

1 Introduction

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International interest in Elgar's music has enjoyed a general revival following the performance and recordings of his Third Symphony, properly entitled 'the sketches for Symphony No. 3 elaborated by Anthony Payne'. When permission was granted by the family for Payne to make his work public, understanding and perception of Elgar was permanently altered. Hitherto it was assumed that the death of Alice Elgar in 1920 had suppressed his creative urge, a view supported by the relatively small-scale works of his last decade, and their dependence on earlier sketches. It appears, however, that he was sufficiently restored not only to contemplate an opera (*The Spanish Lady*) and a new symphony, but to reach a stage in composing the latter from which a complete score could be elaborated – obviously not identical to what Elgar would have written, but rich in ideas and deeply moving in performance.¹ And if both symphony and opera depended in part on earlier sketches, research into Elgar's compositional methods shows that to be true of many, if not all, his greatest works (see chapters 4 and 5).

In fact the level of interest in Elgar among musicians, including musical scholars, was already high. Elgar has never been long out of public view, at least in Britain, where his music is a fixture at the Last Night of the Proms. The Jacqueline du Pré phenomenon, in which a young artist working with a senior conductor (Sir John Barbiroli) presented the cello concerto unforgettably, seemed to recreate the history of Elgar recording his violin concerto with the young Yehudi Menuhin; but we should not forget that the concerto was in the repertoire of senior cellists such as Paul Tortelier. One of the most encouraging features of recent years has been the interest taken in Elgar by conductors, scholars, and audiences from, for example, Russia, Germany, Japan, and the United States. The idea of Elgar as a composer culturally confined to Britain has taken a hard knock, and the question now often discussed is whether there is anything intrinsically English about his music at all (on this see below, and chapters 8 and 15).

This book is not a biography, but a Companion. Its role is not to reiterate facts and views in memorials of Elgar by those who knew him.² Nor is it a replacement for the scholarly biographies and life-and-work studies by, among others, Diana McVeagh, Percy M. Young, Michael Kennedy, Jerrold Northrop Moore, and Robert Anderson.³ Probably the best way to get to know the composer, after listening to his music, is to read personal

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documents, and we are fortunate in having newly edited editions of a large selection of letters.⁴ Nevertheless, besides offering a concise chronology, a Companion should offer a framework within which the chapters by independent scholars with individual viewpoints, can, independently, be read (and if, for instance, letters are cited more than once, it is because the chapters need not be read consecutively). This introduction therefore offers a review of essential aspects of Elgar's personality, life, and music and reflects on some of the principal themes in his historical reception.

Notes on a life

I have worked hard for forty years & at the last, Providence denies me a decent hearing of my work: so I submit – I always said God was against art and I still believe it. Anything obscene or trivial is blessed in this world and has a reward – I ask for no reward – only to live & to hear my work. I still hear it in my heart and in my head so I must be content. Still it is curious to be treated by the old-fashioned people as a criminal because my thoughts and ways are beyond them.⁵

Elgar's revelations of his personal feelings need not be distrusted merely because they cannot be taken literally (forty years? the above was written when he was forty-three). Such outrageous assertions, like the later 'as a child and as a young man and as a mature man no single person was ever kind to me', come from very specific causes of bitterness and are too often taken out of context.⁶ The 'work' mentioned in the first quotation is not his entire oeuvre, but *The Dream of Gerontius*, following its inept premiere in 1900. Providence had not denied him decent hearings of other pieces, notably, during the previous year, the 'Enigma' Variations and *Sea Pictures*. The second complaint was made in 1921 when he had not long lost his wife and helpmeet, and was feeling unable to continue his life's work. Both come from private letters; they are not considered statements. And the second contains, typically, an Elgarian contrast, for it comes after something no less quotable: 'I am still at heart the dreamy child who used to be found in the reeds by Severn side with a sheet of paper trying to fix the sounds and longing for something very great.'

