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978-0-521-86361-2 - Edward Elgar and the Nostalgic Imagination

Matthew Riley

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

Nostalgia

There is a curious moment near the end of the cadenza in the finale of Elgar's Violin Concerto (Ex. 1.1). After a lengthy passage of double stopping for the unaccompanied solo violin (the orchestra accompanies much of the rest of the cadenza), there is a pause and a rest (fig. 105: 9). The violin then softly plays the head-motif of a lyrical theme from the first movement which has already been extensively quoted earlier in the cadenza (fig. 105: 9). It rises to a trill on a high A, the dominant note of the local tonic, D major. The orchestra now re-enters softly with a theme familiar from the concerto's slow movement. The violin's trill rises stepwise to the tonic where it pauses again. The orchestra falls silent once more, as though its attempt to break a spell had failed. Now comes the curious moment: the violin simply repeats its statement of the lyrical theme (fig. 106: 4–5). It is played an octave lower than before, but the key, harmonies (pre-dominant chord involving a G \sharp –D tritone followed by dominant $\frac{5}{4}$), and preparation (the solo violin alone, pausing on D) are the same, and even the dynamic markings and double-stopped patterns are similar. The sense of apparent redundancy is exacerbated by the intensity of feeling with which the phrase has to be played on each occasion – it seems odd that such a poignant moment should be so easily recaptured. Most notably of all, the passage conspicuously invokes and then contradicts Classical/Romantic syntax. The first statement of the lyrical theme, by ending with the dominant $\frac{5}{4}$ chord in D major and the trill, strongly implies a perfect cadence in D major. Such a combination is a well-established sign of a cadenza's imminent end, and a threshold. The trill may be greatly elaborated (through transposition, harmony and figuration) but in eighteenth- and much nineteenth-century practice it remains a 'penultimate thing'; it must lead to the resolution of the dominant harmony to the tonic and the onset of the movement's coda. It makes no sense to follow the portentous preparation of the $\frac{5}{4}$ chord with another such preparation in quick succession. There can be no going back.

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105 + 7

Violin solo

rit. *espress.* *ten.* *pp*

106

Violin solo

rit. *Adagio.* *tr.*

Orch.

Adagio. *ten.* *ppp*

107

tr. *lunga* *tr.* *rit.* *molto string.* *pp*

molto string. *p* *p*

108

rit. molto *Lento.* *espress. nobilmente* *Allegro molto, Tempo I.* *p* *mf*

rit. molto *Lento.* *Allegro molto, Tempo I.* *ff* *dim.* *pp* *pp*

Ex. 1.1 Violin Concerto, III, fig. 105: 7–fig. 108: 1

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To be sure, the second allusion to the first-movement theme does not long delay the coda. There is no trill on the A, which swiftly falls through G to F♯, the dominant of the concerto's home key, B minor. The orchestra now breaks in more decisively with the weighty opening theme of the first movement, observing its original pitch and key, the first bar marked *molto stringendo* and rising quickly from *piano* to *fortissimo* (fig. 107: 1–2). As this impulsive gesture dies away, the violin takes up a continuation which is again familiar from the first movement, but which now carries urgent expression markings (*lento, espress. nobilmente*) and pause marks above the highest and lowest notes of the phrase. The cadenza ends with a perfect cadence in the concerto's tonic, B minor, and music from the opening of the finale returns, leading to a high-spirited coda. The orchestra's second interjection, then, accomplishes what the first singularly failed to bring about, wrenching the violin out of its reverie, asserting the correct tonic, and drawing the cadenza to a close. Conventional order is restored: the coda can unfold and the concerto can end.

Thus the violin's thematic reiteration at fig. 106: 4–5 stands out as an anomaly, disrupting but not destroying concerto convention. Unsympathetic critics would doubtless dismiss it as a compositional misjudgement, or, still worse, a failure of taste – a willingness to linger self-indulgently in a melancholy mood when a swift resolution to the cadenza would have been more effective. On the other hand, to a well-disposed listener, a good performance of this passage may seem strangely moving. The gentleness of the first orchestral entrance, the solo violin's reluctance to relinquish the lyrical theme, the sterner utterance from the orchestra and the violin's answering phrase and perfect cadence in the minor hint at a miniature drama of loss, mourning and acceptance. Might it be feasible to regard the violin's seemingly unwarranted repetition as a deliberate redundancy – a gesture that ignores received wisdom about economy and propriety of expression and contradicts conventional cadential syntax in order to achieve some specific aesthetic effect?

