, but the ear adjusts quickly. The arrival of the Demons brings out the best in the Westminster Choir: they really rip into the music – as do the strings in the fearfully difficult 'Dispossessed' fugue. It is a shame that the singers get a little self-conscious in their 'Ha! Ha' interjections towards the end. 'Praise to the Holiest', too, is absolutely fizzing, and Morley Meredith's voice is far better suited to the Angel of the Agony. No recording can ever do justice to the 'one moment' at which every instrument 'must exert its fullest force' – that is something that must be experienced in the flesh – and this recording certainly can't cope with it. The orchestra gets

into a slight disagreement as to tempo at the beginning of 'Softly and gently', but once the serene presence of Maureen Forrester is felt the magic of the final section takes over. Barbirolli's – and, indeed, everyone's – fervent commitment and drive throughout the second part make this a standout performance of *Gerontius*.

For all these riches we must thank Lani Spahr – Elgar Society member and oboist extraordinaire – and now producer, sound restorer, and note writer. The set is self-recommending, and the four CDs are sold for the price of three.

Martin Bird

Naxos *Historical* 8.112055

Fritz Kreisler: the complete recordings, vol. 2

The Review Editor of this Journal – the Journal of the Elgar Society, mark you – had asked if I would review a CD from Naxos's 'Historical' range, the second in their suite of Fritz Kreisler's complete recordings, in which the legendary Austrian violinist plays 24 short pieces. Many are his own compositions; none is by Elgar. Now I too in my time have been a Review Editor, so I know how great is the temptation to request a free review copy of something you quite fancy, regardless of its relevance to your readers. But Martin Bird is made of sterner moral stuff than me, so: 'Yes, certainly,' I replied. 'But *why*?' 'Well,' he explained, 'these recordings date from 1911 and 1912. And, as you know – [I let that pass] Kreisler premiered Elgar's violin concerto in 1910'.

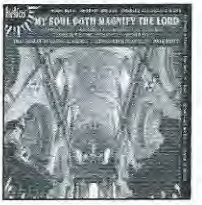
Anyone's list of 'Great recordings that never happened' should include Kreisler playing the Elgar, the non-existent jewel in the crown being the first performance on 10 November 1910, conducted by the composer himself. But since the horse's mouth, as it were, is silent, we who would like to know what sounds reached the Queen's Hall audience that day must rely on imagination. The imagination might draw for its success upon two pieces of evidence. The first is the iconic Menuhin performance of 1932, also conducted by Elgar. The other, arguably, is this disc. We know that Kreisler loved Elgar's concerto. He had inspired it, virtually commissioned it, nagged the composer to complete it, was its dedicatee, and he wrote to Elgar: 'You have written an immortal work'. We know that in 1932 HMV tried to secure Kreisler as soloist but he, apparently, thought little of Elgar's conducting, and declined. So the task of immortalising the composer's wishes passed to the 16-year-old Menuhin. We must presume that his slowish tempi and *portamento*-laden style of playing met with Elgar's approval, and that Kreisler's performance was not dissimilar.

Against that background, listen to Kreisler on the present disc. The pieces included are, for the most part, unashamedly

slight: Brahms' Hungarian Dance No. 5; Gluck's 'Dance of the Blessed Spirits'; Tchaikovsky's *Song Without Words*. Most are by Kreisler himself, *hommages* attributed at the time to Couperin, Dittersdorf, or Boccherini, as well as lollipops such as *Caprice viennois*, *Tambourin chinois* and *Schön Rosmarin*. The sound quality, as you might expect, is scratchy, despite the remastering. But the playing? Stunning. Given that mixing, splicing and similar cheats were not available, the accuracy of Kreisler's intonation is remarkable. The gut strings give an 'up close and personal' feel, well suited to the salon scale of these *morceaux de genre*. And we should not mock the genre. Elgar, himself no mean violinist, contributed enough examples for us to recognise his affection for a style whereat we might be inclined to turn up our noses. As a violinist myself, I cannot believe how fast Kreisler can trill. Nor how, in double stopped passages, he can *portamento* on one note but not the other. So is this a disc worth buying? Yes, certainly.