Here is a richly suggestive inconsistency, and, in all probability, its share of nostalgic distortion. Yet however much one may unpick such confessions, they contain essential truths about Elgar, whose music is so suggestive precisely of longing, of aspiration, mingled, perhaps, with a sense of not quite being able to attain a goal: of hope more than confidence. It seems right, in a way, that his projected oratorio trilogy remained incomplete, with his heroes, the apostles, not yet having encountered the hardest paths and

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bitterest frustrations (see chapter 7). Several commentators, including some contributors to this *Companion*, consider the upsurge of energy that ends such magnificent works as the First Symphony, the violin and cello concertos, as well as the chamber music, to be an expression more of will than of confidence (see chapters 9, 10, and 11). Other works end quietly, in a state of suspense: in purgatory (*Gerontius*), or with a sunset glow (Second Symphony). Nowadays the concept of Elgar as an uncomplicated imperialist, a kind of musical Colonel Blimp or, worse, a Cecil Rhodes, is no longer tenable, if it ever was (see below, and chapter 16). Of course this cultured man, who loved to spend his holidays in Europe, also played his part in hymning England, Britain, and Empire; fraught with sentiment about the past, he was also a man of his time and a prominent public figure who was proposed for Mayor of Hereford, who eventually became Master of the King's Music when that title still meant, if not much, then something, and who was not only knighted, and made a baronet, but appointed to the Order of Merit, which has no more than twenty-four living members.⁷

Where did this man come from, and what was he up against? Elgar lived most of his life in the period which Bertrand Russell ironically christened that of 'Freedom and Organization'.⁸ In mid-career, national and international events had a profound effect upon him and his musical output; they included wars, European and imperial, and changes of government; his life extended from the 'Indian Mutiny' to Hitler's rise to power. Rapid industrial and technological developments, which in his lifetime included electricity, the telephone, sound recording and broadcasting, cycling, the motor car, and air travel, affected him in all his professional activity. His last visit to France, when he visited Delius, was made by plane, and he continued active in supervising recordings of his music almost to the end.

'... as a child'

Edward William Elgar was born into a social stratum which it seems fair to identify as 'lower middle class'. Although his father ran a business (Worcester's music shop) he was also an artisan, a church employee who also tuned pianos, entering the grander houses by the rear entrance. Elgar never forgot, as he moved among the artists of the metropolis, and into wealthy, even aristocratic, circles, that he emerged from 'trade' (see also chapters 3 and 5). His aspirations extended to London's premier club, the House of Lords; in the event he had to be content with a baronetcy. It was no small achievement, and if Elgar was unsatisfied it is an indication of his restless temperament and socially unsettled character.

Still more than his class, Elgar's Roman Catholicism made him an outsider. His faith was the outcome not of centuries of resistance to the Protestant establishment, but of William Henry Elgar's expedient conversion

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in order to become organist of St George's Catholic Church in Worcester in 1846. The family (or at least, one infers, Ann Elgar) converted a few years later. The first two children, born in 1848 and 1852, were baptised as Anglicans; from 1854 they were baptised Catholic, including Edward in 1857. Although his faith progressively weakened, even ended, Elgar did not take the natural step for one aiming at social preferment by joining the Established Anglican church. The effects of Roman Catholicism are discussed below (see especially chapters 7 and 8).

'... as a young man'

A third cause of Elgar's sensitivity was his provincial origin. In fact, birth and upbringing in Worcester were less of a drawback than might be assumed, and not only because, in the age of the train, London was quite easily reached. But Elgar never formally enrolled as a music student, and his achievement in matching, and eventually providing a role model for, the products of the Royal Colleges of Music must have been sweet to him. Nevertheless some products of those schools were helpful (even kind) to him (see chapter 2). If he felt snubbed, an inbuilt tendency to paranoia was probably to blame. As a child of nineteenth-century Worcester, he was no more deprived of opportunities for self-education than a child of Shakespeare's Stratford. Contrary to what has sometimes been maintained, Elgar did not lack general culture, and his education, however much it may have been through precept and in the home (notably from his mother), was sufficient basis to develop his later passions for exploration, in literature and in chemistry.

