

Pomp and Circumstance. Why Americans graduate to Elgar.

In America today the tune of the trio from Pomp and Circumstance No. 1 is just as familiar as it is in Britain, but the words are virtually unknown. The tune has become virtually synonymous with school graduation exercises in North America. How did this come about?

Transatlantic involvement with the March began on 28 November 1902, when Elgar's great American champion, Theodore Thomas, conducted the Chicago Orchestra in its U.S. première at the Auditorium Hall in Chicago. Several further performances followed, but it was not until 1905 that the work was first heard at an American graduation.

With the establishment of the *Enigma Variations* and *The Dream of Gerontius* as works of genius, Elgar began to receive many requests from the United States to visit and perhaps conduct some of his works. Elgar resisted these requests at first, but in August 1904, his great American friend, Samuel Sanford, Professor of Applied Music at Yale University, told the 47-year-old composer that he would receive a wonderful reception if he visited the United States. This led Elgar to change his mind and early in 1905 he received an official invitation from Sanford to stay with him at his home in New Haven which he accepted on 17 February. Then, on 15 May, at Sanford's prompting, Yale University invited Elgar to receive an Honorary Doctor of Music on 28 June.

The Elgars finally left England on the liner *Deutschland* on 9 June, arriving in New York six days later. Here they were met by Sanford who took them to his beautiful house on Hillhouse Avenue, very close to the main university campus. Sanford was a wonderful host, and despite the hot and often oppressive weather of a New England summer, the couple were able to visit several of the more interesting local towns and villages. On the day preceding the degree ceremony drew near, Elgar developed a dreadful headache but he had recovered sufficiently by the following morning to depart with Sanford for the Woolsey Hall where the ceremony was to take place.

The commencement ceremony itself began with the academic procession that entered the hall to the accompaniment of Mendelsohn's *Ruy Blas* overture. There followed a prayer given by the Rev. Dr. Twichell of Hartford and the singing of Psalm LXV. The President of Yale, Arthur Twining Hadley, then addressed the assembly. Following his words, the successful examination candidates, 669 in number, were presented with their degrees.

After this the Meditation and opening chorus, 'Seek Him that maketh the seven stars' from Elgar's *Light of Life* was performed by the New Haven Symphony Orchestra reinforced by several New York Musicians, while members of the College choir, the Glee Club and a few musical members from the faculty, some fifty in number, made up the chorus. The part of the Blind Man was sung 'most effectively' by the tenor, Dr. Charles H. Zimmermann. Professor Harry B. Jepson played the newly installed Newberry organ and Professor Horatio Parker conducted the work. Parker, who Elgar had met previously in England, had taught the young Charles Ives when he was an undergraduate at Yale.

Although there were thirteen other candidates for honorary degrees, Elgar was the only one to be awarded a Doctorate of Music. Now dressed in Yale's magnificent blue robes, he was introduced by Professor Williston Walker who said: 'We would ask that Yale do her part to express the admiration of America for his talents and service by conferring upon Sir Edward Elgar the degree of Doctor of Music, already his by gift of the English Universities, and thus do herself the honour of enrolling him among her graduates.'

Following his words, Professors Sanford and Schwab hooded the candidates. The *Yale Alumni Weekly* subsequently reported that: 'the occasion was notable not only on account of the many distinguished Americans who received honorary degrees from Yale during the morning, but because of the presence of Sir Edward Elgar, England's foremost musician ... His name was received with unusual demonstration.'

The ceremony concluded with Martin Luther's *Eine Feste Burg* and the Benediction before the guests left the hall to Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance March No. 1* played by the orchestra. The impression that the work had on the assembled audience led to its gradual adoption by other prestigious American universities: Princeton in 1907, Chicago in 1908, Columbia in 1913, Vassar in 1916 and Rutgers in 1918. By the mid-1920s it was being performed by many others, and today it is heard at graduation ceremonies throughout the country, both at colleges and at high schools.

The reason for the popularity of the march has to do with Elgar's ability to invent melodies that convey a complex of emotions. The tune manages to sound triumphant, but with an underlying quality of nostalgia, making it perfectly suited to a commencement that marks the beginning of one stage of life, but the end of another.