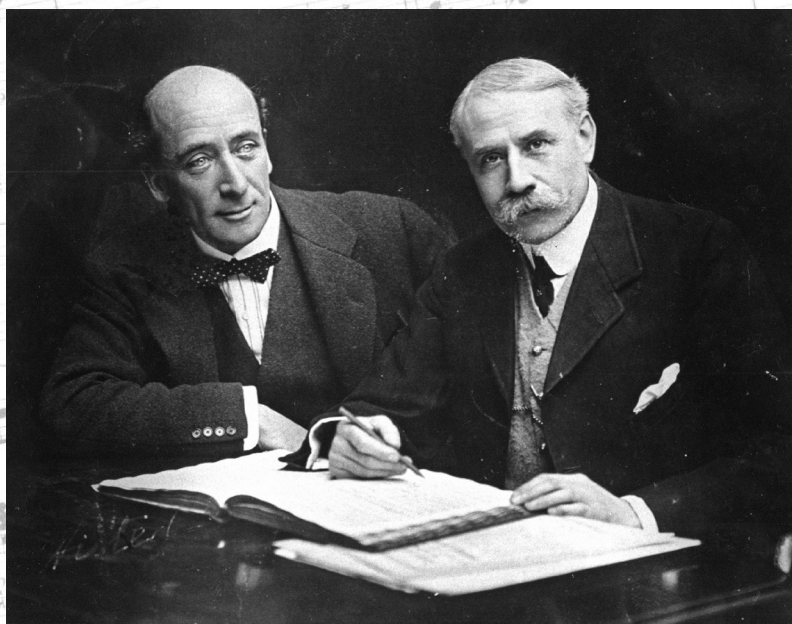


The *Elegar* Society
JOURNAL



August 2014 Vol.18, No. 5



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*The Editor does not necessarily agree with the views expressed by contributors,
nor does the Elgar Society accept responsibility for such views.*

*Front Cover: Elgar and Algernon Blackwood on 18 February 1916 at the recording sessions for
‘The Starlight Express’. (Photo: HMV) Julius Harrison was the conductor of the stage production.*

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Illustrations (pictures, short music examples) are welcome, but *please ensure* they are pertinent, cued into the text, and have captions.

Presentation of written text:

Subheadings: longer articles benefit from judicious use of these.

Dates: use the form 2 June 1857. Decades: 1930s, no apostrophe.

Plurals: no apostrophe (CDs not CD's).

Foreign words: if well established in English (sic, crescendo) in Roman, otherwise italics.

Numbers: spell out up to and including twenty, then 21 (etc.) in figures.

Quotations: in 'single quotes' as standard. Double quotes for quotes within quotes.

Longer quotations in a separate paragraph, *not* in italic, *not* in quotes; please leave a blank line before and after.

Emphasis: ensure emphasis is attributed as '[original emphasis]' or '[my emphasis]'. Emphasized text *italic*.

References: Please position footnote markers *after* punctuation – wherever possible at the end of a sentence.

In footnotes, please adhere as far as possible to these forms (more fully expounded in the longer version of these notes):

Books: Author, *Title* (Place of publication: Publisher, year of publication), page[s]. Thus: Robert Anderson, *Elgar* (London: Dent, 1993), 199.

Periodicals: Author, 'Title of article', *Title of periodical*, issue number and date sufficient to identify, page[s]. Thus: Michael Allis, 'Elgar, Lytton, and the Piano Quintet, Op. 84', *Music & Letters*, 85 (May 2004), 198.

End a footnote with a full stop, please, and never put a comma before a parenthesis.

Titles that are 'generic' in Roman: e.g. Violin Concerto. Others in *italics* (e.g. *Sea Pictures*; the *Musical Times*). Units within a longer work in single quotes, e.g. 'Sanctus fortis' from *The Dream of Gerontius*.

Editorial

'Don't mention the war!' When putting this issue together I realised that I hadn't – no doubt a little remiss of me in an issue dated August 2014 – although in the six-year plan for the *Journal* I drew up when I became Editor¹ there are plenty of opportunities for essays relating to the Great War.

It was only when compiling '100 years ago' that it struck me just how quickly Elgar reacted to the crisis. On 19 July the family left for a six-week holiday in Scotland, intending to return in good time for the Worcester Three Choirs Festival which was to commence on 6 September. War, of course, was declared on 4 August (though the Elgars did not hear about it until next day), and Alice and Carice managed to get back to Severn House on 13 August. Elgar arrived on the 14th having broken his journey at Leeds to see Henry Embleton about the third part of the *Apostles* trilogy, which he had at last agreed to complete.

While in Scotland Elgar had written to Lord Roberts offering his services 'in any capacity during the present crisis'. Roberts replied on the 14th, saying 'I feel sure that on your arrival in London you will find many opportunities of giving your valuable services and meanwhile I thank you most heartily for your offer'. He immediately volunteered as a Special Constable, and on the 15th received a letter from his tame builder, Charles King, now doubling as an Inspector in the Hampstead Special Constabulary, informing him that 'There will be a short drill at the Drill Hall, Heath St. Hampstead on Thursday next 20th August at 9 p.m. It is most important that every Special Constable should be present, and sharp on time.'

On Monday 17 August he 'went up to Hampstead P. Court & was sworn in as a Special Constable – When some of the police or rather the one taking his name saw the O.M. he said "there are not many of them going about".' On the 18th Charles King wrote again, saying 'Your attendance is particularly requested at a meeting to be held to-morrow, Wednesday, at 8 p.m. I feel that your assistance will be very valuable to the Detachment of Special Constables, and if you are agreeable I should like to recommend you to Colonel Dunlop for a position on our Council.'

On the 21st, just a week after his return from Scotland, Elgar wrote to Windflower to say 'I am Staff Inspector to the whole corps & dying to do a man's part in the work'. That day he was summoned to the 'Drill Hall to-night at 8 o'clock, to assist in the distribution of equipment to the Special Constables'.