This possibility invites a more global view of the passage. The allusions to themes from earlier movements fit into a wider pattern established in the later stages of the concerto's finale. The cadenza has already dwelt at length on two first-movement themes, the lyrical theme discussed above having been played in a variety of guises. In this regard, its appearance at the very end is a kind of formal reprise within the cadenza after the long passage of unaccompanied double-stopping. The two orchestral interjections likewise employ material from earlier movements. The content of the second interjection – the opening theme of the first movement – has already been

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invoked at the beginning of the cadenza with special instrumental effects (fig. 101), conveying an air of mystery. Both statements are in the tonic, B minor, with the melody at the same pitch level. The theme thus serves to mark out the boundaries of the cadenza – the area within which inter-movement reminiscence by the soloist may occur. Meanwhile, the first of the orchestra's two interjections similarly employs a phrase which has already been used as a 'frame-breaking' agent in the finale. Belonging originally to the second movement, it nevertheless furnishes the material for a long crescendo which occurs between the rounding-off of the recapitulation (in the movement's sonata-like form) and the transition to the cadenza (fig. 94 to fig. 96: 7). So there is a precedent for using it to herald an imminent, but not immediate, switch between musical worlds. The identity and order of the thematic allusions that occur at the end of the cadenza are thus far from gratuitous; each component already possesses certain associations with cyclic reminiscence and frame-breaking, which help to identify the passage as a 'liminal' zone – an area where boundaries and borders are traversed.

To the listener with a little specialist Elgarian knowledge, the violin's insistence on the lyrical theme suggests an even broader context – that of a semi-secret programme. The mysterious epigraph to the concerto – 'Aquí está encerrada el alma de' ('Herein is enshrined the soul of') – together with Elgar's admission that the soul was feminine and his use of the epithet 'Windflower' for two first-movement themes carry overtones of chivalry. 'Windflower' was his pet name for his friend Alice Stuart-Wortley, and her two themes are precisely those recalled tenderly in the course of the cadenza.¹ Yet during the closing moments of the cadenza the scenario suggested by this discreet gendering works not so much in a personal as in a mythic mode. It is akin to a final bidding of farewell to a 'female' memory which must be left behind in a lower region of consciousness while the 'male' violin returns to the musical present of the finale proper. At the critical moment of transition (after the trill but before the perfect cadence), when the violin is, as it were, traversing the liminal space between the two worlds, 'he' turns back to gaze just once more on the object of his longing. In the concerto, though, unlike the Greek myth, it is not the gaze itself that condemns 'her'. The final adherence to the conventions of concerto genre is enough to seal her fate – to guarantee her future confinement within the underworld of memory. Whatever musical powers of enchantment the violin might possess are devoted only to the staging of this drama. The violin's final repetition of the 'Windflower' theme captures

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a moment of alienated consciousness, for the protagonist must return to the upper world of the finale in order to round off the concerto, but cannot renounce his emotional home without a wrenching pain.

The return home – *nostos*; pain – *algos*: nostalgia. This Greek neologism was coined as late as 1688 in a dissertation by the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer. In so doing he co-opted into the scientific discourse of the early Enlightenment the humble complaint previously known simply as ‘homesickness’, ‘Heimweh’ or ‘maladie du pays’. Having identified this new ‘disease’, Hofer set about providing it with an aetiology and with symptoms and remedies. He had observed alarming symptoms among Swiss mercenaries sent abroad to fight far from their homeland. All too often the soldiers fell into despondency, refused food and languished in melancholy. They held fast to a single idea: the desire to go home. Adopting the vocabulary of seventeenth-century physiology, Hofer explained that, during their displacement, the men suffered from the continuous vibration of the ‘animal spirits’ through the fibres of the middle brain where traces of the Fatherland still clung. Repatriation was the only cure. Nostalgia, according to Hofer, was not to be taken lightly, for, if untreated, it could easily lead to death. Soon the military authorities forbade their Swiss troops from singing or whistling tunes that reminded them of home in case a contagion of nostalgia spread through the ranks.

