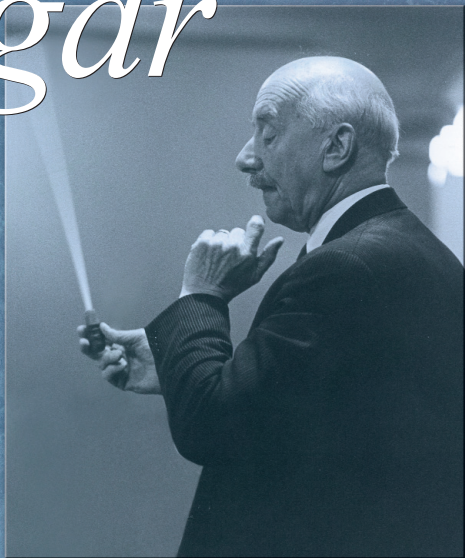


# *Elgar*

Lyrta



## *Symphonies 1 & 2*

*London Philharmonic Orchestra*

*Sir Adrian Boult*

Elgar's two symphonies have a special place in English musical history. When they were first played they towered head and shoulders - in sheer technique, let alone content - above previous symphonic offerings by British composers. Today when we have the magnificent symphonies of Vaughan Williams, Walton, Bax, Rubbra, Britten and others to set beside them, they still stand apart, having already achieved the status of classics. Their mastery may have been equalled; it has not been surpassed. They have also been misunderstood both structurally and aesthetically. It was once the fashion patronisingly to praise their orchestration but to challenge their true symphonic nature: they were regarded as kaleidoscopic rhapsodies, whereas a study of the scores reveals extremely close-knit organisation of material. If the first movements of both works are not essentially 'symphonic' in the Beethovenian sense, then the word has no meaning. Then, because both works were written in the pre-1914 era, loosely termed Edwardian, they were denigrated by some critics in the 1930s as complacent, opulent monuments to a self-satisfied age. Yet the music of both symphonies is riddled with doubts, questionings, withdrawals and conflict. True, there is always a basic hopefulness, but optimism, provided it is not blind, is no crime. The clue to these great works is not in their Edwardian background but in Elgar's personality in which there conflicted an extrovert who loved military ceremonial, the racecourse, Viewing Day at the Royal Academy and influential friends, and an introvert filled with self-doubts, who was at heart lonely, suspicious, a prey to neurotic tendencies and the belief that he was 'not wanted', happy only in the solitude of creative work in the heart of the Worcestershire countryside.

Elgar first contemplated writing a symphony in 1898: it was to be based on the life of General Gordon. The idea was abandoned: principally, he said, because there was no market for such a work, but perhaps because the needs of the *Enigma Variations* and *The Dream of Gerontius* became more pressing. These

masterpieces established Elgar in the forefront, but it was not until June 1907, while living in Hereford, that he began work on the A flat symphony, continuing to sketch it during a visit to Rome and finishing it, in a prolonged burst of activity which left him exhausted, between June and September 1908. It was dedicated to Dr. Hans Richter, “true artist and true friend”, who conducted the first performance at a Halle Concert on 3 December 1908, (a year, it should be remembered, of severe economic depression). The Manchester audience’s enthusiasm was tremendous. After the *Adagio* they burst into applause and Elgar was called to the platform to take several bows before the finale was played. At the end the orchestra ‘rose as one man and cheered Elgar to the echo’. Four days later, when Richter conducted the first London performance with the London Symphony Orchestra, there were similar ecstatic demonstrations. In just over a year the work received 100 performances. Richter himself summed up the general reaction: “the greatest symphony of modern times”. Attempts were made to give the work a programme but Elgar said that it had none “beyond a wide experience of human life, a great charity (love) and a massive hope in the future”. Faith, hope and charity in fact, but, as we can tell now, really an attempt by Elgar to reconcile the contradictory elements of his own nature.

