

Cockaigne (In London Town), op 40

A concert overture for full orchestra.

Approximate Length:	15 minutes
First Performance:	
Date:	20 June 1901
Venue:	Queen's Hall, London
Conductor:	the composer
Commissioned by:	Royal Philharmonic Society
Dedicated to:	"My many friends, the members of British orchestras"

Dispirited by the perceived failure of the first performance of *The Dream of Gerontius*, Elgar uttered his oft-quoted remark "I always knew God was against art..." ...and quickly set to work on this overture. It is supposed to present a musical portrait of life in turn-of-the-century London - admittedly a somewhat romanticized portrait, for Cockaigne is the fabulous country of luxury and delight.

Elgar wrote a detailed programme for the work, including lovers in a secluded public garden and a brass band appearing round a corner. At this time, however, the Elgars had lived in London for only one brief, unhappy spell some ten years earlier, and it is equally possible to see within the music Elgar's native Worcestershire. The lovers' theme in particular evokes the open spaces of his favourite Malvern Hills with their broad panoramas, where Elgar escaped from the harsh realities of life as a struggling composer by flying kites. Indeed, at the end of the score, as if in acknowledgement of his true inspiration, he added a quotation from the medieval poem *Piers Plowman*: "Meteless and moneless on Malverne hilles".

The work was an immediate success, not only in Britain (where Hans Richter was an early champion) but also in Germany and the USA. This is a lively, colourful and varied piece if in parts a little brash. It continues to be performed regularly.