

Elgar/Payne Symphony No3. An Introduction by Anthony Payne

I first came across the sketches for Elgar's Third Symphony at the end of W H Reed's book *Elgar as I Knew Him*. The majority of the most important pages are reproduced there in facsimile and I was immediately fascinated by the power and vitality of the music. It simply leapt from the page, and although most of the sketches were in short score, with only a few instrumental indications, I immediately began to hear orchestral sounds in my head.

I knew that on his deathbed Elgar had placed an embargo on attempts to complete the work, on what he called "tinkering" with it; but I felt this could not prevent me from musing over the sketches in the privacy of my room, and I used to follow them through, aided by Reed's account of how he played them on his violin with Elgar at the piano. It was music that seemed to me to show Elgar in inspirational flight, and it gave the lie to received opinion that he had become a spent force after the death of his wife.

The history of the Symphony has been well documented, but it is worth repeating the basic facts. Elgar's old friend George Bernard Shaw had often badgered the composer about producing a third symphony, and early in 1932 he renewed his attack, suggesting that the BBC might be persuaded to commission it. This time Elgar half rose to the bait. He had recently orchestrated Chopin's *Funeral March*, and when he was asked by a critic if the rest of Chopin's sonata could be orchestrated to make a symphony, he replied that he would sooner write one of his own.

The affair snowballed: newspapers got hold of the story, Shaw cajoled the BBC, and Elgar actually spoke of having "written" the Symphony after he had been quizzed at that year's Three Choirs Festival. Composers can mean many different things when they speak of having "written" something, but we can probably take it that a lot of the Symphony had already come into focus in his mind. All that he needed was time to put it down. Eventually, in December, the BBC announced officially that they had commissioned the Symphony, and from then on we may take it that Elgar approached the work with deep seriousness.

Throughout what was to be the last complete year of his life, he put parts of the work down on paper. It was sometimes an extended section, sometimes just a chord progression, and Reed tells us of intense sessions they spent together on the music. Elgar would pound away at the piano, and exhort Reed to tear his heart out on the violin. The composer had an extraordinary way of working, jumping from movement to movement as the spirit took him. It was as if he was shaping the various pieces of the jigsaw, before fitting them all together. Ideas sometimes came to him outside the context of a tempo, for instance, and one, clearly marked "scherzo", eventually ended up in the slow movement. By the same token, themes from earlier years were pressed into service - ideas for *The Last Judgement*, for instance, an oratorio which never saw the light of day, and episodes from his incidental music for Laurence Binyon's historical drama *Arthur*, which he had composed a decade before. Critics have held this against the Symphony, but there is no real reason why ideas cannot be re-allocated in this way, especially when they are as impressive as they are here: the

practice goes back to Bach and beyond. Elgar's borrowed themes became part of an overall vision, fused together by the intensity of his creative thought.

Tragically, however, his labours were to be of no avail. In October 1933, after an exploratory operation, cancer was diagnosed and he quickly went into a decline. He composed no more, and in February 1934 he died, leaving over 130 pages of sketches for the unfinished Symphony. I believe these pages contain the vestiges of an inspired work, yet they seem to have aroused little interest until comparatively recently. Elgar's reputation sank to a low ebb in the period after his death, which partly accounts for this; but even when the sketches were explored, few imaginative insights seemed forthcoming.

My own involvement with them, dating from late 1972, did not immediately lead to any serious work. Contemplating the sketches was merely an intermittent hobby, and years would pass by in which I paid them no attention. But in 1993 all that changed. Paul Hindmarsh of BBC Manchester telephoned to ask whether I would be interested in putting the sketches into some sort of shape for workshop performance. I jumped at the idea: it would compel me to collect my thoughts and systematically write down the many connecting links between sketches and extensions of them which I had envisaged over the years. I took little note of Paul's caveat, that the BBC would first have to obtain permission for the project from the copyright owners: on the spur of the exhilarating moment I completed the Scherzo, for which the sketches supplied all the material, and then managed to write out a complete exposition for the Adagio by means of jigsaw-puzzling with the sketches. Reed's book, which had been of considerable help in remembering the order of events in the Scherzo, did not help with the Adagio. He seemed not to know how the movement opened, although the sketches make it clear, nor was he aware of the order in which the main subjects were to appear. All this had to be worked out by educated guesswork and intuition.

By now the BBC had sent me photocopies of the complete sketches, which were housed in the British Library, and I discovered that Reed had overlooked many pages of considerable interest. With the bit firmly between my teeth, and encouraged by a scrap of developmental music I had discovered in the complete sketches, I began to see how I could complete the Adagio. I forged ahead and wrote the last bar on February 23 1994, only later realising, with a considerable frisson, that this day marked the sixtieth anniversary of the composer's death. I thought at this point that I had achieved all that was possible, for Elgar had only written down the exposition and recapitulation of the first movement, while the material for the Finale enabled one to assemble the exposition and no more.

All of this was shortly to become of academic interest, however, because the Elgar family, who controlled the copyright to the sketches, came to the decision after much deliberation that they could not allow work to continue on the project. They felt in all honesty that their great uncle's deathbed wish could not be over-ruled. I sympathised with their stance, but was, of course, deeply disappointed. I had begun to feel as involved with the Symphony as if it had been a piece of my own.

