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Orchestral Ensemble Literature

Edward Elgar's *Symphony No. 1 in A-flat major, Op. 55*

Edward Elgar's *Symphony No. 1 in A-flat major, Op. 55* was a long time in the making, but well worth the wait for all parties involved. Elgar's long and unconventional path to becoming one of the most prominent English composers enhanced his creativity and allowed him to develop his own unique style and voice. His lack of a formal education made for a slow start to his compositional career, but it allowed him to study the music that interested him, and did not confine him to a compositional box. This ultimately led to his success as a composer. His *Enigma Variations* were a new and creative form that piqued the audience's interest and launched Elgar's fame as an important composer not just in England, but in all of Europe. Elgar's rich life experiences, along with his boosted confidence allowed him to be successful with the premiere of his *First Symphony*, even if it came late in his life.

Born in 1857 at a country cottage in Broadheath, near Worcester, Elgar was the fourth of William Henry and Ann Elgar's seven children. He was an introverted and precocious child who read often, and was surrounded by music. Elgar's father owned a music store in Worcester and was also the organist of St. George's Roman Catholic Church. Elgar received some piano and violin lessons during his childhood, but much of his early music education came from sitting "in the organ-loft at St. George's to watch his father at work,"[1] and having access to all of the scores and books in his father's store. In addition to

composing, Elgar took a particular interest in the violin, and had hoped to study at the Leipzig Conservatory, but unfortunately his family did not have the financial means to support his education there. Instead, Elgar went to work at age 15, first working in a solicitor's office, and then as a freelance musician. In 1885, he became assistant organist at St. George's, and later his father's successor. Elgar's freelance work during his twenties included: leading the Worcester Amateur Instrumental Society (1877), Worcester Philharmonic (1879), and the Glee Club (1879), playing bassoon in a wind quintet, " 'composer in the ordinary' to the County Lunatic Asylum at Powick, coaching and conducting the staff (1879-84)," and teaching violin lessons.[2] During this time Elgar, made many trips to London to attend performances including, "in 1883 he was at [August] Manns's memorial concert for Wagner; in 1884 he heard [Hans] Richter conduct Schumann's and Brahms's third symphonies; and in 1886 he attended an all-Liszt concert, in Liszt's presence." [3] In his spare time, Elgar composed and arranged music for the organizations and groups with which he conducted and performed. Most of the music that he wrote at this time was chamber music. While most of these pieces are largely unknown and insignificant they foreshadowed many of Elgar's great works to come. In 1889, Elgar married one of his piano students, Caroline Alice Roberts, daughter of Major-General Sir Henry Gee Roberts, KCB. She was well-versed in the arts, and became one of Elgar's biggest compositional supporters and collaborators.

In March of 1890 the Elgars moved to London, in an effort for Elgar to establish himself as a full-time composer, however this hope was short-lived, and the Elgars moved back to Malvern in 1891 where Elgar went back to his

freelance activities. While in London, Elgar and his wife had their first and only child, Carice. Elgar had better success away from London, and in 1890 his overture, *Froissart* was published by Novello for the Three Choirs Festival. Seeing the popularity of the provincial choir festivals in England, Elgar focused his attention on writing cantatas and oratorios during the 1890s. He found increasing success with his works *The Black Knight* (1893), *The Light of Life (Lux Christi)* (1896), *Scenes from the Saga of King Olaf* (1896), and *Caractacus* (1898). The year, 1897, proved to be a life-changing year for Elgar. He wrote *Imperial March* in celebration of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee; the performance of this work finally helped Elgar to gain the recognition he had long been seeking in London. That same year, Elgar met August Johannes Jaeger, publishing office manager at Novello. Elgar and Jaeger developed a lifelong friendship, much of it preserved in their correspondence to each other. In addition to his wife, Alice, Jaeger became one of Elgar's biggest champions. The Worcester Philharmonic Society was also founded in 1897. Elgar was hired to be the conductor, which presented him with a group to perform his music and that of other British, French and German contemporaries. Elgar's success put him in demand as a festival composer, and launched a creative musical period that would define his career.

