# The Elgar Society JOURNAL

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# The Elgar Society Journal

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*Front Cover:* Caradog (Caractacus) by Thomas Prytherch (1864-1926)
Courtesy of The National Library of Wales

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***Presentation of written text:***

*Subheadings*: longer articles benefit from judicious use of these.

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>
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> 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*.

At the end of the essay, add about a hundred words about the author, please.

Full version of the 'Notes for Contributors' please see:
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# EDITORIAL

On 13 December 1916, Marie Hall went into the Gramophone Company studios at Hayes to make the first recording of the Elgar Violin Concerto. The work was just a few years old, and the recording was of course severely truncated, but listening to the resulting discs would have been for many music lovers a thrilling experience, giving them their first chance to hear and get to know at least the outlines of Elgar's masterpiece. Further recordings were to follow, from Albert Sammons (two, the first also being cut), Yehudi Menuhin (two), and most of the great violinists up to the present day, with, of course, the sad exception of the dedicatee, Fritz Kreisler. On page 54 of this issue, John Knowles reviews a new recording of the concerto, by Michael Barenboim with the Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Alessandro Crudele. John calculates this to be the 55th recording of the work since that pioneering version from Marie Hall, and this surprising statistic prompted me to wonder if there is any need for there to be further additions to the list? Is there really anything new or insightful that a performer can add by way of interpretation to the Elgar, the Brahms, or any of the great classical masterpieces for that matter, most of which have been recorded countless times?

Throughout its history the recording industry has regularly evolved, stimulated by technical innovations which have transformed the way we buy and listen to recorded classical music – the introduction of electrical recording in the mid-1920s, the replacement of the 78 rpm shellac disc with the LP in the early 1950s, the development of stereo, and in the early 1980s the development of digital recording, bringing with it the CD and now lossless downloading and streaming. Each of these more than justified the re-recording of the mainstream repertoire, but we have arguably now reached the point where we are unlikely to witness any further significant improvement either in recording technology or means of supplying it to the listener. And if so, should then the industry call a halt to the recording of core repertoire, and focus solely on less familiar fare? As one who made a lifelong career in the recording industry I have often pondered this question, and will give my answer later in this Editorial!

When I was first bitten by the Elgar bug, as a teenager in the early 1960s, there were of course huge gaps in the Elgar discography, one of which was *The Music Makers*. I had read and digested Ernest Newman's analysis in the *Musical Times* of 1 September 1912, published a month in advance of the first performance, but live performances were few and far between and I had never managed to attend one. I can still remember the excitement I felt on buying that first recording under Sir Adrian Boult with Dame Janet Baker, and hurrying home to put it onto the record player, finally to be able to hear Elgar's

great work. The subsequent years have produced a huge number of first recordings of Elgar works, thanks in no small measure to the efforts of this Society, to the point where virtually none now remain unrecorded. And this is an area where the contribution of the recording industry to the music lover has been incalculable, allowing us to hear and evaluate works we would be unlikely to ever hear in live performance.

Benjamin Britten, in his Aspen Award speech in 1964, famously warned against the too-easy accessibility of great music, lamenting the fact that a masterpiece such as Bach's *St Matthew Passion* should be available to hear 'at the turn of a switch…to be listened to or switched off at will, without ceremony or occasion'. Britten was of course fortunate in living in a part of the world where it was possible to hear a live performance, a privilege not open to everybody. And he was also arguably being somewhat disingenuous, as he went on to rival Elgar in the number of his works he recorded under his own direction, but the point has some validity. Recordings do make it easy to treat classical music as a commodity, aided by radio stations such as Classic FM and increasingly Radio 3, where it is regularly used as some kind of aural analgesic, to ease away the pains of the day. I have lost count of the number of compilations of 'Relaxing Classics' issued which include Samuel Barber's *Adagio,* the compiler seemingly noting only the word 'adagio', oblivious to the fact that it is one of the most angst-filled works in the repertoire!

Happily, the recording industry continues to put us in its debt with the recordings of works rarely heard in the concert hall or opera house. Later in this issue (page 48), Paul Chennell gives a warm recommendation for Paul Spicer's new book on Sir Arthur Bliss, *Standing out from the Crowd.* Spicer confesses in his preface that when first commissioned to write the book he was hesitant to accept, due to what he felt was a personal lack of empathy with Bliss's idiom. On closer acquaintance with the music, presumably largely through recordings, his attitude changed considerably. Using Spicer's book as a *vade mecum*, I too have been revisiting Bliss through the many (some admittedly previously unplayed!) discs in my collection. As Spicer points out, Bliss was rarely a composer to wear his heart on his sleeve, and some works require repeated listening before they reveal their true quality, but the effort is repaid handsomely. This is something that only the recordings can make possible.

Of course, closer familiarity with a rarely heard work does not always guarantee musical satisfaction. Earlier this year, I was particularly looking forward to hearing a live performance of the Coleridge-Taylor Violin Concerto at The Proms, as I had hitherto known the piece from two recordings and found it less than inspired. Sadly, in spite of a passionate advocate in American violinist Elena Urioste, the work still failed to convince me as being more than a few pretty tunes strung together, lacking any real musical substance. This is of course a purely subjective reaction, and I know there are some who regard it as an important work, but through recordings and then a major artist taking it into her repertory, we at least get a chance to make an informed judgement.

A second book reviewed this month, to which David Morris gives a strong recommendation, is 'Quartet' by Leah Broad, in which she discusses the music and



colourful lives of four trailblazing women composers – Ethel Smyth, Rebecca Clarke, Dorothy Howell and Doreen Carwithen. The first two may be reasonably familiar – Smyth's *The Wreckers* gets an occasional performance and Clarke wrote a fine Viola Sonata, but these two works aside, my record collection yielded nothing else. Let us hope that this new volume will stimulate further recordings of music by these composers.

Two items of good news recently for those members who prefer to stream or download their music rather than fill their house with more CDs! The much-loved Hyperion label has been purchased by Universal Music, and its entire catalogue will eventually be available to download. And the LPO 'Live' label has announced an exciting streaming deal with Apple Music and other providers. Their 'live' catalogue includes Elgar recordings by Bernard Haitink and Vernon Handley, as well as Sir Michael Tippett's lustrous opera *The Midsummer Marriage*, conducted by Edward Gardner. This wonderful set has just won the *Gramophone* award for Opera Recording of the Year, and Elgar lovers will be delighted to learn that the award for Concerto Recording of the Year went to Timothy Ridout's new disc of the Elgar 'Viola Concerto' (being Lionel Tertis's transcription of the Cello Concerto) with the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Martyn Brabbins.

And so to return to the question posed in the opening paragraph - should the record companies stop recording core repertoire, as the catalogue bulges with ever more duplications? The answer has surely to be 'no'! Each generation of musicians brings its own perspective to the interpretation of the great classics, and by this means the art form remains vibrant. It would surely be arrogant as well as foolish to deny any talented young musician the opportunity to preserve for posterity his or her insights into the great masterpieces. Who knows, a young violinist might be in the studio as I write, making the 56th recording of the Elgar Violin Concerto and one which will prove to be revelatory?

This new issue of the *Journal* contains, as usual, articles and reviews which we hope readers will find of interest. And it might just be that these are now a little easier to read, as in response to comments from a number of members, the font size for the *Journal* has been increased. We listened and got 'the point'! Happy reading, and Season's Greetings!

The deadline for contributions for the April issue is 10 February 2024.

Andrew Dalton
with the Editorial Team of Kevin Mitchell, David Morris and Andrew Neill

**'Caractacus, King of the Silures, deliver'd up to Ostorius, the Roman General, by Cartimandua, Queen of the Brigantes.'**
**– print by F. Bartolozzi, British Museum.**



# *Caractacus:* the national opera that never was

**Julian Rushton**

Is it possible to conceive or re-conceive Elgar's *Caractacus* as an opera? In his annotations to Elgar's letters, Jerrold Northrop Moore mentions this as 'a proposal often made, and always greeted by Elgar with interest'. In 1918, with the war not yet over, Elgar responded to such a proposal from Harold Brooke at Novello: 'there is no one to produce anything now and no one to sing!'[1]

Elgar seems to have contemplated the conversion of his 1898 Leeds Festival cantata into an opera much earlier, but one of Brooke's predecessors. August Jaeger, poured cold water on the idea in December 1901:

> *Don't* cook up Caractacus for Covent Garden. It will never do … I cannot imagine Englishmen & women … enjoying Britons being shown on the stage under the *Conqueror's Yoke*! Your labour will all be wasted and & they'll *never ask you again* if the thing is a failure. You can't alter a Cantata into an opera, no one can. It has been tried times without number (Mendelssohn, Liszt, Dvořák are a few cases)…. Think it over and don't make rash promises, and don't waste your genius & your time on a forlorn hope.
>
> Write a *new* work.
>
> I have studied Caractacus again & cannot see anything *operatically* effective in it except the Love Duet & the march (with Britons tied captive to the Conquerors' wheels!)
>
> DON'T![2]

The duet and march are indeed operatic; such things are ubiquitous in nineteenth-century operas. A pertinent instance is the triumphal procession with captives, including a king, in Act II of Verdi's *Aida*, an opera set in a more distant past than *Caractacus*. However, the march celebrates an Egyptian victory; the premiere was in Cairo. Jaeger twice makes the point that an English [sic] audience would not want to see conquered Britons paraded through the Roman streets; yet apparently it was acceptable for such a scene to be heard in a concert.

I think, however, that much more of *Caractacus* is operatically viable – indeed, nearly all of it, and without too much labour for the composer. Jaeger gives no details

1 Letter of 16 or 23 April 1918. Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Elgar and his Publishers* Vol. 2, 799.

2 Letter of 9 December 1901. Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Elgar and his Publishers* Vol. 1, 318.

of earlier attempts to stage dramatic cantatas, and it would take a year's research to uncover enough evidence to justify his expression 'time without number'. Perhaps he was thinking of Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, which had been considered for the stage.

In recent years Handel's Old Testament oratorios and his Christian *Theodora* have been presented as operas; Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust* (1846), conceived as a 'concert opera' (i.e. a large-scale cantata), has been quite often staged. Perhaps Jaeger's understanding of opera ran on different lines from what an operatic *Caractacus* – or indeed *Elijah* – might be like. Traditionally, the main focus of serious opera was on the solo aria, a Baroque model that survived, *mutatis mutandis*, well into the nineteenth century. By then, however, operatic choruses had more to do than had been usual in earlier eras. Massed voices can represent a whole people in trouble (as it might be British) or in triumph (as it might be Roman). Verdi's early choruses, of which the best-known is 'Va pensiero' (for the exiled Hebrews in *Nabucco*), became identified with Italian subordination to foreign powers (e.g. Austria), or indeed the Vatican. Other choruses are military, as in *Aida*, and some are ritualistic; ritual is another common element in opera and figures in Elgar's Scene II, where it is combined with dancing (not attempted in a concert performance). Chorus, dance, powerful roles for soloists: add fine scenery and *Caractacus* could be formed into a Grand Opera like those of Meyerbeer, albeit not as long.

*Caractacus* falls into six scenes or *tableaux*, which excepting the last two are musically self-contained. This structure is well suited to works in which personal and national dramas are played out; the people's role matches those of the diva and virtuoso tenor and baritone. Berlioz's great epic *Les Troyens* had not been much performed by 1898, but its tableau structure is used in other operas. In Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov* the sufferings of the Russian people are as important as the fate of the Tsar; it begins with Boris's coronation and ends with him dead and Russia in chaos. *Caractacus* begins in hope and ends in defeat; a great Czech national opera, Smetana's *Dalibor*, ends with the hero's death in battle.

A complete operatic representation of another Briton who interested Elgar should not end happily. John Dryden's 'semi-opera' *King Arthur* (music by Purcell) is a national epic subtitled 'The British Worthy'. It ends with Arthur's triumph over the Saxons, despite much of its first audience being 'English' (hence in part Saxon); Dryden stops well short of the end of Arthur's life, amid the chaos of civil war.

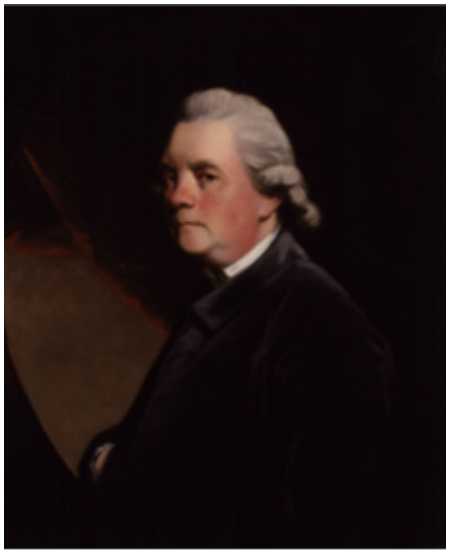
*Caractacus* includes arias as well as the ravishing duet that even Jaeger considered operatic. Hence we might speculatively view it as potentially a 'choral' and a 'national' opera, like Handel's oratorios in which the subject is the fate of the Hebrews, threatened by slavery (*Belshazzar*) or conquest (*Saul*, *Samson*, *Jephtha*) as much as of the title-roles. Although the death of Samson is a kind of triumph, and Jephtha's daughter is spared (contrary to the Old Testament), Saul and Jonathan are slain by the Philistines and mourned with a chorus and the famous 'Dead March'.

For *Caractacus* the Leeds festival, insisting on a choral work rather than Elgar's proposed symphony, got just what it wanted: a dramatic cantata with strong solo roles and fine choruses. As already suggested, these cantata or oratorio materials are, with



added dance and spectacle, decidedly operatic, as is highlighting the fate of individuals against the background of international, inter-cultural, or religious conflicts. While those with whom we sympathize are often dead at the end, heroes may live on, like Aeneas in Purcell's and Berlioz's operas where, however, our sympathies are mostly with Dido. Caractacus and his family are spared by the mercy of the Roman emperor; Robin Holloway suggests an analogy with Mozart's last opera, *La clemenza di Claudio* rather than *di Tito* (the later Emperor, Titus).[3]

Whereas King Arthur is legendary, Caractacus seems to have existed in history: a genuine 'British worthy' who had already inspired operatic treatment in different languages. Johann Christian Bach's Italian opera *Carattaco* (1767) was composed for London. For Antonio Sacchini's last opera, in French (1786), the librettist adopted the worthy's alternative name, Arviragus, under which Caractacus appears in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*. *Arvire et Evelina* is based on an English play, William Mason's *Caractacus* (1759), which largely follows Tacitus's account in his *Annals*: Caractacus is betrayed by Cartimandua, Queen of the Brigantes, a plot element omitted by Acworth.



**William Doughty's portrait of William Mason (oil on canvas, 1778)**

French audiences liked happy endings, so Sacchini's librettist shirked (Elgarian word!) the hero's ultimate failure; when *Arvire et Evelina* was presented in London it was bizarrely advertised as 'the triumph of the English [sic] over the Romans'![4] Acworth was a well-read man of letters; it would be interesting to know whether he knew Mason's play.[5] A feature of the play and Acworth's libretto is the role of Caractacus's daughter; was Evelina perhaps the model for Eigen? The other Caractacus opera, an early work by George Alexander Macfarren (c. 1834), was never performed. In any case, I am reasonably confident that

3 Robin Holloway, ' The early choral works', in *The Cambridge Companion to Elgar*, ed. Daniel M. Grimley and Julian Rushton (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 78.

4 Julian Rushton, 'Musicking *Caractacus*', in Bennett Zon (ed.), *Music and Performance Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain. Essays in Honour of Nicholas Temperley* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 221–240.

5 On Acworth, see Charles Edward McGuire, 'Elgar and Acworth's *Caractacus*. The Druids, race, and the individual hero', in *Elgar Studies* ed. J. P. E. Harper-Scott and Julian Rushton (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 50–77.

Elgar would have known nothing of these precedents.

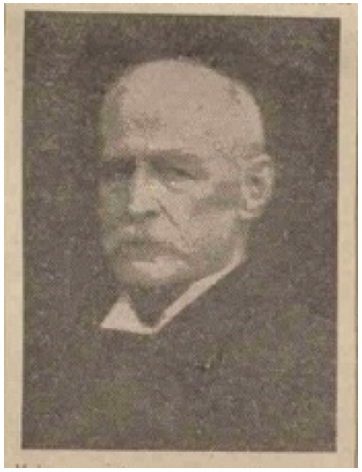
### *Making an opera*

The first creative step is the libretto. Composers may make notes of ideas suited to the story before receiving the poem, but they need words to write for singers. In earlier times, the poet's name might be printed larger than the composer's; today we would not expect this on a poster:

CARACTACUS
A Grand Opera
by
Mr Acworth
the music by Mr Elgar

Acworth had adapted Longfellow for 'Mr Elgar', the successful cantata *King Olaf* which is unsuited to the theatre, not only because of the battle at sea but because the chorus often acts as a narrator. *King Olaf* also lacks *unity of action* in the Aristotelian sense. *Caractacus* possesses this quality of ancient tragedy, though not the other unities of time and place, but it does demonstrate Aristotle's definition of tragedy from a hero's fatal flaw, in this case Caractacus's too ready acceptance of the Arch-Druid's prophecy of an unlikely victory.

Opera librettos include stage directions. This may seem odd in the text of a concert work, but Acworth included several in *Caractacus*, as did Berlioz in *La Damnation de Faust*. In what follows, Acworth's stage directions are in *italics* for ready identification. In a concert, audiences should have a programme with the text – and enough lighting in which to consult it (earlier opera audiences could also purchase librettos and follow them in candle-lit theatres).



**Henry (Harry) Arbuthnot Acworth (1849-1933) (from the local newspaper notice of his death – the only image we can trace. Eds)**

The heading of Scene I is *British Camp on the Malvern Hills.—Night. Caractacus and the British host entering the camp*. This was no doubt intended to help listeners enter into the spirit of the drama, but it also suggests action for the hypothetical opera. Formally dressed concert singers will already have taken their seats before the music begins. They stand up to sing, as also when operas are given in concert performance; this could detract from the dramatic atmosphere. In a *Caractacus* opera the British host could be seen entering as the curtain rises. There is no overture (not unusual in opera c. 1900), but there is nearly a minute of music before voices are heard, and the stage could continue to fill during the relatively simple first choral utterance (about another half minute). Opera choruses are professional and fewer in number, though nearly as loud, as the amateur choruses for which Elgar composed.