Roger Neighbour

Stanford: *Great Service* in C (*Magnificat* and *Nunc dimittis*); Walmisley: *Magnificat* and *Nunc dimittis* in D minor; S.S. Wesley: *Evening Canticles* in E; Blair: *Evening Service* in B minor; Charles Wood: *Magnificat and Nunc dimittis* in F; Brewer: *Evening Canticles* in D
Christopher Dearnley (organ); Choir of St. Paul's Cathedral, directed by John Scott



Hyperion *Helios*
CDH55401

As Elgar Society members we all feel we know Hugh Blair and Herbert Brewer; but how many of us have ever heard a note of their music? This reissue from 1987 of settings of the evening canticles amounts to a mini-celebration of Three Choirs composers and organists. Wesley was organist at Gloucester, and Elgar long remembered his contribution to the 'Mock Festival' of 1875 at Worcester. Ivor Atkins recalled:

> The occasion was the outgoing voluntary at a Three Choirs Festival evensong. Wesley began with a long extemporisation, designed to lead up to Bach's Choral Prelude 'Wir glauben all an einen Gott', breaking off the extemporisation in an arresting way before entering upon the Prelude. The effect upon Elgar was so great that in after years when he returned to live in Worcester and would constantly slip into the old cathedral which had so many memories for him and which he greatly loved, he almost invariably asked me to play him something, and we always had to end with the Giant. But I do not know that I was ever able to recapture the impression left upon him by Wesley.

Walmisley's setting was performed at a special Christmas evensong on 27 December 1891 in which Elgar and his brother Frank were playing in the band. The *Worcester Herald* reported:

> As the anthem a short cantata by Mr. Hugh Blair will be performed, and after the blessings Handel's 'Hallelujah Chorus' will be sung. The Litany of the Incarnate Word will be sung in procession, and the service, with band accompaniment, will be Walmisley in D Minor. The preacher will be the Very Rev. the Dean. We understand the maintenance of these special orchestral services depends on the offerings of the congregation, who are therefore invited to contribute liberally towards defraying the expenses of them.

Dean Forrest 'preached a forcible sermon, shattering all the specious arguments of unbelievers in Christ.' The offertory amounted to 'about £9'.

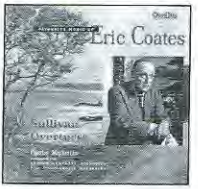
Hugh Blair's setting was performed at the 1887 Festival. The story of his resignation as Cathedral Organist a decade later for reputed persistent drunkenness is repeated in the notes. What seems to have passed unnoticed is his wedding at nearby Kempsey which coincided with his resignation. 'The ceremony was very simple and quiet. There were no bridesmaids, and the musical portion of the service was omitted ... Mr. and Mrs. Hugh Blair left for Southsea, en route for the Channel Islands, where it is proposed to pass the honeymoon'. They did not return to Worcester – am I the only person to sense a whiff of shot-gun here?

Herbert Brewer's setting was written for the 1927 Hereford Festival, and was performed at the opening service along with Elgar's new *Civic Fanfare*. Listening successively to six settings of the canticles, even when evensong has long been my favourite service of the day, is not recommended: far better to savour them over a week. Doing so brought back indelible memories of my days as a chorister: of a magical evensong by candlelight in Hardingham church in Norfolk, where the organ was still pumped by hand; and of a week as a 'summer relief' in St. Paul's itself, while its choir had a well-earned rest. What comes across strongly is the enormous debt of gratitude we owe to our church composers of the Victorian age – they really did create something quite magical and unique.

The performances by John Scott and the St. Paul's choir are tremendous, full of vitality and passion. The recording manages to achieve clarity without sacrificing anything of the spacious cathedral acoustic. Close your eyes, and the reverberation at the end of the Stanford convinces you that you are present in the Cathedral.

Martin Bird

Coates: *The Merrymakers Overture*; *Summer Days* Suite – *At the Dance*; *The Three Men Suite – The Man from the Sea*; *London Again* Suite – March: *Oxford Street*; *The Three Bears*; *By the Sleepy Lagoon*; *The Three Elizabeths* Suite – March: *Princess Elizabeth*
London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Charles Mackerras



Sullivan: Overtures to *The Mikado, The Yeomen of the Guard, Iolanthe, Ruddigore*
Philharmonia Orchestra, conducted by Charles Mackerras

Dutton *Vocalion*
CDVS 1964

These recordings come from EMI Stereosonic tapes issued in the days before stereo LPs. The bulk of the music was reissued in the 1970s on a Classics for Pleasure LP, and I can only say that a direct comparison reveals the current release to be infinitely superior in sound: a tribute both to the original engineers and to Mike Dutton. The recording sounds as though it could have been made yesterday, except that by no means all recordings made yesterday sound as good. The CD arrived shortly before the sad news of the death of Sir Charles Mackerras, a Vice-President of the Elgar Society, and is as good a memorial as any to a very lovely man.

Eric Coates tells us that he was first introduced to Elgar at Dan Godfrey's Easter Festival in Bournemouth: 'Elgar ... told me that he always bought my gramophone recordings, his favourite at that time being my 'Summer Days' Suite, which, he said, he had literally worn out'. That recording was made in the Wigmore Hall in August 1926 by the New Queen's Hall Orchestra conducted by Coates, and was reissued on Naxos *Historical* 8.110173. Coates's biography, *Suite in Four Movements* (Heinemann, London, 1953), contains a wealth of stories about Elgar, including one about his attendance at the first performance of *The Three Bears*, at Eastbourne in November 1926.