The ailments that prompted these confident diagnoses of ‘nostalgia’ would doubtless appear to modern medicine in other, varied, guises. Indeed, some cases may have been feigned in the hope of discharge. But for the most part, the reports that late seventeenth-century patients expressed an overwhelming desire to return home are credible. Hofer invented his disease at a time when transport links were improving and cities expanding. The large-scale displacement of persons, whether for purposes of employment or military service, was becoming common. Localities had not yet lost their pronounced individuality in character and customs as they largely have today. At this moment it made sense to long for ‘home’ as a literal, geographical place. Later, however, doctors discovered that the symptoms of nostalgia were not always cured by repatriation. By the nineteenth century the condition began to be understood as psychological, and the object of desire a time rather than a place. It is not the location of childhood that the adult desires, but youth itself. And that is forever out of reach: upon returning home one is still unhappy, because things are different – at least through adult eyes.²

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Today the term ‘nostalgia’ has been absorbed into everyday speech and has shed its pathological connotations of depression and obsessive disorder. Nostalgia can mean a passing mood, and one which may be partly pleasurable: a feeling of wistful reminiscence or the bittersweet recollection of episodes of personal history. In this sense, the nostalgic person may be open to accusations of sentimentality or self-indulgence (‘wallowing in nostalgia’), but is hardly suffering from an affliction. On the other hand, nostalgia sometimes signifies something more permanent than a mood, but still less than a disorder: something more like a lifestyle choice. A liking for retro fashions, themed 1970s or 1980s evenings, or ‘period’ domestic items purchased from shops such as *Past Times* might make others want to groan or scoff, but not to call for a doctor.

These examples may suggest a trivialisation of the concept, but the significance of nostalgic impulses in contemporary Western culture is undeniable. Indeed the loosening and expanding of the term’s meaning is a sign of the persistence and diversity of retrospective longing. In late twentieth-century Britain, evidence of homesickness could be detected amongst all sectors of society: immigrants and indigenous peoples alike, the rich as well as the poor, dispossessed aristocrats along with redundant former mineworkers. There are relatively few people today who are wholly untouched by nostalgia, for whom the siren call of ‘home’ does not find its way to some corner of their consciousness.

From a historical perspective, the thread of nostalgia appears to be woven deep into our society and collective memory, for as a broad cultural phenomenon (as opposed to a medical diagnosis) it is coeval with post-Enlightenment modernity. Nostalgia in this sense emerges from the shadow of the ideal of progress.³ In the second half of the eighteenth century it appeared in literature and philosophy as a protest against the rationalism of the Enlightenment, the expansion of state bureaucracy, the early stages of the division of labour and the society of the modern metropolis. It came of age in the turbulent early decades of the nineteenth century following the French Revolution and, in England, the Industrial Revolution. The most eloquent nostalgist of the eighteenth century was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who called into question the very premises of the Enlightenment, insisting that advances in science, technology and the arts had corrupted rather than improved human behaviour. Rousseau lamented the passing of earlier societies in which (so he maintained) people’s desires were simpler, their compassion more sincere and their relationships more transparent. In the wake of the Terror unleashed by the French Revolution, Friedrich Schiller voiced a similar critique of modernity in his writings on

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aesthetics, arguing that modern human beings were fatefully divided, not just within themselves, but also from one another and from nature. The modern poet could not portray nature simply and directly, but perceived it as something distant, alien, or seemingly irrecoverable – something to long for rather than to enjoy. Schiller pointed to the distant, alluring example of ancient Greece for a model of the integrated individual. These classic accounts of modernity and its ills set the coordinates for many of the arguments pursued by its future discontents.