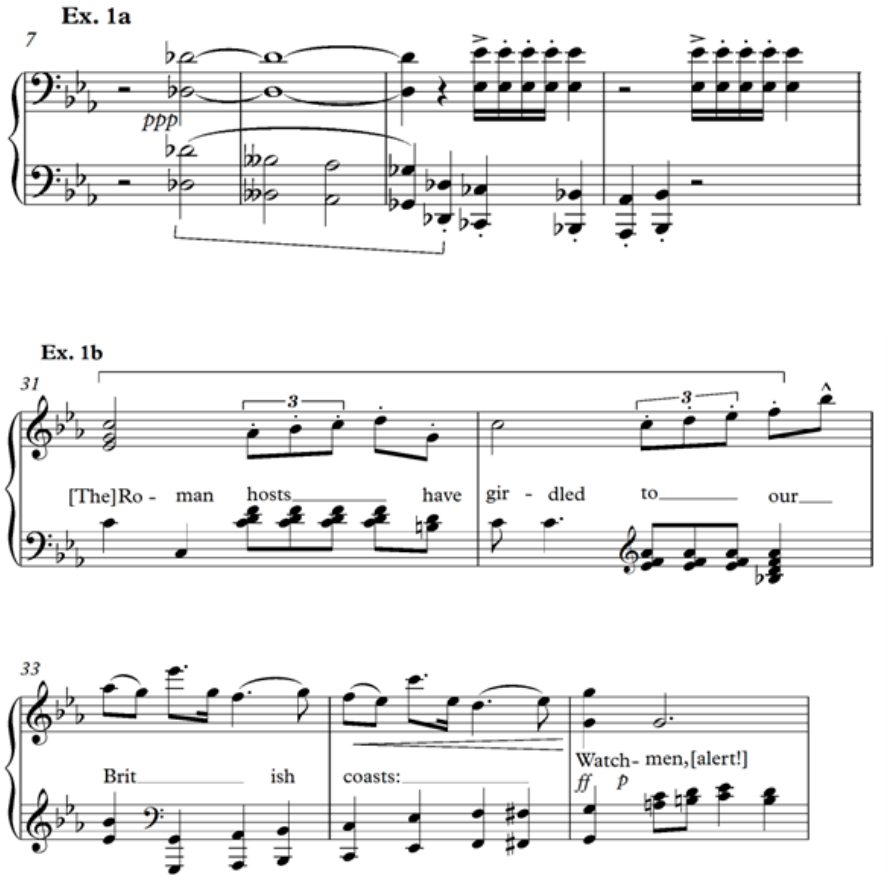
Acworth's stage-directions reflect his determination to evoke location and action precisely, so assisting the audience's imaginative response. Rome and the Malvern Hills are open invitations to a stage designer and two of the stage sets could be repeated with little variation. Actual fighting is not shown and the choreography in Scene II is not complex, so '*Caractacus*, the opera' should not be too expensive to mount.

In Scene I, the soldiers disperse to rest before the inevitable conflict, Caractacus has a monologue (recitative and aria); then Eigen and Orbin enter successively, so that Scene I closes with a trio. What could be more operatic? Elgar's musically self-contained tableaux are bound together by leitmotifs, the many thematic cross-references offered to the Leeds audience in the programme-note by Herbert Thompson, who worked with Elgar's annotations on a proof of the vocal score. Elgar allowed Thompson licence to change the names of motifs, but he accepted them almost throughout. In what follows italicised text in '*quotes*' is taken from that vocal score.[6]

The scene in Britain is of defeat, subjugation, and '*desolation*', Elgar's label for the motif at fig. 6. If the curtain is raised as the music begins, a spotlight could fall on Caractacus as his motif is played (bars 7–9), a doleful phrase that interrupts the military character of this nocturnal march (Elgar wrote *quasi Marcia*; in Berlioz's *L'Enfance du Christ* a 'Marche nocturne', also in C minor, accompanies Roman soldiers in occupied Jerusalem). In two subsections, women address the soldiers, first contraltos ('Night has clos'd above us'), then sopranos ('So the King shall find you'), each answered by tenors and basses who revive the brittle military music. There follows a sturdy fugato ('Comrades firm and fearless') and what Elgar labelled '*Climax of martial "idea"*' (four bars before fig. 16); this is followed by the grandiose entry of the 'Britain' motif. Ex. 1 is a reminder of these motifs, which recur in various guises throughout the work: Ex. 1a (after an ominous silence) is 'Caractacus' (bracketed); Ex. 1b (simplified texture): 'Rome' (bracketed): 'Britain', after the bracket, leads to a reiteration of the watchmen's cry.

Perhaps an experienced opera composer would offer something shorter, and less developed musically, than this choral section, but Elgar did contrive to combine a well-constructed musical form with the exposition of leitmotifs. Wagner equated the art of composition with the art of transition; Elgar's mastery of both is in evidence from fig. 17 as the march fades, implying (with no stage-direction) that the chorus exits rather than stands or sleeps during the remainder of Scene I. The voices of unseen watchmen in the scenes for Caractacus, his daughter, and Orbin would be very effective in a theatre.

6 Now in the British Library; formerly in the Birthplace where I examined it when in preparing 'Musicking *Caractacus*' (see note 4). See also Julian Rushton, 'Elgar's letters to Herbert Thompson', *Elgar Society Journal*. 21/6 (December 2019), 4–26.




**MUSIC 1a Caractacus motif; 1b Rome and Britain motifs**

Caractacus's introspective monologue (figs. 18–32) is placed where protagonists usually have big solos in traditional opera (*Il trovatore*; *The Flying Dutchman*) and indeed in *The Dream of Gerontius*. There is nothing new about such multi-sectioned monologues, the form dictated by a train of thought; they were even a requirement for Italian composers of Verdi's generation. A good precedent for Caractacus's monologue is an aria for the flawed hero, Max, in Act I of Weber's *Der Freischütz* (see the Table). Although the order of relative peace and disturbance is not identical (see the asterisks), each character is reviewing the difficult situation in which he finds himself.



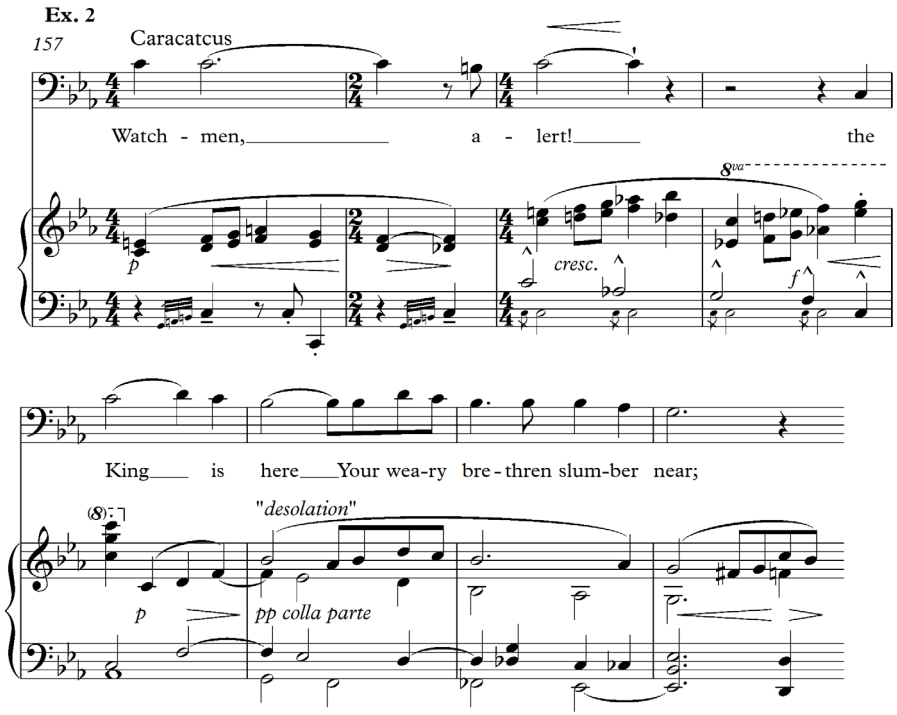
***Monologues of Max and Caractacus***

| Weber, *Der Freischütz*, Act I sc. 3 | Elgar: *Caractacus*, Scene I |
|---|---|
| **Recitative** following on from previous music (waltz), not using its motives | **Recitative** following on from previous music (march), using its text ('Watchmen, alert!') and motives |
| **Aria 1:** 4/4, E flat, Moderato: 'Durch die Wälder'. Recitative: *sizzling tremolo: apparition of the demon Samiel | **Aria 1:** 4/4 C minor leading to E flat, 'Well rest ye on your batter'd shields' |
| **Aria 2:** 3/4, G, Andante 'Jetzt ist wohl ihr Fenster offen' (the air is sweet, no doubt). ***Nostalgia*** for happier days with his beloved Agathe | **Aria 2:** 3/4, E flat, *Andantino*, 'The air is sweet', ***Nostalgia*** for rural idyll:<br>Middle section: *Poco più mosso*, E flat minor, invoking the Spirits of the Hill; Coda/reprise in E flat major |
| | Quasi recit., F minor, 'I have fought and I have striven'; new motif** |
| **Aria 3:** C minor, *Allegro con fuoco*, 'Doch mich umgarnen finstre Mächte' | **Aria 3:** C minor *Allegro molto* 'I have driven o'er the ridges steep of war' (opens in F minor, ends in G minor)<br>*sizzling tremolo: **Rome*** motif<br>**continuing with this new motif |
| | Coda: Recit. 'But it ends'; Chorus: 'Watchmen alert'; Caractacus 'Nay, not yet': D minor, ending in E flat. |
| Entry of Caspar | Entry of Eigen |

Caractacus begins by echoing 'Watchmen, alert', combined with his own motif (Ex. 2). Showing sympathy with his people's suffering, we hear '*desolation*' (introduced earlier, fig. 6). This section is a lyrical declamation rather than austere recitative. It starts at the previous march tempo, but gradually slows, adding a gentle motif signifying '*rest*' (fig. 20). Caractacus *proceeds to the mound by the Spring of Taranis* for the aria proper, in the work's first triple metre (**Aria 1** in the table): a '*peaceful meditation*' with delicate orchestral motivic weaving on a static bass. At fig. 24 Caractacus *ascends the mound* and his mood changes, for the struggle is not over. The 'Quasi recitative' reflects this mood-change; a new motif (fifth bar after fig. 24: 'I have fought and I have striven') links this declaration with the faster but more aria-like continuation (fig. 25; ** in the table). The coda (Andantino) at 'But it ends' includes a soft statement of Caractacus's motif (fifth

bar after fig. 30); but he says 'No' and resolves to continue the struggle. Back in a duple metre, his own motif is presented softly then (three before fig. 32) *fortissimo* in shorter note-values.

**Ex. 2**




No cadence ends this magnificent aria, so there is no chance to applaud; instead there is another transition offering a striking key-change (E flat to E minor) and a new motif, Eigen's. This, after a short pause, resumes the tempo of the transition, yet Elgar has modulated not only in key but from assertive masculinity to music likely to have been understood, in 1898, as feminine in character.

On the passage between figs. 33 and 34 Elgar wrote: '*this is what I call a conversation (domestic* [illegible]*) tune used to bring all else together*'. Orbin enters; the 'conversation' is operatic, but becomes less domestic with Eigen's report of the Druid Maiden's advice, where pastoral music (fig. 40) yields to slower music of a prophetic character (third bar after fig. 42) for reported speech. Caractacus should follow the example of the German Arminius (Hermann), who lured a Roman legion into the forest and destroyed it; or he should take to the hills. But, emphatically, he should *not* fight in open country. The 'family' echoes these words in unison, ending the trio (fig. 51) in the scene's original key (C minor).



This 'domestic' scene closes with its relative, E-flat major, and with a hint of the 'Britain' motif (fig. 52; this is the main key of the cantata's Epilogue). Following a reference to Caractacus's Aria 1 as *They descend the hill*, the last four bars are labelled '*Spirit*' in the vocal score; these prepare for the motif at fig. 53, '*Peace*'. Scene I closes with a short chorus for invisible *Spirits of the Hill*. This is not obviously operatic but could be strikingly effective in a theatre: an empty stage, lights low, the chorus unseen, a dawn glow on the backdrop (Malvern hills) with the morning star (the planet Venus) invoked by the spirits. With a final call of sentries from *afar* and Caractacus's motif, the G major of the chorus is lost in a return to C minor, the opening key of the Scene I and, here, of what Elgar might have called 'stern reality' (cf. his note on *Falstaff*).

## *Structure of the 'opera'*

Elgar in his letter to Harold Brooke suggested that 'the first two scenes wd. knock into one act well'.[7] I would prefer to carry on through Scene III, in which case Act I would last just over an hour. To end an act with a love-duet was an operatic tradition, and this example was much admired at the general rehearsal, as Alice Elgar's diary records.[8] The action divides naturally at this point, as the shorter Act II – c. 35 minutes before the cantata's epilogue – deals with battle, defeat, and exile. The 'Woodland Interlude' separating Scenes II and III covers a change of scene. Actually *Caractacus* could run without an interval, as it is shorter than *Das Rheingold* or Act I of *Götterdämmerung*. Scene-changes should not be too difficult. Scenes I and IV are by the Malvern Hills, and Scenes III and V are near the river Severn (Hafren).[9] Opera audiences of the time expected realistic representations of place, so Scene VI should show something typically Roman (but not the obvious one, the Coliseum, which would be an anachronism).

*Pace* Jaeger, Scene II is arguably the most operatic of all: an arrogant priest presides over a ritual, disturbed by Orbin's truthfulness when he says what the priest does not want to hear. Interrupted rituals were not new, with human sacrifice averted by troops in Gluck's Iphigenia operas and by the heroine in Mozart's *Idomeneo*. Druidic victims were probably an animal other than human.[10]

The scene-change between Scenes I and II might be helped if the hill or mound in the former could support the Arch-Druid's throne in the *sacred grove by the tomb of the kings*. The gentle atmosphere created by singing and dancing maidens, circling the sacred oak, is dissipated by the tremendous choral invocation to Taranis. Orbin's dialogue with

7 See note 1

8 Diary entry for 1 October 1898, mentioning the applause that was officially banned (and had to be suppressed) on the occasion by police (*Yorkshire Post*, 3 October). Martin Bird (ed.), *Road to Recognition. Diaries 1897–1901* (Rickmansworth: Elgar Works, 2015), 118.

9 'Severn' in England, but the battle was probably well upstream from Malvern, perhaps in what is now Powys, where the river is 'Hafren'.

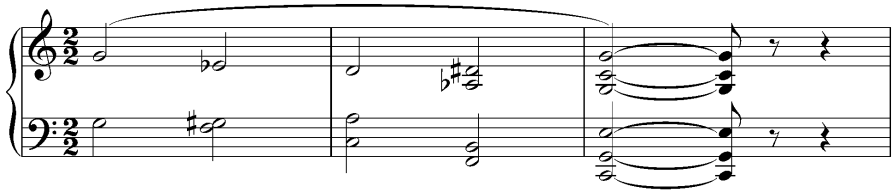
10 Mason, following Pliny, identifies the victim as a white steer.

the Arch-Druid is thoroughly operatic, with a *Parsifal*-like motif for the '*spell*' (fig. 13) followed by '*horror*' when Orbin's shield shows a dead warrior. The music is formed by varied repetitions (another Wagnerian trait). No sacrifice takes place on stage, as the scene dissolves into chaos. Caractacus and his troops hear the Arch-Druid's bad advice, to meet the enemy head-on; the 'spell' motif returns, but now grandioso rather than mysterious (fig. 22), and as the Arch-Druid '*ascends his throne*' he appropriates the 'Britain' motif (fig. 23) before prophesying a Roman defeat.

There are two contrasted reactions. Caractacus's exuberant aria 'Leap to the light' uses a simple repeating form (varied strophes); Orbin's vehement protest (fig. 35) is declaimed, his motif stirred up in the orchestra (Elgar wrote '*Orbin in a rage*' two bars before fig. 36). He is driven away; the druids' continuing curses are contrasted to the troops who take up 'Leap to the light'. Orbin's motif has the last defiant word (from fig 58), an admirably dramatic, and Wagnerian, closing gesture.

Prefaced by the 'Woodland Interlude', Scene III is an illusory calm before the battle. *In the distance youths and maidens sing while they weave sacred garlands*. Their gentle chorus is prefaced by a daringly harmonized version of Caractacus's motif (Ex. 3), repeated at the end.[11] Woodland music introduces and punctuates Eigen's aria. *Orbin enters* for the dramatic narrative of his apostasy and new life as a warrior. The lovers first sing together over a varied reprise of the chorus; just before fig. 24 the chorus could exit, to a long diminuendo where a concert-hall chorus would simply sit down. The rest of the scene is the ecstatic love duet followed, or not, by an interval.

**Ex. 3** "*In the distance youths and maidens sing while they weave sacred garlands.*"



Scene IV is again *The Malvern Hills*, but the mood has changed. The short introduction merges with the chorus of maidens in music of palpable fear. The chorus, in a rounded form (to fig. 6), may seem long for an opera, but with rumours abounding there could be stage business, exits and entries, and then the arrival of Eigen. Earlier themes, Elgar directing Thompson to p. 32, are *'saddened*' and the theme of the Druid Maiden's reported speech (Scene I) is woven into the texture (around fig. 8). This time her prophecy is as explicit as it is accurate: 'Who falls from the mountain / Shall fall by the sword, / Who flits from the forest / Be bound with a cord'.

11 Elgar wrote on the first bars (Ex. 3), for Herbert Thompson's benefit: '*This is hideous on the piano. Don't say anything till you've heard the insts do it!*'



The reprise of the anxious chorus is interrupted by the arrival of troops and Caractacus himself, fleeing the field of battle. The army has been overwhelmed because of their military blunder: 'We were gathered by river' rather than adopting guerrilla tactics. Among other motives, with the irony available to a composer using leitmotifs, an orchestral figure like that in 'Leap to the light' forms part of the texture after fig. 20. There is time to pause and lament the dead in Caractacus's third aria, with choral contributions: 'O my warriors', noted for its septuple metre. This scene, like Scenes I to III, is fully closed musically, but it ends in D major rather than its opening G minor; things have moved on. Why use a major key for a lament, one might ask; is it not 'major cheerful, minor sad'? But a major key *eliminates self-pity*; Caractacus laments not his own fate, but that of his warriors. There are earlier instances Elgar might have known of what Donald Tovey called 'highest pathos' in the major.[12]

Following this closed tableau, the remainder plays without strong dividing cadences. There is no need for elaborate stage props, so the next scene-change could be done quickly; or Elgar, like Debussy in *Pelléas et Mélisande* shortly before its premiere, might have been obliged to compose a short interlude. Scene V, *The Severn*, begins in D minor with a four-bar chromatic introduction lifted from near the end of Caractacus's first aria, at 'but it ends' (Scene I, four bars before fig. 30). In Scene V the fifth bar introduces a diatonic theme that descends over nearly two octaves. The chorus is of druid maidens, and the prophecy is alluded to by the orchestra in a middle part (low clarinets) as they sing. The bard (fig 2) introduces a new theme associated with *British prisoners embarking on the Roman galleys*. Shun the sight, he sings, as Britons in fetters cross the stage. Despite Jaeger, I at least find this not only moving, but operatic; Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* (1893) anticipates the scene, with prisoners (not warriors, however – far from it) boarding the ship that takes them into exile in Louisiana.

**The Oak Grove: At the heart of Druid culture**

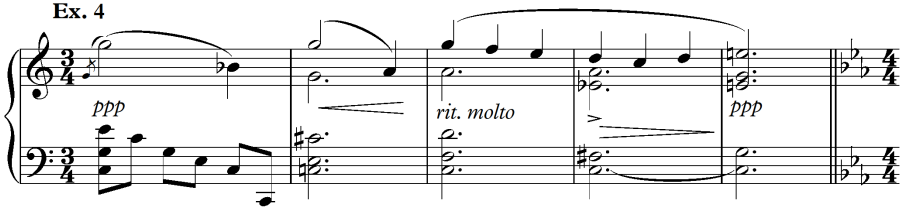
12 Handel's 'Dead March' in *Saul*; Gluck's Orpheus in 'Che faro senza Euridice' (to which Tovey was referring); Dido's farewell in Berlioz's *Les Troyens*.