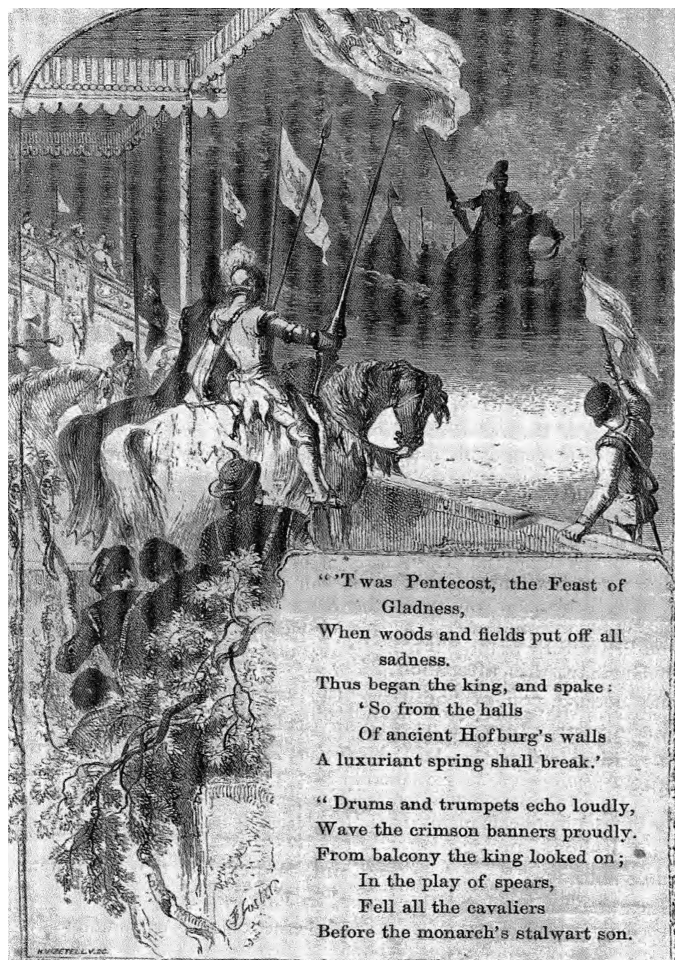
'Don't mention the war! I mentioned it once, but I think I got away with it.'

Martin Bird

¹ Yes, I know it sounds unlikely, but truly I did (and our Chairman might like to take note of my assumed length of tenure).

‘A sort of symphony in four divisions’: *The Black Knight* and its first performances

Richard Smith



A drawing by the Victorian artist, Myles Birket Foster (1825-1899) illustrating the *Black Knight* together with the work's first verse.

As early as April 1879¹ Elgar had been toying with setting Henry Longfellow's *The Black Knight* to music. Encouraged by his mother, Ann, Elgar had cultivated a great love of the American romantic poet, and especially of his early prose romance *Hyperion*. As he was later to confide to Hans Richter it was from him that: 'I, as a child, received my first idea of the great German nations.'² The esteem in which he held the work was further highlighted when he sent a copy of the book to Helen Weaver, his early love, following his first visit to Leipzig in 1883.³ Elgar also gave a copy of *Hyperion* to his sister Lucy, inscribed: 'May 4, 1889, In memory of our six years of companionship.'⁴

Drawing largely from Longfellow's experiences surrounding the tragic death of his first wife, Mary Storer Potter, who died in Rotterdam in 1836 following a miscarriage, *Hyperion*, written three years later, tells the story of Paul Flemming, a young man who had experienced great sorrow. As Longfellow wrote: 'The friend of his youth was dead. The bough had broken "under the burden of the unripe fruit." And when, after a season, he looked up from the blindness of his sorrow, all things seemed unreal.'⁵ To console himself, Flemming embarks on a tour of Germany and Switzerland, mirroring Longfellow's own attempt to drown his sorrows in travel. Flemming first

The young Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.



Johann Ludwig Uhland was born on 26 April 1787 at Tübingen in Germany and died on 13 November 1862 in the same town. Apart from his poetry he is known as a philologist and literary historian.



- 1 British Library BL Add MS 63148 f.24v dated 7 April 1879. Kent, Christopher in *Edward Elgar, a Guide to Research* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993) 122, suggests that an earlier sketch, BL Add MS 63149 f.8v may originate from October 1878.
- 2 Letter to Hans Richter, 25 October 1899, Hallé Orchestra, Richter-Loeb archive.
- 3 Anderson, Robert: *Elgar and Chivalry* (Rickmansworth: Elgar Editions, 2002), 97.
- 4 Anderson, Robert: *Elgar in manuscript* (London: British Library, 1990), 21. Elgar lived with Lucy and her husband, Charles Pipe at 4, Field Terrace, Bath Road, Worcester between 1883 and 1889.
- 5 Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth: *Hyperion* (from the collected Prose Works, London: George Routledge and Sons, 1852), 1.

spends a season in Heidelberg with a German baron friend before his restlessness finds him in the lovely Swiss town of Interlaken. Here he meets a beautiful young girl: ‘Presently a female figure, clothed in black, entered the room and sat down by the window. She rather listened to the conversation than joined in it; but the few words she said were spoken in a voice so musical and full of soul, that it moved the soul of Flemming, like a whisper from heaven.’

In the days that follow, he learns that her name is Mary Ashburton and during one rainy afternoon he picks up a volume of Ludwig Uhland’s poems and asks her whether she has ever read anything by him.

‘Let me give you a lesson in German this afternoon, Miss Ashburton; so that no one may accuse you of “omitting the sweet benefit of time, to clothe your age with angel-like perfection.” I have opened at random upon the ballad of the Black Knight. Do you repeat the German after me, and I will translate to you. *Pfingsten war, das Fest der Freude!*’⁶

Mary replies:

‘I should never persuade my unwilling lips to pronounce such sounds. So I beg you not to perplex me with your German, but read me the ballad in English.’

‘Well, then, listen. I will improvise a translation for your own particular benefit.’

Longfellow, in the person of Flemming, then proceeds with a non too literal but rhyming translation of Uhland’s poem. It was this translation that Elgar later set, unaltered, to music.

The story contained within the poem is a dark one. The first scene begins with the king and his court celebrating the joyfulness of the Pentecost festivities and the promise of a new spring. A joust then follows at which the king’s son is at first triumphant, defeating all that challenge him. Suddenly there appears a mysterious knight in black armour to confront the victor but when challenged as to his identity he will only answer ‘I am a prince of mighty sway!’ He then engages the king’s son and unhorses him with his first blow.

