

Elgar/Payne Symphony No 3. Michael Kennedy reviews the CD

Edward Elgar:

The sketches for Symphony No 3 elaborated by Anthony Payne

The Symphony - BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Andrew Davis NMCD 053
Commentary by Anthony Payne, with David Owen Norris (pianoforte), Robert Gibbs (violin) NMCD 052
Full score, published by Boosey & Hawkes.

After all the heart-searching, the wrestling with consciences, here it is. No point now in worrying whether Elgar's death-bed wish - "don't let anyone tinker with it ... no one would understand ... no one ... better burn it" - should have been respected for ever. It has been done, a *fait accompli*. The spectre of the end of copyright in 2004 was the deciding factor - anyone can 'tinker' then and what might be the result? In any case, W H Reed, to whom Elgar made his poignant remarks, published a number of the sketches of the unfinished Third Symphony in *The Listener* shortly after Elgar's death and in his book *Elgar As I Knew Him*. By doing so, he effectively undermined Carice Elgar Blake's instruction, when she gave all the 130-odd pages of the sketches to the British Museum (now Library), that no one should work on them.

And, as it happened, Elgar was wrong. Someone did understand. Whatever views one may have on his "realisation" of the sketches, Anthony Payne conclusively proves that he had the sensitivity and the integrity to enter Elgar's mind posthumously. His work is the result of 26 years of pondering on the sketches and discovering that, far from being the incoherent jumble most of those who saw them had declared them to be, there were many significant clues to what was intended; and where there were not, Payne has let his Elgarian instinct guide him; to solutions that most listeners will find convincing and acceptable. The symphony sounds like Elgar, with the exception of no more than a very few passages where Mahler comes to mind.

NMC Recordings Ltd, who have issued the first recording of this work so promptly, have wisely also recorded a talk by Anthony Payne in which he shows exactly what he had to contend with. This fascinating exposition is illustrated from the short score (played on the piano by David Owen Norris), by the violin and piano sketches which Elgar wrote out for Reed to play while they worked together in 1933 (played on Reed's violin by Robert Gibbs, with Norris) and by extracts from the BBC Symphony Orchestra recording. Also pinpointed are the only four parts of the symphony which Elgar fully scored - three passages in the first movement (including the splendid opening) and the start of the Finale. These four crucial passages saved Mr Payne from one puzzle : at least he knew the exact forces for which Elgar was scoring (triple woodwind, four horns, three trumpets and trombone, two harps and percussion including triangle, tambourine, tam-tam, cymbals and bass and side drums). In only one place - in the development section of the first movement - has Mr Payne invented a theme. Elsewhere what he has "composed" was always based on Elgar's material, most copiously in the third (*Adagio solenne*) and fourth movements. He had very few "certainties" on which to work, not many probabilities, mostly possibilities. The sketches show Elgar's 'jigsaw' method of composition. He left it until the final stage to put the pieces

together. Mr Payne has had to be a detective, follow clues and, where there are none, make inspired guesses. A few of the sketches have found no place in the symphony. Would Elgar have used them all? No one can know, just as no one can know what he might have added, discarded and changed and what new ideas might have occurred to him. So we can never know what Elgar's Third Symphony would have been. What Mr Payne gives us is an assemblage of the sketches which at least tells us what it might have been. He had a more difficult task than Deryck Cooke who, in working on Mahler's Tenth Symphony, discovered that the work was in fact finished and required no thematic invention.

The greatest tribute I can pay to Mr Payne is to say that, after many hearings already, the work has grown on me so that I can't imagine being without it. Parts of it are indescribably beautiful, truly Elgarian. The second subject of the first movement, for example, inspired by Elgar's autumnal passion for Vera Hockman, belongs among those Elgar melodies which haunt the mind forever - just imagine, we might never have heard it at all! That in itself almost justifies this enterprise. The opening of the symphony is full-blown Elgar - no one but he could have composed this driving, thrusting passage. It shows that the fires were still burning, even though I do feel that generally there is a tiredness, a kind of resigned weariness, in some of the themes (like the Cello Concerto). The second movement, no more a conventional *Scherzo* than those in the other symphonies, is Elgar in his most delightful, Spanish-flavoured light vein. The *Adagio* begins like the Angel of the Agony's solo and there is a serene middle section, but this is the movement where, for all Mr Payne's skill, I feel most keenly the loss of Elgar's genius - he would, surely, have done something special here which would have lifted the movement to the skies. Referring to the opening of this movement, Elgar said to Ernest Newman : "I am fond enough to believe that the first two bars (with the F sharp in the bass) open some vast bronze doors into something strangely unfamiliar". Only Elgar could have shown us what lay behind those bronze doors. In the same letter, Elgar wrote : "I also have added the four final bars of this movement. I think and hope you may like the unresolved *estinto* of the viola solo". This is the passage Elgar wrote out for Reed, saying "Billy, this is the end". Reed believed he meant the end of the symphony, but the letter to Newman proves that he was mistaken and that Mr Payne has correctly placed this very moving passage at the end of the *Adagio*.