The orchestral coda to Scene V is another masterly transition. The lamenting motifs are challenged, then overwhelmed by the leitmotif of Rome (fig. 8). A mighty crescendo breaks into Scene VI. About two minutes elapse before there is any singing, which might allow a scene-change without interrupting the musical continuity.

'*I can't analyse this movement*', wrote Elgar for Thompson's benefit (perhaps to his relief). Elgar could have drawn attention to the orchestral 'flash of sword and corslet' (around fig. 7), a figure anticipated in 'Leap to the Light'. At *Poco meno mosso* (after fig. 10), *Eigen, Orbin and Caractacus pass*, barefoot, to the melody of the bard's lament. There is no stage-direction for Claudius's entry but the chorus tells us when he arrives ('The Emperor fills the currule chair', fig. 21). Claudius leads the dialogued scene, an element, again *pace* Jaeger, more typical of opera than cantatas. Caractacus answers boldly as a king, not a slave; Eigen and Orbin think back to their place of origin; and the chorus calls for the death penalty. Caractacus responds with a hint of his lament (now in 4/4), asking Claudius to spare not him, but his 'comrades' and his 'guileless daughter and the warrior bard'. Despite the renewed indignation of the people, Claudius relents.

The following quartet, an operatic ensemble of reconciliation, is rather obviously not enough to end the putative opera. It is a happy (or fairly happy) ending for the exiled Britons, but after a climax (Eigen soaring to top C) the scene finishes very quietly: ***ppp***, without choral participation and with a cadence that, unlike those of earlier scenes, is elusive, even (deliberately) weak. In Ex. 4, the first bar is where the quartet's last word ('chain') is sung; the motif is that of Scene I's 'domestic' conversation. There is a sense of transition; the choral epilogue, which falls outside the drama, begins at a similarly low dynamic level in C minor, with music derived from Scene I (but now 'The clang of arms is over').

**Ex. 4**




## *The finale problem*

The grand finale of '*Caractacus*, the cantata' is designed to showcase the Leeds Festival Chorus. But the massed voices are no longer in character, or characters: druids, soldiers, Romans; they are of 'today' (1898). Some operas end with an epilogue (*Don Giovanni* is one) but not with such a time-shift, for which a precedent is again Berlioz in *L'Enfance du Christ*. There is possible comparison with Hans Sachs's oration on the purity of German art (*Die Meistersinger*), but he remains in character and the final stage in the drama follows.



The *Caractacus* epilogue is not so much a national or patriotic chorus as one that is downright imperialistic. It forgets pre-Christian Britons and scorns the Roman empire ('crumbled into clay') to proclaim the virtues of the British equivalent. This is no place to review, again, whether Elgar was an imperialist; he was certainly a patriot, and he himself suggested a *patriotic* finale, suitable for the work's eventual dedication to Queen Victoria (Empress of India). To Jaeger he blamed 'the worder' (Acworth), who 'instead of paddling his feet' in patriotic sentiment, 'goes & gets naked and wallows in it', later adding 'I knew you wd. laugh at my librettist's patriotism (and mine) never mind: England for the English is all I say' (though 'Britain for the British' would have been more appropriate).[13] Perhaps one should not take remarks in private letters too seriously, especially given Elgar's habitual teasing of the future 'Nimrod', but the annotated vocal score suggests that Elgar himself may have shared the attitude of the Roman commander in Mason's play who says: 'The Romans fight / Not to enslave, but humanize the world'. For Elgar wrote in the vocal score lines translated from Virgil: '*a land / Pregnant with empire, who the ancient race should exalt, and bend the world / Under the yoke of laws. Virg. Aen. IV 264–7*'.

I can think of only one opera for which such an epilogue was even planned: *Les Troyens*. Berlioz noted that the dying Dido, according to old beliefs, could see the future. Cursing Aeneas, she sees a Carthaginian avenger (Hannibal) and then the fall of the city she founded; her last words are 'Carthage will perish: Eternal Rome'. Berlioz at first wanted heroes of Rome to parade, displacing the vengeful Carthaginians, and invoked France's North African empire (including Carthage); but he scrapped the last idea as 'puerile chauvinism' without composing any music for it.[14] He then rejected the parade of Roman worthies, leaving the Trojan March ringing out against the curses of the Carthaginians. This definitive ending has been subject to criticism, but it is more dramatic than his earlier ideas. Despite a vision of the Roman Capitol, nothing extraneous is dragged in, for the whole *Aeneid* is postulated on the future glory of Rome.

So here, finally, is where Elgar would have had to think again, yet it need not have cost him too much labour. '*Caractacus* the opera' needs no long epilogue, but a more positive conclusion than the pianissimo coda to the quartet of principals – though not, I hope, a version of the strange wishful thinking that has Caractacus and his family become Christians (perhaps to be executed by Claudius's successor, Nero).[15]

What might we wish Elgar to have written? A sequel to the quartet, perhaps, with the principals centre stage, their voices in relief against the chorus? Perhaps the multitude might murmur its acquiescence, then its approval of the Emperor's clemency. Emperors

13 Letters to Jaeger, 21 June and 12 July 1898. Jerrold Northrop Moore, Elgar and his Publishers, Vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 1987), 76 and 79.

14 Hector Berlioz, *Correspondance générale* Vol. V (ed. Hugh Macdonald and François Lesure, Paris: Flammarion, 1989), 401.

15 I remember reading this notion somewhere when working on *Caractacus* in areas of the libraries outside my own discipline (ancient history, classics), but failed to make a note of it.

were supposed to be wiser than their subjects, and the opera could end with a short choral acclamation like that in Mozart's *La Clemenza di Tito*. Elgar could have redeployed music from the epilogue, possibly the passage he labelled (fig. 54) '*Modern Britain. A March*'. This follows a last reference to 'Watchmen, alert' (now 'Britons, alert'), in the closing key, E flat. Elgar's art of transition could cope with this, with modulations expressing the popular change of heart (some new words would have had to be commissioned). The soloists could re-enter, as in the Mozart, their voices heard above now genial choral music; this, once again, would be thoroughly operatic.

To conclude: with much less labour than would be required to complete his *Apostles* trilogy or his third symphony, Elgar might, had he taken the plunge, have turned *Caractacus* into an opera, choral and national, but by no means chauvinistic. The history of opera in English could have been subtly altered by such a work if it had been staged early in the last century at Covent Garden, or by the Carl Rosa company. But this speculation will no doubt, and properly, remain a piece of alternative history, my own wishful thinking about a pre-Variations masterpiece that has fascinated me over many years.

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**The Malvern Hills from the garden of the Birthplace (The Firs)**



# Elgar and Handel

**Relf Clark**

## *Introduction*

In 1923, Elgar arranged for full orchestra the overture to Handel's *In the Lord put I my trust*, HWV 247, the second of the eleven Cannons (or Chandos) anthems.[1] The first performance of the arrangement took place on 2 September that year, at the Worcester Festival, and was given by the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Elgar.[2] This essay marks the centenary of that premiere by attempting a brief summary of the bearing that Handel's music had on the career and music of Elgar.

## *I 1860s*

It was in the context of the publication of the 1923 arrangement that Elgar told John E. West of Novello & Co. that he had known the Handel overture since he was 'a little boy', through the experience of hearing it performed from what he described as 'the old two stave organ arrangement'.[3] That reference to the organ makes it highly likely that Elgar's childhood contact with the work came about through hearing his father play it on

1 Kent, C.J., *Edward Elgar* [:] *a guide to research* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), 328. The anthem dates from 1717. The designation 'Cannons' appears to be the one now preferred by musicologists: see Beeks, Graydon, 'Cannons ['Chandos'] anthems' in Landgraf, A. and Vickers, D., eds, *The Cambridge Handel Encyclopaedia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 41-2, 42. For an investigation of Handel's involvement at Cannons, see Beeks, Graydon, 'Handel and music for the Earl of Carnarvon' in Williams, P.F., ed., *Bach, Handel, Scarlatti* [:] *tercentenary essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1-20. See also Hendrie, Gerald, 'Handel's 'Chandos' and associated anthems: an introductory survey' in Williams, P.F., op. cit., 149-159 and Streatfeild, R.A., *Handel, Canons* [*sic*] *and the Duke of Chandos* (London: Chiswick Press, 1916).

2 ibid.

3 Moore, J.N., *Edward Elgar* [:] *a creative life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 765. The letter is dated 16 July 1923.

the organ at St George's, Worcester.[4] The practice of publishing keyboard reductions of orchestral movements by Handel seems to have been established within the composer's lifetime. In 1749-50, for example, his London publisher, John Walsh junior (1709-1766), brought out a collection with the following title:

> HANDEL'S SIXTY OVERTURES / from all his OPERAS and ORATORIOS / Set for the / HARPSICORD [sic] or ORGAN.[5]

Nothing turns on the precise identity of the 'organ arrangement' to which Elgar referred. It has however been suggested that his father may have known a collection of arrangements bearing the following title:

> *The* / OVERTURES / *to the* / *TEN* [sic] *ANTHEMS* / Composed / *chiefly for the chapel of His Grace*, / *the late* / JAMES DUKE OF CHANDOS; / by / G: F: Handel / *adapted for the Organ, Harpsichord, or Piano Forte*. / LONDON *Pr. 7s/6 / Printed by H. Wright, No 13 Catherine Street, Strand / Proprietor of all Handel's Works*[6]

Like the Walsh edition referred to above, Wright's bears no date, but it must have appeared after 1744, the year of the death of James Brydges, Earl of Carnarvon and the first Duke of Chandos; and 1787 is the date tentatively assigned to it in *The Catalogue of Printed Music in the British Library to 1980*. It is possible that copies were in circulation in the nineteenth century.

Important also in this Handelian context was an event in 1869, by which time Elgar was a teenager rather than 'a little boy':

> The year 1869 brought the Three Choirs Festival to Worcester again … [Elgar] … extracted a promise from his father to get him into the rehearsal of Handel's *Messiah* - for which Elgar Bros were to supply orchestral parts.[7]

The oratorio *Messiah*, HWV 56 was written in 1741, and its first performance took place in Dublin on 13 April 1742. In 1757 it made its Three Choirs debut at the Gloucester Festival and thereafter was performed, in whole or in part, at all but two of the festivals until 1963.[8] Enthusiasm for the work was of course a national rather than a Three Choirs phenomenon and does not appear to have diminished.

4 For a discussion of the organs and organists of St George's, Worcester, see Clark, R., *Elgar's consecutive fifths and other essays* (Oxford: Positif Press, 2008), 39-55.

5 A facsimile edition was published by Dover Publications, Inc. in 1993.

6 Clark, R., *Elgar and 'the Romantic Loner' and other essays* (Oxford: Positif Press, 2017), 33-4.

7 Moore, J.N., op. cit., 43. Note that there appears to have been just one rehearsal. One wonders what the performance itself was like.

8 Boden, Anthony, *Three Choirs* [:] *a history of the festival* (Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1992), 27. It appears that the two years were 1875 and 1955.



A newspaper cutting at the birthplace museum continues the Elgar story:

> I composed [at around this time] a little tune of which I was very proud. I thought the public should hear it … [and] when my father was engaged in preparing the Handel parts for the forthcoming [i.e., 1869] festival … I introduced my little tune into the music. The thing was an astonishing success, and I heard that some people had never enjoyed Handel so much before![9]

But that 1869 performance of Handel's work had an additional significance:

> It was at the age of twelve that … [Elgar] first applied himself to master the violin. The first cause was the singing of 'O thou that tellest' from Handel's *Messiah*, which he heard one day in Worcester Cathedral. He went home with the fixed determination that he would learn to play that aria on the fiddle. With the help of an instruction-book he finally re-created the fine melody for himself.[10]

And it was more than just that particular movement that caused Elgar to take an interest in the work:

> Year after year at the Three Choirs Festivals, his head would appear round a pillar in the cathedral to catch my eye when the altos and tenors enter, with their A flat and F [sic][11] respectively, in the concluding bars of "All we like sheep" … He revelled in the sweeping passage for the violins in "Thou shalt break them" and was disgusted when one year we played from Prout's edition and found the bowing to which he had been accustomed altered so that the broad sweep of the phrase was in his opinion ruined. As to the entries of the sixths (referred to above) in the *adagio* at the end of "All we like sheep", so simple on paper, so colossal in effect, it made him, as he described it, "cry like a cow". At any moment he would rub his hands gleefully and look up to heaven at the thought of old Handel's genius.[12]

9 Moore, J.N., op. cit., 43. The cutting is not identified. Dr Kent wonders whether this was the origin of 'an important feature of Elgar's working practice, his technique of composing countermelodies to an existing texture': Kent, C.J., 'Handel and Elgar', *Händel Jahrbuch* 53 (2007), 211-222, 213.

10 Maine, Basil, *Elgar* [:] *his life and works* (London: G. Bell & Sons Ltd, 1933), 10. Maine wrote with the benefit of information supplied by Elgar himself.

11 Reed meant C, not F. The reference is to bar 85 of that movement, where altos and tenors begin a stepwise descent in consecutive sixths. Reed's reliability is further undermined by his thinking that the Handel transcription was made in 1926: see Reed, W.H., *Elgar* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1939), 13 and 136. It is clear from the later reference to it that '1926' (p.13) was not a typographical error. *Verbum sapienti sat est*.

12 Reed, W.H., *Elgar as I knew him* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1973), 84. Elgar's quotation from the 'Pifa' ('Pastoral Symphony') in *Messiah*, in *A Christmas Greeting*, Op.52 (1907), further demonstrates his knowledge of and enthusiasm for the work.

That quotation from Reed's book makes the point that Elgar's enthusiasm for Handel was not merely a youthful matter but, on the contrary, something he never lost.[13] The sixths, about which Reed was muddled, will be returned to in section III.

## *II 1870s and after*

To c.1875 and later belong four incomplete part books containing not only sketches by Elgar but also various string quartet arrangements made by him. The books are held by the British Library under Add. 64061a (violin I), Add. 64061b (violin II), Add. 64061c (viola) and Add. 64061d (cello),[14] and the works transcribed include the following movements by Handel:

Overture to *Samson*, HWV 57 (second part)
Overture to *Messiah*, HWV 56
March from *Hercules*, HWV 60
Fugue in F major, from Suite in F major, HWV 427
Overture to *In the Lord put I my trust*, HWV 247 [15]
March from *Occasional Oratorio*, HWV 62

Held under Add. 64062 and dating from around the same time is a further set of part books, one relating to arrangements made by Elgar for flute and string quartet.[16] One of the works is the march from *Scipione*, HWV 20. We can take it that Elgar learned a good deal from the experience of laying out these movements for a chamber ensemble. Even today, such an exercise is of value to composers learning their craft, and in 1878, in which year Elgar played in the festival orchestra for the first time, the experience of arranging Handel's notes on paper was extended by that of playing them, in Mozart's version of *Messiah*. Elgar was among the festival orchestra's second violins and must have learned much about the way in which Handel wrote inner voices, and about Handel's procedures

13 As late as 1931, Elgar asked Fred Gaisberg to send him a recording of the overture to *Messiah*. See Moore, J.N., *Elgar on record* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 134-5. Robert Anderson quoted a diary entry which records that Elgar was 'much affected' by a performance of the work at the Gloucester Festival of 1913: Anderson, R., *Elgar* (London: J.M. Dent, 1993), 112 (one assumes that the diary was that of Alice Elgar).

14 Kent, C.J., *Edward Elgar* [:] *a guide to research*, 6-9.

15 Dr Kent subsequently made the point that in this string quartet arrangement, Elgar substituted for the Cannons second movement a spurious fugue in the key of D major: see Kent, C.J., 'Handel and Elgar', 215.

16 Kent, C.J., *Edward Elgar* [:] *a guide to research*, 10-11.



generally; and according to Dennison, Elgar took part in subsequent festival performances of the work in 1881, 1884, 1887, 1890 and 1893.[17]

## *III What did Elgar learn from Handel?*

We tend to think of late Romantic music as having complex textures, but there are times when the music of Elgar is essentially in only two or three parts.

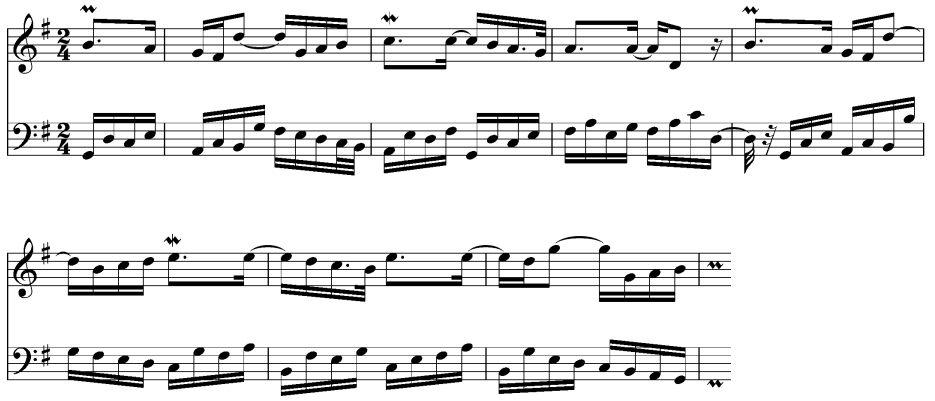
> A student with a dangerous sense of humour once brought to my score-playing class some pages of *Falstaff* … He forestalled my comments by explaining that being pressed for time, he had chosen those pages as a 'soft option' because, though for full orchestra, they consisted entirely of two-part harmony.[18]

Tovey's pupil made a good point. Relevant also is a much later tutorial, given by Professor Stephen Banfield, whose pupil was rash enough to advise him that there was no counterpoint in the first march of *Pomp and Circumstance*, Op.39. The tutor took a different view:

> … the very first thing that we hear in this piece is not the tune … but a tensile passage in two-part counterpoint: just upper and lower melodic parts in restless … contrary motion.[19]

Now consider Ex.1.

Ex. 1



17 Dennison, P., 'Elgar's musical apprenticeship' in Monk, R., ed., *Elgar Studies* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1990), 1-34, 17. Dennison gives other examples of Handel works in which Elgar performed as violinist, e.g., *Esther*, HWV 50, *Israel in Egypt*, HWV 54, *Jephtha*, HWV 70, *Judas Maccabaeus*, HWV 63, etc.

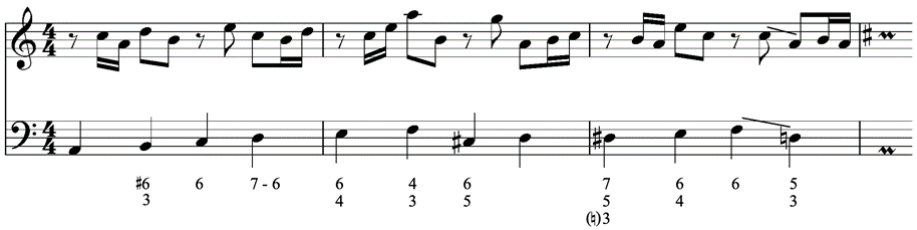
18 Tovey, D.F., *Essays in musical analysis* IV (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 6.

