

Severn Suite, op 87

A suite in five movements for brass band or full orchestra:

- 1 - Introduction (Pomposo) : Worcester Castle;
- 2 - Toccata (Allegro molto) : Tournament;
- 3 - Fugue (Andante) : The Cathedral;
- 4 - Minuet (Moderato) : Commandery;
- 5 - Coda (Lento).

Approximate Length : 18 minutes

First Performance :

- Brass Band Version :

Date : 27 September 1930

Venue : National Brass Band Championships,
Crystal Palace, London

- Orchestral Version :

Date : 14 April 1932

Venue : EMI Abbey Road recording studios, London

Conductor : the composer

Orchestra : London Symphony Orchestra

Commissioned by : National Brass Band Championship
Organising Committee

Dedicated to : George Bernard Shaw,
author, playwright and friend

Severn Suite for Brass Band op. 87 (1930) - (arr. for orchestra 1932)

The Severn Suite is Elgar's last major completed work and was originally written as a test piece for the twenty-fifth anniversary in 1930 of the national brass band championships at Crystal Palace in South London. He was invited to write it by Herbert Whiteley, whose generous offer was appreciated in somewhat straitened times. As Elgar had no particular experience of writing for brass bands, Whiteley suggested that Elgar produce a short score for the expert Henry Geehl to arrange. It was Geehl who, with Elgar's blessing, subsequently arranged the piano works Adieu and Serenade for string orchestra in order that they might be broadcast by the strings of the BBC Orchestra in March 1933. But the brass collaboration proved difficult, causing resentment in both men. Elgar's version consisted of a piano part, a figured bass and indications of orchestration and counterpoint. When Geehl began arranging, he tried to work with Elgar but then rejected most of the latter's unidiomatic ideas in favour of his own. Elgar dedicated the Suite to his friend George Bernard Shaw, who declared himself to be "hugely flattered and touched". More recently, a fully scored arrangement for brass band, apparently in Elgar's own hand, surfaced at auction in 1995 (when the score failed to reach its reserve price) and again in 1996.

Introduction (2 mins 45 secs)

The martial, assertive introduction (Theme A) is in Elgar's best ceremonial vein and is contrasted with a gentler, evenly beating theme (B), which leads peacefully into the *Toccata*.

Toccata (5 mins 00 secs)

The basis of this (Theme C) is derived from the very beginning of the *Minuet* (Theme F), the oldest of the movements and is a cousin of Theme A. It appears against a scurrying background, and a climbing linking passage connects it with an "outdoors", quasi-nobilmente theme (D). C and D are alternated until C, via the climbing link, merges into the *Fugue*.

Fugue (3 mins 15 secs)

The *fugue* follows without a break, and is a deeply felt, serious movement which rises to a richly scored climax. This is the second oldest of the movements, as it was actually written in 1923 for the organist, Ivor Atkins, following Elgar's study of Bach. It differs from the Baroque fugue in that it is almost entirely melodic and unwinds via beautiful, consoling sequential writing. Its subject (E) is a minor-key variant of C, itself derived from the *Minuet* – it is truly remarkable that there is such thematic connection over Elgar's long and disparate composing life.

Minuet (6 mins 00 secs)

This movement has a long history. Its trio section started life in 1878 as the opening to the fifth of the Six Promenades for wind quintet, and then formed the trio section of the Harmony Music No. 5 for wind quintet, with a new minuet added. The whole was subsequently adapted to form the minuet & trio of the Severn Suite, although in the brass version it is more ingeniously wrought. The opening (Theme F) is conventional and comes across as more martial and vigorous than its wind ancestor, and the trio starts with a spiky upward arpeggio before meandering downwards again (Theme G). By the time it appears at this stage in the Suite, the minuet's theme appears to have grown organically out of the previous movements, even though F was the progenitor of both C and E. Each time it is repeated, Theme F is decorated with differing colours and accompanying rhythms. The Trio re-appears and a short but poignant solo links this with the Coda.

Coda (2 mins 30 secs) The *Coda* is a reflective reprise of the first movement material, but becomes more assertive, thus ending this charming Suite with exuberance and panache.

Severn Suite op 87 arr. for orchestra (1932)

Perhaps because of his dissatisfaction with Henry Geehl's arrangement, Elgar rescored the Severn Suite, originally for Brass Band, for full symphony orchestra and it was first performed in this version on 7 September in the 1932 Three Choirs Festival. For this version, he added subtitles to the movements as above. Despite its publication by Keith Prowse, it has hardly been heard in this version since its première, in part because the score disappeared for many years. Elgar also conducted the work at an HMV recording session

with the London Symphony Orchestra on 14 April 1932. He sent the test pressings to the Suite's dedicatee, George Bernard Shaw, who wrote in response, "What a transfiguration! Nobody will ever believe that it began as a cornet corobbery. It's extraordinarily beautiful."