# Edward Elgar, Modernist

The first full-length analytical study of Edward Elgar's music, this book argues that Elgar was a modernist composer, and that his music constitutes a pessimistic twentieth-century assessment of the nature of human being. Focusing on Elgar's music rather than his life, Harper-Scott blends the hermeneutic and existential philosophy of Martin Heidegger with music-analytical methods derived from Heinrich Schenker and James Hepokoski. In the course of engaging with debates centred on duotonality in musical structures, sonata deformations, meaning in music, the nature of tragedy, and the quest narrative, the book rejects poststructuralist and literary-theoretical interpretations of music, radically interprets Schenkerian theory, and tentatively outlines a new space – a Heideggerian 'clearing' – in which music of all periods can be perceived to operate, be experienced, and be understood. The book includes a detailed glossary which provides the reader with clear definitions of important and difficult terms.

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*for my family*

Song is existence

. . . To sing, truly to say worldly existence, to say out of the haleness of the whole pure draft and to say only this, means: to belong to the precinct of beings themselves. This precinct, as the very nature of language, is Being itself. To sing the song means to be present in what is present itself. It means: Dasein, existence.

*(Martin Heidegger, 'What are poets for?')*

# Contents

# Preface

This book grew from a belief in meaning, and the desirability of discovering it, in musical works and human life. It was written to satisfy a perceived need for musical criticism that retreats neither into conservative, narrowly formalist analysis nor into poststructuralist hermeneutics guided by nihilistic Foucauldian or Derridian dogma; a criticism which does not allow for a potentially tendentious location of musical works in scores, psychological states, political ideologies, socio-historical constellations, or mere physical reverberations, but acknowledges that music is, before we make it anything else, *itself* – a distinctive entity with its own ontology that can be unveiled, understood, and relocated within the world (and not just a musicologist's favourite part of that world). It is intended as a challenge to old *and* new orthodoxies.

But more than that or anything else it is intended as an analysis of Edward Elgar's music. Its focus on his music, not his life, makes this book an unusual contribution to Elgar scholarship. And the particular critical attitude adopted in writing it deserves clarification, for which words written to open another book may serve.

> To study the lives of great artists is often a positive hindrance to the understanding of their works; for it is usually the study of what they have not mastered, and thus it undermines their authority in the things which they have mastered . . . Even if the works of art show characteristics closely resembling the faults of the author, we have always to remember that the business of the work of art is to be itself, whereas neither the science of ethics nor the structure of society can thrive for long on the denial that it is the duty of a man to improve himself. A sense of duty imposed upon a work from without is artistic insincerity. Whatever goes into the work of art must belong to it.[1]

So Donald Tovey opens his unfinished monograph on Beethoven. Had he lived another half century and read the vast biographical literature that has grown up (and shows no signs of going to seed) around Elgar, he might have said the same again. Carl Dahlhaus thought that the principle

[1] Donald Francis Tovey, *Beethoven* (London: Oxford University Press, 1945), p. 1.

of reading musical meaning off a composer's biography had died out by the beginning of the twentieth century.[2] He was wrong.

What is Elgar's place in musical history? What are his musical preoccupations, his view of form, language – or meaning? After a hundred years of Elgar studies,[3] detailed responses to those questions, and questions like them, are still quite thin on the ground. What we have in place of rigorous musicological discussion of Elgar's music is a vast and ever-increasing biographical literature which, with a few worthy exceptions, has been the favoured way to write a lengthy study of him. Several of the contributions to this literature have been of outstanding quality.[4] But this book does not add to their number.

This book draws on twentieth-century philosophy and music-analytical theory among other things, makes connexions between different pieces of music, and draws hermeneutic conclusions – literally (the word comes from the Greek messenger Hermes), conclusions about the 'messages carried by the music' – which educe from the works under discussion meanings relating to human existence. It cannot aspire to be a work of what the last century called the New Criticism, but insofar as such a thing is possible these days when fewer and fewer people believe in 'the music itself', a savour of that tradition still lingers in its critical attitude. That is the attitude of (if one could adopt it properly) 'the perfect critic' who – like a phenomenologist or, as T. S. Eliot notes in an early essay on the subject, like Aristotle – looks 'solely and steadfastly at the object',[5] a writer identified ideally as an individual critic (initials and surname) rather than an individual personality (forename and surname). However much it wanders, in whatever direction, it maintains a tenacious propinquity to discrete musical works, and wanders only to bring experience to bear on analysis and understanding of them. Seeing an object steadily and seeing it whole means seeing its place in the world and humankind's place alongside it: but the world must not obtrude on the analysis; and whatever

[2] Carl Dahlhaus, *Foundations of Music History*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983; orig. edn 1967), p. 17.

[3] The first book on the composer was Robert J. Buckley's biography, *Sir Edward Elgar* (London: The Bodley Head, 1905).

[4] Among these contributions Jerrold Northrop Moore's vast and mythic *Edward Elgar: a Creative Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) still dominates, but excellent alternative interpretations are offered by Michael Kennedy, who has written two quite different but equally superb biographies: *Portrait of Elgar*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), and *The Life of Elgar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[5] T. S. Eliot, 'The perfect critic', in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, 2nd edn (London: Faber and Faber, 1997; reset from 1928 edn), p. 9.

meaning is claimed to subsist in a work must be rooted absolutely and solely in its inner workings.