19 Banfield, S., 'Three of a kind', *The Musical Times* 140 (1999), 29-37, 29.

This might at first glance appear to be part of an eighteenth-century keyboard work of the two-part invention kind; but change the key-signature to A flat major, multiply the note-values by four, and play it at crotchet = 72 and it becomes something familiar to Elgar devotees.

Consider also Ex.2.

Ex. 2



Again, the above might at first glance appear to be an extract from an eighteenth-century sonata movement for, say, oboe or violin and continuo; but change the key-signature to G minor, double the note-values, and play it at crotchet = 63 and again one has something familiar (and note the ease with which Elgar's bass line can be figured).

It would not have escaped Elgar's notice that much of 'O thou that tellest', the aria he so much admired in 1869, is essentially a work in two parts, the continuo instruments filling the gap between bass and treble; and we can take it that Elgar was similarly impressed by Handel's three-voice textures. The lesson of such textures, that three voices can be so self-sufficient and musically satisfying as to make any attempt at adding a fourth voice both difficult and undesirable, may well have informed such exquisite passages as the opening bars of the middle movement of the String Quartet in E minor, Op.83 and the bars marked '*pp dolciss*.' between rehearsal cues 71 and 72 in the slow movement of the Symphony in E flat major, Op.63 (and the corresponding bars between cues 81 and 82).

Writers have from time to time referred to the testimony of Herbert Howells:

> He [Howells] would frequently relate how Elgar held up Handel to him as a model for string writing, sometimes adding that it was the G minor Concerto Grosso from Op.6 that was cited.[20] His [i.e., Howells's] own explanation to me, in March 1974, was that he plucked up courage to ask Elgar about his own music – a taboo subject – by saying 'How do you account for the extraordinary sonority of your writing for strings?', to which Elgar replied, with surprising affability, that it was due to Handel.[21]

20 Dr Kent finds in that G minor Concerto Grosso, and in the Concerto Grosso, Op.6, No.12, anticipations of Elgar: see Kent, C.J., 'Elgar and Handel', 218-221.

21 Banfield, S., 'Three of a kind', 34.



Professor Banfield continues by quoting Howells's recollection of a Gloucester Festival rehearsal of *Messiah*.

> Elgar dragged me off through a little south transept slype door to listen unobserved to Part II and pointed out that Handel knew how to write a second violin part – an obvious nostalgic throwback to his own second violin days.[22]

Developing the 'second violin' theme, Banfield suggests that what rubbed off on Elgar was the way in which Handel attached more significance to sonority than to the completeness of the harmony; and he uses an extract from the Concerto Grosso, Op.6, No.12 to illustrate his point, drawing attention to consecutive sixths between the two uppermost voices and how they involve omitting one of the notes ordinarily found in a triad. He then quotes the consecutive sixths in Variation VIII ('W.N.') and at the beginning of Part II of *Gerontius*.[23] The argument is perhaps excessively elaborate. Elgar did not need Handel in order to appreciate the properties of consecutive sixths, and one cannot entirely dismiss the possibility that Howells (a pupil of the hated Stanford) was having his leg pulled. Nor should one forget that Handel was not the only eighteenth-century composer with whom Elgar became acquainted in his formative years (one thinks of J.S. Bach and Corelli). At any rate, it is surely reasonable to see a connection between the passage that Elgar so admired in 'All we like sheep' (and which W.H. Reed recalled inaccurately) and a high point in *The Kingdom*. Consider Ex.3 and Ex.4 (overleaf).

Note in each case (a) the consecutive sixths, (b) the pedal note, (c) how the sixths descend by step and (d) the somewhat unusual chord in the first bar of each example (perhaps an eighteenth-century musician would have figured it differently, but the spacing needs to be underlined). Professor Parrott drew attention to the similar use of consecutive sixths in Part II of *Gerontius*.[24] He used the happy phrase 'cascading clashes' to describe the harmony created by those sixths as they pursue their course without regard to the other parts, but he saw here the influence of J.S. Bach and in particular the Toccata in F major, BWV 540.[25] He did not mention either Handel or the passage in Reed's book.

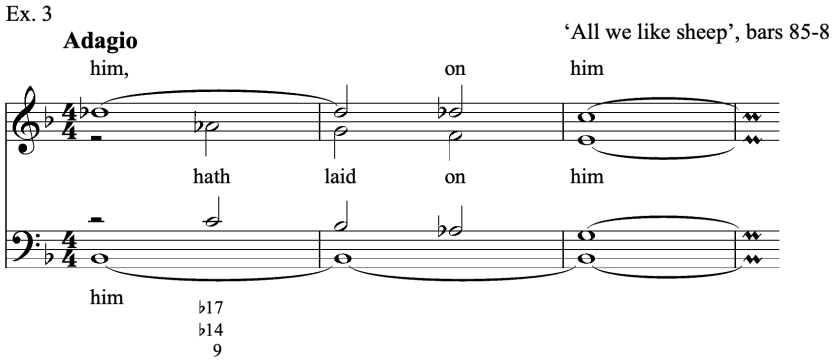
22 ibid., 36.

23 ibid.

24 Parrott, I., *Elgar* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Limited, 1971), 89. The reference is to the two bars immediately preceding rehearsal cue 3. See also the fourth and fifth bars after cue 7 and the passage between cues 22 and 23.

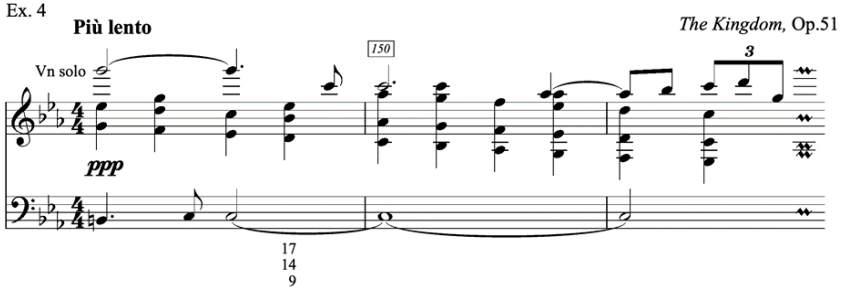
25 ibid., 88-9. Parrott's quotation from BWV 540 omits the pedal part and therefore fails to convey his point, except perhaps to readers who are organists or Bach scholars.

Ex. 3




'All we like sheep', bars 85-8

Ex. 4




*The Kingdom*, Op.51

## *IV 1923*

An answer to the question Why an overture to a Cannons anthem? has already been suggested. Elgar heard the work as a boy, and it created an impression. But we can take it that the mature Elgar knew a good deal more of Handel. What was it that caused him to go back to that particular work? An answer is suggested in the letter to John E. West referred to above:

> [I] always wanted it to be heard in a large form – the weighty structure is (to me) so grand – epic.[26]

What Elgar meant by 'weighty structure' is not clear. Note, however, the word 'always', which suggests that his initial contact with the work had caused it to lodge in his mind. And no wonder, for it is indeed impressive. One thinks in particular of the dramatic alternation of large chords and lines of single notes, of the sonorous 4-2 chords on the first beats of bars 3, 5, 7, 9 and 11, and the sequence and the falling sevenths in those opening bars. Stanley Sadie put it thus:

26 Moore, J.N., *Elgar and his publishers* [:] *letters of a creative life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 828.



> The first [movement] is a severe, noble piece, setting triplets on unison violins against stern tutti chords – not quite as vast a tutti, however, as Elgar provided in his once-popular [!] Overture in D minor arranged from it.[27]

And Handel himself was sufficiently taken with the work to re-use it in his Concerto Grosso in D minor, Op.3, No.5, HWV 316 (Walsh, 1734) and to re-use the fugal second section in the Suite in F sharp minor, HWV 431 (J. Cluer, 1720), in which it appears, much modified, as the third movement. Wulstan Atkins claimed that the arrangement was made at his father's suggestion, but that seems doubtful.[28] Even today, the Cannons anthems are relatively rare, and it would be surprising to learn that any of them formed part of the Worcester choir's repertoire. This is partly because of their length, which makes 'cantata' seem like a more appropriate designation. The following timings are of performances by The Sixteen under Harry Christophers: [29]

| | |
|---|---|
| *O be joyful in the Lord*, HWV 246 | 19:39 |
| *In the Lord put I my trust*, HWV 247 | 21:46 |
| *Have mercy upon me*, HWV 248 | 19:34 |

Clearly, these are works far too long for ordinary use as anthems; and they call for considerable virtuosity on the part of the soloists. Of course, Atkins may have known the overture as an organ piece, but his recital programmes (which are preserved in a scrapbook held by the library of Worcester Cathedral) appear to make no reference to it.[30] And it would not be hugely surprising to learn that Elgar's knowledge of the Cannons anthems did not extend beyond, or much beyond, the overture to *In the Lord put I my trust*. One must not make assumptions based on today's ready availability of printed music and recordings.

But perhaps the question should be Why a work by Handel at all? We have seen (note 1) that in 1916 R.A. Streatfeild (1866-1919) published a book dealing specifically with Handel, the Cannons anthems and the Duke of Chandos. Did Elgar's contact with Streatfeild cause the book to come to his attention?[31] Did he read the book? Did reading it, or skimming it, or merely learning of its title, stir recollections of the string quartet

27 Sadie, S., *Handel Concertos* (London: BBC, 1972), 18-9.

28 Atkins, E. Wulstan, *The Elgar-Atkins friendship* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles (Publishers) Ltd, 1984), 366.

29 Chandos, CHAN 0503.

30 Clark, R., *Robert Hope-Jones, M.I.E.E.* [:] *an interim account of his work in the British Isles*, diss., U. of Reading, 1993.

31 As an example of that contact, it was Streatfeild who persuaded Elgar to join the Hampstead Volunteer Reserve: Moore, J.N., *Edward Elgar* [:] *a creative life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 682. That was in 1915, the year before the book was published.

arrangement he made in the 1870s? Did the idea of a transcription on a larger scale come to him at that time and lie dormant until aroused by the J.S. Bach transcriptions made in 1921 and 1922?[32]

Whatever exactly it was that caused Elgar to make the transcription, it was complete by 27 May 1923, on which date he wrote to Henry Clayton of Novello & Co. and told him that the manuscript of the work was on its way.[33] Clayton's colleague John West shared Elgar's enthusiasm for the work, which he described in an internal memorandum as being 'very good Handel'; and on 15 June Elgar accepted Novello's offer for it of 60 guineas.[34] Novello had paid Elgar 100 guineas for the Bach fugue arrangement,[35] and Clayton justified the smaller offer by saying that Bach was 'always in demand' but Handel was in demand 'only occasionally' (which is an interesting reflection of those times).[36]

It seems clear that the performance on 2 September was a success, for five days later the following minute was made at a meeting of The Gramophone Company Limited:

> A report on the Worcester Festival was submitted. New works by Arnold Bax and other composers were performed, but none were considered of sufficient interest for recording purposes. An arrangement of Handel's Overture [*sic*] by Sir Edward Elgar which had a very successful performance at the Festival was recommended for recording.[37]

Elgar recorded the work at Hayes on 26 October.[38]

32 In 1921, Elgar made an arrangement for full orchestra of J.S. Bach's Fugue in C minor, BWV 537 (ii), an organ work. Its first performance took place at the Queen's Hall on 27 October 1921, when it was conducted by Eugene Goossens. In 1922, Elgar arranged the Fantasia in C minor, BWV 537 (i), the work that precedes the Fugue, and the first performance of both Fantasia and Fugue, now united as Op.86, took place on 7 September that year, at the Gloucester Festival, Elgar conducting. It is possible that Elgar was steered in the direction of J.S. Bach by Bach-related activity in the previous decade. In 1911 Novello & Co. published an Atkins-Elgar edition of the *Matthäus-Passion*, BWV 244, and in 1916 they published Atkins's edition of the *Orgelbüchlein*, BWV 599-643, which may well have come to Elgar's attention.

33 Moore, J.N., op. cit., 826.

34 ibid., 826-7.

35 ibid., 821.

36 ibid., 826-7. With reluctance, Novello & Co. had paid 100 guineas for the orchestration of the Fantasia. Perhaps Elgar was now getting his comeuppance.

37 Moore, J.N., *Elgar on record* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 49.

38 ibid.



As to the transcription itself, Elgar's source was a piano transcription made by J. Mazzinghi, details of which are given by Dr Kent.[39] Whereas the J.S. Bach arrangements made in 1921 and 1922 did not involve cuts or additions, Elgar's Handel arrangement involved the pruning of a few bars in the second movement, the insertion of a dominant pedal[40] towards the end of that movement, and the addition of a coda based upon the first movement. The Bach arrangement went into the Elgar canon as Op.86, but an opus number was not given to the Handel arrangement. In 1923, Novello & Co. published a full score (15026):

> OVERTURE / IN D MINOR / BY / G.F. HANDEL / ARRANGED FOR FULL ORCHESTRA / BY / EDWARD ELGAR

It makes no mention of the Cannons anthem. It sold at 7 shillings and 6 pence, and parts were available on hire. The orchestra includes a cor anglais, bass clarinet and contra fagotto, the trumpets are in C, and Elgar calls for bass drum, cymbals and tambourine.[41] There is an *ad lib*. organ part.

## *Coda*

We can take it that Elgar continued to attend Three Choirs performances of *Messiah*, but his active involvement with Handel seems to have ended there, in 1923.[42] One cannot of course conclude without making the observation that Elgar died on 23 February 1934,[43] which was not quite the 250th anniversary of Handel's birth. The coincidence is pleasing, and helpful to those planning quiz nights, but it does not appear to be significant.

39 Kent, C.J., 'Elgar and Handel', 213-15. The fact that it was a piano arrangement seems to rule it out as the arrangement Elgar heard as a small boy.

40 Inspired by the fugue in Handel's F sharp minor suite.

41 The orchestra at Cannons at the time the second anthem was written seems to have comprised a small body of strings (without violas), and an oboe or two. These slender forces were supplemented by the Gerard Smith organ in the church of St Lawrence Whitchurch, where the anthems were first performed.

42 See note 13, however.

43 General Register Office and Principal Probate Registry.

*Relf Clark was born in Bray, Berkshire and studied with Sidney Campbell at St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle and with Robert Sherlaw Johnson and F.W. Sternfeld at Worcester College, Oxford. He subsequently read historical musicology at London University and obtained at Reading University a distinction in performance studies and the degree of PhD. A solicitor, he practised with a City law firm and retired in 2017. He is a Fellow of the Royal College of Organists and an honorary life member of the Elgar Society and the Royal Society of Musicians of Great Britain.*



# A.T. Shaw Lecture 4 June 2023

***Michael Berkeley in conversation with the Elgar Festival Artistic Director Kenneth Woods held in the Henry Sandon Hall, following an introduction by Society Chairman Stuart Freed***

***[The following is a verbatim transcript, retaining the speech-patterns and improvisatory style of a live lecture]***

**MB** I asked that Ken and I could do this as a conversation because I am not academically as qualified as some of the previous speakers who have given the A. T. Shaw lecture and who really were specialists in Elgar. Although I am a great lover of Elgar and have been influenced by him, I don't quite put myself in that category, so I thought that something where Ken and I could explore Elgar's influence in terms of the way he writes, and how that has influenced other composers including myself, might be a more valuable vein to mine. One of the things I was going to mention first, Ken, and then perhaps you could offer your memories, is how we first came across Elgar.

In my case, actually, I was really interested last night[1] – it suddenly came back to me listening to *The Music Makers* as Jess Dandy sang very beautifully and it was a wonderful night, I suddenly thought 'I know this very well', because I was in the chorus in the Adrian Boult recording with Janet Baker and the LPO in the EMI Abbey Road Studio No.1 all those years ago.[2] The reason was that in those days the LPO would often draft in singers from the Royal Academy of Music and other colleges to give a bit more muscle to the sound. We also recorded *The Hymn of Jesus*, but certainly I shall never forget Janet Baker singing that music, so at that age, to get inside a score, is incredibly helpful.

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1 Gala Concert in Worcester Cathedral on 3rd June 2023 with the English Symphony Orchestra and the Elgar Festival Chorus conducted by Kenneth Woods. The concert opened with *Celebration Fanfare* by Samsara Prokopp, followed by Michael Berkeley's *Secret Garden* and Elgar's *The Music Makers*. Elgar's First Symphony was played in the second half.

2 Recorded in May 1967, issued on HMV ASD 2311 and currently reissued on Warner Classics CD 3919782 coupled with *The Dream of Gerontius.*

I remember when I was in the opera class at the Academy I was a bit uncertain about Richard Strauss, but singing *Die schweigsame Frau* and one or two other Strauss operas, I began to understand the importance of the enharmonic changes, the thing when G sharp is suddenly A flat and how tricky that can be to perform as a singer, so that was one experience. Then a few years later, when I was already making my way as a broadcaster, I narrated a performance of something that afficionados would probably know well, but I didn't, which is *The Starlight Express*, the music which Elgar wrote for that. It's like a lot of incidental music, up and down in quality, but there are some wonderful things and we had Stephen Roberts, that wonderful bass-baritone, singing, and for some reason we were actually doing it in Holland, not in England. So, I have performed Elgar, if only as a speaker.

I found, as a child, that Lennox, my father, would point out to me how Elgar used strings, for example in the *Introduction and Allegro* - such wonderful string writing, how he used the open strings. Those of you who heard *Meditations* the other night, my piece for strings, will perhaps remember a very crucial moment in the middle, underneath the soloist, where the strings go crazy, go up and down and end up on an open string, which gives that wonderful sort of gut sound which is so characteristic of English string music.[3]

Ken, when did you first encounter Elgar?

**KW** I was a teenager, and it's interesting because I've just come from the Mahler Festival that I conduct in the United States, and both composers are very dear to me, though my journey with the two was quite different. I discovered Elgar as a young American cellist through the Cello Concerto, which probably is not a big surprise, but at that time in the US Elgar was really not a well-known or well respected musical figure and I got the Elgar recording with Du Pré because it was a cello concerto, not because of the composer, and was completely blown away by it, telling friends and teachers 'I just found this incredible piece' and they said 'Well, he's not a real composer, but that's a nice piece, a good piece' and I said 'But I love it'. Then after about six months I flipped over to side B and discovered *Sea Pictures* and thought 'Well this is amazing', and I started going around telling people 'Well, there's this other piece which is just as good'. 'OK, well he's got two pieces, but he's not a real composer'.

And so it went over the years, and maybe by the time about four years had passed I discovered the First Symphony and that was the one where finally I just said 'This is ridiculous – this is one of the greatest composers who ever lived and fight me if you don't agree'. The First Symphony is a piece that I've taken all over the United States over the last twenty years and I've never done it with an orchestra that's done it before and everywhere I've done it people have loved it, so it's a wonderful feeling coming full circle to do it here at that point in this journey. I feel that minds are opening about his music in the US these days but I think there's so much work and festivals like ours can help that especially in the digital era, by not only making things like concerts available, but contact like these lectures available, blogging and video lectures to help people get past whatever misinformation they might have about a composer and to listen with open ears – I'm absolutely convinced that people who listen with open ears to Elgar will fall in love with him.

**MB** Isn't it extraordinary though – think how difficult it must be for composers of my generation that we are still trying to sell a major figure like Elgar round the world. It's extraordinary what you just said, that orchestras were new to that music now. It's rather like Charles Mackerras who brought Janáček operas to this country, but let's not forget that Bach was not played for a couple of centuries until Mendelssohn put him back on the map, so it just shows that we have to be constantly curious, constantly opening our ears.

