

Polonia, op 76

A symphonic prelude for full orchestra.

Approximate Length:	15 minutes
First Performance:	
Date:	6 July 1915
Venue:	Polish Victims' Relief Fund Concert, Queen's Hall, London
Conductor:	the composer
Dedicated to:	I J Paderewski

In 1914, Elgar had written *Carillon*, a recitation with orchestra, for the benefit of wartime charities in Belgium, which had just been overrun by German troops. It was immensely popular, and in April 1915 the Polish conductor Emil Mlynarski asked Elgar to compose something for a concert he was organizing with Thomas Beecham to help Polish refugees in the way that *Carillon* had helped the Belgians. Within the space of two months, Elgar produced *Polonia* which was first performed in London's Queen's Hall at a Polish Victims' Relief Fund Concert in July 1915, with Elgar conducting. Elgar dedicated the work to his friend Ignace Paderewski, the great pianist and later Prime Minister of Poland.

The English habit of writing Fantasias or Rhapsodies on patriotic airs was never much in Elgar's line, and *Polonia* is his only example of this genre. Elgar called it a symphonic prelude but it is in fact more of a rhapsody in the style of Enescu and Liszt, mixing much original Elgar with Polish airs and quotations from Chopin and Paderewski. Despite its rather specific purposes, *Polonia* is a significant work of considerable merit. It never achieved the success of *Carillon* but was sufficiently well received for The Gramophone Company (later His Master's Voice) to commission Elgar to record the work for them in 1919.

The work is lavishly scored for a very large orchestra (strings, triple woodwind, full brass, 6 percussionists 2 harps and organ). A martial introduction leads to a lyrically expansive treatment of a Polish national song on cor anglais, cellos and harps. The tempo increases and bassoons announce a jaunty theme in folk dance rhythm, and this is worked up in an exuberant passage of virtuoso orchestration. Shifting, swirling orchestral colours lead to a section based on Paderewski's *Fantasie Polonaise*, and there is a quotation from Chopin's G minor Nocturne on which the solo violin muses. The tempo increases again as more magical orchestration clothes a rich recapitulation of this material, the Polish National Hymn is heard, distantly, but it then grows with grandeur and tumultuous orchestration to end the work with jubilation.

Barry Collett

A more detailed account of the background to Polonia, written by Elgar Society member Joseph Herter, can be found at:

http://www.usc.edu/dept/polish_music/news/aug99.html#back3.