> He scared me out of my life by appearing in the artists' room just as I was about to go onto the platform to conduct my Three Bears and he insisted on sitting behind the drums. He was quite oblivious of the fact that his entry into the orchestra had created a minor sensation among the audience and that during the performance he nearly dried me up by tapping his feet and wiggling his head from side to side, to such an effect that it was only with the greatest difficulty I managed to keep my mind on directing the orchestra through the cross-rhythms of the foxtrot section of my Phantasy.

One can easily see why Elgar was attracted to this piece: is it too fanciful to detect glimpses of *Falstaff* therein? The

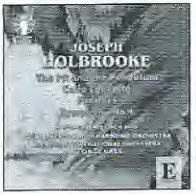
Princess Elizabeth march, too, could well be a sixth *Pomp and Circumstance*. In all Coates's music one senses the hand of a master – not least in the orchestration which, like Elgar's, has been produced by someone with great experience from within the orchestra itself. But perhaps part of the attraction felt by Elgar was due to the sheer carefree exuberance of it all, a feeling I never find in Elgar's own music.

Mackerras, like Adrian Boult before him, was a grand exponent of both Coates and Elgar, and this selection is one to enjoy at face value. It is completed by four Sullivan overtures. Elgar's diary for 7 May 1889 reads:

> Drayton Gardens.
> A. to Genl. Raikes
> Saw House 3. Marloes Rd.
> Met Hy, Will, & Pollie at S. Pancras.
> to Yeomen of Guard with Uncle

It says much for Elgar's appreciation of Gilbert and Sullivan that he should choose to spend the eve of his wedding with his Uncle Henry at the latest Savoy opera, one which, in the words of the *Daily News*, 'opens up the prospect of a genuine school of English opera'. He would have had the opportunity, too, of seeing in Worcester the other operas represented on this CD: *Iolanthe* was given at the Theatre Royal in March 1883, *Mikado* in November 1885, and *Ruddigore* in June 1887. One suspects, though, that the quality of the orchestral playing would have been nothing like that of Walter Legge's Philharmonia; indeed, it is unlikely that these overtures have ever been played better. The exquisite sound and phrasing of the oboist in his solo from 'The sun, whose rays' says it all, really. Mackerras, too, was for long recognised as a natural conductor of Sullivan, so these performances give the greatest pleasure.

Martin Bird



Dutton *Epoch*
CDLX 7251

Joseph Holbrooke: *The Pit and the Pendulum*, Pandora,* Cello Concerto, Symphony No 4 in B minor (*Homage to Schubert*)*

* Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra
Royal Scottish National Orchestra
Raphael Wallfisch, cello, conducted by George Vass

I'm afraid this has to be one of those irritating 'On the one hand, on the other' reviews. On the one hand, there are barely a half-dozen other recordings in the catalogue of works by Joseph Holbrooke, a contemporary of Elgar and, in his own estimation

at least, a friend of the greater man. So we have the possibility of a rare treat – a whole orchestral concert of Edwardian English music by a composer perhaps unjustly neglected. On the other hand, the verdict of history has not, in Holbrooke's case, been unjust. In the opinion of this reviewer at least, his music is all talk and no trousers, music to listen to once, maybe twice, but not more.

Holbrooke (1878-1958), sometimes known as 'the Cockney Wagner', appears to have been an irritating social gadfly, a regular biter of the hands that could have fed him, his paranoid pugnacity reminiscent of Frederick Rolfe ('Baron Corvo'), author of *Hadrian the Seventh.* The musical world was nonplussed. To quote the *Musical Times* of 1 April 1913: 'Holbrooke is the most amusing serious musician in our midst. In his compositions ... we are continually encountering the bizarre and unexpected. A good deal of his music has a weird, grim and fearsome psychological basis... [His style] includes an opulent and amazing, almost dazzling, variety of imaginativeness, yet bold, bad critics sometimes have had the temerity to hint that his music does not always accurately fit the situation, and that it is applied haphazard... He does not employ those reserves of analytic criticism of his own music which he lavishes freely on that of other composers ... He induces a feeling that some of his swans are masquerading geese'.

I suspect Elgar would have endorsed these sentiments. The Birthplace contains a series of letters from Holbrooke alternately beseeching his patronage and berating him for the lack of it. 'Dear Sir Edward', Holbrooke wrote in April 1905, 'I often think if my "3 Blind Mice" had been done a few times by a great man, it *may* have been published'. And in February 1920: 'You will admit ... you have seen native music go right down – and no protest from you ... all could be so different if you bestirred yourself'.

