

(Scenes from the Saga of) King Olaf, op. 30

A cantata for soprano, tenor and bass soloists, full choir and orchestra, based on the epic poem by H W Longfellow, arranged by H A Ackworth. The cantata comprises a prologue, nine scenes and an epilogue. It is usually performed with an interval after the third scene (The Conversion) although Elgar allowed as an alternative an interval after the fifth scene (The Wraith of Odin).

Approximate Length:	95 minutes
First Performance:	
Date:	30 October 1896
Venue:	North Staffordshire Music Festival, Victoria Hall, Hanley
Conductor:	the composer
Commissioned by:	Dr Charles Swinnerton Heap, conductor and founder of the North Staffordshire Music Festival

The saga tells the story of the life, battles and eventual death of King Olaf, a Norse crusader in his own country. The work has often been criticised for the banality of the lyrics and storyline. While performed regularly in the years immediately following its composition, it has been largely neglected since then.

A pity, for the work contains some of Elgar's most engaging melodies and is regarded by many as his best pre-Enigma composition, foreshadowing the great oratorios that were to follow. The forceful first scene, The Challenge of Thor, is probably the most easily assimilated but the dashing fifth scene, The Wraith of Odin, the lilting duet between Thyri and Olaf, The Grey Land Breaks to Lively Green, and the jolly chorus, A Little Bird in the Air all have considerable appeal. But Elgar saves the best music for the epilogue. A recapitulation of a number of earlier themes leads into the unaccompanied and soulful final chorus, As Torrents in Summer, bringing the work to an moving climax which Elgar hardly equalled in any of his later works.

King Olaf may however be enjoying something of a revival. The work received its first recording in 1985, a recording partly financed by the Elgar Society and Elgar Foundation. And in 1996, it has received performances in Reading, Hitchin and, on 2 November, in the Victoria Hall, Hanley, where Elgar himself conducted the first performance one hundred years earlier.