

Elgar at Play

"Dreary weather - Good music - Liver pills - Calomel - Income Tax - No Biking - New Boots - Bad golf - etc etc - Fill up the life of your despised E.E."

wrote Elgar to 'Nimrod' in 1902, summarising the life of a very untypical composer. For Elgar was a man of the countryside, with a wide range of interests - animal, vegetable and mineral - who just happened to be a great composer as well. This article looks at a few of those interests which intertwined with his life as a musician.

GOLF

Elgar first played golf at Christmas 1892, when he and Alice were staying with her friends the Bakers, at Hasfield Court. His teacher was Richard Baxter Townshend, (RBT of the Enigma Variations) one-time Treasurer of the Oxford University Golf Club and, in 1921, author of "Inspired Golf" - a "humorous examination of some of golf's techniques and pitfalls". In March 1893 he joined Worcestershire Golf Club, and played regularly from then on.



Golf ... is the best form of exercise for writing men. as it involves no risk of accident, is always ready without much preliminary arrangement, and has the inestimable advantage of being solidly respectable, inasmuch as it is seldom worth seeing and rarely worth reading about.

Edward Elgar, March 1904

On one occasion ... he caused considerable excitement at the school by arriving in a golfing suit - the breeches and long gaiters which were worn prior to the introduction of plus-fours ... I had a suspicion that this enthusiasm for golf was a trifle artificial and something of a departure from his usual sincerity. I felt, indeed, that golf appealed to him less

as a game than as a mark of a certain social status and that it represented an attempt to live up to his wife's rather exacting standards.

Rosa Burley

When we returned E.E. heard us and called out to me: "Child, come up here. I've got a tune that will knock 'em - knock 'em flat." And he played the Military March No. 1 in D. I was thrilled; the whole thing carried one along so splendidly - and as to the coda, I thought it glorious. E.E. came in to dinner that evening in a bright red golf blazer with brass buttons, over his evening shirt.

Dora Penny, 10 May 1901

For my father the mornings at Craeg Lea always passed too quickly. After lunch he and Elgar would drop down the hill to the golf links. Elgar would then play a round with some friend and my father would follow them round, supplying conversation and, when necessary, consolation. Elgar was at that time a keen golfer, but clearly they did not take the game as

seriously as most do today. Back to Craeg Lea for tea, then more music, supper and a wild dash to the station.

Wulstan Atkins, Spring 1903

CYCLING

In the summer of 1900 I went cycling with some cousins to Scotland where we had a thrilling time which was duly reported to Edward by letter. The result was that when I returned to Malvern I found that he had bought a bicycle which he had been taught to ride by Mr Little of Birchwood and on which at the first opportunity he wobbled round to The Mount with the suggestion that I should go for a ride with him.

Rosa Burley

Bicycle sent for.

Alice Elgar diary, 10 July 1900

The best way to learn to Bike is to have a good strong strap around your waist & let your coacher grab that: that's how I learnt.

Letter to August Jaeger, 22 March 1903

We are here in the woods which is very lovely. E loves orchestrating here in the deep quiet hearing the 'sound of summer winds amidst the lofty pines'. I wish you & Mr. Kilburn cd. see the lovely scenery here. It is a nice little cottage on the edge of woods. We have both been learning to bicycle, E can now go beautifully & I am just beginning, our landlord friend and neighbour has been unweariedly patient in teaching us.

Letter from Alice Elgar to Alice Kilburn, 3 August 1900

Elgar had been riding a hired bicycle at first, but on 29th August 1900 he collected his new Royal Sunbeam bicycle, price £21/10/-, and immediately nicknamed 'Mr. Phoebus'. However, outings were not invariably successful.



Cycling, especially in a hill country, is often arduous work and no doubt my temper as well as his would sometimes be to blame. On one occasion we had taken with us as an addition to the party two neighbours whose conversation irritated him and, to make matters worse, a drizzle of rain overtook us. "Oh I can't stand this," Edward suddenly exclaimed in exasperation. "Let's go home!" And without waiting for us he turned back. We paid no attention to him and continued our ride.

Rosa Burley

E, E Wilson, E Griffith & Miss Burley started to bicycle. E returned. Stormy day.

Alice Elgar diary, 15 April 1901

A new bicycle was bought in March 1903, and the old one given to Jaeger, "from Edward Elgar, BICYCLE & ORATORIO MONGER". He was photographed with it, and with his daughter Carice in the background, at Craig Lea on 16th September 1903 in connection with an interview he gave to the Daily Sketch.

I have been photographed in your cap! there's a conversion for you, if all goes well you will see 'it' in Sketch some day.

Letter to Frank Schuster, 16 September 1903

But by now Elgar's cycling days were nearing an end.

It was not until 12 June (1908) that Atkins went over to Plas Gwyn. He was staying the night and had suggested taking his bicycle with him, as he often had done, but Elgar told him that it was not worth while since 'biking' was no longer much fun these days owing to the motor cars which had increased greatly ... Walking by the river was better.

