

Cello Concerto. The Concerto Onstage

J.B. Priestley's *The Linden Tree*

Playwright and novelist J.B. Priestley (1894-1994) was a lifelong admirer of Elgar. In fact, one of the few pieces of film footage we have of the composer was taken by Priestley at a Malvern festival in the early 'thirties. In his book *The Edwardians* (1972), Priestley explained the composer's appeal for him:

"Over and above his inventiveness and magnificent orchestration, and more important than they are, is something that never fails even now to ravish my ear and catch my heart. It is the kind of passage, forever recurring, when strings are quietened and the jagged thunder of his brass is gone, and - it is all different, strangely beautiful as music and catching at the heart because the man himself, no longer masterful, seems to be staring at us out of a sorrowing bewilderment. These moments when the persona is dropped are to me the secret of Elgar's lasting enchantment."

Priestley used Elgar's Cello Concerto in his play *The Linden Tree* (1948). The play's main character is Robert Linden, an ageing professor of history who is being pressured to retire. One of his daughters is a cellist, and in Act II she practises the concerto offstage, prompting Linden to comment that it is

"a kind of sad farewell. An elderly man remembers his world before the war of 1914, some of it years and years before perhaps - being a boy at Worcester - or Germany in the nineties - long days on the Malvern Hills - smiling Edwardian afternoons - MacClaren and Ranji batting at Lords, then Richter or Nikisch at the Queen's Hall - all gone, gone, lost for ever - and so he distils his tenderness and regret, drop by drop, and seals the sweet melancholy in a Concerto for cello. And he goes, too, where all the old green sunny days and the twinkling nights went - gone, gone."

But Elgar's nostalgia, Linden observes, is not the whole story of the music: "But then what happens? Why a little miracle - young Dinah Linden - who knows and cares nothing about Bavaria in the nineties or the secure and golden Edwardian afternoon, here in Burmanley, this very afternoon - unseals for us the precious distillation, uncovers the tenderness and regret, which are ours as well as his, and our lives and Elgar's, Burmanley today and the Malvern Hills in a lost sunlight, are all magically intertwined."