The scene changes to the evening where a dance is being held in the castle. Half hidden by the torchlight, the knight appears, again dressed in black, and asks the king’s daughter to join him in the dance. This she agrees to do but as they dance ‘a measure weird and dark’ the flowers at her breast and hair fade and fall to the ground.

The final scene is at the sumptuous banquet which follows. The king glazes reflectively at his pale son and daughter but is temporarily consoled by the Black Knight’s offer of golden wine to make them whole. But then his mood changes to one of anguish as he sees his children die. He cries despairingly: ‘Take me, too, the joyless father!’ but the Black Knight replies without emotion: ‘Roses in the spring I gather!’

Although Longfellow’s translation was taken directly from Uhland’s *Der schwarze Ritter*, which dates from 1806, the poem may have its origins in a much earlier story. In addition to his many other skills, Uhland was a researcher of medieval manuscripts and folk legends and it is very possible that he based his poem on a previous German work of 1694 which describes the strange events which occurred at the wedding feast of King Alexander III of Scotland to his second bride, Yolande de Dreux in 1285. According to the legend a masque was performed at which musicians were followed in procession by a solemn dance of armed men. “But upon the heels of these there

followed a single figure, of whom it could hardly be told whether he were a man or a phantasm. He seemed rather to glide like a shadow than pass by on his feet; and before the eyes of all the company he suddenly vanished.”⁷ Later it was said that Death himself had appeared. Whatever the truth of this story, there is no doubt that Alexander was no stranger to tragedy. His first wife, Princess Margaret of England, the daughter of King Henry III, died in 1274, and their three children, David, Alexander and Margaret expired within two years of one another between 1281 and 1283. Finally, King Alexander himself died falling from his horse on a dark and tempestuous night while riding to visit the queen at Kinghorn in Fife in March 1286. While some of the events recounted in *The Black Knight* were obviously compacted or transposed, they bore a considerable similarity to the life of the Scottish king.

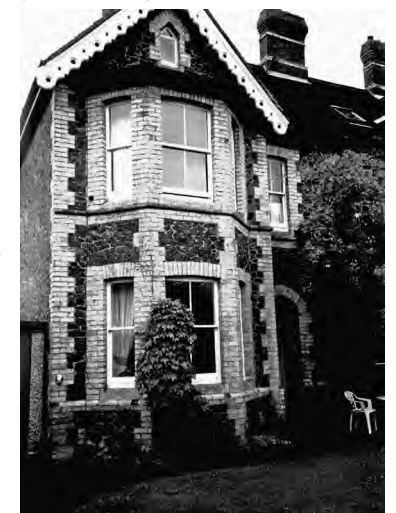
Composition begins

Apart from his love of Longfellow, there was perhaps another reason why Elgar chose *The Black Knight* to set to music. He had experienced the loss of two of his brothers by the time he was nine, and the final words seemed to express the thoughts of his sister Lucy after the death of their oldest brother, Harry, from scarlet fever in 1864: ‘We must live on, just as the rose-tree lives though all its flowers be broken off; and the Spring brings roses again.’⁸

For some 13 years the original sketches which Elgar had written for the opening scene lay dormant, but now there were new incentives. He had married Caroline Alice Roberts in 1889 and 15 months later they had a baby girl, Carice, but the attempt to bring his music to a London audience had failed miserably. In despair the family returned to Worcestershire, renting *Forli*, a semi-detached house under the Malvern Hills, on 20 June 1891. By 18 April 1892 he had completed a 28 page vocal score sketch of *The Black Knight*,⁹ but doubting his ability to finish such a large work, he wrote in the top left hand corner: ‘Music by Edward Elgar – if he can.’

During the next few weeks Edward busied himself with the new piece and during the evening of 11 June he played over the completed parts to 27 year old Hugh Blair, assistant to William Done at Worcester Cathedral. By this time, due to the ill health of the official incumbent, Blair was the organist in all but name. In addition his duties included conducting the Worcester Festival Choral Society which provided the county’s component at the Three Choirs Festivals. Blair was so taken with the outline of *The Black Knight* that he said: ‘If you will finish it I

‘Forli’ - the Elgar’s house in Malvern.
(Richard Smith)



7 Quoted by Alexander III’s biographer, James Fergusson, deriving his account from the *Scotichronicon*, an ancient Scottish chronicle similar to *Froissart*.

8 Contained in ‘*Reflections*’ written by Elgar’s oldest sister, Lucy, (Elgar Birthplace Museum)

9 BL Add MS 47900A ff.39-82v.

6 *Twas Pentecost, the Feast of Joy!* (or *Gladness* as Longfellow translates it).

will produce it at Worcester.¹⁰ It was to be Elgar's longest work to date, with an approximate performing time of 35 minutes.

Blair's support further spurred Edward into action and, on 23 July, he was able to deliver the first three scenes of the vocal score of *The Black Knight* to Mr. Fry, General Manager of his London publisher, Novello's. The Elgars were en route for Bayreuth as part of a visit to Germany at the invitation of Mary Francis 'Minnie' Baker.¹¹ It was to take in Bonn (where they visited Beethoven's birthplace), Mainz, Nuremberg and the Wagner festival at Bayreuth. After attending two performances of *Parsifal* and others of *Tristan* and *Die Meistersinger*, the Elgars moved on via Nuremberg, Munich, Lindau and Oberstdorf to Heidelberg, where they arrived on 11 August. Next day Edward wrote to his mother: '...then when driving up here we suddenly had to stop & make way for a great procession of Students – torchlight – three duelling guilds with a brass band & marching – all their faces wounded (silly fools) & many with bandages on, gay uniforms & no end of torches: it did remind me of *Hyperion* & the beer scandal etc., etc.'¹²

Returning to London on 16 August Edward called at Breitkopf & Hartel, who agreed to publish his *Serenade for Strings*, and Novello's who agreed to give *The Black Knight* their best attention if he would finish it.¹³ The next month saw him busily engaged on the work. As it neared completion the family went to stay with Minnie Baker at Hasfield Court in Gloucestershire. As Mrs Richard Powell (Dorabella of the *Enigma Variations*, who later became the step-daughter of Minnie Baker) remembered:

'It was summer time and very hot. He used to bring in hedgehogs from the woods and feed them in the house. He sat in the strawberry bed and wished that someone would bring him champagne in a bedroom jug.' His wish seems to have been met because forever after the last scene where the Black Knight drinks his toast was known as "the *Perrier Jouet* theme"¹⁴.