A drum-roll introduces the march-like theme in A flat which is to haunt the whole symphony. For convenience it will be called the motto-theme, though strictly that is a misnomer. Woodwind and violas play it first *dolce*, over a steady pulsing from cellos and basses, with the inner harmony given to two muted horns. The theme is repeated fuller and louder and fades on a low A flat. The *allegro* section, in the opposed key of D minor, begins with a restless *appassionato* theme. A change to 6/4 brings three more themes, all tender in mood, which form the second subject group. Efforts by the motto-theme (now in C major) to reassert its influence are fiercely rebuffed and a detailed development section follows, with a specially eloquent and poignant treatment of the main second subject. At the climax, with the brass sounding a hollow note of doom, the motto-theme reappears in violas

and violins and gradually swamps the whole orchestra, bringing this tempestuous movement to a tranquil and wonderfully scored end.

The second movement is in F sharp minor. Its first section contrasts scurry and swagger and the middle section, in B flat has an elusive sense of airiness and nostalgia. Elgar told orchestras he wanted it played “like something you hear down by the river”, so that a comparison of its atmosphere to the wind in the reeds on Severn-side is not merely fanciful. Both sections are repeated but the tempo slackens, there is a suggestion of the motto-theme, and the music moves imperceptibly into the rapt D major of the Adagio. The first subject of the slow movement is note for note that of the main theme of the second movement, but the transformation is total. This glorious Adagio, in many ways the heart of Elgar, needs no description: to those who love his music its capacity as a source of solace seems limitless and the final bars, with the clarinet’s gentle farewell, must melt a heart of stone. Elgar’s friend, Jaeger (‘Nimrod’) said this movement ‘brings us near to heaven’.

The Finale reverts to the struggles of the first movement. Strings stir uneasily in D minor, and an ominous theme from the opening Allegro returns. The movement’s main theme is announced stealthily, with fragments of the motto-theme as appendages. Suddenly the music blazes into hectic activity, only the transformation of the rather jaunty main theme into a spacious, noble melody giving relief from the strife. Obviously the music is leading to a grandiose return, brilliantly orchestrated, of the motto-theme, but its final victory, though emphatic, is hard-won, as is underlined by the efforts to disrupt its rhythm. The ‘massive hope in the future’, far from being complacent was realistic.

If Elgar’s First Symphony deals with moral issues, the Second is much more autobiographical. Elgar himself called it ‘the passionate pilgrimage of a soul’. With two other compositions, the Violin Concerto and the Ode, *The Music Makers*, it forms a trilogy, completed between 1910 and 1912, of deeply personal significance. In these three works, Elgar said, ‘I have written out my soul ... I have shewn myself.

The symphony in particular is full of associations with people and places dear to Elgar, and though musically it is in no sense programmatic these links with his life are an essential consideration.

Parts of the work were sketched as early as 1903. Some fragments of the elegiac slow movement were written in 1904 while Elgar was still shocked by the early and sudden death of his friend and admirer Alfred Rodewald. An early version of a theme in the finale is marked, in a sketchbook, 'Hans himself!' - evidently a reference to Richter. Serious work on the symphony as we now know it began in October 1909, the year in which Elgar visited Venice, where he was deeply impressed by St. Mark's and the Piazza, but it was laid aside until October 1910 and completed by 28 February 1911. 'I have worked at fever heat and the thing is tremendous in energy', he wrote on 29 January, 1911. 'I have recorded last year in the first movement'. 'Last year' was 1910, when Edward VII had died, but despite the dedication of this symphony to the King's memory, the music is far more than a loyal tribute to the sovereign with whom Elgar had been on friendly terms. Elgar said he was 'weaving strange and wonderful memories' into the symphony, and these included his visits to Venice and to Tintagel, names which he wrote at the end of the score. 1910 was also the year of his great triumph with the Violin Concerto, another work which had personal associations for him. 'What a wonderful year it has been!' he wrote. 'With all the sad things in the great public life - the King's death downwards - the radiance in a poor, little private man's soul has been wonderful and new and the concerto has come!'