Romantic literature soon became saturated with modes of longing and dissatisfaction, as poets and writers sought a resolution to the perceived modern split between subject and object, mind and nature. Often these impulses had a pronounced atavistic component, such as the idealisation of childhood and of simple people, or a longing for the life and art of distant times such as antiquity or the middle ages. Philosophy grappled with dichotomies such as the rigorous dualism of Kant, which separated subject and object, inclination and duty, the world as we can know it from the world as it is. The Romantic poet Novalis ventured that ‘philosophy is really nostalgia – the urge to be at home everywhere’.⁴ Nostalgia was now fast becoming respectable. In some quarters, the yearning for a homeland or for the distant past, far from being an illness in need of cure, was seen as fashionable or even progressive. The English middle classes sought out picturesque ruins or admired Strawberry Hill, Horace Walpole’s mock-medieval gothic mansion. Under the influence of the ideas of Johann Gottfried Herder, early nineteenth-century nationalists aimed to preserve local languages and cultures and to memorialise the history of individual nations, however small. These were thought to be the foundations of human identity. Localism – the very sentiment that military commanders had tried to stamp out – could now be held up as a patriotic virtue.

The rapid developments in society that began at the turn of the nineteenth century provided yet more fertile ground where nostalgia could flourish. In this period, for the first time, radical changes in society could take place within the span of a single lifetime. In Britain, the Industrial Revolution, and the consequent consolidation of urban centres and depopulation of the countryside, meant that the rate and scope of social dislocation were unprecedented. Later, the Victorians came to accept the rapid and fundamental changes wrought by new science and technology as natural and inevitable. Unsurprisingly, then, the nineteenth century cultivated a new sense of time, which was unknown to feudal and even to early capitalist societies. Time was viewed in predominantly linear rather than cyclical terms, and could be recorded, monitored and standardised

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through the use of precise instruments. If the future was now a source of unprecedented excitement, then the past, by the same token, could be said to be out of reach in a stronger sense than ever before.⁵

Of course, versions of nostalgia have been experienced at other times and places, long before the post-Enlightenment age or even the devising of a medical name. From the psalmist at the waters of Babylon to Odysseus sailing the Aegean and the pastoral poetry of ancient Greece and Rome, human beings have told stories of displacement and homesickness and have lamented the passing of better worlds. A nostalgic impulse is embedded in the religious consciousness of the three great Abrahamic faiths, for their doctrines all draw on stories of disinheritance, exile and the search for rehabilitation. The lost garden of Paradise and its Classical equivalent, the Golden Age, were standard points of literary reference long before Hofer's day in the seventeenth century. Furthermore, nostalgia's basic concern with the recovery of simplicity is articulated by Neoplatonic metaphysics. According to this doctrine, the first principle is the One or the Good, while the evil and multiplicity that are so evident in the world are a belated 'emanation' from unity. We naturally long to return to that unity. Today, nostalgia often draws on these ancient sources for its modes of expression, imagery or literary 'plot', and they can provide it with rich historical resonance. Nevertheless, an awareness of their existence should not blind us to the particularity of the modern version of the feeling. In the last two centuries nostalgia has expanded beyond its literary origins (which confined its expression to an educated elite) and its medical origins (which tied it to a single nationality). As the historian of twentieth-century nostalgia Svetlana Boym puts it, 'a provincial ailment, *maladie du pays*, became a disease of the modern age, *mal du siècle*'.⁶

In Britain, one of the most destabilising periods of the entire modern era was the four decades between 1873 and 1914. These years have often been perceived retrospectively as a lost golden age, especially the reign of Edward VII from 1901 to 1910. From a twentieth-century perspective, and in the light of two world wars, it is easy to understand why people might envy that time its apparent security, unhurried ease and leisure, when the empire was at its zenith and human beings less cynical. And in some respects this picture is accurate, especially as regards the affluent classes. But beneath the idyll, a collection of heterogeneous factors challenged the established order and spread unease about the future. Britain's place as the world's leading political and economic power began to seem distinctly vulnerable, while mid-Victorian convictions about the stability of society, the laws of *laissez-faire* economics and the inevitability of steady progress were called into

