

Piano Concerto. The Realisation

Elgar's sketches, drafts and recordings of his Piano Concerto realised for performance by Robert Walker

As we have learned from Anthony Payne's performing edition of the sketches of Elgar's Third Symphony, while it is not possible to write a dead composer's music for him from his sketches, in sympathetic hands it is possible to present such sketches in an idiomatic context so that all may hear the surviving themes and material, gain some appreciation of what the composer was aiming at, and arrive at a work which may be listened to with satisfaction in the concert hall. This is what Robert Walker's has set out to achieve in his performing realisation of the sketches, fragments and recordings of Elgar's Piano Concerto.

Elgar began his Piano Concerto in 1913, twenty-one years before his death, and was sketching it alongside the Third Symphony at the end of his life. While we can never know just how he would have put this Concerto together, we do know what he would have put in it. There are page after page of sketches, and half an hour of music improvised from Elgar's own finger-tips straight onto hot wax: what was needed was someone with the insight to see how it could fit together to make a great piece, just as Payne did with the Third Symphony. Walker's comparable performing edition of Elgar's Concerto has been developed through several performances over a number of years, in association with the pianist David Owen Norris, Although the gloriously Elgarian first movement is realised from more fragmentary material than the first movement of the symphony, the amount of completely invented, linking material is small - there is very little that is not related to the sketches, and Walker knows Elgar so well that it sounds exactly like the real thing.

Until now all we had heard of the Piano Concerto was the slow movement which Elgar gave to Harriet Cohen as a short score for two pianos and which the late Dr. Percy Young orchestrated for piano and strings for Harriet Cohen to play in 1956. Dr. Young later expanded it adding wind and horns, and this was recorded by Margaret Fingerhut. As Dr. Young reminds us "the desire to write a concerto for this instrument was long standing ... Of the concerto the only section in which the outlines are more or less complete, in sketch form, is the second, slow, movement ... Elgar left a draft of the piano part in which occasional points of entry by the orchestra are marked."

Elgar himself can be heard playing much of this as a piano solo in the fifth of his piano improvisations, recorded in 1929 for HMV which were not issued until 1975. It was not until the 1990s that Robert Matthew-Walker (no relation) and David Owen Norris showed that there is some material link between the concerto and the improvisations, making it possible to complete a performing version of the sketches. Up till Robert Walker's work on them, the astonishingly disparate keys in which the sketches appeared - a first tune over an F minor seventh, a tune in E flat, and then a tune in D# - have been an insoluble puzzle. The improvisations' insistence on the keys of D and G gave Walker the clue he needed, and the tonal structure of the whole work is one of his remarkable discoveries about the material.

In Walker's performing realisation we may cherish the five great harmonized themes that Elgar wrote down for his Concerto - two separate first subjects for the opening movement, and a second subject; a solemn introduction for the finale (an idea later - the concerto came first - to be quarried by Elgar for the proposed finale of the Third Symphony), and a wistful piano reverie which Elgar himself developed in several ways. They change their character in true Elgarian fashion - the reflective piano line becomes a raunchy counter-subject, the solemn introduction becomes a menacing march and a triumphant peroration. The second subject of the first movement, in particular, is a key to unlock many doors, not least its tonality of D major. The second movement we have straight from Elgar's fingers at the piano and the manuscript he gave to Harriet Cohen.

Robert Walker's realisation of the third movement uses Elgar's shorter and more tantalising sketches to flesh out the third recorded improvisation, a brilliant Rondo. (The solemn introduction, familiar now from Anthony Payne's performing version of the Third Symphony sketches, is clearly marked by Elgar 'Concert III' in the sketches.) Thanks to Robert Walker's knowledge of the composer this splendidly Elgarian concerto allows us to hear Elgar's themes in a convincing setting. It's as close as we can come to hearing how Elgar himself might have completed it.

And here is the remarkable aspect of the Concerto. Most of the late music that Elgar actually finished was in fact quarried from his earliest sketchbooks. Yet Anthony Payne demonstrated where the real late Elgar was going in his realisation of the slow movement of the Third Symphony sketches, and this sound world is even more vividly explored in the outer movements of the Concerto.

Lewis Foreman

From a note accompanying the Dutton recording of Robert Walker's realisation, and reproduced here by permission.