The score also bears a motto from Shelley: 'Rarely, rarely, comest thou, Spirit of Delight', a clue to the music's predominantly restless and tragic character despite the many exuberant passages. While composing it, he had quoted to a friend some other lines by Shelley as a description of his state of mind: 'I do but hide under these notes, like embers, every spark of that which has consumed me'. With such a confession of the emotional power of his creative impulse, it is not surprising that he was bitterly disappointed when, at the first performance, which he conducted in London on 24 May, 1911, the public's response was nowhere near

as wildly enthusiastic as it had been for the First Symphony. 'Like stuffed pigs' was his own description of the audience. In fact the work did not really come into its own until March 1920, when Adrian Boult, then aged 30, took it up and revealed its true qualities.

The first movement bursts into life with impetuous, impatient ardour, the tempo quickening almost at once and all the first 43 bars needing very subtle control of their fluctuating rhythmical progress. The principal theme contains a short phrase which may be taken as representing the 'Spirit of Delight' and which occurs in each movement. When the pace slackens the wistful second subject is heard, shortly to be followed by 12 important bars for cellos and violins marked *dolce e delicato*. But the 12/8 rhythm returns with increased vigour, only to subside again while eight 'chimes' on the harp and muted strings and muted horns prepare for an expansion of the cellos' theme above a sinister throbbing. This remarkable episode Elgar described as 'a sort of malign influence wandering through the summer night in the garden'. The 'Spirit of Delight' links this material to the recapitulation in which an almost neurotic climax is reached and the opening theme returns to end the movement brilliantly.

The Larghetto is a personal lamentation which also has the character of an expression of national grief. The main theme is introduced by flutes, trumpet, horn and trombones. Strings and drums add their solemnity. A more aspiring theme bridges the way to a passage for strings alone and a further important elegiac melody. Two features are of particular beauty: the oboe solo which provides an almost improvisatory counterpoint to the solemn tread of the music; and the final climax when the strings return to the key of E flat. After a visitation by the 'Spirit of Delight' phrase, the movement closes quietly and hesitantly.

Elgar described the Rondo as 'wild and headstrong with soothing pastoral strains in between and very brilliant'. Out of one of the 'soothing' episodes grows the astonishing central section when the music begins pulsating and the cello theme from the first movement - 'the malign influence' - returns. Percussion, with a relentless hammering ('like that horrible throbbing in the head during some

fever', to quote Elgar again) overwhelms the rest of the orchestra while the brass distort the theme. At breaking-point, the nightmare stops. The rondo resumes as though nothing had happened, and ends with a display of rhythmical fireworks.

The finale opens with leisurely dignity. But soon this composure gives way to the nervy restlessness which marks the whole work. A *nobilmente* theme - the 'Richter' theme of the sketchbook - plays an important part until it gives way to a fugal section and to an excitable episode crowned by a trumpet's top B piercing the texture of the score. Just when a conventional ending, based on the first subject, seems inevitable the 'Spirit of Delight' theme, broadened and *dolcissimo*, returns to banish both pomp and restlessness, and the final pages are a long, tender, glowing farewell, radiating serenity.

MICHAEL KENNEDY

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## EDWARD ELGAR (1857-1934)

### Disc 1

#### Symphony No. 1 in A flat Op.55 (1908) (48'37")

- |   |   |          |
|---|---|----------|
| 1 | 1st movement: <i>Andante. Nobilmente e semplice - Allegro</i> | (18'28") |
| 2 | 2nd movement: <i>Allegro molto</i>                            | (7'14")  |
| 3 | - 3rd movement: <i>Adagio</i>                                 | (10'27") |
| 4 | 4th movement: <i>Lento - Allegro</i>                          | (12'24") |

### Disc 2

#### Symphony No. 2 in E flat Op. 63 (1911) (51'16")

- |   |  |          |
|---|--|----------|
| 5 | 1st movement: <i>Allegro vivace e nobilmente</i> | (16'31") |
| 6 | 2nd movement: <i>Larghetto</i>                   | (13'17") |
| 7 | 3rd movement: <i>Rondo (Presto)</i>              | (8'26")  |
| 8 | 4th movement: <i>Moderato e maestoso</i>         | (12'58") |

**London Philharmonic Orchestra**  
conducted by  
**Sir Adrian Boult**

The above individual timings will normally each include two pauses. One before the beginning of each movement or work, and one after the end.

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