10 From "Elgar at Craeg Lea", an interview of Elgar by Rudolph de Cordova published in *The Strand Magazine*, May 1904, 542.

11 Edward and Alice Elgar's joint diary, entry by Edward dated 23 July 1892.

12 Moore, Jerrold Northrop (editor): *Letters of a Lifetime* (Rickmansworth: Elgar Works, 2002), 51.

13 Moore, Jerrold Northrop: *Edward Elgar – A Creative Life* (Oxford University Press: 1984), 165.

14 Powell, Mrs Richard, *Edward Elgar: Memories of a Variation* (4th edition, Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1994), 11.



The first page of Elgar's short score for *The Black Knight* which includes his comment 'Music by Edward Elgar – if he can'. (BL Add.47900A)

At last, on 26 September, Alice joyfully recorded 'Finished the Black Knight – May all good be with his Booful music.' Four days later, 'the Mascotte' (Edward's nickname for Minnie Baker) mailed the vocal and piano score to Novello with the following covering note:

Dear Sirs:

By this post I send (the P.F. arrangement, voc: score) of a Cantata for Chorus & orchestra 'The Black Knight' now completed & shall be glad to know if you can accept it for publication.

You were good enough in a late letter to ask me to send you any vocal work for your inspection: I would point out that the present work is of a class much in request – chorus & orch:- & that the poem set is picturesque & popular at the same time presenting no great difficulty to the performers.

Should there be any point requiring explanation I should be extremely glad to call upon you but I am diffident in offering to do this knowing the M.S. will receive the fullest consideration.

I am, dear Sirs,
Faithfully yours
Edward Elgar

P.S. The work is announced for the Worcester Festival Choral Socy's Second concert to be given early in next year under my direction at the Conductor's invitation.¹⁵

Much later Elgar told Dorabella that: 'We posted it [the manuscript] at Heidelberg. I said she [Minnie] would bring me luck and so she did.' However, this seems impossible as we know that the vocal and piano score were not completed until long after the Elgars left Heidelberg. Perhaps this story originated from wishful thinking of the association of Heidelberg with *Hyperion*.

Novello's first reaction to the manuscript came on 8 October when they asked Edward to call. Next day he received a letter from Mr. Fry and on the 12th, he went to London to see their Music Editor, Berthold Tours, who explained that several passages of the accompaniment would be too difficult for the average choral society pianist. Elgar brought the score home with him to alter, but Alice commented in their diary that she was 'drefful anxious.' Four days later he returned it to Novello's with another letter:

Dear Sirs:

'The Black Knight'

Since my interview with Mr. Tours on Wednesday last I have most carefully gone through the P.F. accompaniment of the above-named Cantata & have removed all the difficulties which he was so kind as to point out. I now return the M.S. & shall be extremely obliged if you will consider the question of accepting it for publication.

I may repeat that the leading Society of this district ('Worcester Festival Choral') are announcing the first performance of the work early in the year at their second concert so that an early reply will be most welcome.

Believe me,
Faithfully yours,
Edward Elgar

15 Moore, Jerrold Northrop: *Elgar and his Publishers – Letters of a Creative Life* (Oxford University Press, 1987), 12-3.

P.S. The arrangement now fairly represents the orchestral effects but should any of the passages be found intrinsically too difficult I would be willing to alter them rather than anything should stand in the way of the acceptance of the work.¹⁶

In spite of two prompting telegrams from Elgar it was not until 10 November 1892 that he finally heard from Novello's that *The Black Knight* had been accepted for publication, with a fee of 2d. for each vocal score after sales of 500, with the orchestral material in manuscript. Edward replied immediately:

Dear Sirs:

'The Black Knight'

In answer to your letter of yesterday's date I write to say I shall be glad to accept the terms therein contained.

I should esteem it a favour if you would let me know how soon the vocal score can be ready as it seems to me (I am inexperienced in such matters) that time is very short: can it be issued at Christmas? The Chorus will require copies for practice early in the new year.

I propose to complete the orchestration during the holidays in January & shd. require a copy to work from as I have only my rough sketch.

I enclose a copy of the announcement of the first performance & awaiting your reply am

Vy faithfully yours.
Edward Elgar

PS I need not say that I am extremely obliged & gratified by your acceptance of the work.¹⁷

Later he wrote in their diary that: 'Little Brauts [was] vesey happy & home at 5 to meet her clever & booful.' The next few weeks were spent awaiting the first proofs, some of which Elgar corrected and sent back on Christmas Day from Hasfield Court. In an accompanying letter he asked that the following dedication should be included: '*The Black Knight*, To my friend Hugh Blair, M.A.Mus: Bac: Cantab.'

With the proof correction almost finished, Edward began orchestrating the work on New Year's Eve. This was completed on 24 January 1893 and despatched to Novello two days later. It was probably with some sense of relief that he wrote at end of the full score: '*Laus Deo!*' (Praise God!). The full score was then passed to the copying firm of Alexander Bles for duplication and drawing out the wind parts in manuscript. The string parts were engraved by their own expert, a German named Brause whose skill was famous throughout the industry. It was hoped that the whole would be completed by 18 March.

First performances

Plans were now going ahead for the first performance which was scheduled for 18 April 1893 at the Public Hall in Worcester. During February and March Elgar was consistently busy rehearsing *The*

16 Moore *op.cit.*,13.

17 Moore *op.cit.*,14.



Left: The Worcester Festival Choral Society poster advertising first performance of *The Black Knight* (Elgar Birthplace Museum).

Above: The Worcester Public Hall where *The Black Knight* was premiered on 18 April 1893. The building was demolished in the 1960s.

Black Knight, receiving the engraved violin parts together with the manuscript full score to correct on 7 March. The remaining parts followed during the month. By April the Worcester Festival Choral Society was announcing the second concert of the 1892-93 season at which:

'Mr. Edward Elgar's Cantata "The Black Knight" for chorus and orchestra will be produced *for the first time*. Special pains will be taken in engaging high-class instrumentalists and principals. A chorus of 100 voices will be accompanied by a full orchestra of 50 instrumentalists including several London players of note.'¹⁸

Following a final 12 o'clock rehearsal on 18 April, the Elgars had dinner with Henry Dyke Acland, Hugh Blair and Frank Ehrke and then proceeded to the hall. Although Elgar normally led the Worcester Festival Orchestra, he took the baton from Blair for the first performance of *The Black Knight*. There is little doubt that the work received a great reception and splendid reviews.

