

Coronation March, Op 65, Imperial March, Op 32, Empire March

Ceremonial marches composed for full orchestra.

Coronation March

Approximate Length: 11 minutes

First Performance :

Date : 22 June 1911

Venue : Westminster Abbey
(Coronation of King George V)

Imperial March

Approximate Length: 4 minutes 30 seconds

First Performance :

Date : 19 April 1897

Venue : Crystal Palace, London

Conductor : August Manns

Empire March

Approximate Length: 4 minutes 30 seconds

First Performance :

Date : 21 July 1924

Venue : Wembley Stadium, London

Conductor : Henry Jaxon

Although Nimrod from the Enigma Variations, and possibly Salut d'Amour, Chanson de Matin and the Serenade for Strings are arguable contenders for the title, few would dispute that Elgar's best known work is the first Pomp and Circumstance March with its world-famous refrain of Land of Hope and Glory. (The story of how the words came to be associated with the march is told elsewhere.) Of the five Pomp and Circumstance Marches, the first is the most militaristic in character and it is almost certainly this work's popularity that has singlehandedly created the false but widely-held view among superficial commentators on Elgar's music that it is the work of an excessively nationalistic personality. There are, of course, other passages in Elgar's output, notably the Triumphal March which opens scene 6 of Caractacus, which convey a similar atmosphere. But it will surprise many to learn that, throughout his life, Elgar composed only three formal marches for ceremonial occasions: the Imperial March, written for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897, the Coronation March for King George V's Coronation in 1911 and the Empire March for the British Empire Exhibition held at Wembley in 1924. The unquestioning nationalism is surely more in the mind and ear of the audience than of the composer.

At the time of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, Elgar had just achieved a measure of national fame. King Olaf had been well received in London the previous year and when, at

the turn of the year, Elgar submitted sketches for two new works to mark the Jubilee, Novello's eagerly snapped them up. One work was *The Banner of St George*, the other was the *Imperial March*. Both captured the mood of public confidence and national celebration, and were immediate and considerable successes. But only the *Imperial March* has retained anything like that level of popularity. Most, on hearing it today, would recognise the tune if not the title. It is, on the whole, a lively, rumbustuous march, tuneful, cheerful, exuberant, yet displaying a proper sense of restraint in its more subdued trio section. It is not difficult to see why this easily memorable march should so readily strike a chord in the wider public's affection.

It was not until he had reached, and perhaps even passed, the peak of his popularity, with four of the five *Pomp and Circumstance Marches* now published, that Elgar was again committed to produce a march for a ceremonial occasion. That occasion was the Coronation of King George V in Westminster Abbey in June 1911, for which occasion Elgar also wrote the short offertory *O Hearken Thou*. The *Coronation March* is by far the best of these three marches - indeed, better also than any of the *Pomp and Circumstance Marches* taken separately. It is an impressive, extended work, running to something over ten minutes in length, with conflicting moods and tensions and an underlying tinge of sadness, surprising in view of the work's purpose. It is also surprising to learn that Elgar had composed the majestic opening theme for a projected ballet on *Rabelais*, begun some ten years earlier but abandoned possibly because of Victorian prudery expressed by, among others, his wife Alice.

A similar gap separates the second march from the third, the *Empire March* of 1924. This is music from Elgar's twilight years, while he was still grieving over the death of his wife Alice some four years previously. It is but a pale shadow of his earlier marches, lacking the distinctiveness and decisiveness of melody which so characterised his more successful marches. But, unlike the more musically satisfying *Pageant of Empire* which Elgar also composed for the British Empire Exhibition, the *Empire March* retains a significant measure of popularity.

The *Empire March* was followed six years later by the completion of a fifth *Pomp and Circumstance March*, an altogether more accomplished work, but based on sketches made many years earlier.