In music, he studied excellent models. The current edition of the standard German music dictionary urges that the priority in Elgar studies should no longer be the man, or the national composer, but the music in its widest context, including continental influences.⁹ In fact commentary on Elgar has always tended to emphasise the German influences so current in British musical life, notably, in Elgar's case, Wagner, Brahms, and his own younger contemporary Richard Strauss. But for Elgar, of course, the canonical status of composers was by no means as fixed as it now seems, and he learned from musical figures not now considered prominent; Basil Maine, in a biography published when Elgar was still alive, mentions composers already obscure by 1930, if not 1870, such as C. P. E. Bach, Schobert and Kozeluch.¹⁰ In a searching discussion of Elgar's style, Diana McVeagh mentions Mendelssohn, Spohr, and Gounod among early formative influences.¹¹ He also learned from his English inheritance, mainly of sacred music (see chapters 2 and 8), and from overseas composers of marked national, but not Germanic, character, such as Dvořák and Bizet. According to Maine, Elgar also learned from treatises, benefiting from the publishing zeal of Novello, which offered English translations of Catel's harmony treatise, Cherubini on counterpoint,

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Berlioz on orchestration, and the spurious ‘Mozart’ thoroughbass treatise, whose authenticity Elgar seems not to have doubted.¹² Elgar also learned by setting himself compositional exercises, many of which survive; sacred works based on Beethoven symphonies, a fragment of a symphony based on Mozart’s in G minor, and so forth. Although he lacked the direct example of experienced composers as teachers, no music college would have provided a better education.

Another chip on Elgar’s shoulder emerges from his frequent insistence on his own poverty and the poor rewards of composition, other than popular work such as *The Crown of India*. In common with other composers, such as Schumann and Sibelius, Elgar had aspired to become a virtuoso. He was surely aware of the greater financial rewards this pathway would have offered, but because of his late start with violin lessons, his aspiration was foredoomed. It was only when aged twenty that he sought out Adolf Pollitzer for advanced lessons in London. These had long-term benefits: mastery of an instrument contributed to mastery of the orchestra, and he came into contact with what was then the central, largely German, tradition of European music, anticipating later contact with Hans Richter and Strauss.¹³ Pollitzer urged Elgar to move to London to further his career as both composer and violinist, and provided an introduction to August Manns, conductor of the Crystal Palace concerts, an influential early supporter of Elgar’s music. As a result, Elgar the provincial was not only an artist with an explosive imagination, but also a consummate professional musician with the means to realise his conceptions to fullest effect.

Given his inspired handling of stringed and other orchestral instruments, it is perhaps surprising that Elgar’s ‘first’ instrument was in fact the piano. He took to the piano from an early age, and gained local fame for his ability to extemporise on it. But the piano quickly became a working instrument, on which he learned to realise baroque figured bass, a practical skill that developed his sense of harmonic syntax. He rarely seems to have associated the instrument with an aesthetic sense of tone colour. In the first of his Birmingham lectures, for example, he suggested:

Now the rigid piano is capable of only two *qualities of tone simultaneously in the hands of a moderate player* – and most players are that. Better performers are able to produce further effects by allowing one part (one voice) to predominate in each hand, giving us four distinct weights of tone. Beyond this the piano cannot go.¹⁴

Elgar’s apparently utilitarian attitude to the piano is not supported by his own solo piano works such as the *Concert Allegro* (1901), written for Fanny Davies, or the atmospheric miniature *In Smyrna* (1905), nor by his writing for the instrument in the Violin Sonata and Piano Quintet.