But enough of its intriguing composer; what of these world premiere recordings of some of his larger works? The Cello Concerto of 1936 gets a committed performance by Raphael Wallfisch, no less. The listener can distract the wandering attention by playing 'spot the influence'. I gave up after Dvořák, Lalo, and Eric Coates. The Fourth Symphony of 1928 is subtitled 'Homage to Schubert', being Holbrooke's entry for a Schubert Centenary competition the previous year for 'an apotheosis of the genius of Schubert, or variations on Schubert themes'. It didn't win. The piece is mostly pre-(Richard) Straussian, with ill-fitting inserts of mock-Schubertian pastiche. I'm bound to say that Elgar does late Romantic, and Schubert does Schubert, a great deal better than Holbrooke. The tone poem *The Pit and the Pendulum,* one of a series based on the horror stories of Edgar Allan Poe, is the most successful piece on this CD, provided one doesn't attempt

to match its moods too exactly to Poe's well-known nightmare. Almost against my better judgement I found myself playing it a third time and thinking that a contemporary orchestra, seeking an unfamiliar opener to a concert of lollipops, could do much worse than choose this.

The performances by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic and Royal Scottish National Orchestras under George Vass are never less than competent, and often as persuasive as it is possible to get. So, on the one hand, this is not great music; but, on the other, it has novelty and curiosity value. And at £9.99 it won't leave you feeling cheated.

Roger Neighbour

Naxos
8.572497

John Ireland: Violin Sonata No 1, Violin Sonata No 2, Cello Sonata

The Gould Trio: Lucy Gould (violin), Alice Neary (cello), Benjamin Frith, piano

This is another very welcome John Ireland disc from Naxos, bringing together three of the composer's finest works. The performers are members of the Gould Trio who brought us an earlier Naxos disc of Ireland's piano trios. They bring superb advocacy to the sonatas with brilliant individual contributions and predictably fine ensemble. The violin sonatas were both prize-winners. The D minor sonata gained first prize in a W.W. Cobbett competition of 1909 and the second, in A minor, was awarded the main prize in a special wartime competition in support of musicians in 1917. The performance that followed, given by violinist Albert Sammons and pianist William Murdoch, was famously a success and brought Ireland's name to prominence overnight. Many further performances followed swiftly and the first printing was sold out before publication. The piece chimed in with wartime mood in a remarkable way; as Ireland said: 'It was probably the first and only occasion when a British composer was lifted from relative obscurity in a single night by a work cast in a chamber-music medium'.

The first sonata opens with an insistent oscillating figure on the piano which underpins the violin's opening theme and, in a variety of guises, haunts the rest of the first movement (and the memory). The figure and the theme gradually transform into the sweetly singing second theme with its hints of the Edwardian salon. The movement develops many changes of mood from these features ending with a coda based on the oscillating opening figure. The piano opens the second movement preparing the way for a tender song from the violin. The melody is gradually treated more expansively with the aspiring line leading to high trills and a mysterious quiet sequence on the piano. This develops to a climax of much grandeur before

the music gives way to a more plaintive sequence that fades to a gentle close. The rondo finale is light-hearted and cheerful with imaginative episodes interspersing the buoyant main theme. (I could imagine it with the Edwardian subtitle *Puck's Dance*.)

The second sonata's turbulent opening leads to a jaunty theme and then a quieter section characterised by gently tolling chords on the piano. The turbulence of the opening returns to sweep the movement to an expansive close. The second movement opens with a quiet sequence that dies away into a lamenting theme characterised by simple repetitions. Descending phrases on violin and piano lead to a nostalgic, regretful theme. The simple theme returns and the descending phrases on violin and piano bring the movement to a gentle close. The finale opens in a dramatic, agitated manner with falling phrases of lament from the violin but the mood lightens with a jaunty, innocent, nursery rhyme theme. There are a number of more reflective sequences before the return of the turbulent opening but the movement ends with the jaunty mood uppermost.

The violin sonatas have had a number of fine performances on disc including epic ones from Lydia Mordkovich and Ian Brown on Chandos and more intimate, probing performances from Yfrah Neaman and Eric Parkin on Lyrita. These performances by Lucy Gould and Benjamin Frith are equally fine. Lucy Gould, with her clear, incisive tone, plays brilliantly and movingly and Frith is remarkably successful at clarifying the shifting harmonies and subtly colouring the varied textures.

The Cello Sonata of 1923 is a profoundly expressive work influenced by Ireland's love of ancient pre-Christian history and artefacts. It is claimed that *The Devil's Jumps*, Bronze Age round barrows on the Sussex Downs, were a particular inspiration for this work. The sonata opens plaintively with the opening four notes of the cello's first theme being used as a unifying feature throughout the movement's varying moods. The second movement opens with an impassioned cry from the cello before a more subdued mood leads to a gently tender theme on the piano. This is taken up by the cello and leads to a brooding central section. The movement moves without a break into the finale bursting into an exuberant leaping theme on the cello. This theme, punctuated by more reflective passages, dominates the vigorous movement. The sonata is played superbly. Alice Neary brings beauty and variety of tone as well as depth of feeling and brilliant technique – her fearless attack on the perilous high notes is remarkable. Benjamin Frith plays magnificently, again bringing a wide range of tone colour to Ireland's fascinating textures and harmonies. The recording is clear and well balanced and the disc is a very desirable bargain.

