

# Arthur

## **Incidental music to a play by Laurence Binyon**

- 1 - The King and Sir Bedivere
- 2 - Elaine Asleep
- 3 - The Banqueting Hall at Westminster
- 4 - The Queen's Tower at Night
- 5 - Battle Scene
- 6 - Arthur's Passage to Avalon.

Approximate Length (suite): 23 minutes

First Performance (play):

Date: 12 March 1923

Venue: Old Vic Theatre, London

Conductor: The composer

Commissioned by: Laurence Binyon/The Old Vic Theatre

Elgar first became friendly with Laurence Binyon, the celebrated British First World War poet, through his setting of three of Binyon's poems as *The Spirit of England*, Elgar's last cantata first performed in 1917. When, towards the end of 1922, Binyon was commissioned by London's Old Vic theatre to write a play on the life of King Arthur, Binyon turned to Elgar to provide incidental music for the play. Elgar responded somewhat reluctantly, claiming that since Alice's death in 1920 his ability to compose had also died. He nevertheless produced a substantial score for the play which he himself conducted at the play's premiere at the Old Vic in March 1923.

Like most incidental music, the score is limited both by the size of orchestra that could be accommodated in the theatre and by the confines of the play itself, in places requiring snatches of no more than a few bars in length. But Elgar wrote more substantial introductions to all but one of the play's nine scenes. It is a suite formed from six of these which are usually heard today.

Ignore the incidental music tag - the label is inappropriate, for the score contains some of Elgar's most powerful and convincing post-1920 music. (Michael Kennedy, in his book *A Portrait of Elgar*, describes it as 'a superb score'.) The introductions to scenes 2 (Arthur and Sir Bedivere) and 8 (Arthur's Journey to Avalon), the latter a variant of the

former, capture both the majesty of medieval knighthood and the mystery of the holy grail, while the introduction to scene 4 (The Banqueting Hall at Westminster) is set to become more widely known: Elgar reworked it to form the basis of the second movement of his Third Symphony which he left unfinished at his death and which was realised in 1998 by composer Anthony Payne.

An orchestral suite, not by Elgar, can occasionally be heard in the concert hall, but the rarely performed full score deserves far greater exposure.