Elgar's modernism has not had a sure ride through the critical chicanes. Apart from the often incisive contemporary assessments of his position in musical history, his place in early modernism has often been doubted in the eighty-odd years since his wife's death (a date which has, as part of the later interpretation, been considered overly significant).[6] But that does not make this book's impassive critical attitude any less essential for a study of Elgar; indeed it is likely that the assumption of a critical position closer to a tenor of modernism (an early exponent was T. S. Eliot) will reveal aspects of his music which the more Romantic, and generally biographical, accent of the vast majority of the Elgarian literature to date is by nature ill-attuned to grasp. Any findings of the present study will inevitably be provisional and partial, but if they provide a counterweight to the differently orientated findings of other studies, they could do some good.

Of course nobody is a perfect critic; nobody quite manages to sacrifice the individuality signified by his or her personal name even when it hides behind initials: and although this study attempts to concentrate attention steadfastly on the works it discusses, drawing on larger ideas only insofar as they aid in detailed, note-centred critical engagement with the texts, it risks slightly distending the works' frame when discussing their possible meanings. (Eliot would call this a 'tolerable avocation'[7] for a critic.)

It is a failing of critics that they take from their reading only what confirms their own insight, and excoriate other ideas which left alone might spoil their party. So although the argument of Chapter 5 Section 1 is not intended to dismantle the apparatus of poststructuralist theory – it would be an inadequate weapon with which to attempt that task – it *is* a rigorous attempt to distance my views and my critical method from aspects of contemporary writing with which they might, to my discomfort, otherwise be associated. But not all misunderstanding can be avoided. I shall inevitably distort or misuse even the work of writers whose views I think I hold, and by arguing without sufficient clarity will leave open room for interpretation that I do not intend. However that

[6] Several contributors to the *Cambridge Companion to Elgar*, ed. Daniel M. Grimley and Julian Rushton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) argue for Elgar's modernity with renewed vigour, however.

[7] T. S. Eliot, 'Studies in contemporary criticism', *Egoist* 9 (1918), p. 113, cited in A. David Moody, *Thomas Stearns Eliot, Poet*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. xix.

may be, the book must stand on its own feet, in the hope that they provide a sufficiently sturdy support – at least until the last page, if no further.

Some technical points should be dealt with here. When using Heideggerian or Schenkerian terminology I follow the usual practice in the relevant traditions of philosophy or musicology: so 'Dasein' (which cannot be avoided in discussion of Heidegger) is set in roman, but '*Ursatz*', '*Urlinie*', '*Augenblick*', '*Ereignis*', etc. (which *can* all be avoided in discussion of Heidegger and Schenker, and so remain 'foreign') are italicized. Musical pitch is indicated in the form C–B, c–b, $c^1$–$b^1$, $c^2$–$b^2$, etc., where $c^1$ is middle C. Scale degrees and keys are written in abbreviated form, so that '$\hat{3}$/a' indicates scale degree 3 within the key of A minor and '$\hat{5}$/F' indicates scale degree 5 within F major. Other conventions are introduced in the text. A glossary of hard terms (most of them Heideggerian) is found on p. 231.

I acknowledge with heartfelt thanks the help of Magdalen College, Oxford, Jeff Lincoln, and the Arts and Humanities Research Council, without whose generous financial support I could not have written this book at all. I am grateful too to the staff at Oxford's libraries, especially the Music Faculty Library, the Music Reading Room of the Bodleian Library, the Philosophy Faculty Library, and Magdalen College Library. I also thank staff and students at the Universities of Oxford, Nottingham, Liverpool, and Royal Holloway, University of London, for giving me something profitable and enjoyable to do with my time while writing, expanding, and tinkering with the text, and Penny Souster and (especially) Vicki Cooper for steering the book to publication with care and generous encouragement.

I could not have been more fortunate in my D.Phil. supervisors, Nicholas Marston and Suzannah Clark, without whose advice I could never have proceeded in the right direction. But others also aided in the gestation, and I can only mention by name a few of the most important. Without the use of Bill Ives's keyboard, my analysis of Elgar's music would have been almost impossible. Julian Rushton has been a sage support, guide, and friend throughout the process. Daniel Grimley's generous response to and help in focusing my work is greatly appreciated. Furthermore I am indebted to Robert Anderson and Michael Kennedy, inspirations from my boyhood on, for (among other things) writing so beautifully and insightfully on Elgar and British music that I felt I wanted to join in, and to Jeremy Dibble for evangelizing so strongly that in the end I could do no other. I thank Raymond Monk for years of encouragement, and for providing the cover photograph from his private

collection. While writing and revising I have benefited from the criticisms and suggestions of Robert Bailey, John Williamson, Max Paddison, Julian Johnson, Aidan Thomson, Arnold Whittall, and an anonymous reader (to whom must go credit for the idea of a glossary). Heideggerian discussions with Michael Inwood have done much to shore up my doddering arguments. But naturally no one except me is responsible for any unobliterated nonsense.

My family have kept my emotions on track throughout, and the book is dedicated to them. Among friends, thanks for many favours both academic and amicable must go to Duncan Ferguson, John Livesley, Peter McCullough, and Michael Piret. Frederick Hodges, Peter Anthony, and Andrew Petiprin were always on hand to help with German, and Russell Dewhurst introduced me mysteriously to Heidegger. Without them, this study would have been very different and might never have been completed.