Wulstan Atkins

CHEMISTRY

Another of Elgar's abiding interest was chemistry, and at his Hereford house, Plas Gwyn, he was able to set up a small laboratory. His manuscript of the Prelude to The Kingdom, dating from January 1906, bears the stains of his chemistry experiments.

... bought chemicals

Alice Elgar diary, 30 October 1905

... 'genial, cheery, at peace with the world' and discovering the joys of chemistry in a laboratory which he had fitted out in the basement.

Robert Buckley, December 1905

In August 1908 his laboratory moved from the basement to 'The Ark', converted from part of an outhouse.

I was taken to see the 'Ark', as the beautifully fitted-up little laboratory at Plas Gwyn was called. It was rather like a toy Noah's Ark from the outside. I went round reading the names on the bottles ...

Dora Penny

One day he made a phosphoric concoction which, when dry, would "go off" by spontaneous combustion. The amusement was to smear it on a piece of blotting paper and then wait breathlessly for the catastrophe. One day he made too much paste; and, when his music called him and he wanted to go back to the house, he clapped the whole of it into a gallipot, covered it up, and dumped it into the water-butt, thinking it would be safe there.



Just as he was getting on famously, writing in horn and trumpet parts, and mapping out wood-wind, a sudden and unexpected crash, as of all the percussion in all the orchestras on earth, shook the room, followed by the "rushing mighty sound" he had already anticipated in The Kingdom. The water-butt had blown up: the hoops were rent: the staves flew in all directions; and the liberated water went down the drive in a solid wall.

Silence reigned for a few seconds. Then all the dogs in Herefordshire gave tongue; and all the doors and windows opened. After a moment's thought, Edward lit his pipe and strolled down to the gate, andante tranquillo, as if nothing had happened and the ruined water-butt and the demolished flower-beds were pre-historic features of the landscape. A neighbour, peeping out of his gate, called out, "Did you hear that noise sir: it sounded like an explosion?" "Yes," said Sir Edward, "I heard it: where was it?" The neighbour shook his head; and the incident was closed.

W H Reed

I am resuming chemistry & made soap yesterday between fits of scoring (not scouring!) the symphony. I have been vainly trying to persuade Carice to wash with it - strange how little encouragement I get!

Letter to Frank Schuster, 28 August 1908

You will perhaps be amused - I hear that the 'new Sulphuretted Hydrogen Machine designed by Sir Edward Elgar' is to be manufactured & called the 'Elgar S.H. Apparatus'!! I will not offer to send you my invention - you would soon tire of it - although a nice toy.

Letter to August Jaeger, 11 November 1908

WOODWORK

In May 1917 the Elgars went for the first time to Brinkwells, a cottage in Sussex that was to be both a country retreat and an inspiration over the next few years. Woodcraft was the hobby to hand.

It is a most extraordinarily lovely spot. Endless walks & paths in the woods - There is also a Carpenter's bench & tools &c & E. has already made me 2 rustic footstools -

Letter from Alice Elgar to Alice Stuart Wortley, 26 May 1917

Mother was ... very busy arranging for the move to Brinkwells ... She had to think what would be wanted in the country as there was a scarcity of furniture and comforts there and also the business of shutting up Severn House safely. Father's only contribution to all this was choosing tools which he would need for the woodwork he did and the repairs and small improvements he made.

Carice Elgar

Gleaning Mr. Reed arrived tried over Sonata.

Elgar diary, 29 August 1918

At the top of the hill, looming on the sky-line, was what at first sight I took to be a statue; but as we drew nearer I saw it was a tall woodman leaning a little forward upon an axe with a very long handle. The picture was perfect and the pose magnificent. It was Sir Edward himself, who had come to the top of the hill to meet me, and placed himself there leaning on his axe and fitting in exactly with the surroundings. He ... could not wait another moment to introduce me to the very heart of these woods, and to tell me all about the woodcraft which he had been learning from the woodmen who earned their livelihood here. Chemistry, physics, billiards, and music were abandoned and forgotten: nothing remained but an ardent woodman-cooper.



I was not surprised when, after tea, Lady Elgar took me on one side and said, "I am so glad you have come: it is lovely for him to have someone to play with."

W H Reed

The wood reeve came to see E.& E. bought the Underwood below garden house. Vesey excited & peased & took chopper worked hard clearing path. A. helped - E. wrote more of the wonderful Quintet - Flexham Park - sad 'dispossessed' trees & their dance & unstilled regret for their evil fate - or rather course - wh. brought it on -

Alice Elgar diary, 16 September 1918

Made a music stand for Reed

Elgar diary, 30 November 1918

Sir Edward, finding that there was no music-stand in the studio, went down to the tool-shed and knocked up a very creditable one. Standing back and surveying his handiwork with his head a little on one side, he became aware that Mark (*his handyman/gardener*) had entered and was standing looking at it, too. "You see I have made a music-stand, Mark," said Sir Edward. "Mr. Reed is coming, and will want something to put his music on. I am afraid it is rather rough; but then, you see, I am not very handy with tools." "No," said Mark dully, and walked away.