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The organ and violin were central to much of Elgar's music-making, not least through his membership of the Glee Club, a circle of amateur and semi-professional musicians who met in the Crown Hotel in Worcester to rehearse and perform informal concerts. Programmes for the Glee Club reveal that its repertoire was broad-ranging and eclectic, from Haydn symphony movements (performed with reduced forces), to chamber music by Beethoven and Schubert, operatic overtures and arias, music by Mendelssohn and arrangements of popular songs and dances. The existence of such groups in England was widespread and their significance has not always received due recognition. The Glee Club not only provided Elgar with his first practical experience of working within an instrumental ensemble, but also introduced him to a wide range of music from the Classical and early Romantic periods that had a powerful impact on his subsequent development as a composer. The majority of Elgar's early works were pieces of chamber music intended for himself and members of the Glee Club to play. The Club's repertoire provided good models of musical style and form, and Elgar's sketchbooks include various attempts to compose music for string quartet, violin and piano, and piano trio. Other works include seven large-scale suites for wind quintet, 'Harmony Music' (translating the German 'Harmoniemusik') christened 'Sheds' by Elgar after the space at the back of his father's shop where the group rehearsed.

Elgar was well qualified to teach the violin, and he wrote a number of pedagogical pieces in addition to a range of lyrical miniatures, light music intended for domestic use, a genre that he cultivated successfully throughout his career. As a professional fiddler, he played for Stockley in Birmingham and at the Three Choirs Festival, sometimes under important musicians, such as Dvořák. He organised music at the Powick lunatic asylum, and taught violin in schools, necessitating tedious and tiring travel. Competent on keyboards and the bassoon, he was able to take advantage of a varied musical culture that allowed him to work with amateur groups, small and large, as well as professionals, and he embarked on his conducting career with the Worcestershire Philharmonic. Amateur as well as professional musicians are included among the 'Friends Pictured Within' the 'Enigma' Variations, including some friends he acquired through his wife (see chapter 10); among the benefits of this peripatetic way of life were his encounter with Caroline Alice Roberts, to whom he taught piano accompaniment.

They were married in 1889. For several years teaching and playing were his chief sources of income. Mrs Elgar came from a higher social stratum but had only a modest inheritance; he was obliged to work hard to maintain a household in the comfortable middle-class style to which she was accustomed, with a small core of domestic servants. Their frequent changes of address reflect changing economic fortunes. In a first flush of optimism,

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they removed to London where their only child, Carice (the name compresses her mother's) was born in August 1890. During this time Elgar was more exposed to first-rate music-making, but he failed to make an impact on the capital.

Before his marriage to an older woman, who undoubtedly was kind to him, he had fallen in love with another violinist, Helen Jessie ('Nelly') Weaver. Recent investigations of this short-lived romance, which got as far as an engagement in 1883, have considerably changed our view of Elgar, and not only of his early years.¹⁵ His letter to Charles Buck declining an invitation to his wedding, and informing him of the end of his own engagement, nearly explodes with suppressed emotion:

You ask me to let you know 'soon' whether I can visit you & also be at the marriage feast: With many thanks & many regrets I must say 'nay' to both.

I will not sorry you with particulars but must tell you that things have not prospered with me this year at all, my prospects are worse than ever & to crown my miseries my engagement is broken off & I am lonely.

Perhaps at some future time I may come out of my shell again but at present I remain here; I have not the heart to speak to anyone.¹⁶

No doubt many Victorian engagements ended through religious and economic differences between the parties, and Elgar was perhaps fortunate that Helen's health, forcing her emigration to New Zealand, made a clean break. Throughout his life he remained dependent on the sympathy of women, of whom Alice was only, as she surely understood, the chief; Rosa Burley, Lady Mary Lygon, Julia Worthington, and Alice Stuart-Wortley (the 'Windflower'), whatever the precise nature of his relationship with them, were women who, like Alice, had a professional or social confidence Elgar lacked. His literary-minded mother, it appears, was closer to him than his musically professional father.