Worcester Daily Times (19 April 1893)

The second concert of the season of the Worcester Festival Choral Society took place last evening at the Public Hall. In every particular the concert was a success. Its signal triumph was the proud achievement of Mr. Edward Elgar, aforetime leader of the band. The first performance of Mr. Elgar's new cantata, 'The Black Knight', made the concert specially attractive... The orchestra was composed of 60 instrumentalists, and the chorus of 100 voices, ample guarantees of the strength and efficiency...

18 From the advertising poster held at the Elgar Birthplace Museum

... 'The Black Knight' was the next item on the programme, the modest composer appearing to conduct. It is the greatest effort of composition Mr. Elgar has made. He has done himself eminent credit with instrumental suites and other trifles, but he has not previously ventured upon so large a work as a cantata. Under his direction the band and chorus sympathetically rendered 'The Black Knight'. Perhaps the orchestra were a trifle too strong for the chorus here and there, but, that notwithstanding, the performance was a positive triumph for the composer, and his masterly production was applauded with an enthusiasm which broke into positive cheers.

The Worcestershire Advertiser (19 April 1893)

Much was expected of the work, but the highest expectations were far out-distanced. There is little doubt that 'The Black Knight' will be in frequent demand where large and efficient orchestras and choruses are to be obtained. As to Mr. Elgar's treatment of the poem, he has throughout told the story as perfectly musically as any words could tell it. His orchestration is as nearly as possible perfect, and the many original and truly marvellous effects he obtains must make his work speedily known in musical circles. Originality abounds everywhere in the work.

Worcester Herald (22 April 1893)

Festival Choral Society
Grand Concert at Worcester.

On Tuesday night this Society gave its second concert of the season in the Worcester Public Hall. As Mr. Edward Elgar's cantata, 'The Black Knight', was to be performed for the first time, every section of the hall was taken by people who were eager to hear – and some, no doubt, to pass a critical opinion on – this rising composer's most ambitious work. The cantata concluded the first part of the programme; but it may be as well, perhaps, to speak of it at once and say that it emphasizes the characteristics of Mr. Elgar's orchestral writings – sumptuous examples of orchestration, relieved by charming melodies and sparkling with bright and picturesque passages. Mr. Elgar had a very cordial reception as he took the baton to conduct the performance of his work, and there was no mistaking the enthusiastic cheering which followed its conclusion...

... The performance of the work takes about 40 minutes but so realistic is its treatment, in consonance with the poem, that the interest of the audience increased rather than flagged till its conclusion. The cantata bristles with too many difficulties for any but a thoroughly competent orchestra to perform it. A liberal interspersing of professionals strengthened the band very much on Tuesday, with the result that the conductor had a sympathetic interpretation of his ideas, the performance being almost without blemish. Mr. Elgar has the true grasp of the principles of orchestration, and many of the passages – in particular those where the horn, flute, oboe and clarinet were used – were of striking beauty and picturesqueness. A sincere word of praise must be given to the chorus, who paid strict attention to their leads – some of them very awkward – and gave the proper emphasis to their parts.

The Musical Times (1 May 1893)

On the 18th ult. the Festival Choral Society gave a Concert, the interest of which centred in Mr. Edward Elgar's new Cantata 'The Black Knight', then given for the first time, and received with great enthusiasm by a large audience. The work is a setting of Longfellow's translation of Uhland's weird poem, and reveals qualities in the composer which are bound to bring him rapidly to the front. His themes are striking and picturesque, and his command of the means whereby they can be made the most of is very considerable. The result is a work displaying power, charm, and musicianship in a high degree. Its orchestration is excellent, and abounds in judiciously contrasted effects. Chorus and orchestra did their best for this, the most ambitious of the clever composer (who is a local man) and a performance of exceptional merit was the result.

Alice Elgar merely wrote in her diary: 'Quite glorious & splendid reception. Star most beautiful & Brauts had the proudest happiest evening in all ser lives.' Next evening they received the first newspaper giving a 'glorious notice of my darling Star's Triumph.'

A few days later Edward received an interesting letter from his great friend Hubert Leicester, a flautist in 'the brothers wind' who later became Worcester's first Catholic mayor.

You must indeed have been gratified by the splendid reception given to you & to the 'Black Knight' on Tuesday. Of course you have seen the local papers; as far as I have read them, there is nothing but praise both for the work & the composer.

I was sorry you should have missed me on Monday, but I was so ill that it was with the greatest effort that I rose in the morning & my throat so sore that I could not swallow properly. When I did reach rehearsal I had to sit down the whole time & be silent. The next day I was a lot better & able to help in the Vocal parts so you see I was wise to keep quiet at rehearsal. Have you quite recovered from the anxiety? The band fellows were all loud in their praise of the 'Knight' & hoped to hear it again.¹⁹

While Elgar's setting received significant acclaim, many criticised his choice of words. As the critic, Ernest Newman, wrote in 1906:

The Black Knight – described on the title page of the score as a Cantata – is said to be called by the composer himself a 'Symphony for Chorus and Orchestra', a title which it deserves by reason of the closeness of its texture and the concision and economy in the use of its material. It is set to a ballad of Uhland – '*Der Schwarze Ritter*' – that has been translated into broken-backed, spavined verse by Longfellow... The English verse, as already hinted, is not of a very high order, but its deficiencies are hardly noticeable through the music; while the ballad as a whole, with its quick dramatic narrative and its broad contrasts of mood, is admirably adapted to a musical setting.

The success of *The Black Knight* encouraged Elgar to make an organ arrangement of the Solemn March for which he received a fee of 3 guineas from Novello on 13 May 1894.²⁰ He sent a copy to his great friend, the blind organist, William Wolstenholme, on 13 July 1895.²¹ He received his first royalties for the complete work on 18 November 1894.

