

Piano Concerto. The History

The History of Elgar's Piano Concerto

Elgar worked, fitfully, at his Piano Concerto for at least twenty years. Encouragement and inspiration came from three pianists - two professional, and one amateur. The latter, Alice Stuart-Wortley, his "Windflower", had already done much, directly and indirectly, to deliver the Violin Concerto, the Second Symphony, and The Music Makers, and it was she who first came to Severn House to play the sketches.

E. headache after such a tiring day - came down after lunch. A.S.W. came & played the lovely Piano Concerto piece - E. returned to bed - dreffful headache & very depressed. Extraordinarily hot weather like summer -
Alice Elgar diary 10th January 1914

While staying at their friend Frank Schuster's Thames-side country retreat near Maidenhead, "The Hut", a fellow guest was the London-born pianist Irene Scharrer. Then in her early 30s, she had studied at the Royal Academy of Music, and had played with Artur Nikisch in Berlin and Leipzig.

Lovely day, sunny & lovely all day - garden lovely & wonderful blue hedge with the field & trees & willows framing it - More soldiers to tea, a splendid Ulsterman with them, just arrived from France, Tiepval &c - E. rather tired & cd. not bear talking, did not come in to tea - Irene Sharer Lubbock & her mother came.

Alice Elgar diary 9th July 1916

Later that year Windflower again played the sketches:

E. to Book Sale & A.S.W. came to tea & played the lovely phrase of Piano Concerto. A. to lunch with Lady Petre & with her & Eleanor Berkeley to the 'Old Vic' to see Julius Caesar. Very interesting, all so simple & earnest - no scenery to speak of, a modern street (residential) served for most of it - Actors not great -

Alice Elgar diary 26th October 1916

The following January Elgar himself played the sketches to another close friend, the actress Mary Anderson (Madame de Navarro).

E. met A. at M. de Navarro's Savoy Hotel - Nice time - she was most affectionate & dear - E. played some Bach music to her & his lovely fragment of Piano Concerto over & over again. Back late by omnibus of various kinds -

Alice Elgar diary 26th January 1917

Later that year, when Elgar was composing his short ballet, The Sanguine Fan, he thought of using up the piano concerto sketches, but could not bring himself to do so.

My dear Windflower:

It is so dreadful your not coming - I am better & am doing the Ballet - or think of doing it -

but where are you? I wanted to tell you the theme & every note must be approved by you (bless you!) before anything can be done. Oh! why are you so far away & so difficult to get at??

Love
EE

I thought of using up your Piano Concerto! (Labour exchange!) but you would not allow that would you?

Letter from Elgar to Alice Stuart-Wortley, 8th February 1917

At the Hut the following year Irene Scharrer, now Mrs. Lubbock, was again there, as were the sketches.

E. & A. at The Hut - mild day but damp - not out & Irene Lubbock came to lunch & then E. played her P. Concerto phrase & she did it beautifully & E. told her she shd. have the 1st. performance so she was absolutely delighted - Then Frank & Irene & Mr. Spring Rice went to Eton by river & Mr. C. Lennox came & had most interesting talk & E. played to him wh. made him vapid with delight.

Alice Elgar diary 27th October 1918

Elgar himself put it rather more briefly:

*Mme Scharrer to lunch
E & A. at Hut
Cosmo Gordon Lennox*

Edward Elgar diary 27th October 1918

The following year comes the only indication that the Piano Concerto might one day be finished.

My dear Windflower:

Here is everything the same & the weather divine. Felix Salmond has been & we have polished the Cello concerto: Carice is here until Monday night. Poor dear A. has had a bad cold, better now ... I want to finish or rather commence the Piano Concerto which must be windflowerish so I hope you will come but somehow I know you will not. Your lavender blooms apace.

Love
EE

Letter from Elgar to Alice Stuart-Wortley, 3rd August, 1919

Then came the inevitable hiatus caused by Lady Elgar's death. But in 1922 new music (or at least the resurrection of old projects) was again on the agenda.

To London at 9.1. Pouring wet all day. Went to Westminster Cathedral & heard High Mass. On to Flat - Mary there - Father & I lunched at Pall Mall & back to Flat - to sale room & bought piano - funny people bidding. Back to Flat - Father played some of new music - 3rd pt

of Kingdom Piano Concerto. Came back by 6.27

Carice Elgar diary 1st November 1922

Now the final pianist comes into the story, Harriet Cohen, who as a girl lived near the Elgars in Hampstead.

