

Falstaff, Op 68

A symphonic study for full orchestra.

Approximate Length:	30 minutes
First Performance:	
Date:	1 October 1913
Venue:	Leeds Festival
Conductor:	the composer
Commissioned by:	Leeds Festival Committee
Dedicated to:	Sir Landon Ronald, conductor and pianist

Elgar had long admired Shakespeare's plays and, when approached to write a piece for the 1913 Leeds Festival, determined on a symphonic portrayal of Falstaff. The character had of course been tackled before, most notably by Verdi in his opera, but Elgar considered the comic image of Falstaff as a bumbling buffoon, a figure of fun, to be superficial and sought to produce a work which gave a greater psychological insight into the character.

The result is an intensely programmatic and episodic work. Moreover, while Elgar had by this time passed the peak of his popularity, his technical skills had continued to develop. As if to demonstrate this, he produced a work of considerable musical complexity. This has led some to regard it as something of an academic exercise, only properly appreciated through a detailed understanding of the programme that underlies it.

This is nonsense. The piece can be enjoyed on a number of levels, including purely as a piece of virtuoso orchestral writing. Having gained a familiarity with the work, the programme can, if wished, be more easily followed. But, whatever Elgar may claim to have been his intention, the music speaks more loudly. The breathtaking variation of the theme representing Prince Hal immediately preceding the dramatic climax of the work is noted in Elgar's programme as no more than past times remembered, but who cannot see in it the exhilaration of a chase across wide open spaces, the sensation that drew Elgar so unswervingly to the Malvern Hills.

The work makes regular appearances on the concert platform and seems to be particularly popular with, and particularly well performed by, youth orchestras.