At this stage I put everything back into my bottom drawer, thinking rather dejectedly that I would probably never return to the Symphony. But the saga continued to unfold. The family

said that they had no objection to the idea of a radio programme about the sketches, as long as my "tinkerings" were not alluded to. Accordingly I went ahead and recorded a talk for the BBC in March 1995. It caused something of a stir, and convinced many who had previously underestimated the sketches that the Symphony would have been of the highest quality. I returned home from the recording thinking that this really was the end of the affair, but fate had other ideas. Next day, when taking a final look at the sketches, prior to packing them away for good, I quite suddenly discovered the key to completing the first movement - the very thing I had just said was impossible in my radio talk. The idea struck with the force of a lightning bolt: I recognised that four pages of faintly outlined fragments I had previously discounted were in fact intended for the development section. Plunging in at the deep end, I completed the development and the related coda in a couple of weeks. Despite the family's embargo, I felt that I owed it to Elgar to finish as much as I could whilst the spirit was upon me. Maybe posterity would find a place for my realisation, even if circumstances were currently against it.

It was now the summer of 1995, and I had to put the Symphony aside for the time being while I completed a commission of my own. But after the exhilarating experience of finishing the first movement, I felt for the first time that I could perhaps complete the whole Symphony. It seemed as if I was being impelled by forces outside myself, and again fate took a hand: the Elgar family began to change their minds. Realising that the sketches in Reed would in any case come out of copyright in 2005, allowing anyone to "tinker", they decided to take control of the situation. It was a few months before they reached a consensus, but finally a unanimous decision was taken to commission from me a complete version of the Symphony, and in August I began to write out in full orchestral score all that I had so far done. That is, the first three movements and the beginning of the Finale. It was while doing this that I became more consciously aware of the overall sweep of the Symphony. It was different in its sheer breadth of emotion from any of his other symphonic works. There was the raw vigour and magic lyricism of the opening movement, the use of a lighter manner in the second which went far beyond his established symphonic practice, and the searing intensity of the Adagio, tragic in its import, while the Finale revealed a world of chivalric action and drama.

All this was at the back of my mind as I faced the last and greatest obstacle: nowhere did Elgar leave a hint as to how his Symphony was going to end. I had to compose the whole of the development section and the coda, much as in the first movement, but without the helpful pointers, and I had to envisage the work's ultimate goal - the toughest assignment of all, involving visionary concepts if I was to be true to Elgar's creative bravery. It was not even certain what basic structure Elgar had in mind for his Finale, although I felt that the breadth of the expository material in the sketches pointed towards a sonata form. This is enriched by incorporating into the development a ravishing G minor interlude whose placing in the movement is not precisely indicated by the sketches. As it now stands, the passage seems to have strayed from some rondo sub-stratum and yields a structural ambivalence which I hope is worthy of Elgar's symphonic thought.

As for the Symphony's closing pages, I decided to dare all in honour of Elgar's unpredictability. What if he had thought to place the haunting repetitions of *The Wagon Passes* from his recently completed *Nursery Suite* into a broader symphonic context? The

Finale's main subject actually suggests this kind of treatment, and it would lead the music away into some new visionary world, spanning the years between the composer's death and my attempted realisation of his sketches. I trusted my intuition and went ahead and wrote.

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Composer, writer, broadcaster and amateur, Anthony Payne is one of the most respected British musicians of his generation. Born in London in 1936, he began composing as a schoolboy - though after reading music at Durham University, he suffered a period of creative uncertainty as he struggled to integrate the innovations of the Continental avant-garde with the romanticism of such early 20th-century British composers as Elgar, Delius and Vaughan Williams for which he felt an affinity. Only with the completion in his early thirties of the *Phoenix Mass* (1965-72) did he at last sense "the natural emergence of a new manner, long sought after but previously only partly envisaged".



Since then, however, he has accumulated an imposing catalogue of some 50 works in all genres except opera. In addition to his two major commissions for the BBC Proms - *The Spirit's Harvest* (1985) and *Time's Arrow* (1990 - NMC D0375) - his orchestral output includes the remarkable Delius paraphrase *Spring's Shining Wake* (1981) and the autobiographical *Orchestral Variations - The Seeds Long Hidden* (1994), while his vocal and chamber music ranges from the impressively constructivist *String Quartet* (1978) to the whimsical fantasy of the much-played sextet *A Day in the Life of a Mayfly* (1981), which will be released in August 1998 on a disc of Anthony Payne's chamber music (NMC D056).

Meanwhile, Payne has continued to promote the understanding of music through a multiplicity of activities over the decades: as author of books on Schoenberg and Frank Bridge, as music critic for the *Daily Telegraph*, *The Independent* and *Country Life*, as contributor to a range of publications from *Tempo* to the *New Grove Dictionary*, as a teacher in universities as far afield as Australia and the United States, and, not least, as a frequent broadcaster. And, in addition to years of service to the Society for the Promotion of New Music, he continues to guide the questing young ensemble, Jane's Minstrels which he co-founded in 1988 with his wife, the soprano Jane Manning, as a practical expression of his lifelong dedication to music.

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