Just two short years later, Elgar's best-known work, *Variations on an Original Theme ('Enigma')* was premiered on June 19, 1899 in St. James's Hall with Hans Richter conducting. The premiere was an immediate success. "Not only was the music fully appreciated, but the additional interest of the dedication, 'To my friends pictured within,' whetted public curiosity." [4] Following the

success of *Enigma*, Elgar composed many significant works over the next decade, including: *The Dream of Gerontius* (1900), *Cockaigne (In London Town)* (1901), the first two *Pomp and Circumstance* (1901) marches, of which the first one is largely associated with graduation ceremonies today, *The Apostles* (1903), *In the South (Alessio)* (1904), inspired by his vacation to Italy, *Introduction and Allegro* (1905), and the sequel to *The Apostles*, *The Kingdom* (1906). Even after being knighted in 1904, and the good reception of all of these pieces, Elgar still felt that something was missing. He had been trying to write a symphony, but without success since the 1890s, even declaring “himself ‘possessed’ by the idea of a symphony on the life and character of General Gordon, ‘but, he said, ‘I can’t write it down yet.’ No *Gordon Symphony* was ever written.”[5] Finally, in 1908, at the age of fifty-one, Elgar succeeded in writing his *Symphony No. 1 in A-flat major, Op. 55*. Premiered in Manchester on December 3, 1908, with Richter conducting, the work was highly acclaimed and received over eighty performances in its first year.[6]

During the early 1900s, Elgar was finally able to make a living as a composer, and not have to rely on other work for income. In 1905, Elgar was given an endowed chair of music at Birmingham University where he gave eight lectures, but this did not suit him, and he left the position. Elgar composed his *Violin Concerto* in 1910, followed by his *Symphony No. 2 in E Flat Major* (1911). Just before and during World War I, Elgar turned his attention towards writing for the theater, which he had always enjoyed. Following the war, Elgar retreated from London and went back to the countryside where he composed his *Cello Concerto, String Quartet, and Piano Quintet*, all written in 1919. The

premiere of his *Cello Concerto* on October 27, 1919 turned out to be the last performance that his wife attended before she passed away. Subsequently, it was also “the last first performance of any major Elgar work. Alice Elgar, who had been failing for some months, died on 7 April 1920, and with her died a part of Elgar’s creativity.”[7]

After his wife’s death Elgar spent time in London, but returned to live in Worcester in 1923. Elgar, who refused to write an autobiography, spent his remaining years pursuing many interests outside of music. While he gave up most composing after his wife’s death, he did not retire completely from music. He continued to conduct his music and recorded much of his instrumental works with himself conducting on the Gramophone label. With a renewed interest in composing, Elgar began work on an opera and his third symphony in 1932, but neither of these works was completed before his death on February 23, 1934 from a malignant tumor.

Elgar’s long and untraditional path to becoming a composer, ultimately led to his success as one of the best-known English composers. While Elgar’s instrumental works were largely non-programmatic, he was inspired by nature and the countryside of his youth, and literature. An anecdote in Michael Kennedy’s *Portrait of Elgar*, says, “It was about this time that Edward was found sitting on the river bank with a pencil and music paper. He said he was ‘trying to write down what the reeds were saying.’” Elgar composed much of his music in his head, sometime letting musical thoughts germinate for years before ever using them. He also recycled many of his musical thoughts throughout his works. Seeing as how Elgar was largely self-taught, and only able to compose during his

spare time, it's not surprising that his compositional development took longer than most other major composers. Elgar wisely sought out the music of other great composers by attending "the Crystal Palace concerts, day after day, hearing Weber overtures, Meyerbeer selections, Gounod and Massenet, Mendelssohn, Schumann and Brahms, Liszt, Berlioz and Wagner." [8] Elgar was able to craft his signature sound by combining his inspiration from the English countryside, with his innermost thoughts, with composition techniques from many composers. This wide variety of influence and lack of schooling in a particular method allowed Elgar to develop his own unique style. Unlike fellow English composers, Ralph Vaughan Williams and Gustav Holst who used traditional English folk songs to inspire their compositions, Elgar did not collect or find inspiration in English folk songs.