You mentioned Jacqueline du Pré, and I knew her a little bit and I heard her play the Cello Concerto live and it was an extraordinarily emotional experience. I just want to tell you a little personal story, because I think it throws some light on her - as you know she got multiple sclerosis and about 15 years ago I got something called peripheral polyneuritis, and what that does is attacks the myelin sheath of the nerves. Now if you imagine the nerves as being a bit like electric cables, but with the rubber around it shredded, or not actually working properly, the thing that I got is very similar in onset to Jackie, but it gets better. The thing she got, of course, does not get better, and what happened was one day I was driving home from Wales to London and I suddenly thought 'I'm seeing double on one side' which was disconcerting. I went and saw my GP and she looked into my eyes and she said: 'It's off to the neurologist with you – one pupil is twice the size of the other'. That was the beginning and then I went and saw a man who attached electrodes to my arm and sent electricity up and down and measured whether it was going up and down or not, and what they diagnosed was something called Miller Fisher Syndrome, which is a bit like Guillain-Barré and has the same effect, but just for a while I understood what she went through. I couldn't listen to music properly, I couldn't play music – it was too painful and I had no energy whatsoever and I put myself in her position, with it not getting better but gradually getting worse. I remember her saying to me the awful thing of not being able to apply pressure on the string in order to find the right note. I just offer that as a small insight into the person who probably made the greatest and most memorable recording of the Elgar Cello Concerto. Again, I think a lot of the success of that piece derives from such a wonderful understanding of the instrument – would you agree, being a string player?

3 Studied at a conducting masterclass for aspiring conductors with Kenneth Woods and the English String Orchestra in the Carice Room of The Firs on 30 May 2023.

**KW** Yes, in addition to playing it last night on the electric guitar I've actually conducted and played it a quite number of times as a cellist.[4] For me it's the most rewarding cello concerto to play, particularly the slow movement and the last page of the last movement, which for me is like *Wotan's Farewell* – it's just the most incredible soliloquy and you can play it dozens of times and still feel like you're just at the beginning of it, and it's so personal. This is the thing that people here will understand, and many of the folks I'm trying to open ears with in the US and elsewhere. Germany's always been a problematic country for Elgar, though Simon Rattle made some headway when he was with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. It's the most intensely personal music at its best and the slow movement of the symphony – it's nothing to do with Empire, pomp or any of that. All of that stuff is a sort of mask and a façade and I can't really think of any composer who reveals more of his soul in his most beautiful moments, and in the Cello Concerto to be able to be the voice of that soul is an incredible feeling for a performer.

**MB** I noticed when I was at the Elgar birthplace, The Firs, Elgar's violin. Does his music speak to you as being by somebody who understands how the instrument works and how string writing works.

**KW** Very much so, absolutely. For me he is the most knowledgeable orchestrator of any composer I can think of and in that generation of the mighty three, Richard Strauss, him and Mahler, all of them had this incredible mixture of a hard-won self-taught understanding of the orchestra which they'd learned from learning other people's scores, plus the sort of real-world experience of working as conductors. Someone like Elgar, who had conducted, the LSO, but also the Worcestershire Symphony Orchestra and the Hereford Symphony Orchestra and amateur groups in this part of the country, that kind of work where you have to teach, explain and develop and articulate your ideas to people who don't take too [easily to it?] gives you this incredible grounding and so he's a composer who seems to understand every single instrument in the orchestra as if he plays it himself. You look at scores of his that look unbelievably complex and virtuosic – look at something like the Violin Concerto which just looks super-human in its demands, and it is demanding and virtuosic but there's always a solution there, as there is with Strauss; something like the first page of *Don Juan*, once you've learned it you can play it. The first time you encounter it you think this is impossible, but he's thought it through and he understands.

A composer who I admire very much who is not like that in any way is Schoenberg – his music is always awkward, every note is awkward and never feels comfortable,

4 Following the concert in the Cathedral Kenneth Woods performed an hour-long set with his jazz/rock group Blue Enigma. He played the electric guitar with bassist Joe Hoskins and drummer Sean McNicholas. This event took place in the Henry Sandon Hall.



both the later atonal stuff but also the really beautiful early romantic works like *Verklärte Nacht* – as a string player you feel like you're shifting and twisting your hand from note to note all the time, whereas with Elgar, once you learn it it's just there and it sounds – he knows just how the instruments are going to resonate in different registers, he understands how bowings work. There are some wonderful printed bowings in the symphony from Elgar that no string player would ever think of, sort of backwards and upside-down – they give a wonderful expressive contour to the music. That for me is just fascinating and as a conductor I can learn so much from the way he deals with scores.

**MB** As a composer, it's not just the strings – I think his brass writing is sensational. I think of the trombone scales for example, just when you get to moments of climax, he'll let rip with one of those scales up and it's completely overwhelming.

**KW** The first time I heard the First Symphony and got to that bit [sings] I felt this is off the charts, brilliant.

**MB** I wonder whether Verdi's 'oom-pah-pah' writing stems very much from him hearing brass bands in the local town. Lennox, my father, used to take me as a small child to Paddington Station to hear the band on Sunday mornings and he pointed out to me that this is what Verdi had experienced and I wonder whether Elgar came across brass music in that way.

**KW** I would guess that he did. He was someone who was so embedded in community music making, amateur music making, I would think it would have been almost impossible for him to escape, given the way he developed as a young musician.

**MB** That's another aspect of English music making which I think is very important, is that RVW, Elgar, Britten, all felt very strongly that they should be providing something that would be of use to society, to communities, and I think it was part of their *raison d'être*. You mentioned Simon Rattle - I remember I'd written a piece for a concert and it was in the Albert Hall. He was doing 'Nimrod' (the *Enigma Variations*, obviously) but when it got to 'Nimrod' it just blew me away – he started it *ppppp*, so quietly that you absolutely had to strain to hear it, and then of course it built, and that was the other thing that Elgar could do – he does it in the symphony as well - is to take things and build the music and so it's funny in a way that it took time in Germany, because for me it has the strength of German Teutonic symphonic argument – would you agree?

**KW** Absolutely – in a lot of ways he's more musically in line with German music than most major English composers and these were his roots – Brahms and Wagner in particular as big influences in his early work. I think that's one of the reasons that it took

him so long to write a symphony – if your model is Brahms, first of all Brahms was 42 when he wrote his first symphony – you don't feel like it's something to tackle when you're nineteen necessarily and that he wanted to write something on that level, which he did. What's fascinating about the First Symphony is that it has almost a new dimension of that kind of Beethovenian integrity of structure, with both the micro and the macro ideas weaving the piece together. The most obvious is the opening melody, which comes back at key moments throughout the piece and ends the piece, which was critiqued by some at the time because 'Beethoven does two or three notes – we don't repeat whole melodies' but this was Elgar being a modernist and finding his own way. But at the same time there's all sorts of little tiny cells that work their way through the piece and things like an absolutely amazing musical transformation, the most incredible of which is that the little violin perpetual motion thing which starts the second movement is in fact the theme of the slow movement. That transformation is one of the most incredible things I think any composer ever did and the way that he expands that material into something that's completely different from its original manifestation is something I think Brahms and Beethoven would have definitely liked.

**MB** The other thing he might have got from studying the Brahms symphonies is I think they have some of the greatest openings in music, each one, and of course his is a wonderful opening. He uses it to great effect towards the end of the symphony.

**KW** Yes, absolutely. It's a big challenge for a composer I think to come up with something instantly original, distinctive, engaging as a way of opening a symphony. Mahler is another composer who seems to have a great knack for making sure that the very beginning of each of his symphonies was unique in itself, but also completely arresting, and there really had never been something quite like that. Maybe you could point to the opening of the Mendelssohn *Scottish* as another one that really begins with a melody as opposed to a gesture and sort of self-contained melody, but then to bring it full circle as he does at the end…. Whenever I conduct or listen to the symphony I'm always reminded of Michael Steinberg – many of you may know of him – a wonderful American musicologist who passed away about fifteen years ago.[5] Interestingly the last time I saw him he came out to give a talk on the Elgar Violin Concerto, describing the ending of that as a ship fighting its way through the most incredibly fearsome storms trying to get into port, so all of these wild cascades of string sound buffeting the melody as it fights its way to the end and there's really nothing like that in music – that sense of fighting right to the last note. Even when you get to the very last few bars of the piece, you seem so close and you have this big *stringendo*, it's all building up and then the trombones come back in with that quite threatening [sings] then finally you're there and it's this wonderful mixture of exhilaration and exhaustion.

5 Carl Michael Steinberg, American music critic (1928-2009).



**MB** So there are two areas where I think Elgar has been for me very influential. One is the importance of music socially, but the other is – you mentioned just then running passages, semi-quavers in the strings, and in *Secret Garden* which some of you heard last night – that was also very much in my mind, that string sound towards the end where it builds. In terms of structural innovation, I think really Elgar was not unlike Sibelius, who after all in his seventh symphony completely telegraphed or you think of a telescope, that's what he did with symphonic form and reduced it into this incredibly powerful utterance, and what Elgar does in the symphony we heard last night, moving from the scherzo-like second movement into the most profound adagio, utterly memorable, wonderful tune which comes from the cellos, so I think any young composer studying this, and indeed they should. I do worry sometimes now that composers don't study these scores enough.

When I was with the BBC NOW as the Associate Composer I innovated a scheme whereby the orchestra would play a five-minute piece by students from the Welsh College and students from the university and I would comment on them with the conductor Jac van Steen – he was the sort of good policeman and I was the bad policeman. One of the things the bad policeman discovered to his horror was that we also had a session where we played very famous bits of orchestration from Elgar, Debussy, Wagner, Sibelius, and they didn't know these seminal works and I thought 'What's going on?'

That brings me back to something which I am sure Elgar would have felt very strongly about and that is music in schools. Nothing worries me more at the moment than the fact that music education, peripatetic teaching, singing, supply of instruments [has vanished], and this bodes very badly for the next generation and the players coming into orchestras. So, when in the House of Lords I'm talking about musicians touring, the problems of Brexit or whatever they are, what I always end up with even more fundamentally is the need to be teaching young people and I think that's something Elgar would have felt very strongly about. We could be storing up a sort of minefield in the future with a dearth of players. But quite apart from that, the great thing that music does, and this is what you were saying about what Elgar was doing for himself, and by the way you're so right that these are not political imperialist statements; he hated being tied to this sort of propaganda. So, one of the things I think is so vital about music is that it's beneficial to society in a much wider sense. For example, if you allow young people in their teens to play music, to make music, like you were doing after the concert on your guitar, it acts as a means of expression, which means you probably have a more cohesive society because people are learning to listen to each other.

I remember I was on something called the Koestler Trust which puts art and music into prisons, and I managed to arrange to get a guitar to a young man who was serving a long sentence and he wrote to me and said 'I want to thank you so much for this instrument which has really been a life-saver for me, because I feel I can express the turbulence in myself through music. If I had had this guitar when I was seventeen I probably wouldn't be serving life for murder'. I actually mentioned this in my maiden speech in the House of Lords, as I don't think anything brings it home more drastically.

One of the things I was very pleased about with this Festival was the conductors' course, because these opportunities are so rare, like the ones for composers to hear their music performed by a professional orchestra and the players were very good – they would say 'it's very difficult to play that note on this instrument'. But with the conductors, you were brilliant at actually showing them where their beat was stopping them from getting what they were trying to achieve; very simple things. I was very fascinated by that process, and they were doing my *Meditations* and I thought they were coping pretty well on the whole. Do you feel very strongly that education in music is something which the Festival needs to give a helping hand to? Like the little very good piece of brass music we heard at the beginning last night which I helped with; in fact there were a couple of pieces I thought were very good and either would have stood the test of time.[6] Is that an important part of having a festival dedicated to somebody like Elgar?

**KW** It's absolutely essential I think; one of the surprises as you go from being a young musician to just a plain old musician is that when you're a young musician you think that this is all because that's the way the world is – that these institutions exist. You don't realise as a young composer that the Welsh composers' workshop is actually Michael's idea. So many of these things just depend on the goodwill of a handful of people to get them going, get them off the ground and if you sort of stand back and if you wait for institutions to do it nothing's ever going to happen, certainly not these days and it is a crisis. The crisis had already happened; so many musicians left the industry during Covid – Covid and Brexit have combined to make the profession unviable for many, many people along with the spike in travel costs.

In my lifetime as a cellist there was always that sense that for any gig that I got there were 50 other cellists just a good as me who wanted it, and any orchestra that paid a decent fee could always have their pick of any number of absolutely brilliant freelancers. There are not enough string players to go around in the UK right now, there just aren't, and it's very scary, so we've got to really work at it and create opportunities, we need to create conductors who can be not just effective musical leaders but advocates who understand how to build things and develop organisations. I think we need to put new music back in the heart of what we do; part of that is how we train young composers – I think it's so interesting and important what Michael said about exposing young composers to the full breadth of our musical history because that's ultimately the foundation.

For young people growing up these days it's possible – we use the expression the rabbit hole – you get obsessed with, say, Morton Feldman and you go down the Morton Feldman rabbit hole and say 'I'm going to be a composer, I'm going to write like this' and you learn a phenomenal amount about one or two composers, what movement they were in, and you go to university and the nature of everything in the digital world is to show you more of what you're already interested in. So you end up with people - Elgar was a complete auto-didact but he was lucky enough to keep finding ways to broaden his horizons - whereas the world in which young musicians are teaching themselves just teaches them more of what they already know and doesn't do anything to say 'Have you thought of this? Have you ever checked out that?' and that's something we really need to work on and I think the only way to really work on it is to try and get rid of the schism between music and new music as much as we can; we don't play new music because it's new, we play new music because music is an ongoing integral part of who we are, and that likewise we create new music and champion it with the idea that it's rewarding to hear and engage with now, that it's not 'good for you' or something that has to be done, it's something that you really want people to enjoy, hence the ESO's 21st Century symphony project. I wanted with that to give people a sense of 'What would it have been like to be at the premiere of Elgar's first symphony?' So often today the new work on a programme is like a seven-minute very intricate piece with a very long complicated programme note and you can say, 'Well, the audience didn't get it because it's too harmonically sophisticated for them', but a seven-minute piece if you've got audience members who are listening to Shostakovich or Bruckner symphonies, Wagner operas, you're not using most of their listening skills, which are the ability to follow music on a long journey, so I really want with the ESO for people to get that sense of the thrill of discovery of a major statement from composers who are living through what you're living through and participating in it.

**MB** To what extent, do we think that Elgar's music is saturated by place, this part of the world? I often wonder, if we didn't know where it was located – let's take Britten, for example, the 'Four Sea Interludes' – if we didn't know that he loved the sea he was living by, would we still, blind as it were, associate this music with the sea? But I think we probably would. You mentioned Elgar and experience, and Debussy went off in a small boat before he wrote *La Mer*, into the English Channel, in a storm, to understand what that would feel like. I mentioned Britten and I think there's one thing - I was very interested in the programme note for the Bridge *Variations*, a masterly piece (and by the way I thought the Tippett, another piece of wonderful string writing), there's something in here which I slightly take issue with. It says, not inaccurately, that Britten was rather dismissive of what he called pastoralism, or cowpat music, and the use by RVW and Elgar of folk music and I found that rather surprising actually because in all my dealings with Britten he worshipped folk music. He wrote *A Time there was*, a suite based on English folk tunes, and of course when I was a young student I would regularly, with my father playing the piano, sing the folk song arrangements, which was wonderful. So, I found that rather strange, but it did lead me to think that it's worth saying, it's very dangerous to listen to composers talking about their contemporaries, their colleagues. I think very few are as generous as my father was – my father lived with Britten and he recognised in him a kind of amazing talent and instead of being bitter or envious he was just grateful to be in the presence and to know him so well and that's rather what I felt

6 The winning entry in the first Elgar Festival Young Composers' Competition, won by the thirteen-year-old Samsara Prokopp with her *Celebration Fanfare in D major*.

about Britten too. So, when he makes slightly disparaging comments I take them with a pinch of salt actually; I think he recognised quality when he saw it. He would have loved the *Tallis Fantasia*; he would have loved the *Introduction and Allegro, Enigma,* all these pieces; and even the workings out of the symphony would have struck him I think as absolutely marvellous. Somebody came up to me and said 'Why do you think Britten was dismissive of Elgar and that he only did *The Dream of Gerontius* so that Peter Pears would have a good vehicle?', and I said 'I'm sorry, I just don't believe that – he was too much of a musician to spend time on a piece like that if he didn't admire it'. So, I think we have to be cautious about what composers say about their colleagues. I now, with my living colleagues, say nothing – I know who I admire.

When BBC Music Magazine asked me to mention five greatest English composers I hadn't got Elgar in and now I put him almost at the top really, but I did mention Dowland, Purcell, Britten – I didn't mention Tippett, I mentioned Birtwistle, who's dead, so I was able to get him in, because I wanted to be a bit provocative and challenging, but I certainly think Elgar is up there – the music has such power, such beauty, and I'm also constantly surprised by it, and I think that's something you want in a composer, you want that feeling 'Gosh, I haven't quite heard that before' – I felt that last night. Interestingly in *The Music Makers*, here's another point which I think goes back to Bach, that if you come up with an idea as in the *Enigma Variations* which you feel is incredibly powerful, then you use it again, and we certainly heard that in that sort of synthesis of ideas for *The Music Makers* and in the synthesis of thematic material in the symphony.

I did a programme, I think on BBC2 – *Masterworks* – about Elgar and we had Oliver Knussen and Anthony Payne, who of course completed the third [symphony] talking about Elgar's symphonies, and they both were in awe of the things that you were talking about, the structural innovation, the use of orchestration, and the sheer sort of power and drive through these works and I thought it was interesting that somebody like Ollie Knussen found such inspiration in Elgar. And Simon Rattle too. So, I think you get some composers who are very good and very generous talking about their colleagues and you get others who are a little more barbed, but I always take it with a pinch of salt. What about the vocal writing Ken?

**KW** Well, it's beautiful; he understood the voice very well, and Jessica Dandy - what a singer – my goodness. as soon as she started the rehearsal yesterday I just melted into a puddle – what a sound, an incredible musician. It's so fascinating working with soloists, the very best ones are in the most wonderful sense of the word like having another conductor there because it's so easy to anticipate where the music is going. We had just time to run through her music once in the rehearsal – there's no fussing around, going back and doing it again – and yet I could always tell from the way she shaped vowels, the way she breathed, the way she prepared, exactly when she was going to move and where she was going to go with the phrasing; it felt so easy and artists like that it's just such a joy to work with because you feel like their awareness of the whole score is



really incredible. I have a slightly derisive term for the other kind of soloist – we can call them top-liners, they only know their part and they expect the backing track to follow them, but she's one that just felt so safe and thrilling and he puts all that there for the singer, he uses the tessitura so well.

**MB** Janet Baker [marvellous] singing that is just – that's why it stuck in my mind – the interesting thing here – and here's a thought – I think that kind of genuine contralto voice is slightly disappearing because they all want to be mezzos and sing these things which push the voice up a bit. Is that true?