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question. There was a series of severe economic depressions, resulting in mass unemployment; Britain's trade figures showed a worrying decline in exports; Germany and the United States negated Britain's early lead in manufacturing and then overtook her. The British army's difficulties in suppressing a small but determined force of Boer fighters in South Africa in the war of 1899–1902 boded ill for her military prowess in the new century. The existence of a new German navy threatened the foundation of Britain's power, her command of the seas. At home, careful studies of urban poverty overturned complacent assumptions and struck at the heart of Victorian economic theory. There was concern bordering on panic over the nation's health, living conditions in the large cities, and the possibility of 'racial degeneration' which threatened to sap Britain's vitality. In the arts, late nineteenth-century developments showed tendencies towards 'decadence', and the conviction of Oscar Wilde in 1895 for gross indecency seemed to confirm the undesirability of this trend. Meanwhile the political sands were shifting. During the 1880s the hitherto entrenched power of the aristocracy was undermined by a collapse in agricultural prices and land value and by the Third Reform Act – the beginning of a long process of decline for that class. Radical political movements such as socialism, trade unionism, Irish nationalism and women's suffrage posed serious challenges to the two-party system that had dominated Victorian politics.⁷

Almost predictably, then, this period witnessed a renewed upsurge of interest in the past – both personal and collective, real and imaginary. Societies devoted to the preservation of ancient buildings and the countryside were established; literature and art that celebrated rural life became immensely popular, from Thomas Hardy, Samuel Palmer and Richard Jeffries to the 'Georgian' poets; enduring classics of children's literature were composed by Robert Louis Stevenson, James Barrie and Kenneth Grahame, and were read by adults as much as by their offspring; searching autobiographies such as those of John Ruskin and Edmund Gosse delved into the personal experience of childhood for an explanation of adult identity; artists such as William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones turned to medieval myth and fantasy in deliberate revolt against the present. The 'invention of tradition' became a flourishing practice, on both official and unofficial levels, bestowing a dubious sense of antiquity on royal ceremonial and other public events.⁸ So although this was undoubtedly an age of relative peace and of continuing progress in technology, it was also a time of sustained and sometimes gloomy reflection on the relationship between past, present and future, with confidence dwindling that the latter would be an improvement.

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It was in this world that Edward Elgar, born in 1857 and brought up in provincial Worcester, spent most of his adult life, and practically all his creative life. During those years and later, in the course of the twentieth century, Elgar and his music became sites for an almost unrivalled variety of nostalgias. The most obvious of these belong to the composer himself and the themes of his works. First there is his well-documented attachment to certain people, places and times from his past: the Worcester of his youth, the surrounding countryside, the cottage where he was born and, by the 1920s, what may have seemed to him a prelapsarian world before the cataclysm of the Great War. In his music there are moments such as that in the Violin Concerto finale when a theme from one movement breaks through the 'frame' set up by a later movement, sounding like a recollection, a haunting memory, or a fixation induced by bereavement. There are consciously archaic gestures and episodes which draw a line between a specifically musical 'past' and 'present'. On a more invigorating note, at certain moments of magical transformation the music seems to pass across a threshold from a mundane sphere to a yearned-for world of enchantment somewhere 'beyond'. Such episodes are usually transient and dreamlike. Finally, in Elgar's dramatic and programmatic works there can be found characters who pine for a distant homeland, for lost youth or for an idyllic landscape.

A still more extravagant collection of nostalgic impulses is evident in writings on Elgar by later commentators and critics and in independent artistic ventures inspired by him – plays, poems, novels, films and paintings. On one level, some find in Elgar's ceremonial idiom an echo of Britain's vanished imperial greatness. Others dismiss this view as superficial, and perceive in the music the sights and sounds of the English countryside, captured with unparalleled immediacy. Some are moved by a lament for a phase of civilisation which, it is said, in his day was passing and in ours is lost for ever. For others, in turn, Elgar's numerous pieces for or about children capture the freshness of youthful vision, and the composer's own childhood has become the object of wide interest. Others project a fiery, radical nostalgia onto Elgar. In this view, beneath the veneer of British Establishment values his music hints at a deeper, unruly kind of Englishness, connected to his home landscape but with ancient, pagan associations, resistant to all imposed authority.⁹ Inevitably some versions of Elgarian nostalgia are whimsical; others lay themselves open to commercialisation. The Worcestershire authorities have not been slow to exploit the phenomenon in recent years, devising, amongst other attractions, a sign-posted 'Elgar route' for drivers exploring the local countryside. There is a