

Elgar/Payne Symphony No3

A Justification by Colin Matthews

"... the symphony all bits and pieces... no one would understand... no one... no one. Don't let anyone tinker with it... no one could understand... no one must tinker with it. I think you had better burn it."

Could anything be more unequivocal than Elgar's words to his friend W H Reed, spoken under the shadow of death in November 1933? Yet only a few days before, Elgar, in the knowledge of his inoperable cancer, had said to his doctor: "If I can't complete the Third Symphony, somebody will complete it - or write a better one - in fifty or five hundred years. Viewed from the point where I am now, on the brink of eternity, that's a mere moment in time."

The moral questions raised by the completion¹ of unfinished works are nowhere more complex than when applied to music. For the great majority who cannot read a musical score, music, in order to be heard, needs an intermediary. Anybody can read an unfinished book or poem, anyone can look at and understand an unfinished painting or sculpture: but, without outside intervention, an unfinished piece of music must lie unheard. In the case of such works as Mozart's *Requiem*, Mahler's Tenth symphony, Puccini's *Turandot*, Berg's *Lulu* or Bartók's Viola Concerto, the work of reconstruction, although always in some measure controversial, has added greatly to our knowledge of these composers, and the works have entered the repertoire. More dubious cases, where what has survived is far less coherent - Beethoven's Tenth Symphony, Schubert's Eighth and Tenth Symphonies, Debussy's *Fall of the House of Usher*, Scriabin's *Preliminary Act* - remain more musicological curiosities than valid works in their own right. But even in the more extreme instances, when the music bears little relationship to what the composer may have intended (and the composer would almost certainly not have approved of the reconstruction), no actual harm is done to the composer's reputation by the devoted work which has gone into bringing to life something which would otherwise have languished in silence.

The status of Elgar's Third Symphony has been an issue, and an emotional one, ever since its composer's death. Opponents of any attempt at completing it have often cited, as well as Elgar's own words, the agreement made by Elgar's daughter Carice with the work's commissioners, the BBC, under which she gave them the manuscript sketches (they were subsequently deposited in the British Library). While this agreement clearly states that no one should have access to the manuscript "for the purpose of finishing or completing or making any alteration", its most important clause was an undertaking that "none of the said manuscripts shall ever be published in whole or in part". Yet little more than a year after Elgar's death, W H Reed had published *Elgar as I Knew Him*, with more than forty of the most important pages of the manuscript reproduced in facsimile, having already breached the undertaking in 1934 with a major article in the BBC's magazine, *The Listener*. And in 1968 Carice herself was prepared to sanction a BBC project to realise the sketches, although it did not in the event materialise.

What was it that had made Reed, Elgar's closest musical friend, act in this way? He had reassured Elgar that no one would "tinker with it", but he had not agreed to burn the sketches. According to Reed, Elgar expressed no further wish for them to be destroyed in the last three months of his life - indeed, a month after asking for them to be burned, he discussed the Symphony in detail with Ernest Newman, copying out the beginning and end of the slow movement for him in a letter. Reed's very moving account of Elgar's words should not blind us to the fact that the composer was, throughout his life, very prone to such dramatic outbursts, as Reed would have been well aware.

In publishing the sketches selectively, it seems most likely that Reed felt that he would be reinforcing the case for leaving the Symphony alone by revealing what he took to be the incompleteness of Elgar's final thoughts - which he described as "nebulous . . . woefully lacking in cohesion". Most of those who have looked at the sketches have followed Reed's lead in feeling that to be the case. But even Reed, who had played through the sketches many times with Elgar, was unable to interpret them adequately, placing, for instance, two isolated full score pages of the first movement in the wrong order, and adding "it is difficult to decide where they actually fit". Yet he had several pages earlier reproduced exactly the same music in Elgar's sketch, where it is clearly headed "after reprise leading to second appearance of the second subject".

Although it was obviously not his intention, Reed's publication of the sketches brought with it the inevitability that sooner or later someone would try to reconstruct the Symphony, since it meant that what he had published would eventually come into the public domain. If the sketches had been destroyed, or if Reed had not broken Carice Elgar's agreement with the BBC and reproduced such a large proportion of them, they would have remained as silent witnesses to Elgar's last years. As it is, when Elgar's copyright finally expires in the year 2005, no one will have the authority to prevent a reconstruction based on the published sketches, even though they are far from complete (the British Library manuscript contains more than 130 pages. For this reason, if no other, it is eminently realistic of Elgar's heirs to have sanctioned Anthony Payne's "elaboration" - a carefully chosen designation - while they are still able to control its performance and publication.

But the legal status of the sketches is a minor issue. The critical point for debate is whether the work had reached a stage at which its reconstruction is more than mere guesswork, and, equally important, whether the quality of the surviving material makes such reconstruction worthwhile. Conventional opinion has it that Elgar, who had produced relatively little in over a dozen years, had run out of ideas, and was simply recycling earlier sketches in a half-hearted fashion in order to flesh out the Symphony. Certainly there is much use of music composed for other purposes, or taken from abandoned projects: but this is little different from Elgar's working method throughout his life. More importantly, there is also newly composed material which shows evidence of vigour and inspiration - particularly in the Finale, which is otherwise the least complete of the four movements - and detailed labelling and reworking of the sketches which reveal just how involved Elgar was with the composition. It is very hard to understand how those who have studied all the material - not just that published in Reed - have failed to recognise the energy and enthusiasm with which Elgar was tackling the work, and what a long way he had got with it. What is lacking is not so much development (much of which is implicit) as the overall pulling together of the material

- a consequence of Elgar's usual practice of only finalising a work when putting it into full score. He had begun to do this not long before his last illness struck, and there can be little question that, in his mind, the Symphony was more or less complete.

Inevitably Anthony Payne's elaboration of the Third Symphony sketches will be compared to Deryck Cooke's performing version of Mahler's Tenth Symphony. It is by no means a close parallel, since Mahler had sketched a complete draft of the work, without a missing bar. Because Mahler completed his sketch in haste, there are many weaknesses of texture and structure: much would surely have been recomposed had he lived. Yet the architecture and the force of his ideas are so strong that the work of reconstruction brings the Symphony vividly to life even in its imperfect and incomplete state. And because the music that Elgar was sketching for the Third Symphony is just as powerful and compelling, its remarkable quality is able to remain intact in spite of the fact that someone has had to stand in for the composer in bringing the work to its final form. Although there can be no pretence that this is the Symphony as Elgar would have completed it, what we are given is the unmissable opportunity to hear the final thoughts of a great composer.

What in the end is the alternative? Should the Third Symphony not be heard because Elgar in his darkest moment asked for it to be destroyed? Should the view prevail that it is better (better for whom?) that any attempt at realising the Symphony ought not to be performed? The German musicologist and philosopher Adorno, writing of Mahler, said: "I incline to the view that precisely someone who senses the extraordinary scope of the conception of the Tenth ought to do without adaptations and performances. The case is similar with sketches of unfinished pictures by masters: anyone who understands them and can visualise how they might have been completed would prefer to file them away and contemplate them privately." Such a view seems breathtakingly selfish and arrogant, and the thought of unfinished music reserved for the private pleasure of musicologists deeply distasteful. For better or worse, Elgar's sketches for the Third Symphony have been preserved. As a result of his long involvement with them, with a composer's unique insight, and with a deep love and understanding of Elgar's music, Anthony Payne has rescued them from silence, and for that the only proper response is one of immense gratitude.