**KW** Yes, they're rare these days, contraltos.

**MB** Alice Coote, Jess, they've got it, they've got the chest sound as well.

**KW** Yes, and for me it's just the best – I would much rather do *Sea Pictures* or some of the Mahler songs with someone with that richness of timbre which is really incredible. Janet Baker was a phenomenon because she sounded great top to bottom and kind of flawless in every way. I wanted to come back to Britten for a moment because it ties in a little bit with what you were saying about your work with young composers, which is that all of these composers that we've been talking about, whether it's you as a young chorister, Elgar as a professional conductor, Britten as a pianist, you see that engaging with other people's music as a performer is really essential and I've come to believe very strongly that all would-be composers should perform regularly, not just in new music ensembles, but in all kinds of settings, and that all conductors for sure, in fact all musicians should try to compose, create and improvise and I'm curious about your thoughts on the subject.

**MB** I think it's essential; it's what I was saying when I was a student at the Academy. I learnt more at that stage, because I only went to Richard Rodney Bennett after the Academy; I was in the opera class and we had a wonderful man, John Copley, who was the producer, and we did various things as part of making opera. We had to do fencing, we had to dance – I was a terrible dancer and John was an ex-ballet dancer and a very naughty one too, and he had to teach me to do the 'Polonaise' from Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*. He said to me after we'd tried this a couple of times 'Well, I've heard of two left feet but really….'. And what with the fencing …. But that's actually to take an extreme example of what making an opera is all about, making music, so singing in that I learnt a lot. Then I earned a living for a long while conducting church choirs at services, at weddings and funerals, and I would always take that opportunity to write a short piece because it was a way I could hear my music.

When I was at the Royal Academy of Music a lot of the other people that were there

were the nucleus of the people that became the Nash Ensemble, so I made friends with them and I got them to try things out. I also conducted a little bit at the Academy– and I conducted Walton's *Façade* which actually is tricky, and I conducted Lennox's *Four poems of St Teresa of Avila*, one of my favourite pieces of his, written originally for Kathleen Ferrier, then sung by Janet Baker wonderfully, and Jess would actually do those stunningly.

I was talking in an earlier talk about how Poulenc and Lennox slightly sublimated their feelings almost more naturally in religious settings than in secular ones – that somehow it gave them permission to be more emotionally explosive, and in that piece, the third one in particular*, Let mine eyes see thee, sweet Jesus of Nazareth*, I think Lennox hits something gold. So, the opportunity to conduct, and I also narrated, that point taught me many things, one of which was that I am not a conductor. But in the trying, what students would say to me, and I think this is true of Michael Tippett, they'd say 'Look, we forgive your technical omissions, because the emotional strength of what you're giving us is interesting and useful because you wrote it, you know what you want it to do'. And the *Piers Plowman suite* that we did really well the other night made me like the piece, which I wasn't sure I would after all these years.[7] But I did that, and Susan Bradshaw, who worked a lot with Richard Rodney Bennett, was playing the piano. Because Richard was my teacher I think she felt a bit like my academic aunt, she was able to say what she wanted and at one point it went wildly astray and she said 'Michael, have you ever tried counting when you're conducting? You should try it – it helps'. So yes, absolutely – muck in, take every opportunity, and I think this is true whatever you do in life, whether it's painting, writing, immerse yourself in that world. I was very lucky because of broadcasting – I ended up introducing the Proms and producing concerts and operas, so I got exposed, almost too much.

When I was in continuity between 1974 and 1979 I had to leave – I couldn't take this amount of music coming in five hours solid and I think that's a very interesting thing that if you're really interested in music it's very hard to have it as background music because your brain is constantly analysing it, constantly saying where I'm going.

Just to bring this back to Elgar, I think the idea that through a kind of inner inspection you can achieve company for yourself, you can achieve something that really speaks. I was very moved in *Meditations* actually for that reason; it was my first piece and I felt it hit something almost naïve but as a result touching. In other words, if you hear a piece by a composer which may not be as skilfully written as later pieces, but there is something about the sheer honesty of the emotional energy of young music which is really important. For example, *Secret Garden* last night is obviously many years on from *Meditations* and probably more difficult for some people, but I think you've always got to go on questioning yourself, pushing your boundaries forwards, looking at different ways of writing music, because otherwise it just stultifies and so I think the journey that Elgar went on, in much more enclosed surroundings than the ones I had, fascinates me really,

7 Performed in Malvern Priory on 1 June 2023.



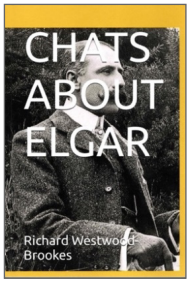
because this was somebody who was totally honest in his approach to music – that's one of the things I get about Elgar always – sometimes I find bits of it a bit rhetorical, even in *Gerontius*, but there is a kind of touching humility in the face of music.

I think Ben always knew he was a great composer in some ways and he and Stravinsky had a dreadful kind of ridiculous competitiveness, and Britten of course was someone who did know how to score for an orchestra – he could play most of the instruments. I mentioned the other day that a viola player said to him 'I'm not sure if this passage is possible' and he seized the viola and played it, which must have been rather humiliating.[8] He was the person that looked at my early scores and said to me 'Look, I have great sympathy with what you want to do with music' which at the time was very much about the loneliness of the outcast, but he said 'I do advise you to try and write away from the piano so that you actually are not writing pianistic music for the orchestra' and I think in Elgar you get this feeling that somebody understood the orchestral canvas, the orchestral palette; I never get the feeling the music is written from the piano – it's heard in the head. That's what Britten wanted me to understand and when I suffered a very severe degree of deafness that was so useful because I didn't need the piano, and when I played the piano it sounded horrible. Well, it never sounded very good when I played it and Lennox thought that when I played the synthesiser in *Seeds of Discord* it sounded even worse. So, I think this thing of going on a journey, whether you're a writer or a painter or sculptor or whatever, and at whatever level, it is constantly to be questioning yourself, and in a sense that's perhaps the thing I get from Elgar, is that he is honest to his own conscience, to his own musical abilities and what he wanted to say.

*The editors wish to express their thanks to Ruth Hellen who transcribed this from a recording of the conversation.*

8 Michael Berkeley's talk at The Firs on 2 June 2023

# BOOK REVIEWS

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207 pages

## Chats About Elgar
Richard Westwood-Brookes

Richard Westwood-Brookes will be known to many who visit Elgar's Birthplace, now of course called by its original name of *The Firs*. More widely, we are already in his debt through his brilliantly researched *Elgar and the Press*. In his introduction to this volume of essays, which are based on 'regular talks about Elgar', the author writes 'the idea of the talks was to provide insights into Elgar the man, his music and certain aspects of his life with a view to introducing him to a much wider public'.

Despite our mutual involvement in Elgar matters for a long time our paths have rarely crossed but I am more than aware of the work that Westwood-Brookes does and his, at times, strongly held opinions. I may not agree with all he has to say but admit it is far preferable to paint a clear, vivid picture of Elgar than the alternative. I opened the book at random and found that I agreed with Westwood-Brookes immediately. He points out that the words Elgar set in his *Coronation O*de would have avoided or minimised controversy today had these been those more widely adopted.

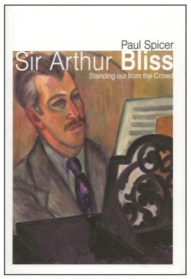
> Land of Hope and Glory
> Mother of the Free
> How shall we extol thee,
> Who are born of thee?
> Truth and right and freedom
> Each a holy gem
> Stars in solemn brightness
> Weave their diadem.

There are, among others, substantial chapters on the *Variations*, Elgar's finances, the Violin Concerto and its 'soul', Elgar the Music Hall Artist and an essay speculating that Elgar and Delius had met in Leipzig when young. All the essays make you think and, when you feel you are being led up a blind alley, the evidence is produced to make you think again! Perhaps Westwood-Brookes dwells too much on the darker side of Elgar's character for my taste, but that is his prerogative. If he set out 'to provide insights into Elgar the man, his music and certain aspects of his life' then there is little doubt he succeeds.

'Music' is now a commodity exploited by an international industry which, when combined with the ignorance of government, has succeeded in marginalising music education and is, at the same time absurdly destroying our ability to appreciate why Schubert's or Bach's or Elgar's music is a fundamental part of what remains of our civilisation. Anything or anybody who can play their part in redressing this anomaly deserves our thanks, as does Richard Westwood-Brookes for 'doing his bit' in this invaluable way.

Andrew Neill

## SIR ARTHUR BLISS Standing out from the Crowd
Paul Spicer




Robert Hale

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384 pages

What is the best way to approach the preparation of a biography of a composer? Should we adopt a cool detached manner; giving no quarter to any weaknesses in the works surveyed, or should we allow some indulgence for the subject with here and there a dose of 'special pleading'? This dilemma is worth remembering when reading Paul Spicer's new biography of Arthur Bliss. In the Preface the author mentions how little he knew about Bliss and his music, and after initial doubts, decided that rectifying this ignorance might be the most positive and satisfying way into tackling the biography: so, he would pose several questions to allow him to judge Bliss the man and his music.

This book is aimed at musicians and the music-loving public and where there is musical analysis this is not weighed down with jargon. Anyone who wants to listen to the music of Bliss for the first time, or who wants to remind themselves of these compositions after a long period of time, will find Spicer's commentary attractive. Whilst writing the book Spicer wondered why he, a specialist in British music, didn't know Bliss's music earlier in his life. As he says in his Preface 'This, then, is at the heart of writing of this book. I want the reader to share my journey of exploration, and to join me in the excitement of discovery'.

In this biography, as well as the analysis of the music, we are given a full narrative of the principal events of Bliss's long life. People and places are described in great detail. The book is laid out in sixteen chapters, followed by endnotes, a bibliography, and a useful index. Also included are several significant illustrations and photographs which bring to life people and places of particular importance to Bliss.

I hope readers will feel that Spicer gives us a biography which meets our expectations: it is I think, a worthwhile addition to the bookshelf and greatly expands our understanding of Bliss the man and musician. What this book adds to the literature concerning Bliss is a thorough examination of his life and all his major compositions, in one place.

According to Spicer, Arthur Bliss first met Elgar in 1912 when the younger composer was at Cambridge. Alice Elgar first mentions Bliss in her diary in November 1915 when she attended an afternoon concert at the Aeolian Hall given by the Philharmonic String Quartet, which included a String Quartet by Bliss. The diary entry confirms that Alice 'Liked it very muss [much]'. It is odd that there is very little mention of Elgar in Bliss's *Autobiography* which states quite clearly that he visited the Elgars only three times; firstly in 1912 through the assistance of a mutual friend, secondly on 2 October 1917 (as Alice's diary entry for that date accurately records) and thirdly, just after the end of the war, when he turned over the pages for Elgar at the play-through of the newly written Violin Sonata with W. H. Reed. Bliss appears to have forgotten the visits he made to Severn House in 1916. His second visit is recorded by Alice Elgar in her diary entry for 14 April 1916: she mentions that Bliss came to Severn House the day before he was to leave London, and indeed his diary shows that he was on leave from 7 April to 15 April.

Bliss next appears in Alice's Diary entry for 21 July 1916 as one of the visitors to Severn House that day. In his *Autobiography* he relates how he came to be injured just ten days before this meeting with Alice, having been taken off the field of battle and returned to hospital in London. Information kindly provided to me by Margaret Jones at the Arthur Bliss Archive which is held in the Music Department at the Cambridge University Library, shows that there are no entries for 1916 in Bliss's diary after 6 July when he was wounded. Alice's diary entry records that Bliss returned to Severn House for tea on 27 July 1916. On 17 November Alice records that she went with Bliss to a matinée at the London Opera House which was arranged to raise money so that Christmas puddings could be sent to the forces. On



25 November, in the afternoon, Alice and Carice went to the Royal Albert Hall with Bliss and several other friends to hear the Royal Choral Society concert which included *For the Fallen*, conducted by Elgar and sung by Agnes Nicholls.

In her diary entry for 3 May 1917 Alice mentions that she went to the Grafton Galleries to see an exhibition of Russian pictures and there met Bliss where they had tea. On 2 October 1917 Bliss again came to tea at Severn House; a visit he mentions in his *Autobiography*. Bliss appears next in Alice's diary entry for 5 February 1918, when he is once again a guest for tea at Severn House. The next we hear of Bliss is when a dance was held at Severn House for Carice on 18 February 1919. The guests, all of whom Alice suggests had had an enjoyable time, included Bliss, who also returned to Severn House on 2 March, again as a guest for tea. On 7 March at Severn House, a play through of Elgar's new chamber works – the String Quartet, the Quintet and the Violin Sonata – was given by W. H. Reed, and his colleagues. With the Elgars on that occasion, were Bliss and a few other friends. Bliss recalled that day at Severn House in his *Autobiography*. His recollections of his meetings with the Elgars and the number of the visits he made to Severn House are not a complete account as can be seen from Alice's diaries.

Spicer mentions something of a mystery concerning Alice Elgar and one of Bliss's early instrumental works. It appears that Bliss may have wanted to dedicate his Violin Sonata to Elgar's wife. There is no mention in Alice Elgar's diary of a dedication of this Violin Sonata to her. However, in a letter to his father, Bliss had asked for the dedication to be placed at the top of the score of this sonata, but we learn from Spicer that there is no mention of the dedication in the extant score of this early work.

In 1920 Herbert Brewer asked Elgar for the names of appropriate young composers who could be approached for new works for the 1922 Three Choirs Festival. Elgar recommended Bliss. Spicer recognises here that 'Elgar had a real eye for those who he felt were likely to take the language of music forward as he knew it must [be], and Bliss had been given the seal of approval'. In December 1921, Elgar gave a lunch to Bliss and others[1] and on 5 December 1922 attended the first London performance of Bliss's *Colour Symphony*, given by the Royal College of Music student orchestra conducted by Adrian Boult. However, Elgar's response to the Symphony was cool

1 Spicer suggests tthis took place in 1920. However, Elgar's diary confirms it was in 1921.

and, now widowed, his relationship with Bliss became more distant.

There have been a relatively small number of performances of Bliss's work in the concert hall in the last fifty years. We are offered one explanation for the rapid decline in popularity of the music of Bliss following his death in 1975. Spicer suggests 'It is quite possible that one of the reasons for his decline in public consciousness after his death was that his music, however brilliant, descriptive, or moving it might be is simply unmemorable because of the lack of readily recalled melody, which helps to ensure longevity'. This book might, however, do much to change the minds of musicians and the music-loving public once the scores are reconsidered.

When covering Bliss's *Music for Strings*, Spicer reassures us that 'Our task is not to analyse his works in great detail, though this work being seminal to his development needs some greater exploration'. With a description of Bliss's music, it is hoped we will discover more about the composer to help our understanding of his creative aims. We learn in one chapter about Bliss's work for the BBC and there is also much coverage of his work for films. Spicer tactfully but persuasively explains why *The Olympians* is only partially successful, despite the involvement of Bliss's friend and collaborator J. B. Priestley. *The Olympians* is compared to *Peter Grimes*, which was first performed four years earlier. Spicer thinks Britten's opera '…was much more in tune with a contemporary approach to the genre,' making *The Olympians* look old-fashioned. New thinking was necessary for the postwar era.

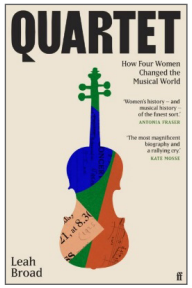
Spicer succeeds in what he has set out to do in this biography and it is a pleasure to read. The author's initial scepticism, which is followed by a positive open-minded analysis of the music and thorough narrative of the composer's life, is surely the most successful approach. Whilst I am writing this review, the BBC Proms festival is in full swing, and I wonder if a review of some of Bliss's finest works might not be a good theme for a future Proms season. This book would be a good place for the Proms planners to start.

Paul Chennell



## Quartet: 'How Four Women Changed the Musical World'

Leah Broad




Faber & Faber

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It is necessary to start this review with a criticism. The subtitle of this book – 'How Four Women Changed the Musical World' is inapposite, albeit that it may help sales. These women did NOT change the musical world – indeed, how many composers could be said to have been so influential? My own list would include Bach, Mozart, Wagner and Schoenberg, but opinions will differ.

Having got that out of the way, I can report that this is a most enjoyable book. For those who find these daunting, I am able to report that there is a complete absence of technical musical terms and Ms Broad writes in an entirely approachable way. She appears to have made a very detailed study of her chosen composers and her strategy of using a chronological outline works well for the most part.

Of the four composers, Dame Ethel Smyth is the best known. She has never been as neglected as the other three, and recent revivals of *The Wreckers* at Glyndebourne (and for one night at the 2022 Proms), plus recordings of some of her other operas and choral works have reinforced her position. Dame Ethel was clearly a strong-minded woman who was prepared to go to considerable lengths to achieve her goals – although sometimes scoring a spectacular own-goal in the process. She had many affairs with women, not all of whom were particularly kind to her (Virginia Woolf being one) and one with a man, the already married Henry Brewster, 'HB'. Ms Broad brings out the full dimensions of this complex woman's personality and makes her more human than the caricature sometimes employed. It must be said that Smyth referred to Elgar as 'the greatest bore I ever met in my life' but given her and Elgar's personalities, it is extremely unlikely they would ever have got on!

The devoutly Catholic Dorothy Howell was in some ways the opposite of Ethel. Dorothy was not assertive and her work was mainly away from the Metropolis. Henry Wood performed her *Lania* at the Proms – this has been recorded by Chandos, as has her Piano Concerto. Attractive works and one would like to hear more. Of Elgarian interest is the fact that having moved to the Malvern area she served on the West Midlands Branch committee in its early years, and also helped to tend the Elgar grave at St Wulstan's, where she regularly worshipped.

Doreen Carwithen was born in the village where I live, although this was simply because her mother was visiting family here when

she went into labour – they actually lived some miles away at the foot of the Chiltern escarpment. Clearly a highly gifted composer, she studied under William Alwyn at the Royal Academy of Music, later becoming his mistress and finally his wife. She spent a good deal of her composing life writing for films and once again Chandos has done us proud by issuing recordings of some of her work. She gave up her career for Alwyn and appears to have been happy to have done so despite difficulties, such as his fondness for drink.

Rebecca Clarke was not a composer about whom I knew much at all. I had heard of her but didn't know her work. It has been put to me that she is the finest of this quartet of composers and based on the works I have now heard on YouTube that is entirely possible. She suffered from a father who was an unmitigated bully, and became a professional violist also writing many songs and fine chamber music: this book has made me anxious to hear more of her output.

But why these four ladies? Why not Ruth Gipps, Imogen Holst, Elisabeth Lutyens, Grace Williams, Ina Boyle, Lilian Elkington, and many more. The answer appears to be that they were chosen because of their interesting and, sometimes overlapping, lives rather than their purely musical qualities. In this the book definitely succeeds; it is well written and held my attention throughout. Furthermore, it has given me new insights into some composers I thought I knew well, and inspired me to get to know more music by at least one. There are copious endnotes, a selected bibliography and discography, and a detailed index. I have only seen the Kindle version but have no reason to believe that the printed book is any way deficient.

A most successful book: warmly recommended.

David Morris



# CD REVIEWS

## Elgar: Violin Concerto; Britten: *Peter Grimes* Four Sea Interludes

Michael Barenboim, Violin, Philharmonia/Alessandro Crudele


Linn

CKD 729

How things have changed! When I was first collecting Elgar recordings, there were so few of the concertos that BBC's Record Review was able to do comparative reviews of both of them in one half-hour session. By my reckoning this is the 55th recording of the Violin Concerto to be made available, ten of them within the last decade. In many ways, the recording that broke the mould and gave indication of the growing wider acknowledgement of Elgar's music, came in 1976 from Pinchas Zukerman and Daniel Barenboim on CBS, an American record label, and it stills sounds very good.