Elgar's *First Symphony* is not programmatic, but instead it "affords us so vivid and complete an insight to the psychological aspect of a great man." [9] Elgar's music "draws deeply on private sources and allusions, and in that sense, as in others, is as romantic as any composed. 'Music is in the air,' he said in the 1890s, 'you simply take as much as you require!', and in 1908 he described his First Symphony as 'a composer's outlook on life'." [10] His themes are tuneful and developed throughout an entire piece, like a person's identity is developed over a lifetime. Elgar's symphonic compositional style is Romantic and "autobiographical, admitting frailties and doubts as well as strengths and visions, then their [Elgar's symphonies] occasional overworkings, rhythmic monotony and inferior ideas can be accepted as part of a comprehensive and adult perception of the world." [11] Perhaps this desire to write an autobiographical

symphony is part of the reason it took Elgar until he was fifty-one to write his first symphony.

After many previous attempts, Elgar was finally convinced by Jaeger and Richter to finish and publish his *First Symphony*. He dedicated the work to Richter, writing, “To Hans Richter, Mus. Doc., true artist and true friend.”[12] Richter also conducted the premiere of the *First Symphony* with the Hallé Orchestra on December 3, 1908 in the Free Trade Hall, Manchester. The London premiere occurred four days after the premiere on December 7, 1908 with Richter conducting the London Symphony Orchestra. Due to Richter and Jaeger’s public support for the work, and its initial public success, the work received many performances around the world during its first year, including its U.S. premiere on January 3, 1909 with the New York Symphony Society and Walter Damrosch conducting.[13] Subsequently, “it was allowed to lie on the shelf and it is only due to Landon Ronald and one or two others that it was not allowed to be forgotten.”[14] Since it was published in 1908, Elgar’s *First Symphony* has continued to be a staple of the symphonic repertoire, although not nearly as popular as Beethoven and Brahms’s symphonies, mostly due to its length, which is over fifty minutes long. Elgar conducted the first recording of his *First Symphony* with the London Symphony Orchestra in 1930. Since then, numerous recordings have been made by orchestras around the world, but most are by English conductors and orchestras.

Elgar’s *First Symphony* is scored for three flutes and piccolo, three oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, bass tuba, timpani,

bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, two harps, and strings. This instrumentation is standard for most other European symphonies being written during this time.

Despite its unconventional length, the *First Symphony* follows the conventional four-movement form of symphonies: I. *Andante (Nobilmente e Semplice)*. *Allegro (Appassionata)*, II. *Allegro Molto*, III. *Adagio (Cantabile)*, IV. *Lento-Allegro*, but “the extensive transference of themes from one to another makes these divisions little more than formal breathing space.”[15]

The noble and stately principal theme first heard beginning in measure beginning in measure three reoccurs in various forms throughout the symphony. The opening movement begins simply in A-flat major, but suddenly changes character as it leaps from A-flat major to far away D minor in the *Allegro* section. With Elgar’s music, harmonically, “Often it is more accurate to say that a passage is in a tonal region rather than in a key.”[16] This movement follows standard sonata form with a very long development section. Opposing themes are interspersed with the principal theme throughout the first movement. This movement grows increasingly darker, until it reaches the coda. At this point the principal theme returns in the upper voices, calmly foreshadowing the exciting and feverish second movement. Beginning in 4/4, this movement switches to 6/4 following the harp passages.

The second movement is a scherzo in F-sharp minor characterized by two contrasting themes in the A section. The first theme opens with frantic strings over a low drone interrupted by a sighing woodwind melody. This theme gives way to the militaristic second theme characterized by the percussion and brass. These two themes twist and turn throughout this movement to provide the



listener with a darkly dramatic, but energetic feel. The second movement briefly gives way to respite and joy in the B sections when the theme modulates to B-flat major and the texture is thinned to exclude the brass and percussion. Elgar firmly establishes that this movement is in F-sharp minor by droning an F-sharp that shifts from the violins to the bassoons and back to the violins for the last thirty-four bars, which lead directly in to the third movement without pause. Curiously, Elgar writes this movement in 1/2, instead of the typical 3/4 of most scherzos.

