

Piano Concerto

A concerto for piano and orchestra

Elgar toyed with the idea of writing a piano concerto from the turn of the century onwards. But, as with the Third Symphony and The Spanish Lady, on his death he left behind no more than an assortment of fragmentary sketches.

In 1901, concert pianist Fanny Davies asked Elgar to write a work for her to perform on stage. No doubt she hoped that he would write a piano concerto for her, but the work he produced, the Concert Allegro, was in fact a much shorter work for solo piano. Over the next five years, Elgar considered providing the piece with an orchestral accompaniment but he never did and the score then became lost for many years.

In 1902, Elgar met Alice Stuart-Wortley, the daughter of painter Sir John Millais and wife of Conservative Member of Parliament Charles Stuart-Wortley. They formed a close and affectionate relationship that lasted until Elgar's death. They corresponded frequently and at length, exchanging intimate letters in which he addressed her as Windflower. Through these and their common love of music, she probably understood him as his wife Alice never did. She is widely accepted as the soul enshrined in the Violin Concerto. But the Violin Concerto was dedicated to Fritz Kreisler - Elgar had dedicated the 1909 part-song The Angelus rather formally to 'Mrs Charles Stuart Wortley', but 'Windflower' never became the dedicatee of any of Elgar's major works. Michael Kennedy believes the omission would have been corrected if Elgar had completed a piano concerto, for Windflower was herself a competent amateur pianist - Elgar claimed to enjoy her playing above that of any other solo pianist - and it was she above anyone else who encouraged him to write the work.

It appears that Elgar first committed sketches for a piano concerto to paper in 1909. His relationship with Windflower had recently assumed a new level of intimacy, Elgar having first addressed her as My Dear Carrie (the diminutive by which she was known to her closest friends) in a letter dated March 1909. The first Windflower letter was to follow a year later. In his letters, he wrote at length about the spell that her piano playing cast over him. But at that time he had recently completed the Violin Concerto and was beginning to put together the Second Symphony. Work on the piano concerto was soon set aside.

He considered resuming work on the sketches shortly after completing the Part songs of op 71-73, but he found the distractions of London un conducive to the composition of substantial works. The completion of the Violin Sonata in 1918 resurrected his interest in writing for the piano as, for less obvious reasons, did composition of the Cello Concerto. In a letter to Windflower in 1919, he claimed to be arranging part of the then unpublished Cello Concerto for piano and, in a second letter written just over a week later, indicated that, having completed the Cello Concerto, he now wished to finish the piano concerto. And again in June 1925, he told Windflower in a letter that he had resumed work on the concerto but, recognising that his interest might soon lapse, asked her not to mention this to anyone.

Not that the sketches for the piano concerto were in any sense sacrosanct. In February 1917, he told Windflower that he had considered using some of the sketches for the hastily

composed Sanguine Fan ballet music. And the sketches which Elgar left behind for the uncompleted Third Symphony contain material which he had originally planned to use in the piano concerto. And in contrast to the Third Symphony, Elgar issued no embargo on others attempting to complete the concerto after his death.

The sketches nevertheless remained more or less ignored for fifty years after Elgar's death, probably because they are so brief and fragmentary that any attempted completion of the work would require far more original composition from whoever took on the task than Elgar had left behind in the sketches. In 1997, however, Robert Walker announced that he planned to produce a performing version of the work. Commissioned by Gavin Henderson for the Dartington International Summer School with funds provided by the David James Music Trust and the Woo Foundation, Robert Walker's score was first performed by David Owen Norris and the Dartington Festival Orchestra conducted by Graeme Jenkins on 17 August 1997 in the Great Hall, Dartington. Later, it appeared at the Worcester Three Choirs Festival, in Canada, and in the Netherlands, all the time being revised and polished

David Owen Norris has now recorded the realisation, with the BBC Concert Orchestra, conductor David Lloyd-Jones, on Dutton Epoch CDLX 7148. The score is published by Maecenas Music.