The name Barenboim appears on this new issue too - not however conductor father Daniel, but violinist son Michael, born in 1985, and probably familiar as leader of his father's Western-Eastern Divan Orchestra. The conductor, Alessandro Crudele, Italian born, now resident in Berlin, is drawing critical enthusiasm from concerts all over the world.

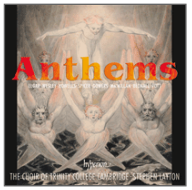
The first thing to say is that the recorded quality is stunning. There is a wonderful clarity that allows all sorts of details to emerge, the whole reproducing effortlessly. Timings can be misleading but I did notice that at just under 51 mins, this newcomer is 3 mins longer than my favourite amongst recent recordings, Thomas Zehetmair with Mark Elder, and there are plenty of others swifter than them. This does though give some indication of the overall style of the performance. The opening *tutti* is very clear and controlled but I miss the richness and daring that other accounts bring to this music, performances which are able to highlight from the outset that this is a big score, that big matters lie ahead and that there will be struggle that is only overcome in the final bars.

Barenboim seems totally in control at every moment and he has a beautiful, sweet tone, gentle and poised, with some really lovely pianissimo playing. He brings out the musing inward quality of the accompanied cadenza with everything immaculate and carefully placed, albeit somewhat restrained and dry-eyed. Elsewhere, what I miss is much sense of daring. At times, there seems to be a lack

of forward propulsion, for example, the big orchestral *tutti* in the first movement is strangely underwhelming. That said, any new performance brings new perspectives. There is now plenty of choice and we are beyond the days when we looked for and recommended a best recording. I'm sure we all have our favourites and here is a new one to explore.

Preceding the concerto, there is a very atmospheric account of the 'Four Sea Interludes' from *Peter Grimes*, with a vivid 'Storm' where you can not only imagine just seeing the waves but, in a sense, smelling and tasting them too! It's a pity that room was not found for the 'Passacaglia' which is included on many other recordings of the Interludes.

John Knowles




Hyperion

CDA 68434

**Anthems, Vol 1.**
**Elgar, *Great is the Lord*, Op.67, S.S. Wesley, *The Wilderness,* Elgar, *Give unto the Lord,* Op.74, Herbert Howells, *The house of the mind*, Paul Spicer, *Behold, O God our defender*, Patrick Gowers, *Viri Galilaei*, Sir James MacMillan, *O give thanks unto the Lord*, Francis Pott, *Toccata*, David Bednall, *Everyone sang***
The Choir of Trinity College, Cambridge, Harrison Cole and Jonathan Lee (organ)/Stephen Layton

At the Worcester Festival of 1875, Elgar heard S.S. Wesley play the organ in the south transept of the cathedral.[1] Wesley was then the organist of Gloucester Cathedral. He died at Gloucester the following year, and it may be that that encounter with Wesley was Elgar's last; but it was one that he never forgot.[2] On 1 June 1908, he told Alfred Littleton that he held Wesley in 'awe & reverence'.[3] Nearly four years later, in a letter to Henry Clayton, he described a new work of his as being of 'Wesley length but alas! not of Wesley grandeur'.[4] Given

1 *RCO Calendar*, 1935-6, 176-7.

2 ibid.

3 Moore, J.N., *Elgar and his publishers* [:] *letters of a creative life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 695.

4 ibid., 766.



Wesley's prominent role in English church music, it is likely that by 1875 Elgar knew at least some of the anthems, not only through hearing them at Worcester Cathedral but also perhaps by examining scores in his father's shop. The work that Elgar was referring to in the second of the above letters was *Great is the Lord*, Op.67, and one feature of it in particular more than hints at Wesley's influence; it is that Elgar's organ part, like that of *The Wilderness*, is on three staves and contains detailed instructions with regard to registration. Even today such an organ part is relatively rare; and it would not be surprising to learn that Elgar's superb pictorialism, both in the great oratorios and here in these psalm-settings, had its origins in such things as Wesley's 'painting' of waters breaking out in the wilderness. As to *Great is the Lord*, Elgar was being modest. Heard here in the vastness of Ely Cathedral, and notwithstanding a certain amount of damning with faint praise, it reasserts its position among the grandest of Elgar's shorter choral works. That one of its themes recalls the finale of the Violin Concerto is the basis of the damning, but that seems a shaky ground for disapproval. Ivor Atkins thought that the work was 'gorgeous', a verdict hard to disagree with after listening to it in this recording.[5]

The decision to record at Ely rather than the chapel of Trinity was no doubt for reasons to do with the former's acoustic properties and its more comprehensive organ. Used as they are to the somewhat austere instrument at Trinity College (Metzler, 1976) the two organ scholars respond to the great engine at Ely (Harrison & Harrison, 1908) like thirsty nomads chancing upon a sparkling watercourse. The result is thrilling indeed. Seldom if ever have the ships of Tarshish been so dramatically reduced to matchwood, or the cedars of Lebanon so violently trashed; and the appearance of the Bombardon in the final bar of *Great is the Lord*, where it utters DDDD, can only be described as sensational. But when S.S. Wesley wrote *The Wilderness*, he had in mind the organ at Hereford Cathedral, which in 1832 was the relatively modest instrument recently rebuilt by J.C. Bishop.[6] When adding registration to the manuscript, he could not have been thinking of heavy-pressure chorus reeds like those of the luxuriously appointed Harrison & Harrison organ at Ely, and perhaps a little restraint could

5 Atkins, E. Wulstan, *The Elgar-Atkins friendship* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles (Publishing) Ltd, 1984), 239.

6 Shaw, Watkins and Massey, Roy, *The Organists and Organs of Hereford Cathedral* (Hereford: Hereford Cathedral Organ Committee, 2005), 44.

have been exercised here. At any rate, the fact that the organ is used uninhibitedly reflects the size of the Trinity choir, which according to the liner notes comprised eleven sopranos, nine altos, nine tenors, and nine basses, which is a complement of lower voices larger by a considerable margin than one would find in a cathedral choir (in which it is sometimes just three voices on each second row). Elgar devotees with a fondness for comparing recordings may like to listen again to the more modest forces deployed by Christopher Robinson at St John's, Cambridge in 2003[7] and by James O'Donnell at Westminster Abbey in 2006.[8]

Devotees of Howells will be grateful indeed for the inclusion of *The House of the Mind*, which is something of a rarity. One wonders, though, whether it truly has a place in a compilation entitled 'Anthems', for Beaumont's four stanzas are deeply misanthropic and un-Christian (and making them the subject of a nine-minute work suggests insensitivity to its essentially brief and straightforward message). No one, though, will question the fine selection of contemporary works, which includes Francis Pott's *Toccata*, played here by the redoubtable Harrison Cole.

Viewed in its entirety, this is a disc that testifies to a continuity in English music. Wesley (b.1810) and Elgar coincided at the 'mock' festival. Howells (b.1892) grew tired of being introduced to Sir Edward Elgar.[9] Paul Spicer (b.1952) studied with Howells. David Bednall was born in 1979. The evidence of this disc, of abundant creativity, and of mastery of organ, choral and conducting technique, seems like an earnest of further continuity, at a gratifyingly high level.

The liner notes are by Professor Jeremy Dibble, which is necessarily a further selling point. He is, though, another who seems to subscribe to the view that Op.67 is not first-rate Elgar; but perhaps this recording will cause him to change his mind.

Warmly recommended.

Relf Clark

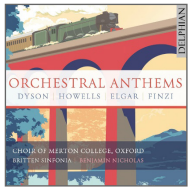
7 Naxos 8.557288.

8 Hyperion CDA67593.

9 Palmer, C., *Herbert Howells* (Borough Green: Novello & Co. Ltd, 1978), 14.



**Orchestral Anthems (Elgar, Finzi, Dyson, Howells)**
**Bairstow, *Blessed city, heavenly salem*, Elgar, *Ecce sacerdos magnus*, Dyson, *Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis in D major*, Howells, *Behold, O God our defender*, Purcell, orch. Elgar, *Jehova, quam multi sunt hostes mei*, Z.135, Finzi, *Lo, the full, final sacrifice*, Vaughan Williams, *Te Deum in G major*, Elgar, *The Spirit of the Lord***




Delphian

DCD 34291

Áine Smith (soprano), Ruairi Bowen (tenor), William Thomas (bass), Girl Choristers and Choir of Merton College, Oxford, Britten Sinfonia/Benjamin Nicholas

In a letter dated 9 January 1929, Sir Ivor Atkins told Elgar that he could 'weep' at his 'keeping silence'.[1] In the post-Alice years, Atkins made many attempts at getting Elgar to return to his study, but with little success. In 1923, however, he somehow managed to persuade him to make orchestral arrangements of the organ parts of Atkins's *Abide with me*, Battishill's *O Lord, look down from heaven*, and S.S. Wesley's *Let us lift up our heart*, and all three were heard at that year's Worcester Festival (along with Elgar's orchestration of the overture to Handel's *In the Lord put I my trust*, HWV 247).[2] For the festival of 1929, Atkins was similarly successful, but this time in relation only to Purcell's *Jehova, quam multi sunt hostes mei*, Z.135.[3] The four orchestral accompaniments were not published. Elgar's Battishill manuscript appears to have been mislaid,[4] and that of the Wesley anthem is believed to have been destroyed in a fire.[5] The Purcell manuscript has survived, however, and in 1995 or thereabouts Donald Hunt made a performing edition which Douglas Bostock and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Chorus and Orchestra recorded in 2002 for the first time.[6] For the purpose of

1 Atkins, E. Wulstan, *The Elgar-Atkins friendship* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles (Publishers) Limited, 1984), 410.

2 Kent, C.J., *Edward Elgar* [:] *a guide to research* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), 326-8.

3 Kent, C.J., op. cit., 343-4.

4 Kent, C.J., op. cit., 326.

5 Kent, C.J., op. cit., 327. It appears that the fire was at the premises of Bayley & Ferguson, to whom Elgar had sent the manuscript: see Moore, J.N., *Elgar and his publishers* [:] *letters of a creative life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 826.

6 *Elgar & the English Choral Tradition*, CLASSCD 456.

the present recording of the work, Benjamin Nicholas was assisted by Elgar Works, who were able to supply him with parts and a full score in advance of a forthcoming volume of the Complete Edition; and similar assistance was given in connection with *Ecce sacerdos magnus*.[7]

That in a tiny nutshell is the story behind the Purcell track of this fine disc, in which choral works generally heard with organ accompaniment are heard with an orchestra instead. Elgar's Purcell orchestration is in a sense the odd-man-out, all the other works on the disc, except *Ecce sacerdos magnus*, having been written in the twentieth century: appropriately sober, Elgar's treatment of Purcell has none of the high jinks to be found in his J.S. Bach and Handel arrangements, but one is moved by the spectacle of Elgar reaching across the centuries and respectfully engaging with a work so remote from anything of his own. Bairstow's great anthem appears here in a version with string orchestra and piano made by the composer himself. Whether it works as well as the organ original is perhaps a matter of taste: the strings underline details occasionally lost in a cathedral acoustic and render even more affecting the very moving coda ('To this Temple, where we call thee'); but Bairstow's writing for strings is nowhere near as sonorous or inventive as Elgar's, and one misses not only the various colours and effects prescribed in the organ version (Flute, Full Swell, Oboe, etc.) but also the greater drama the instrument brings. Similar remarks could be made about the Dyson setting. Here a full orchestra is substituted for the organ, but the orchestra has nothing quite like a Willis Contra Posaune or a Harrison & Harrison Double Ophicleide, and again one misses the 'cathedral' drama that one is used to. On the other hand, though, the orchestra renders even more *New World*-like the little phrase that introduces the second *Gloria Patri*. But the Howells anthem decidedly benefits from the orchestra, which somehow adds backbone to a work rendered somewhat flabby by too few accidentals. Finzi's *Lo, the full, final sacrifice*, although written for St Matthew's, Northampton, and therefore with the organ in mind, is enhanced by its orchestral accompaniment, which the composer himself made for the work's performance at the Gloucester Festival of 1947 (though 'accompaniment' is hardly the right word for an instrumental role which is so much more than a duplication and reinforcement of the voices).

Given the tendency nowadays for Matins to be ousted by Sung Eucharist, only rarely does one hear settings of the *Te Deum*, which is a pity. The Vaughan Williams setting in G major was written

7 Communication from Mr Nicholas on 18 July 2023.



for the enthronement of Cosmo Gordon Lang, which took place at Canterbury Cathedral on 4 December 1928,[8] and its bold, 'outdoor' style calls to mind the last of the *Five Mystical Songs*, as well as the *Benedicite*. The orchestration is by Arnold Foster and not Vaughan Williams himself, but no one listening with an innocent ear would suspect the master's absence. It would be hard to argue that this is an outstanding example of Vaughan Williams's art, but one is glad to have it on disc.

As to *The Spirit of the Lord*, it must be the case that before 1974, when Boult recorded *The Apostles*, it was only or mainly Three Choirs regulars who knew it otherwise than in its version with organ accompaniment. The inclusion of the much earlier *Ecce sacerdos magnus*, which comes across as stirring but not particularly remarkable, provides an illustration of the growth of Elgar's style from his St George's, Worcester years to those of his international success. Devotees wishing to compare and contrast the organ and orchestral accompaniments of these two works may like to revisit the recording that James O'Donnell made at Westminster Abbey in 2006.[9]

The playing and singing are first-rate throughout. Final consonants are not invariably as audible as one would wish, and perhaps (here as in so much music-making nowadays) just a little more attention could have been paid to dynamics: it is easy to be so carried away by beautiful music that one takes little and sometimes not so little liberties in this connection. The highlights? Bairstow's coda would have to be included in any short-list, Áine Smith's delicate notes floating movingly above the choir; but the Finzi performance is truly outstanding, rendered so partly by the fine contributions of Messrs Bowen and Thomas.

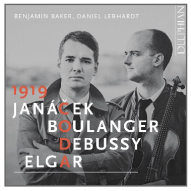
Michael Emery's liner notes are generously informative. Whether there was a Birmingham Festival in 1845 seems doubtful, and if Vaughan Williams wrote any Anglican chants, it appears that they remain in manuscript. But these are small points. Somewhat enigmatically, the cover of the liner booklet bears a fanciful depiction of a Gresley 'A3' pacific - 60103 *Flying Scotsman*, presumably - on the Severn Valley Railway. A Great Western locomotive would surely have been more appropriate, e.g., 7005 *Sir Edward Elgar*.

Warmly recommended.

Relf Clark

8 It is not to be confused with the F major setting, which was written for the coronation in 1937.

9 Hyperion CDA67593.




Delphian

DCD34288

## CODA 1919: Sonatas for Violin and Piano by Janacek, Debussy and Elgar, and pieces by Lili Boulanger.

Benjamin Baker (violin) and Daniel Lebhardt (piano)

This fascinating and imaginatively planned programme is particularly interesting as the Elgar is juxtaposed alongside other music for violin and piano by composers contemporaneous with him, who display the considerable variety of musical developments that were current during the second decade of the 20th Century - in France (Debussy and Lili Boulanger), and in Eastern Europe (Janacek). The disc's title is explained in the blurb: 'The music on this album……records vividly a world that was shortly to vanish forever - a world to which the year 1919 was already a coda'.

The first of the sonatas is Leos Janacek's of 1914-21 which underwent many revisions, rewriting, and reordering of movements, before reaching the final version heard here. There are four movements, the second of which is entitled 'Ballad' [sic], the others being untitled with only the tempo markings to indicate character. Being Janacek, there is plenty of character in the music, short epigrammatic phrases and longer melodic lines occur frequently and, as so often with this composer, the influence of Moravian folk music is evident, with occasional imitations of the cimbalom in the piano part. It is a markedly individual work which relates to no previous musical school. Its strange flutterings, abrupt endings, sensuous melodies and occasional passionate outbursts are strongly characterised by both performers.

Debussy's Sonata of 1916/17 is one of the trio of chamber works written immediately before his premature death in 1918 and the work in which, at its premiere, he made his last public appearance as a pianist. In three movements, its economy of means in a duration of around fifteen minutes encompasses many rapid changes of mood amid Debussy's characteristic shifting harmonies and textures of immaculate clarity.

Elgar's familiar Sonata of 1918 stands absolutely as a great work in this company and although his style can be said to be backward-looking in comparison (Brahms being the most obviously identifiable influence), he subsumes any apparent influence into his own style. The first movement is shaped most beautifully, Baker's sweet tone being an asset in the lyrical moments, especially high in the violin's register, and both players rise impressively to the impassioned climax of the movement. The particularly beautiful and unusual central 'Romance', a quite original inspiration, is interpreted with acute sensitivity. Interestingly, all three sonatas seem to me to have central movements displaying fantastic, often strange and harmonically adventurous qualities. In the last movement, the artists strike an ideal tempo and achieve the many changes of mood with convincing spontaneity.

Lili Boulanger (younger sister of the great teacher Nadia) who also died in 1918 at the early age of 24 (having been prone to severe ill-health from a early age) was probably the most promising young French composer of this period, having won the prestigious Prix de Rome in 1913 - a particularly major achievement as she was also the first woman to do so. The several works she had written up to this point show a maturity beyond her years. The short pieces for violin and piano on this disc offer music of a delightful personality through which a lightness of mood and texture contrasts strikingly with the three major sonatas in the programme. The *Two Pieces* ('Nocturne' and 'Cortège') date from 1911 and 1914 respectively, '*D'un matin de printemps*' from 1917 (also later orchestrated). As programmed, the *Two Pieces* follow the Janacek and '*D'un matin…*' follows the Debussy, preceding the Elgar.

The performers, New Zealand-born Benjamin Baker (UK trained at the Menuhin School and the Royal Academy of Music) and Hungarian pianist Daniel Lebhardt, were both new to me. They produce duo playing of fine-tuned rapport and sensitivity in each of these disparate works, responding acutely to the very different worlds of each and to the delicate nuances so often required, as well as to the virtuosity and technical address that each composer demands.

With the fine playing as well as a faithful and natural balance in the recorded sound, plus informative booklet notes by writer and broadcaster Nigel Simeone, the programme on this disc is one to acquire, especially for the presence of Elgar at his finest amongst some of his greatest contemporaries.

Stephen Dickinson


Accord

ACD322

**My Story: Music for Violin and Piano by Wagner (arranged Seybold), Paderewski, J. S. Bach, Elgar and Messiaen**
Robert Kwiatkowski (violin), Dominika Glapiak (piano)

The Elgar Violin Sonata on this new recording is surrounded by a variety of unexpected works: a transcription of a Wagner song, a highly romantic violin sonata by Paderewski, a movement from an unaccompanied Bach *partita* and the final movement by Olivier Messiaen from one of the twentieth-century's most original chamber works.

Polish violinist Robert Kwiatkowski explains his personal choices of repertoire in an introductory note: '…I attempted to build the narrative in such a way that it resembles the dramaturgy of a live concert'. The 'narrative' thus begins gently, continuing with major sonatas by Paderewski and Elgar separated by the reflective Bach movement, and ends with the radiance of Messiaen's finale.