The *Adagio* third movement is perhaps the most well-known and beloved of all of the movements in Elgar's *First Symphony* because it is warm, passionate, and constructed with such care. Elgar craftily reuses the first theme from the second movement in the beginning of the third movement. It is so transformed by the slower tempo, and shift to D major that it is barely recognizable if one does not know to listen for this connection. It is "the opening of the *Adagio* (and the many other examples of subtlety in which this symphony abounds) [that] mark Elgar out as a master of the first order...Hans Richter spoke of it as a *real Adagio*, and worthy of Beethoven." [17]

After the third movement, the fourth movement slowly reawakens the principal theme of the first movement from a deep slumber beginning with warm sounds of the strings, clarinets, bass clarinet and bassoons. Beginning in D minor, the *Lento* section gives way to the march of the *Allegro*, which builds throughout the sonata form. Finally, after what seems like a very long time of foreshadowing, Elgar returns the listener back to the principal theme in A-flat major in the coda. Once the principal theme finally returns it feels as if one is coming home after a long and difficult journey. Elgar allows the listener and the

orchestra to savor the return home by reuniting the entire orchestra for one last triumph together.

In composing the journey of his life, Elgar was incredibly successful because it allowed the audience to connect to him personally. In a letter to Ernest Newman, who wrote the program notes for the first concert, Elgar wrote:

As to the 'intention': I have no tangible poetic or other basis: I feel that unless a man sets out to depict or illustrate some definite thing, all music—absolute music I think it is called—must be (even if he doesn't know it himself) a reflex, or picture, or elucidation of his own life, or, at the least, the music is necessarily coloured by the life. The listener may like to know this much & identify his own life's experiences with the music as he hears it unfold: I have had a wide experience of life but...as to the phases of pride, despair, anger, peace & the thousand & one things that occur between the first page & the last, I prefer the listener to draw what he can from the sounds he hears.[18]

Listening to Elgar's *First Symphony* can be exhausting because of its length, and tumultuous musical journey with many ups and downs. Elgar's brutal honesty in this work makes it engaging and worth a listen. He does not shy away from any emotions, from the darkest desperation, to the most joyous passion.

McVeagh writes,

In both symphonies the mettlesome spirit, the soar and plunge of the melodies, the steep dynamics, give untold energy. Occasionally Elgar takes a refined idea and subjects it to so much violence that it seems raw. Such inflation is common to many Romantic composers; in Elgar, a latecomer, it was intensified by a sophisticated technique at the service of a complex but unsophisticated man. At its most characteristic his music does not aspire to pure expression, but to a complex of emotions – rich, ambivalent, often conflicting – that is truly Romantic.[19]

Elgar's *First Symphony* cemented his place in history, not only as the first English symphonist, but as one of the greatest composers in all of classical music history. While Elgar was not much of a compositional innovator as far as

stretching the forms of the symphony, he was able to combine the best of the Romantic period, with the extravagance of Gustav Mahler and Anton Bruckner, with his personal experiences to create a noble and regal English sound that his uniquely his own.

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[1] Michael Kennedy, *Portrait of Elgar* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 7.

[2] Diana McVeagh, "Elgar, Sir Edward," *In Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/08709> (accessed November 16, 2011).

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] Kennedy 57.

[5] Michael Steinberg, "Elgar: Symphony No. 1 in A-flat major, Op. 55" San Francisco Symphony program notes, <http://www.sfsymphony.org/music/ProgramNotes.aspx?id=54136> (accessed: December 15, 2011).

[6] McVeagh, "Elgar, Sir Edward."

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] McVeagh, "Elgar, Sir Edward."

[9] J.F. Porte, *Sir Edward Elgar* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1970), 114.

[10] McVeagh, "Elgar, Sir Edward."

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Edward Elgar, *Symphony No. 1 in A-flat major, Op. 55*, Symphonies Nos. 1

and 2 in Full Score (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999).

[13] Steinberg. "Elgar: Symphony No. 1 in A-flat major, Op. 55."

[14] *Ibid.*, 115.

[15] Porte, *Sir Edward Elgar*, 115.

[16] McVeagh, "Elgar, Sir Edward."

[17] Robert Layton, ed., *A Guide to the Symphony* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1995), 430.

[18] Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Edward Elgar: A Creative Life* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1984), 537.

[19] McVeagh, "Elgar, Sir Edward."

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