W H Reed

CHILDREN

Elgar had a great affinity with children, and they with him. To add a personal note; my son's piano teacher has a vivid memory of sitting on Elgar's knee as a very young girl. To understand better his relationship with Carice, I recommend the lovely little book of postcards from father to daughter - "Dear Carice". Children in abundance were to be found

at Hasfield Court, where the Elgars stayed with the Baker family for the 1901 Gloucester Festival.



... the three boys had woven themselves into a romantic atmosphere engendered by a study of Royalist plots, taking the characters of Prince Rupert, the Duke of Buckingham, and the Earl of Rochester ... Elgar of course entered heart and soul into the whole business, becoming, oddly enough, 'Nanty Ewart', the rather disreputable Captain of the Brig 'Jumping Jenny', from Redgauntlet, which the boys had just been reading. Discrepancy in dates led Elgar to say that he was never quite sure what century he was living in! But this did not in any way prevent the whole affair from flourishing most remarkably.

Dora Penny

E on the moat - "Nanty Ewart" in the Fort.

Alice Elgar diary, 9 September 1901

To his Highnesse the Prince Rupert
these
Honour'd Prince:

For the winter months Ye goode shippe 'Jumping Jenny' is in docke and yr. Servant idle: he purposeth to fitte out the sd. shippe, when the tyranny of ice & snow be overpast, as a pirate and descend upon ye Spanish main, hopinge good spoil may in a measure make uppe for a weake summer & autumn: of whilk mair anon.

Your servant, for purposes of the cause, wille be at the hostelry of ye Langham on Monday for several dayes & hopes he may be permitted to pay his humble respects in Brighton to ye Royalists & especially to the Ladies of ye party!

Yours to command
Nanty Ewart
(in baptism Alexander)

Letter to the Baker children, 23 November 1901

PETER RABBIT

Elgar had a deep love of animals, and especially of dogs, which I suspect will warrant a separate article one of these days. But here I will confine myself to the multi-talented Peter Rabbit.

C & May brought up lovely white



“Peter rabbit” ... who was very naughty ... played about with Peter all the aftn. Everybody!

**Alice Elgar diary,
15 April 1905**

Atkins bicycled to Hereford ... After lunch Elgar persuaded him to help mend and fill a tub, repair a gatepost, and, with May Grafton's help, put wire netting over the back gate to keep Peter the rabbit in.
Wulstan Atkins

My dearest chuck:
The animals are all well & not likely to remain so I fear, as everyone who goes by their house gives them something: I find the following extras were offered & devoured -

May: 4 Chicory leaves each
Mother: 2 large Carrots
Father: 2 pea-pods (full)

The doves do not lend themselves to stuffing so readily.
Letter to Carice, 3 August 1905

The parrot here is a most amusing beast & when everything is quiet starts talking, sotto voce, on his own account; I find that the equivalent to 'Polly' is 'Loretto': every Italian parrot will answer to that ... There is another abandoned beast up the street who talks both languages & nothing decent in either: a bad bird my child, & no fit company for Peter. I hope Peter is well: I often think of him & wonder if he has any dried clover for a change: do get him some if he wants it: I know all the pen straw must be gone by now.

Letter to Carice, 26 January 1907 (from Capri)

From this point Peter took on a Italian alter ego, and when Elgar's Choral Song "Owls" was completed at the end of the year, it was dedicated "To my friend Pietro d'Alba". Thus inspired, Peter took to composition on his own account, making a telling contribution to the second Wand of Youth Suite.

My dear Peter:
Your idea - the vigorous entry of the drums - was splendid

Thanks

Yrs affectly
Edward Elgar

Letter to Peter Rabbit, 26 January 1907

There was now no holding Peter, and in December 1909 Elgar wrote "The Torch", a setting of a poem by his small white friend.

I send a specimen of my dear friend Pietro d'Alba in his most, or almost most pessimistic mood. To read it one wd. think the carrot crop had failed or some other catastrophe acutely affecting the rabbit world was toward.

Letter to Frances Colvin, 2 February 1910

Sadly these words were all too prophetic, for on 3rd May 1910, Peter died.

You are always so very lenient to me in my foolishness so I write to tell you how very sad we are to-day: my dear old friend Peter left this life this morning quite suddenly & painlessly: Why should I tell you this! Because I want to write to somebody (- ? everybody) and say how really grieved I am - & then only two people in the world would understand & you are one. So you will not think me a nuisance. It is terrible to think how many human beings could be spared out of our little life's circle so much easier than my confidant & adviser Pietro d'Alba.

Letter to Frances Colvin, 3 May 1910

Compiled by Martin Bird.

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