'... as a mature man'

Nevertheless, it was partly through marrying another literary woman, whose belief in her husband was absolute, that Elgar was eventually able to break out of the debilitating grind of the local musical professional.¹⁷ When commissions came, they were for provincial festivals of national standing, notably the Three Choirs, for which living in Worcester became an advantage; the festival commissioned *Froissart* (1890) and *The Light of Life* (1896). *The Black Knight* was also first performed in Worcester, and with it (1893) Elgar was taken up by the principal British publisher of choral music (see chapter 3). Novello recognised Elgar comparatively early, and initially as a contributor to enduring traditions of cantata, oratorio, and part-song, rather than as someone revolutionary, and possibly subversive, within them

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(see chapters 6 and 7), still less as a composer of large-scale instrumental music. Then came festival commissions from Hanley (1896, *King Olaf*), Leeds (1898, *Caractacus*), Norwich (1899, *Sea Pictures*) and Birmingham (1900, *Gerontius*), by which time Elgar was a major national figure. These were years of exceptional activity, of which numerous letters to publishers in the 1890s and 1900s form an extraordinary record.¹⁸ Elgar's relationship to Novello's editor August Jaeger ripened into a bantering friendship. Despite its later history as a kind of funeral ode, the variation devoted to Jaeger, 'Nimrod', is a testimony to a creative dialogue based on mutual respect, and fruitful in that Jaeger's advice was sound and his encouragement, as well as discriminating praise, could have a healing effect on the mortally sensitive composer. (Elgar's dependence on Jaeger need not, however, be exaggerated; his productivity remained at its highest level for a decade after Jaeger's death in 1909.)

Before *Gerontius*, the orchestral Variations ('Enigma') had been performed in London; and these two works formed the basis of Elgar's international reputation and consequent professional visits to Germany and America. The former, in particular, produced some fascinating reception literature (see chapter 15). Yet in the following decade, at the height of his powers and success, Elgar continued to experience exasperation and depression in the intervals between creative outbursts of extraordinary energy. His health was never considered robust, but his problems lay in the mind; he would not forget the *Gerontius* premiere just because *The Apostles* was better performed (under his own direction) and greeted with acclaim.

His huge oratorio project was never completed, despite its long prior gestation (see chapter 7). A curiosity of the reception of *The Apostles* is the dissenting voice of Ernest Newman; far from resenting this, and his harsh verdict on *The Kingdom*, not to mention Newman's critique of Elgar's Birmingham lectures, the composer channelled his creative energies in directions suggested by Newman, and advocated for British composers a decade earlier by the oratorio-despising Bernard Shaw.¹⁹ Over ten years Elgar produced two symphonies, two concertos (of which the Violin Concerto is as long as a symphony), a masterpiece of programme music, *Falstaff*, three large-scale chamber works (see chapters 9, 10, and 11), and much else, notably the introspective cantata, *The Music Makers* (see chapter 5) and the wartime choral, patriotic and theatre music (see chapters 12 and 16). The major orchestral works tend to dominate recent Elgar performance and reception alongside the earlier overtures, Variations, and *Introduction and Allegro*. For practical reasons and as a result of changing tastes, the oratorio as a genre declined in Britain, with Elgar its greatest climax, while symphonic and related genres developed with startling rapidity (see chapters 9, 10,

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and 11). The excitement created by the revelation of Elgar's 'Third Symphony' was testimony to the continuing interest in a genre in which twentieth-century British composers were probably more prolific than those of any other nation, partly as a result of Elgar's example.²⁰

Nearly every commentator on Elgar has nevertheless noticed a difference in nature between the works composed in the years before the First World War, notably the symphonies, the Violin Concerto, and *Falstaff*, and those composed at the end of the war, the Cello Concerto and chamber music. Elgar sensed, however, that he was going out of date in his own lifetime. He sometimes encouraged younger colleagues, and gained three of them commissions at the 1922 Three Choirs Festival, possibly not expecting to like the outcome (see chapter 2); at least he was showing the kind of support which, not quite honestly, he claimed never to have received.