Although the premiere of the complete work had been extremely successful, it was not for 18 months that thoughts were being given to further performances. On 30 October 1894 Arthur Prendergast, whom the Elgars had met in Garmisch that summer, wrote to Edward regarding a possible performance in the capital by Miss Caroline Holland's Choir.

I have not yet heard from Miss Holland about her Society, but she shall have one of our leaflets about the 'Black Knight', & I hope she will not look as black as night on the occasion...²²

The next performance was, however, to be at the Shire Hall in Hereford by the Herefordshire Philharmonic Society. The first rehearsal was held on the afternoon of 3 November with Alice commenting: 'Booful music – triumphant over feeble & scanty performers.' She was somewhat

19 Letter from Hubert Leicester, 23 April 1893, Martin Bird transcript. EBM Letter 9773.

20 Moore *op.cit.* p.22.

21 Letter to William Wolstenholme, EBM letter 10325.

22 Letter from Arthur Prendergast, 30 October 1894, EBM letter 3904.

happier with the actual performance which took place on 9 November; ‘Black Knight quite blazing & splendid. Such a hapsy Braut & so saulsful proud.’ A lengthier appreciation was given by Richard Penrose Arnold (RPA of the *Enigma Variations*) in the following letter:

My dear Mr. Elgar,

I must send you a line to thank you so very much for having given me the opportunity of hearing your Black Knight. I think it is splendid, and was delighted with it, and I now wish to hear it again, but I hope when I next hear it the chorus will be a very much larger one. The orchestration seemed to me to be so specially interesting and varied, &, I shld. think, beastly difficult: I saw poor Blair once or twice in terrible difficulties, though everyone seemed to be as busy as possible.²³

On 13 December a third performance, with only piano accompaniment, was given at the Temperance Hall in Walsall²⁴ with Charles Swinnerton Heap conducting the Walsall Philharmonic Society. Heap had studied at Leipzig on a Mendelssohn Scholarship and became the conductor of the Birmingham Philharmonic Union in 1870. The performance received qualified approval:

The Walsall Observer (15 December 1894)

The concert closed with ‘The Black Knight’, a cantata for chorus and orchestra by Edward Elgar who, we believe, is a rising composer of great promise. The libretto is Longfellow’s version of Uhland’s legend ‘*Der schwarze Ritter*.’ It is a pity this work should ever be given without a band. It is very difficult and rapid in places, and what musical people call ‘catchy’, and for a chorus to undertake it without the aid of instrumentation, which we believe is elaborate, is a most trying task. The chorus, however, showed their excellent training by the spirited execution. Only a few weak attacks were noticeable, but we thought the male voices very much overpowered by the trebles, which were rather too numerous in proportion. No doubt this work would gain much more approval on a second hearing. It would have received more on Thursday if it had come first instead of last in the programme. Mr. Amos Keay rendered indispensable services in his very onerous duties as an accompanist [*sic*]. He never failed to perform his important part with his brilliant execution and his skilful reliability. It is superfluous to add Dr. Heap conducted with his usual musical ability and energy. Altogether this concert will be remembered as one of the most enjoyable the society has ever given.

Heap was so impressed by *The Black Knight* that he visited Forli on 21 December and invited Elgar to conduct the work with the Wolverhampton Festival Choral Society. It also led him, on 5 July 1895, to commission *King Olaf* for the North Staffordshire Festival which he also directed. (Heap’s untimely death in 1900 was a factor in the disastrous first performance of *The Dream of Gerontius*.)

Some two months later Arthur Prendergast wrote again to Edward regarding the proposed London performance.

I am glad to hear the Black Knight is to be done at Wolverhampton; it is getting on at Miss Holland’s Choir, and she has fixed her Concert for Thursday afternoon March 28th at St. Martin’s Hall with a final rehearsal at her house 72 Brook Street the preceding Tuesday the 26th.²⁵

23 Letter from Richard Arnold, 11 November 1894, EBM 3906.

24 The Walsall Temperance Association began construction of the hall in Freer Street in 1866. It was designed by Loxton Brothers of Wednesbury and was opened in 1867. It was used for public meetings, lectures, and concerts before becoming a cinema in 1931. It was demolished in 1965.

25 Letter from Arthur Prendergast, 22 February 1895, EBM letter 3905.

Following an orchestral rehearsal after lunch on 26 February 1895, Elgar himself conducted the Wolverhampton performance, given at the Agricultural Hall.²⁶ This time with a ‘band and chorus of 250 performers’ the work was extremely well received

The Wolverhampton Express and Star (27 February 1895)

Mr. Elgar had no easy task before him in setting to music Longfellow’s translation of Uhland’s weird ‘*Der schwarze Ritter*’ but he has attained his object with marked success. The orchestration was very fine and the work abounds in striking passages of great beauty, especially where the flute, oboe, horn and clarinet are used. The composer was fortunate in having his work in such good hands as the choral society. The chorus could not have been better; the band suffered slightly from having a hurried rehearsal, and were near making a serious mishap in the opening of the third scene ‘Pipe and Viol call the Dancers’ but with this exception, the performance was full of merit...

...Mr. Elgar received quite an ovation at the close of the work, and a pleasing little scene took place during the interval, when he appeared along with Dr. Heap and Mr. G N Adams in the ante-room, and thanked the members of the society for the excellent manner in which they had done their work.

The Birmingham Daily Post (27 February 1895)

The work of preparation received the advantage of the composer’s personal attention during the choral rehearsal on Monday night, and he made it manifestly clear that he knew precisely not only the effects he wanted, but how to obtain them, and the same may be said of the orchestral rehearsal yesterday afternoon, and when it is added that he was announced by invitation to conduct the performance it will be seen that considerable interest is attached to the occasion.

The performance must have been highly acceptable to the composer – not without blemish, for the orchestration, heavily scored, showed some roughness at times which might have been modified by a better acquaintance; but the chorus, who, under Dr. Heap, had bestowed attentive care in the work of preparation, revelled in their task and sang con amore. It would be a great pity if so richly conceived and highly successful work was not followed by others from the same pen. The applause at the close from the audience and executants was spontaneous and prolonged, and the composer had repeatedly to bow his acknowledgements.

Not surprisingly, Alice Elgar was overjoyed:

To Concert at 7.30. Never to be forgotten. Such a lovely reception & the glorious music & splendid chorus, & ovation to E[dward]. & a special ovation & speeches in the ante-room – A[lice]. so zuulsfully hapsy – Thank God for such happiness.