Richard Spenceley

Dutton *Epoch*
CDLX7250

John Ireland (arr. Tertis): Violin Sonata No. 2, Cello Sonata
Frederick Delius (arr. Tertis): Violin Sonata No. 2, Violin Sonata No. 3
Roger Chase, viola
Michiko Otaki, piano

'Usually considered the finest player of that instrument in the world'. (*Morning Post*, 27 June 1927), Lionel Tertis was a great viola player and a champion of the instrument. He persistently sought new works to expand its repertoire and focused much of his energies on making arrangements for the viola of other composers' works for the more popular violin and cello. Tertis' ambition for the viola knew no bounds. In 1929 he transcribed Elgar's cello concerto; so delighted was Elgar with Tertis's arrangement that he recommended it to Novello for publication. Although he did not conduct its first performance (an occasion somewhat spoiled by Tertis's A string breaking early in the finale), he did so at other concerts.

One of the features of Tertis' arrangements is that he attempts to keep the solo part as close as possible to the original, resisting opportunities to transpose to facilitate an easier rendition, unless of course it is to take advantage of using the low C string (as noted by Roger Chase in the accompanying notes). Tertis took this approach with the slow movement of Elgar's Cello Concerto by keeping it at the same pitch as the cello part; so what to do about the single unplayable note (B flat below the C string)? In a subterfuge with his piano accompanist when playing it to Elgar for the first time, Tertis tuned down his C string to a B flat 'surreptitiously', to use Tertis' own words, and watched 'Elgar's looks of growing consternation as we approached the low B flat ... When I played the low B flat he nearly sprang out of his chair with surprise and delight'.

As with many transcriptions of violin or cello works to the viola it takes time to acclimatise to hearing them on the viola. At first the forays up the A string sound a little brash, without the brilliance of the violin. However, one is soon won over by the sonority of the C string and the constantly varying but subtle tone and colour that is so remarkable about the viola. With the Delius and Ireland sonatas, as with Elgar's concerto, Tertis kept as faithfully as possible to the original notes, posing technical challenges for the violist for which Roger Chase is more than a match. Using Tertis' viola to play these arrangements lends a degree of authenticity to the performance, which at times is majestic and at other times subtle, but always melodic.

The Delius sonatas lend themselves well to the arrangements

for viola. Indeed, Delius himself was overjoyed at hearing both pieces played by Tertis in his home. In a letter dictated to his wife Jelka on 1 December 1929, Delius commented on Tertis's ability to get inside his music and his surprise that the viola 'could sound so lovely'. There is a distinct change in atmosphere with Ireland's cello sonata to a darker, more melodramatic mood. There is considerable opportunity to exploit the richness of the C string, which comes across very convincingly on Tertis's viola. The CD really culminates, however, in a climactic performance of Ireland's Second Violin Sonata; there is clearly a close musical relationship between viola and piano, and one gets the feeling that the piece might really have been written for the viola originally.

Justin Cross

Cyril Scott: Violin Sonatas No. 1, Violin Sonata No. 3, Sonata Melodica
Clare Howick, violin
Sophia Rahman, piano

Naxos
8.572290

Early in his career, Cyril Scott (1879-1970) had a reputation as something of a modernist whose harmonies were seen as exotic. When G.B. Shaw remarked to Elgar that *his* harmonies were becoming daring, Elgar replied: 'Yes, but don't forget it was Scott who started it all'. But Scott's modernism was to become unfashionable, sidelined by more radical styles during the interwar years, and he became increasingly neglected, even dismissed as hopelessly romantic. But, in recent years, interest in Scott has increased and there have been notable recordings of major orchestral works on the Chandos label and some chamber works from Dutton. This Naxos issue brings welcome performances of the first and third Violin Sonatas as well as of the *Sonata Melodica*.