Mr Payne's toughest task was with the Finale, of which he has written over half. The initial fanfare (in Elgar's full scoring) launches the movement in ceremonial style. Would Elgar have returned to this style at the end? He left no clues as to how the symphony would end. Mr Payne's solution came to him from *The Wagon Passes* movement of the Nursery Suite (1931), a crescendo and diminuendo derived from the Finale's main theme, a ghostly reference to the opening of the symphony and a final quiet but hollow sound from gong and harp. It is certainly an Elgarian idea. But would it have been Elgar's solution? He wrote to Newman: "I send you my stately sorrow (*adagio*). Naturally what follows brings hope". Is Mr Payne's ending hopeful? Maybe.

Some of Elgar's themes for the symphony were taken from his 1923 incidental music for Laurence Binyon's play Arthur, some from the abandoned third oratorio The Last Judgment, others from other discarded projects. This is not in itself a sign of failing powers. It was his method throughout his career (as it has been with many other composers - think of Brahms' First Piano Concerto). Admittedly in his last fifteen years of life he returned to

early sketches for most of his works but, in the case of the symphony, an original creative urge does seem to have re-awakened and it is a tragedy that the cancer which killed him did not wait a few more months before striking him down. He was, as we should say today, most definitely back in symphonic mode and this is what Mr Payne has sensed most strongly. In so doing he has created a work of art. But whose? His or Elgar's? Whatever one may answer to oneself, the truest answer is that Mr Payne has brought his own insights and intuitions to the selfless service of Elgar and has paid him homage in his own image. It now remains to be seen how many Elgar conductors will take it up and how many will follow the (misguided, in my view) attitude of several famous Mahler conductors to the Cooke performing version of the Tenth and refuse to conduct if because it is not *echt*-Elgar (yet they conduct Mozart's Requiem, without a qualm, not to mention much Monteverdi).

It is historically right and proper that the work's first performances should have been given by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, for whom it was intended in 1934. Right, too, that a recording should have preceded the first public performances, for Fred Gaisberg planned that also. The recording comes not from EMI, but from a small company, NMC, which specialises in new music - a commentary on the present state of the recording industry. It is splendidly bright and full, well balanced, resonant without boom, and it is conducted with the utmost conviction by Andrew Davis and played with zest, colour and poetry. The only pity is that room was not found on the disc for the Arthur suite. But, as I said at the start, no Elgarian - and certainly no member of the Elgar Society - should be without the documentary disc which is indispensable to full appreciation of Anthony Payne's achievement. In these days when the BBC and most of the media seem to have decided that no one can concentrate on anything for longer than two minutes and then only if it is spoon-fed to them, it is heartening to find a record company which trusts music-lovers to be intelligent and inquiring.

Congratulations, too, to Boosey & Hawkes for producing the full score in good time, too - a properly engraved score, not a photostat of a manuscript. It is beautifully done. There are facsimiles of Elgar's full score of the opening page and of his sketches for the Adagio, containing his comments like 'Why not?' and 'First two bars repeat third higher sequence'. Mr Payne's account of his involvement with the sketches and of how he went to work on them occupies two pages and there are short biographies of Elgar and Payne. All three articles are also printed in French and German. Ideally one would have liked there to be some way of indicating in the score those passages fully scored by Elgar, but I can see that might have been difficult. There is an index to the starting-page of each movement, something that occurs more often these days and how welcome it is.

There will, inevitably, be differing views on this symphony. I confess I had misgivings at first, but the music is enough of an Elgarian experience to still 95 per cent of my doubts. I hope dry academic musicologists will not niggle and haggle over every bar of Mr Payne's "composition" of Elgar development sections. The music is now there. It was dead, but it is now alive. And if we still have a moment's uneasiness over "Don't let anyone tinker with it", remember that Elgar also said : "If I can't complete the Third Symphony, somebody will complete it - or write a better one - in fifty or five hundred years".

Michael Kennedy