To London and further afield

The first London performance of *The Black Knight* was given at St. Martin’s Hall on 28 March 1895 by Miss Holland’s Choir (a charity ‘for sending little sick children into the country’). Miss Holland herself provided the piano accompaniment but this lack of an orchestra and the repetition of the words were to result in unfavourable reviews:

26 The agricultural hall was erected in 1863 by the corn merchants who felt that there was insufficient light to inspect the corn at the old Exchange building. It cost £2,000 and was situated on Snow Hill, opposite the Theatre Royal.

The [Evening] Standard (29 March 1895)

...The music is by no means gloomy. It is modern in spirit and phraseology, and although the part writing is not very difficult, it is not conventional, except in the repetition of the words. In adopting this device for lengthening the work, Mr. Elgar has, of course, precedents in abundance, but a composer of the present day need not employ methods that have become antiquated. The *Black Knight* was sung with much spirit by Miss Holland's choir of about sixty voices, conducted by Mr. Prendergast...

The Times (29 March 1895)

Miss Holland's Choir. The body of amateur singers which has in the past done no small amount of really artistic work within somewhat narrow limits, and has raised very large sums for charitable objects, gave a concert at St. Martin's Town Hall on Thursday afternoon, when a choral cantata by Edward Elgar, set to Longfellow's translation of Uhland, called *The Black Knight*, was on the whole very creditably performed. The work has clever points, such as the weird dance in which Death takes part, but it is sadly diffuse, the words are continually reiterated for no apparent reason, and very little dramatic skill is displayed. Sound musicianship and a laudable desire to vary musical rhythm of verses that are a little monotonous in their regularity are the best of the composer's qualifications apart from his possible skill as an orchestral writer, which could not, of course, be judged from the pianoforte accompaniment.

Alice Elgar's fury at the latter review prevented her from adding it to the couple's press cuttings books until five years later when she wrote:

!!! Not put in book till 10 April 1901 when such foolish remarks can have no sting. (C.A.E.)!²⁷

On 5 July 1895 Edward received a telegram from Swinnerton Heap saying that he had arranged to conduct a performance of *The Black Knight* with 'a full orchestra and chorus of 450' at Birmingham Town Hall in December. A day before the scheduled concert, on 4 December, the Elgars left Malvern to attend the rehearsal at the Midland Institute where they were introduced to the chorus. Next morning Edward had a bad headache but he soon recovered to accompany Alice to the Oratory at Edgbaston, where Cardinal Newman had written the *Dream of Gerontius* and where Dvořák had met the cardinal. After lunch with Mrs Heap they attended the orchestral rehearsal with the concert itself taking place during the evening. Alice predictably commented: 'Wonderful evening... Thank God for giving us beautiful things.'

There is little doubt that the work was well received, Robert Buckley writing:

Birmingham Daily Gazette (6 December 1895)

The 'Black Knight' is no merely ingenious vamping-up of stale and worn-out platitudes. From first to last the work bears the impress of strong and original thought. There is little or none of the quality known as elegance, but in its places is a rugged power combined with a richness of imagination and a fertility of invention which remind us of Richard Wagner or Thomas Carlyle. Without being affectedly eccentric, the themes are novel and striking, their development masterly, their harmonic treatment and orchestral colouring of a great and noble type, as well as modern in the extreme sense of the term.

Berrows Worcester Journal (7 December 1895)

The Birmingham Press is lavish in its praise of this work, which is regarded as of the highest artistic

27 The press cuttings files held at the Elgar Birthplace Museum.

value. We quote passages from the *Post* critique:- ... A work which may be characterised as the outcome of keen imagination and real musicianship, admirable in technique and replete with strength – a most honourable achievement. At the close an outburst of applause broke forth from audience and executants, and the gifted composer was summoned to receive a well-earned tribute of approbation.

Although praise for *The Black Knight* seems to have been universal, some criticism of its performance was printed in another Birmingham paper which said that it was '...too little rehearsed. The vocal parts are doubtless exacting, and hardly grateful to singers, but this does not explain the numerous faults of attack, the worst instance of which was the premature lead of the soprano in the dance scene, when for several bars a complete fiasco was threatened.'²⁸

Meanwhile, Elgar had begun to establish a regular correspondence with Novello's music editor, August Jaeger (Nimrod of the *Enigma Variations*). On 18 October 1897 he wrote to Edward:

I have persuaded Mr Webb, of Torquay to do your 'Black Knight' and he may perhaps write to you about it. The work is also to be done at Sligo (I believe) so there may be a chance of the beautiful work yet, if only people's eyes are opened a bit.²⁹

Some misgivings had been expressed by the conductor at Torquay regarding some of the vocal writing of the work, and Jaeger asked Elgar whether he would consider simplification. He replied by postcard:

Dear Mr. Jaeger:

Many thanks for your card: the Concert is on Dec.21: let me have any sort of copy this week if you can – poor B.K!

Yrs ever

E.E.³⁰

Novello's had also decided to reprint *The Black Knight* as Jaeger confirmed to Elgar on 10 December. He hoped that the passage beginning 'When he rode into the lists', where the Singers 'cannot at present get the words in Edgeways' could be altered in time for this new edition. He felt that 'not only can the singers not sing the words at the speed you demand, but in their efforts to "get them in" somehow they produce ludicrous effects (not intended by the composer) which make them laugh. If you can alter the passage, kindly send me your amended version as quickly as



Elgar's drawing of 'poor BK' which was included in a letter to August Jaeger postmarked 6 December 1897. (Elgar Birthplace Museum)

28 Young, Percy M.: *Elgar OM* (London: Collins, 1955), 73-4.

29 EBM letter 8282.

30 EBM letter 9517, postmarked 6 December 1897.

possible, will you please?’³¹ Just prior to the publication of the second edition of *The Black Knight*, Elgar wrote to Jaeger describing the work as he saw it:

I intended the work to be a sort of symphony in four divisions founded on the poem – different to anything, in structure, ever done before – where the ‘picture’ is fixable for a little time the words are repeated – in dramatic parts the words ‘go on’: it’s not a proper cantata as the orch. is too important: but if the pretty little public want a small orchestra they must have it.³²

He further expanded this view of the work in an important introductory note to the second edition:

This Cantata is symphonic in design; the poem is divided into four sections, which are musically illustrated. Where a ‘picture’ is suggested, the words are repeated; at the more dramatic points, the action is correspondingly rapid.