Sir Landon and Lady Ronald's musical party at their house in Warwick Avenue the other evening must have been the first as well as one of the most distinguished of the autumn season. It was given to inaugurate the new music room, which looked delightful. Everyone admired the decoration in general and the chandeliers in particular. All sorts of notabilities in the musical and other worlds were there, including Sir Edward Elgar, Moiseiwitsch, Lilian Braithwaite, and Mrs Lionel Harris. Harriet Cohen played the piano and the singers were Olga Haley and John Barclay, the new baritone who is making such a success in London.

Newspaper report, September 1924

It is nice to recall that it was at a musical party given at his home near Maida Vale that I first played in front of Sir Edward Elgar. 'Ha! Grown up at last, I see!' and Sir Edward cast a pleased and twinkling glance over my first long frock, as with a courtly how he brought me a glass of wine saying, 'Champagne to match a champagne-coloured silk.' I had not known that I was going to be asked to play and my fingers were icy cold. I was trembling as Sir Landon led me to the piano while Sir Edward stationed himself behind me ... Our composer was so fascinated by the Debussy Preludes, that he came and stood by me as I played. Elgar was often to say to me that he did not much care for the piano as an instrument and he thanked God that his father had made him take up the violin at an early age, for that was really his love.

Harriet Cohen

Maybe that is the main reason why we have a Violin Concerto and a Cello Concerto from Elgar, but only his sketches for a Piano Concerto.

Elgar gave the slow movement to Harriet Cohen in the form of a short score for two pianos. In his foreword to her autobiography, Percy Young tells us: *"At the end of her long and distinguished career I remember her performance of the only extant movement (in sketch form) of Elgar's Piano Concerto. She loved this movement - which we brought into viable performing shape together - for its associations."* And he goes on to speak of *"the tenderness with which she invested this fugitive music"*.

In the 1930s Elgar worked with renewed vigour on a number of major projects, none of which were destined to be completed by him. Ruth Newcomb Moore, a singer with the Croydon Philharmonic Society, heard Fred Gaisberg talk of this time.

Mr Gaisberg told us of Elgar's visit to Paris, on which he accompanied him and generally looked after him. Once he and Elgar were getting into a taxi on the boulevard when two women of a disreputable type got in at the opposite door and tried to sit on their laps! His description of Elgar's horror and disgust, frantically pushing them aside, "Go away you horrible women, go away!" Elgar went to see Delius and they were like a couple of schoolboys, each trying to outdo the other, Elgar boasting of his journey by air, of the works he had in progress - a symphony, an opera, a piano concerto, chamber works and how poor

Delius - the younger man, but an Invalid - envied the "young man of 75" that he saw in Elgar.
Ruth Newcomb Moore

Harriet Cohen, too, had cause for hope:

At the end of May Elgar went to Paris - much enjoying his first flight in an aeroplane - to conduct young Yehudi Menuhin in the violin concerto. He described the Gala occasion to me at tea in the Langham Hotel just after his return and told me of his visit to Delius at Grez when he had taken some Sibelius records. He expressed great admiration for Jelka Delius and Eric Fenby, Delius' amanuensis, but above all dwelt on his delight at Yehudi's playing and remarked on the way he had 'matured' in the two years or so he had been working on the concerto. He told me he was anxious to get back to Marl Bank 'and get my teeth into work again.' His creative activity seemed renewed, his projects vast: a third symphony, an opera (The Spanish Lady) - and he even had new ideas for 'Your poor old Concertothen'. We discussed the plans Barry Jackson and I were making for the 'festival within a festival' at Malvern in July-August. We had really built it around Elgar and he seemed pleased at this. He would conduct the strings of the City of Birmingham Orchestra in his Serenade, sharing the honours with Adrian Boult who would direct the rest of the programme, including myself in the Bach D minor concerto. At the opening concert on 23 July I would play his quintet.

Harriet Cohen

But it was not to be. Until now we have been unable to hear most of the sketches of the Piano Concerto, and our grateful thanks are due to Robert Walker for giving us a glimpse of what might have been.

One man, however, thought in the 1920s that he knew of Elgar's Piano Concerto, and wished to hear it. Deep in the recesses of the Elgar Birthplace Museum archive lurks the following letter from one Benjamin Whitehall, of Bow, to Adrian Boult:

Sir

Please acquit (sic) me of any desire to find fault with the BSO's playing or the program's you arrange. Indeed I could not if I would - more I cannot say.

Out of the plenitude of glorious music at your command it may indeed be difficult at times to know which selections to make. Possibly you would accept a request as helpful. Could you include in the program at some future date Dvorak's New World Symphony and Elgar's Concerto for the pianoforte. I am sure they are both very beautiful compositions and worthy of your beautiful orchestra.

If you cannot accept my suggestions I shall rest content in the knowledge that you know best.

With all good wishes

Yours truly, Benjamin Whitehall

Letter to Adrian Boult, 20th February 1922

Martin Bird