The First Sonata was dedicated to Ethel Barns who gave its 1908 premiere. (Barns was a frequent performer in the Malvern area and was a member of a circle of accomplished performers known to the Elgar household.) The sonata is a substantial work written in Scott's characteristic rhapsodic and improvisatory style. On a first hearing, Scott's music can seem rather formless but repeated listening reveals some cohesive features. The *Allegro moderato* opens with chromatic chord progressions which return at intervals (and are echoed in other movements), sometimes accompanied by high trills on the violin. Scott uses extended piano interludes, often based on material already used, as transitions. A piano solo based on richly flowing arpeggios

opens the *Andante mistico* and Sophia Rahman plays this most imaginatively, desynchronising the hands in evocative period fashion. A glowing violin theme emerges almost imperceptibly from this solo (magically done by Clare Howick). The brief *Allegro molto scherzando* is notable for rapid figures on the piano and jaunty dotted rhythms on the violin. The *Allegro maestoso finale* is based on a powerful wide-ranging theme and uses structural procedures familiar from the other movements. A late flowering of Scott's art led to the *Sonata Melodica* of 1950 and the third sonata of 1955. Both sonatas show familiar Scott traits with extended piano interludes, chromatic chord sequences (something of a Scott fingerprint), and melodious improvisatory violin writing. In the three-movement *Sonata Melodica*, marked use of dissonance in the first movement creates a sense of disquiet. The haunting *Adagio ma non troppo* is mainly restrained and calm, while in the finale the energy promised by a vivacious theme for violin is impeded by overextended ruminative passages. The Third Sonata shows Scott at his most inventive. Sombre double stops open the often un-tranquil *Tranquillo* first movement, while ethereal double stops close the flowing 'Pastoral'. The 'Rondo Capriccioso' opens dramatically on the piano and a violin theme promises 'capricious' energy that is, again, stalled by extensive ruminative interludes.

The Naxos duo prove powerful advocates for Scott. Sophia Rahman brings brilliance, warmth and imagination to piano writing which consistently catches the ear. Clare Howick, using a 1721 Stradivarius, plays superbly, employing a rich sound and showing fine technical command. The recording, set in a warm acoustic, is full and detailed. It seems churlish to want more but I did sometimes feel the need for greater variety of tone colour from the violin. The third movement of the first sonata, for instance, would have benefited from a leaner sound to emphasise its scherzando qualities; and occasionally a more withdrawn, inward sound, such as she produces for the attractive second movement of *Sonata Melodica* would have created some valuable variety.

Richard Spenceley

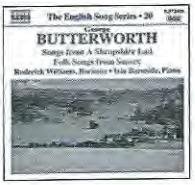
Vaughan Williams: Symphony No. 9*; *A London Symphony* (Symphony No. 2)
*Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Malcolm Sargent
NBC Symphony Orchestra
Dimitri Mitropoulos

Pristine Audio
PASC234

The sonic limitations of the NBC recording (Studio 8H, New York, 9 December 1945) make it difficult to enjoy a fine performance to the full, whereas the sound is absolutely no barrier to appreciation of the world premiere performance of the Ninth at the Royal Festival Hall (2 April 1958). Vaughan Williams was in the Royal Box, 'looking well with his hair shiningly white and the kind of reserved dignity that applause caused in him'.

Quite unexpectedly, I was struck by the similarities, musically and in ambience, between this occasion and the first public performance of Anthony Payne's realisation of Elgar's last Symphony in the same hall. Of the Vaughan Williams Vernon Handley wrote: 'What dread there is in those final pages: here is a man staring death in the face, wondering what on earth comes next'. What must it have been like for Vaughan Williams to listen to this performance, and to hear his innermost emotions laid bare? The predominant feeling emanating from the music is one of anger, with eventual acceptance. By contrast, I found myself taken back to that Elgar premiere, and especially the feelings of intense sadness and despair of a man in turmoil that gripped many of those present during the *Adagio*. Elgar's reaction comes across as resignation rather than acceptance of the inevitable. W.H. Reed tells us how he would never give a hint of how the symphony would end, 'and would not discuss [it] any more, and it would be quite a while before he became calm'. Elgar would not confront finality, whereas Vaughan Williams demonstrably could. Forget anything you may have heard of an under-rehearsed, flawed, performance: Sargent and the orchestra contribute fully to an extraordinarily moving occasion.

Martin Bird



Naxos
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George Butterworth: Songs from *A Shropshire Lad*; *Folk Songs from Sussex*
Roderick Williams, baritone
Iain Burnside, piano

Roderick Williams seems to be cornering the market in English song at the moment, and I for one am grateful. This is the 20th release by Naxos in its English Song Series. The major item must be the two groups of songs from Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*, which Butterworth wrote in 1911 and 1912. His orchestral rhapsody of 1913 utilises themes from these settings, and had its first performance at that year's Leeds Festival conducted by Nikisch, in the concert preceding the première of *Falstaff*. There seems to be no sign of another meeting between Elgar and Butterworth, but the Elgars knew Housman and his sister, who both came to tea at Plas Gwyn.