The work might be described as a ‘Symphony for Chorus and Orchestra founded upon Uhland’s poem *Der schwarze Ritter* rather than as a Choral Ballad.

Several exceptional difficulties in the vocal parts, chiefly occurring in the second scene, have been removed and the work is now practicable for smaller choral societies.³³

The first American performance³⁴ took place on 21 February 1902 by the Ravenswood Musical Club at the Congregational Church in Ravenswood, Illinois.³⁵ The conductor was Peter C. Lutkin³⁶ and the performance boasted a tenor soloist, Holmes Cowper. This concert was repeated on 27 November 1902.³⁷ The Canadian premiere of *The Black Knight* took place on 11 February 1904 by the Mendelssohn Choir of Toronto at the Massey Hall in that city. The choir was conducted by Augustus Steven Vogt with the accompaniment provided by the Pittsburgh Orchestra conducted by Victor Herbert. The programme commented: ‘The composer has been particularly successful in his treatment of Uhland’s weird poem.’ A review was admiring both of the work and the performance:

Elgar’s cantata, one of his comparatively early works, a setting of Uhland’s poem as translated by Longfellow, should alone allow him to be considered England’s representative composer. The work was presented in a most efficient light by the Mendelssohn Choir and the Pittsburghers. The interpretation was of course Mr. Vogt’s and his direction proved that he had grasped all the essentials ideas of Elgar’s creation. The choir, one would think, derived keen enjoyment in the performance, as

they sang with much life and spirit, and with a close observance of the nuances.³⁸

It was not until 11 April 1916 that the Columbia University chorus under Walter Henry Hall gave the New York premiere of *The Black Knight*, coupled with Frederick Converse’s cantata *The Peace Pipe*, at Carnegie Hall. *The New York Times* review was not particularly complimentary:

Elgar’s ‘Black Knight’ is one of the earlier cantatas preceding ‘The Dream of Gerontius’ by apparently eight or nine years. There is a certain vigor and flow in the music, certain passages that still seem striking, but by far the most of it seems to tend towards the commonplace. The composition suffers in comparison with Mr. Converse’s.³⁹

On 4 and 5 May 1938 a spectacular performance of the work was given in New York by 400 voices from the Down Town Glee Club and the Golden Hill Chorus under Channing Lefebvre with 50 musicians from the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. *The New York Times* was effusive in its praise: ‘Throughout the evening the choristers maintained the true pitch admirably and could be counted on for sharp attacks and releases.’⁴⁰

In spite of the appearance of the second edition of *The Black Knight*, the work had not sold as well as Elgar had hoped. He was to comment to Jaeger: ‘Another ‘Enigma’ – the Black Knight you say is unsuccessful commercially – and it’s the only thing I ever recd. any royalty on yet...’⁴¹ Sometime later ‘Nimrod’ was to sympathise and make a suggestion:

I say, your ‘Black Knight’, which is spanking fine stuff doesn’t move much for some reason or other, chiefly, no doubt, because the subject is a bit gruesome & the music ends poetically pp. I have thought that if we could do something with the work for orchestra alone, we might make it better known, & it has struck me that the *Banquet* music (Menuet &c.) might be done in a short orchestral suite. Do you think there is anything in the idea? There are several lovely themes in those ‘Dance’ & ‘Banquet’ movements.⁴²

This suggestion came to nothing and the success of Elgar’s subsequent compositions meant the work was relegated to relative obscurity. Even today, it is seldom performed but a rare New York airing of this ‘forgotten score’ was given by the Pro Arte singers on 11 March 1989. *The New York Times* previewed the attraction:

The music director, Johannes Somary, will retrieve the podium for a rare performance of Elgar’s first important choral work, written in 1893 [*sic*], ‘The Black Knight.’ A romantic tale of chivalry and sorcery set at a medieval jousting competition, the expansive score was described by the composer as ‘a symphony for chorus and orchestra.’ The Amor Artis Orchestra will join the chorale.⁴³

31 Moore, Jerrold Northrop: *Elgar and his Publishers – Letters of a Creative Life* (Oxford University Press, 1987), 59.

32 EBM letter 8305, 1 March 1898.

33 Note published in the Second Edition of *The Black Knight* published on 9 March 1898. In subsequent years the note was removed although all later printings were from the revised edition.

34 A reference has been found to a much earlier American performance of *The Black Knight* being given by the Bâton Club of Boston, Massachusetts on 18 November 1898. Extensive research among many respected archives in the area has failed to confirm this reference.

35 *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, 21 February 1902.

36 Peter Christian Lutkin (1858-1931) was a talented choirmaster and organist who resurrected the Northwestern Conservatory of Music at Evanston, near Chicago, Illinois.

37 *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, 21 September 1902.

38 *The Globe* of Toronto, 12 February 1904.

39 *The New York Times*, 12 April 1916.

40 *The New York Times*, 5 May 1938.

41 EBM letter 8350, 28 May 1899.

42 EBM letter 8526, 18 October 1901.

43 *The New York Times*, 5 March 1989.

The premiere recording of *The Black Knight* was made in 1984 by The Liverpool Philharmonic Choir and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Sir Charles Groves. (This was coupled with *Scenes from the Saga of King Olaf* by the London Philharmonic Choir and Orchestra conducted by Vernon Handley) but is sadly no longer available.⁴⁴ The only currently available recording is by The London Symphony Chorus and Orchestra conducted by Richard Hickcox, made in 1996. This is coupled with *Scenes from the Bavarian Highlands*.⁴⁵

Richard Smith has published around 25 books on historical aviation, but his retirement as a teacher of software development with British Telecom a few years ago enabled him to turn his attentions to researching the life of Elgar. He has had affection for the man and his music since his teens, and fate then gave him the opportunity to express this in more practical terms. In 2005 his book on the composer 'Elgar in America' was published by the Society and he has written several other articles for the Journal. He is currently Secretary of the West Midlands Branch and, with Ernie Kay, temporary compiler of the Elgar Society News.

44 EMI Classics CMS 5 65104 2.

45 Chandos 9436.