The disc begins with the transcription, made by violinist Arthur Seybold, of 'Traume', the final song from Wagner's *Wesendonck Lieder*. Transposed a tone down here from Wagner's original, there is perhaps a darker emotional turn to the music not necessarily to be evinced in the original (Wagner's own transcription for violin and chamber ensemble keeps to the original key). The song was also a study for the 'O sink hernieder' section of the love duet in the second act of *Tristan und Isolde*.

Following this gentle start, Kwiatkowski and his pianist, Dominika Glapiak, launch into Paderewski's stormy and passionate Sonata of 1885 (dedicated to Sarasate) with great abandon whilst also recognising the *cantabile* nature of the many lyrical passages. The expansive first movement (*Allegro con fantasia*) is the longest followed by an attractive Intermezzo (*Andantino*), lighter in texture but rising to a fine climax whilst the Finale (*Allegro molto quasi presto*) returns to the dramatic style of the opening movement. Both artists rise to the emotional and technical challenges (the piano part unsurprisingly virtuosic) of this fine work, hitherto unknown to me.

Following those storms and stresses in full Romantic mode, the palate cleanser of the 'Sarabande' from Bach's D minor *Partita* (from which also comes the famous 'Chaconne') is a welcome, reflective moment before the players embark on the Elgar sonata.

The qualities displayed in the Paderewski are also in evidence in the duo's reading of Elgar's magnificent work: bold and forthright when necessary, the lyrical moments projected with sensitivity and



affection, Kwiatkovski's beauty of tone to the fore, Glapiak's excellent piano playing adding much to a fine rendition. The remarkable 'Romance' second movement elicits from them an interpretation of deep understanding. In the final movement the varying moods are conveyed with great attention to detail, bringing the work to a fine conclusion.

This is not the end of the disc, however, for what follows to conclude the programme is something quite unexpected. The juxtaposition of Elgar with Olivier Messiaen must be a first or at the very least, a very rare coupling of two completely different human beings and musical animals (their only obvious point of similarity being their shared Catholicism). In practice though, to my surprise and indeed admiration, the choice of the deeply expressive final movement from Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*, 'Praise to the Immortality of Jesus', is a complete success. It is cleverly and specifically chosen, clearly with much thought behind it and follows on from Elgar's final bars (a firm E major) in the same tonality but in very different emotional territory. Moving, reflective, ecstatic, radiant and intense, these are characteristics of so much of Messiaen's music (what must its effect have been at the Quartet's first performance in a Polish prisoner-of-war camp in 1941?). These most beautiful six minutes conclude a very worthwhile disc (excellent in performances as I have indicated, as well as recording) in which Elgar stands out strongly amongst the other fine composers in this unusual programme.

Stephen Dickinson


Chandos

CHSA 5317

**Parry: *Scenes from Shelley's 'Prometheus Unbound'*; *Blest Pair of Sirens***
Crouch End Festival Chorus, soloists & the London Mozart Players, conducted by William Vann

The musicologist Ernest Walker famously wrote 'If we seek for a definite birthday for modern English music, September 7, 1880, when *Prometheus* saw the light at Gloucester … has the best claim'. Parry's *Scenes from Shelley's 'Prometheus Unbound'* is a part-setting of the poet's four-act lyrical drama of 1820. This was in turn based on *Prometheus Bound*, the ancient Greek tragedy, attributed to

Aeschylus, on the myth of Prometheus. The subject is a Titan who defies Zeus (Shelley turns Zeus into Jupiter) and protects and gives fire to mankind, for which he is subjected to the wrath of Zeus and punished.

Parry's dramatic cantata was first performed, conducted by the composer, in Gloucester's Shire Hall at the Three Choirs Festival. The critic H. C. Colles wrote '*Prometheus* shows a sense of forceful declamation which English music had not known since Purcell'. The work caused a stir by its novelty, yet fell into neglect until a centenary revival on 9 September 1980, when Vernon Handley conducted the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, soloists and BBC Singers. This performance was broadcast on BBC Radio 3, and the announcer's concert notes, written by Michael Pope, then Chairman of The Elgar Society and a noted Parry scholar, made the following key point:

> It is interesting to note that the decision to choose Prometheus as a subject was made at the house of Edward Dannreuther, Wagner's closest friend in England, with whom Parry had been studying for years; for, as Shaw pointed out in *The Perfect Wagnerite*, Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* is an English attempt at a Ring ... 'Both works set forth the same conflict between humanity and its gods and governments, issuing in the redemption of men from their tyranny by the growth of his will into perfect strength and confidence'.

It has been said that *Prometheus Unbound*, an invocation of political and moral renewal, was Shelley's answer to the mistake of the French Revolution in replacing one tyrant with another. Given Parry's high-mindedness, it is unsurprising that he chose such a drama for the text of his first large-scale choral and orchestral work.

Yes, there are links with Wagner - on both a literary level (the struggles of the protagonists recall Wotan and the Ring) and a musical level (chromaticism, the declamatory style and some use of leitmotiv). It is a mould-breaking work. Parry's searching mind is opening the way for others, and follow they did. Herbert Howells referred to 'the time of our escape from a Mendelssohnian captivity'. Moreover, and specifically, Stephen Banfield wrote 50 years ago in *The Musical Times* that Parry 'helped in no small measure to form the basis of Elgar's vocabulary, thus bearing fruit after 20 years'. The evidence is in this work, for one is reminded of Elgar in works such as *Caractacus* and *The Dream of Gerontius.*

Some critics in 1880 were hostile, yet J. A. Fuller-Maitland praised Parry's 'superb power of choral architecture' and thought it was 'one of the first of greatest glories of the Renaissance of English music' and 'a work of art so full of beauty and so complete in its sympathy between words and music'. The orchestration is certainly competent, even if it fails to match Elgar.

Having achieved a critically acclaimed revival of Parry's oratorio *Judith* at the Royal Festival Hall in 2019 (subsequently recorded and released by Chandos Records, reviewed in *Elgar Society Journal*, Vol.22, No.2), the conductor William Vann, again with the Crouch End Festival Chorus and London Mozart Players, has now recorded *Prometheus Unbound* and so filled a gap in the discography. This is a significant work in the canon of English choral music and is done full justice in this new recording.

The orchestral introduction to Part I, *maestoso* and reminiscent of Wagner in its sombre chromaticism, is finely played by the London Mozart Players. Fuller-Maitland called the soliloquy of Prometheus 'the perfect example of verbal accentuation as well as dramatic truth'. Baritone Neal Davies sings 'Monarch of Gods and Demons' ably and with real conviction.

The Crouch End Festival Chorus is effective in 'Thrice three hundred thousand years'. Prometheus sings 'call up the fiends' and, after an ominous drum-roll, the Chorus of Furies' 'From the ends of the earth' bursts forth, reminiscent of the Demons' Chorus in *The Dream of Gerontius*, especially the triumphant ending. This is superb music, well directed by William Vann. Mezzo-soprano Sarah Connolly gives an impassioned account of the Brahms-like 'Earth's song', 'I felt thy torture, son'. The orchestra then introduces the melting melody that heralds the women's Chorus of Spirits' 'From unremembered ages', disarming choral writing with the freshness of an Elgar part-song.

No one would cavil at Fuller-Maitland's description of the Chorus of Spirits' 'Life of Life! thy lips enkindle' as 'exquisite', with its aspirational rising sixth, another presage of Elgar. The soloists join in the masterly build-up of tension that ends quietly and sublimely. Here we hear the gentle, tender side of Parry the man.

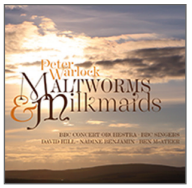
Part II opens with a brief orchestral opening of typical Parry jauntiness, and we hear tenor David Butt Philip sing 'Ye congregated powers of heaven' in fine declamatory style, continuing with 'Pour forth heaven's wine', a song of Handelian nobility (Fuller-Maitland called it 'a thing of unforgettable beauty'). The mood changes to one of repose, and we hear accomplished singing from soprano Sarah Fox as the Spirit of the Hour in 'Soon as the sound had ceased'. The 'unseen spirits' of the chorus continue lyrically with 'The pale stars

are gone' before the pace quickens as we witness Parry's genius for working up great choral climaxes. The soloists enter with beautifully blended voices that dissolve into the final chorus 'Then weave the web of the mystic measure', an exultant peroration to a remarkable work.

This is original, arresting music that is full of interest. Ernest Walker went so far as to say that Parry 'never again caught the lyrical rapture of the best parts'. (Not *Blest Pair of Sirens*, a strong performance of which is included on this disc?) It is easy to see the impact *Prometheus* had on some in 1880 but a mystery why it was then so long forgotten. I commend this outstanding disc to Elgarians.

There are informative notes by Jeremy Dibble, in which he quotes from Elgar's inaugural lecture as Peyton Professor of Music at Birmingham University: 'In looking for a practical starting point for anything that may be usefully considered in relation to present day music, I think it unnecessary to go back further than 1880'. We do not know if he had heard it, but Elgar could have been thinking of Parry's *Prometheus*.

Michael Trott




EM Records

EMR CD080

**Maltworms and Milkmaids**
**(Songs and other music by Peter Warlock)**
Nadine Benjamin (sop.), Ben McAteer (bar.), BBC Singers,
BBC Concert Orchestra/David Hill

Philip Heseltine used the pseudonym 'Peter Warlock', no doubt partially reflecting his interest in the occult. He was almost entirely self-taught. His life appears somewhat unconventional, with sex and excessive alcohol featuring at various times. E.J. (Jack) Moeran (who co-wrote one of the songs on this CD) shared a property with him in the 1920s and it seems developed a taste for alcohol that severely and adversely influenced his future output.

Warlock (as I shall now refer to him) was a 'miniaturist', best known for his songs: he wrote about 150 mainly for solo voice and piano accompaniment. There are a few purely instrumental works, such as the *Capriol Suite*, and a few choral pieces, some with instrumental or orchestral accompaniment. After his death in 1930 (almost certainly by suicide although other theories have been circulated) his music fell from favour, probably largely as a result of reports of his personality and scandalous behaviour. Luckily, most of us can now separate a composer's personality and beliefs from his music, and the formation of a Peter Warlock Society in the 1960s has helped to bring about a renaissance in his music.

This very welcome and well-filled (nearly 74 minutes) CD includes mainly songs, most orchestrated by other hands, mostly for solo voice although a few are choral, plus the *Capriol Suite* arranged (by Warlock himself) for full orchestra, and some other instrumental pieces including a *Serenade* that could have been written by Delius. Some of the songs are rambunctious (in 'Jolly Rutterkin' mode) others more thoughtful. All are however possessed of memorable melodies and attractive orchestral accompaniments. I was particularly taken by 'Sorrow's lullaby' with a chromaticism not usually associated with Warlock.

Performances by the two soloists are excellent with McAteer in particular bringing clear diction and great musicality throughout. The BBC Singers and BBC Concert Orchestra turn in excellent performances, guided by the experienced hand of David Hill. The recording (made in the fabled acoustic of the Watford Colosseum (AKA Town Hall)) is first class. The 36-page CD insert gives full details of the works and performers and all has been produced to a very high standard.

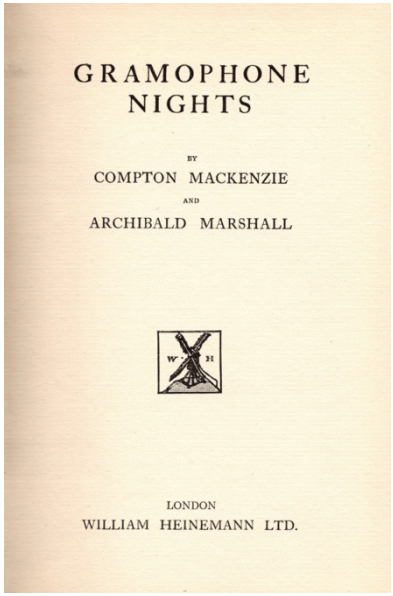
Many of these songs are receiving world premiere recordings and it has been a delight to get to know them. I am sure this is a recording to which I will return often in the years ahead. Highly recommended.

David Morris

# LETTERS

## Elgar, the Gramophone and *The Gramophone: A postscript*

*Andrew Neill*


GRAMOPHONE
NIGHTS

BY
COMPTON MACKENZIE
AND
ARCHIBALD MARSHALL

LONDON
WILLIAM HEINEMANN LTD.

The August 2023 issue of this *Journal,* published my article about Tony Griffith and his brothers. I mentioned the work in which I had become involved - clearing the flat of the late David Michell. In doing so I came across a little book, titled *Gramophone Nights*. Seemingly unread, it opened doors to a distant world: that of disciplined listening to gramophone recordings. What follows is a brief summary of what the book was attempting to do and forms a postscript to my essay.

*Gramophone* magazine is now 100 years old and, as the magazine began its life in 1923, Compton Mackenzie and fellow novelist Archibald Marshall published this little book. The authors provided a guide on how to listen to and programme the discs in a collection. Bearing in mind that this was still a few years before the microphone revolutionised the sound of recordings it is a tribute to the enthusiasm of both authors that their excitement in the technology then to hand is palpable. Mackenzie, was of course, the founder editor of *The Gramophone* (as it was then called) and both writers owned substantial record collections which would have been expensive for many of *The Gramophone's* readers to emulate in 1923. Checking at random I found I can now buy for £14 all of Beethoven's symphonies conducted by Daniel Barenboim. Had such a set been available in 1923, the price would have been beyond the means of all but a few.

The idea behind the book was to listen to discs as part of a programme, and the authors took turns to put forward suggestions for several such programmes. Few suggestions ran beyond one or two sides and there was an emphasis on British conductors such as Sir Landon Ronald and Sir Henry Wood, no doubt because they were recorded by home grown, available, labels. The 'Sacred' selection included Elgar's setting of *O Salutaris Hostia* with the Westminster Cathedral Choir conducted by Sir Richard Terry, 'Oriental' covered Beethoven's *Ruins of Athens* and 'The Dance of the Seven Veils' from Strauss's *Salome* with Strauss conducting the LSO. Under 'Symphonic' Marshall interspersed his choices with piano music, but included Elgar's first recording of the *Enigma Variations*.



Marshall's comments about the music shows the value of gramophone recordings even then: 'The "Enigma Variations" I have not always found appreciated at first but to me they bring more and more pleasure as I play them over'.

There is even a mention of the excerpt from *The Sanguine Fan* (included on the final side) which was recorded on 24 February 1920, 'a good example of our great English composer in his lighter vein'. Of course, what was available to Mackenzie and Marshall was the best for its time. A fine gramophone was almost only a rich man's toy and to listen to a complete symphony was a challenge. Sir Henry Wood's recording of 'Eroica' was recommended, which was one of the few 'full-length' symphonies (but cut heavily) listed. Nevertheless, it also shows how essential to these two writers was listening to music in a domestic setting. Collecting recordings has continued ever since and the music of Elgar, like that of countless others, has benefitted greatly from this ever-changing technology. Whether or not it continues to do so with music downloads available through the medium of a telephone remains to be seen.

# RECORDING NOTES - OCTOBER 1923

Following the Three Choirs Festival in Worcester in September 1923, where Elgar's arrangement of Handel's *Overture in D minor* was successfully premiered, on 7 September The Gramophone Company recommended it be recorded.

A recording session took place at Hayes on 26 October with a large group comprising many members of the Royal Albert Hall orchestra, although the total number of players was still half that of a regular symphony orchestra.

Two takes were made of the Handel Overture arrangement. Elgar's arrangement of the Bach *Fantasia in C minor* was also recorded. It had recently been decided that the opening section of *In the South*, which had been recorded on 7 December 1921, was unsatisfactory so this was repeated.

On 14 September it was decided that Elgar should be approached about recording the Second Symphony, as this was to feature in the forthcoming season of the Queen's Hall Symphony Concerts.

*Acknowledgement is made to Dr Jerrold Northrop Moore's* Elgar on Record *(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974) in compiling this note.*

Kevin Mitchell



# 100 YEARS AGO …

Following London orchestral rehearsals in August 1923, Elgar returned to Kempsey. On 25 August, he visited the Stuarts of Wortley at Stratford-upon-Avon, with his niece Clare Grafton, and the following day the Stuarts motored to Kempsey for tea. They later attended parts of the Worcester festival.

Elgar's transcription of Handel's *Overture in D minor* (Chandos Anthem II) was given its first performance on 2 September 1923 at the Worcester Three Choirs Festival, conducted by EE, and on 6 September he conducted the first performances of his orchestral accompaniments to Battishill's Motet, *O Lord, look down from heaven* and S.S. Wesley's *Let us lift up our hearts.* He also conducted 'For the Fallen', *The Kingdom*, *Gerontius* and the Cello Concerto (with Beatrice Harrison), his own arrangement of the National Anthem, the orchestration of Parry's *Jerusalem* and Atkins' arrangement of *Abide with me.* He unveiled a window in the cloisters dedicated to the five organists of the Cathedral buried there.

For the duration of the festival Elgar and Billy Reed were guests of the house-party held at the Atkins home. They were both great raconteurs telling many stories and carrying out 'japes' and when joined by Herbert Thompson, the music critic for the *Yorkshire Post*, the tales went on until late into the night. Shopping expeditions with Elgar and Reed were often hazardous, for once they returned with 12lbs of tomatoes - Wulstan noted they were 'eating tomatoes all the week, in salads and soups'.

After the festival he wrote on 12 September to Alice Stuart of Wortley: 'I am so delighted you were there & liked the dear old things – they sounded well in the cathedral but I cannot see the future…The Kingdom, Gerontius & For the Fallen are not bad. I think I deserve my peerage now, when these are compared with the new works!!!'.

Elgar left Napleton Grange at the end of September on the expiration of his lease and wrote to Atkins on 26 October: 'The only thing that at all reconciles me to leaving Kempsey is the awful weather. I shd have drowned at K. but I miss it awfully …'. Back in London he informed Alice Stuart of Wortley that he had 'been to 12 theatres since I retd: I am so desperately lonely & turn in to see anything. It is interesting to hear of Hardy but I never by any chance think of music now – entirely gone. I hope I may see you because I may shortly be away for ever – or at least a very long time – but do not say so'. Alice who knew Thomas Hardy, had been to Tintagel and may have called in at Hardy's home, Max Gate at Dorchester, on her way back to London.

He went to Hayes on 26 October to record the Handel *Overture,* his arrangement of Bach's *Fantasia in C minor* and part of *In the South.*

A voyage to South America was in prospect with a thousand-mile trip up the Amazon to Manaos on board the cargo ship *Hildebrand* which sailed from Liverpool on 15 November. A few notes to Carice survive. He wrote on 18 November: 'Quite fine now & warm: dreadful weather from Liverpool till last night…' and from Lisbon he wrote that all was well. As the ship neared Madeira – the last posting place – he wrote on 20

November: ‘All well – weather bad – the worst passage in ten years – but it is warm & out of doors weather – with occasional sun – a good deal of motion … I did not go ashore at Lisbon as it was wet & raining heavily at times – quite like a London Nov. day!’ On reaching Manaus Elgar was impressed by the grand opera house, built by Brazilian rubber barons. He returned to Liverpool on 30 December and went to stay with his sister Pollie at Perryfield in Bromsgrove for the New Year.

Kevin Mitchell

**Manaus Opera House**

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