The eleven *Folk Songs from Sussex* are 'exactly what it says on the tin', and none the worse for that, and the CD is completed with settings of Stevenson's *I will make you brooches*, Shelley's *I fear thy kisses*, and Oscar Wilde's *Requiescat*. Once again I have been struck by how different an art form the English song of the first half of the twentieth century is from that of Elgar's songs, which inhabit a much more public world. These little gems are beautifully performed by Roderick Williams and Iain Burnside, and the recording is all one could ask for. Once again I must offer three hearty cheers to Naxos for an issue of considerable distinction.

Martin Bird

Naxos
8.572014

Havergal Brian: Concert Overture: *For Valour*; *Comedy Overture: *Doctor Merryheart*; *Symphony No. 11; Symphony No. 15*
RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra conducted by Tony Rowe, *Adrian Leaper

Havergal Brian first came across Elgar in 1896:

> A choral rehearsal was on and I heard music that held me spellbound – it was unlike any known to me. At that time I was organist of Odd Rode Parish Church in Cheshire. On the following Sunday I told my choirmaster of my experience with this unknown strange music. He said: 'Oh, I was there – it was the chorus of the North Staffordshire Triennial Festival and we were rehearsing a work by a new chap named Elgar – called *King Olaf*. It is strange

music and we don't understand it. We are not supposed to lend out copies, but I will bring mine for evening service and you can look at it during the sermon'. I carried that copy home. By the time of the performance I had borrowed it incessantly and knew it backwards. I regarded Elgar as a phenomenon and spent my time gaining converts.

He got hold of Elgar's address and sent him an anthem: Elgar replied, saying that he thought the work 'original if somewhat involved', and encouraged him to continue composing. In 1905 Brian was among the organisers of the performance of *The Apostles* at Hanley. Alice wrote in her diary: '... to fine rehearsal at 2. H. Brian sat by me ... Glorious performance, immense audience, marvellous scene of enthusiasm ... E. conducted superbly'. Afterwards Elgar wrote to Alfred Littleton and mentioned Brian: 'I may ask a young man here who is very clever to send an account of last night to the M.T.'. Elgar continued to take an interest in Brian both as a writer and a composer. In December 1905 he gave an interview to the journalist Charles Kenyon: '... I found him very appreciative of the work done by his juniors. He particularly mentioned Havergal Brian, a composer who has more than justified what Elgar prophesied of him, though perhaps not in the manner Elgar anticipated'.

The earliest work on this CD, the concert overture *For Valour*, dates from this period. Elgar's comment that Brian's music was 'original if somewhat involved' could well apply here; in rather less than 15 minutes Brian throws everything including the kitchen sink at the listener. Here is a musical mind that is brimful of ideas, but has not yet the maturity to be selective – there is material here sufficient for a dozen symphonies. *Doctor Merryheart* is less an overture than a set of variations reminiscent of Strauss's *Don Quixote* (complete with German titles to the variations), with touches of *Falstaff* (it was first performed in the same year, 1913). Despite its relative brevity (16 minutes) and the variation form, it manages, to my ears at least, to lack any sense of structure. Nevertheless, it is an enjoyable piece with some very fine moments.

More than 40 years separate *Doctor Merryheart* from the Eleventh Symphony. Here the frenetic feeling of the early years has long gone, and the opening *Adagio* especially is rather moving. The Fifteenth Symphony was composed early in 1960 and, I fear, made little impression on me: a case of a lot of content, but very little substance. Considering the complexity and rarity of the music, and the fact that each conductor had only a single day in which to produce the goods, performances are rather persuasive. The recording is not the clearest – maybe the fault of the music as

much as anything – but overall this issue will be of considerable interest to those who, like me, have heard little of Havergal Brian's music, and want to know more of a composer to whom Elgar meant so much:

> I sometimes think that if I had never received the one letter from Elgar of encouragement in my youth I might never – under the circumstances – have gone any further. But Elgar at that time meant far more to me than any other man, dead or alive. And I went on, and here I am!

Martin Bird

LETTERS

From Andrew Neill

The deaths of Philip Langridge and Anthony Rolfe Johnson, in short succession, means that we have lost the two leading English tenors of their generation. Both were fine interpreters of *Gerontius*, and of course Rolfe Johnson recorded the role under Vernon Handley for EMI. There is, moreover, another Elgarian role which links these two great singers, and that is King Olaf. When the London Philharmonic Orchestra (again under Tod Handley) performed *King Olaf* in October 1985, Rolfe Johnson was the chosen tenor. It was apparent, after the performance, that he was not happy with his voice (he was to have an operation on his vocal cords in 1988), and he withdrew from the recording due to take place that December. Into the breach stepped Philip Langridge and his performance as King Olaf (the role quickly learned) contributed to the excellent result which all Elgarians have grown to know and love.