A study of Elgar's prime, the twenty years from 1899, reveals a major, rather than an overwhelming, presence in concert programmes and in critical assessments. He survived better than his immediate seniors and contemporaries, and his influence may be felt even in students of Stanford; his importance was openly acknowledged by Vaughan Williams (who wrote of finding with astonishment 'how much I cribbed from him, probably when I thought I was being most original') and Holst (who dated the 'modern Renaissance' to the Variations: 'here was music the like of which had not appeared in this country since Purcell's death').²¹ Elgarian gestures appear in composers as aesthetically remote as Finzi, while Walton, whose bright-young-thing image of the 1920s was alien to Elgar, became his natural heir in oratorio, string concertos, symphonies, and coronation marches. Elgar's legacy extends to lighter music, for example the pleasingly evocative tone-pictures, not to mention the marches, of Eric Coates.

Reaction to the works of 1917–18, and particularly the elegiac Cello Concerto (see chapter 11), suggests that Elgar had almost predicted the crushing blow that came with the death of Alice in 1920. Yet the silence of his last years was only relative, and some works (the Bach transcriptions, *Pomp and Circumstance* No. 5, the *Severn* and *Nursery Suites*) are substantial. But his activity was directed more towards reproduction than new creativity. He had recorded before the war, but his intense involvement with recording in his last years left a larger recorded legacy than any composer of his generation (see chapter 13). He was also interested in broadcasting, and thoroughly merited the BBC commission that the indefatigable Shaw eventually negotiated, for the Third Symphony (see chapter 14). Suffering cancer, he was ill for much of 1933 but was able to return home and resume work, some of it by telephone to the recording studio. He died on 23 February 1934 – reluctantly, one feels; the evidence of W. H. Reed, who was often by

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his side, suggests that he was still deeply concerned for the fate of his music, including unfinished pieces.²²

Modernism/Empire/landscape

If, as Jeremy Crump has suggested, ‘it requires an effort of some historical imagination to come to terms with the frequent contemporary comments on the startling modernity of Elgar’s music’, Elgar’s work can nevertheless be understood as part of a broader modernist musical practice. Crump concludes that ‘the emphasis placed on Elgar’s modernity served to locate him within the European mainstream’.²³ James Hepokoski lists Elgar as a senior member of a ‘generational wave’ of European modernists born around 1860, including Mahler, Strauss, Sibelius, Nielsen, and Debussy, whose work reveals similar preoccupations with issues of colour, large-scale form, timbre, subjectivity (nature-mysticism and spirituality), and extended diatonicism, despite the diversity of their completed work.²⁴ Various commentators in this volume agree that Elgar’s work draws freely and willingly upon continental musical models. The parallels with Strauss are well known: the opening of the overture *In the South*, for example, with its spirit of youthfulness and enthusiasm (lusty whooping horns) recalling *Don Juan* and *Till Eulenspiegel* (see Ex. 10.1), a mood recaptured from the (revised) ending of the ‘Enigma’ Variations. It is possible to find points of correspondence with other composers’ music as well: Fauré and Franck, for example, in the chamber works. But Elgar’s work particularly invites comparison with that of his modernist contemporaries, notably Strauss and Mahler, through its use of allusion, musical borrowing and self-quotation.²⁵ As in Mahler’s music, these quotations and borrowings take several different forms, depending on their context. Elgar is especially fond of reminiscences of past musical styles such as the antique style of the first Dream Interlude in *Falstaff*, ‘Jack Falstaff, now Sir John, a boy, and page to Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk’ (fig. 76), or the use of neo-Baroque textures in the *Introduction and Allegro*, discussed in chapter 9. Other works are characterised by allusions to musical styles not normally associated with the concert hall, such as popular songs: the Italian ‘canto popolare’ from *In the South* is one such example, as is the distant sound of a brass band that marches through *Cockaigne*. Tunes whose direct simplicity of outline and harmonic syntax seem intended to appeal to a large popular audience are an integral part of Elgar’s musical style: the most famous example is the trio from the *Pomp and Circumstance* March No. 1. Here, as in the Kipling songs, *Fringes of the Fleet*, the music’s popular idiom cannot be regarded as a form of allusion. But elsewhere Elgar clearly seeks to frame such references so that