As many readers will know, Langridge was delightful company and was great value as we sipped champagne in the studio at the end of the sessions. I attended some of the *Gerontius* sessions in Liverpool a few years later, and found Rolfe Johnson equally delightful and amusing. It is good that both tenors recorded major Elgar roles and it is fascinating to compare their interpretations of *King Olaf*, for the Rolfe Johnson performance was broadcast live.

From Walter Hurst

I write to ask readers of the Journal not to take the review of Sullivan's 'Ivanhoe' by Martin Bird as the last word on the subject. Do buy the recording and make up your own minds about it. The recording, dedicated to the memory of the late and much lamented Richard Hickox, was to have been conducted by him. I cannot imagine that such a brilliant musician would have bothered to do this if he had not thought it a worthwhile work and worthy of his attention.

I have read most of the reviews of the recording. A good 90% of them, especially in the Gramophone and BBC Magazines, are extremely positive and express amazement at how good the opera is and one of them named it the recording of the month! I have listened to the recording innumerable times and cannot, in all honesty, understand why your reviewer has been so negative and ultra critical of the opera.

A Message to Readers

Publication dates

Elgar Society Journal and News

The Journal and News have been appearing in March, July, and November. The Council of the Elgar Society has decided that from Volume 17 (2011–12) the months of publication will be:

April – August – December

This means that the standard deadlines for submissions will be 1 February, 1 June, and 1 October. Later deadlines, especially for reviews and letters, may be negotiated with the editor.

Please note also that there is a change of editor. Potential contributions and letters should now be addressed to Martin Bird at the address given on the back of the News, or by e-mail (as at present) to journal@elgar.org.

100 YEARS AGO ...

The orchestration of the violin concerto was completed on 5 August, and Elgar wrote to Charles Sanford Terry: 'I have put the last note of the last movement in the full score and have lit a pipe'. The Elgars relaxed with short visits to Worcestershire, first with the Whinfields at Severn Grange, where at Mrs Hyde's they 'met many old friends'. Then on the 13 August they moved on to Broadway to stay with the De Navarros at Court Farm. Mary De Navarro later wrote that 'to the four of us, it seemed as though we had known each other for years'.

Alice wrote to Alice Stuart Wortley to thank her 'for writing about Beaconsfield' – one of the many places in the London area that they were thinking of moving to. Back in Hereford on the 18th, Edward began work on a setting of the 48th Psalm: on 24 August he 'went on with his Anthem, pleased with his flying Kings'. The following day he travelled to London for Three Choirs Festival rehearsals. They went to Gloucester on 3 September, having taken the Cookery School, a house on the Green. When Dora Penny and a friend arrived, they heard Kreisler and Elgar going through parts of the concerto. On the following evening Billy Reed, with Elgar at the piano, played through the concerto to a select few, including Dorabella, Schuster, and several cathedral organists – Brewer, Atkins, Sinclair, Harford Lloyd, and Lee Williams.

On Tuesday 6 September Edward conducted *Gerontius*. Alice's comment was: '*Most* beautiful. Like being on a mystic height or Island'. The work was preceded by the first performance of Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*. The following day Edward conducted the Symphony: 'a wonderful rendering'. On Thursday at the Cookery School Kreisler played the Concerto to a full house: 'people sat outside & on [the] stairs'.

Proofs of the concerto began to arrive, and Professor Terry arrived to help Edward with checking them. In the second week in October, Edward and Alice went up to London, he to discuss with Novello problems which had arisen over the printing of the concerto, she to look at houses. On the 15th, Kreisler went to Queen Anne's Mansions to play through the concerto, and Alice noted: 'Wonderful. Quite different from previous time. Most enthusiastic'. Two days later he came again: 'a glorious playing, really magnificent'. Back in Hereford, Edward was hard at work checking proofs. There had been mistakes by Novello, and on 23 October John Austin came to help Edward check proofs. Troyte Griffith said they worked from 10 in the morning to 11 at night, only stopping for meals: a large parcel was returned to London the following day. Edward now turned again to his new symphony, writing to Alice Stuart Wortley on the 25th: 'I ... am sitting at my table weaving strange & wonderful memories into very poor music I fear'.

The premiere of the concerto had been eagerly awaited. It was one of Elgar's greatest successes: the applause lasted a quarter of an hour. Alice's diary entry sums it all up: 'Crowd *enormous*. Excitement intense – performance wonderful. Enthusiasm unbounded – *Shouts* – E. walked backwards & forwards bringing Kreisler but England wanted *him* & he had to come by his souse [self]. He looked beautiful & Kreisler fine & dignified. – A *wonderful* event'. There were reservations on the part of several critics regarding the work's length, and the difficulty of the solo part. But the overall impression was one of ecstatic acceptance. As Robert Anderson has pointed out: 'No subsequent Elgar premiere received such acclamation'. They returned to Hereford on the 14th, where Edward resumed work on his second symphony.

Geoffrey Hodgkins

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