

Symphony No 2. A Commentary by Ian Lace

One hundred years ago, on 22nd June 1897, Queen Victoria stepped into the telegraph room in Buckingham Palace and sent a message to her subjects all across the globe. She then joined her Diamond Jubilee procession through the streets of London. In this huge procession were representatives from every corner of her Empire. The British Empire was the largest in the history of the world, comprising nearly a quarter of its land mass and a quarter of its population.

Yet many people both at home and in the Empire felt that the best years were with them, or had even begun to pass. This mood was caught by two artists: one a writer, the other a musician. The writer, Rudyard Kipling, expressed it in his Jubilee poem *Recessional*; the musician, Edward Elgar, perhaps voiced it in the upward leaps and down turning figures of his Imperial March. Only two years later, British confidence was thoroughly shaken by severe defeats in the Second Boer War. It was the beginnings of Imperial Retreat.

Elgar's Imperial March catapulted him to fame. It caught the Londoner's imagination in 1897 and made Elgar's name well known. He was then 40 years old. Behind him were his early Choral works - The Black Knight, King Olaf - and one or two small Orchestral works: Froissart, and the Serenade for Strings. Caractacus and, in particular the Enigma Variations confirmed his stature.

England at the time of the Jubilee was thought to be '*Das Land Ohne Musik*'. Even though she boasted composers of the calibre of Sullivan, Stanford and Parry, none was considered equal to their continental equivalents. Elgar was to change all that. His music sparked what has been called the English Renaissance. The torch he lit was handed down to succeeding generations: Vaughan Williams, Bax, Walton, Bliss, Britten, Tippett.

Elgar was born in the middle of Victoria's reign. In fact he was more Victorian than Edwardian and he was brought up to observe Victorian traditions and values. He was a tradesman's son and a Catholic, and suffered social stigma on both accounts. Indeed, when he married Caroline Alice Roberts, the daughter of the late Major-General Sir Henry Gee Roberts, she was 'cut' by her Aunts for having married beneath her. But Alice was the making of him. When she entered his life the music began to flow; when she died in 1920 it all but dried up.

Elgar was self-taught. He read scores and books on musical theory in the fields around Worcester and taught himself to play the instruments in his father's shop. He travelled by train to attend concerts at Crystal Palace, London. In the early days of their marriage, in 1889-90, he and Alice lived in London hoping for the elusive breakthrough in his fortunes. Edward used every opportunity to go to concerts at the Crystal Palace. This was the equivalent of his time at University. He soaked up all this music and used it for his own ends. He was young enough to be open to all the influences, but mature enough not to let them overwhelm him, or suppress his individuality. Thus the unique Elgar style evolved without being shaped by academic institutions.

It was not until 1908 that Elgar wrote his first Symphony; he was then 51. He had made a number of attempts in previous years, but was often deterred by purely financial considerations, because there was more demand for choral works to satisfy the formidable provincial choral societies than there was for Symphonies.

As early as 1888/89 he was considering a sort of Eroica Symphony about General Gordon, the colourful and eccentric hero who had been martyred in the Sudan. Elgar had received a copy of Cardinal Newman's *The Dream of Gerontius* as a wedding present in 1889. In it were reproduced underlinings and markings that General Gordon had made in his own copy at Khartoum five years earlier. The Gordon Symphony was never to be, but Elgar returned to *Gerontius* ten years later and produced a masterpiece.

Material that was eventually used in the Second Symphony dates back even further, to Elgar's very early years. A little figure of descending steps, first conceived in his childhood, was fashioned into the music for the Second Symphony's closing pages. A theme from *The Black Knight* (1893), epitomising the King's grief, became the motto theme of 'dying delight' in the Second Symphony.

Elgar talked about writing a Symphony in 1901 but nothing developed and, despite financial encouragement, he would not be hurried. Early sketches for the Second Symphony date from 1903 and 1904 but first, of course, came the A flat Symphony, composed during the summer of 1908. "There is no programme beyond a wide experience of human life with a great charity and a massive hope in the future", he said of it. It had its first performance by the Hallé orchestra under Hans Richter (to whom it was dedicated) in the Autumn of that year. Richter himself had said: "Let us rehearse the greatest symphony in modern times and not only in this country".

The first London performance followed four days later. Queens Hall was packed. The applause at the end was tumultuous; it was a sensational success. The symphony received over a hundred performances in its first year, in America and many European countries. One would hear it being played whilst shopping in a London department store. The grand noble opening theme, the beautiful pastoral *Andante* movement and the stirring *Finale* were greeted with rapturous acclaim.

Most of the work on the Second Symphony was undertaken in 1910 and 1911. It was dedicated to the memory of King Edward VII, who died in May 1910. His passing marked the end of an era; yet the romanticised view of the Edwardian Age as being 'one Golden Garden Party' was only partly true. It was a time of rapid change and upheaval. Britain's greatness was being challenged on all sides; she no longer 'ruled the waves'. Elgar had seen that at first hand in 1905 when he was in the Mediterranean with the British fleet. European and American competitors - especially an aggressive and ambitious Germany - were rapidly catching up in technical innovation and commercial astuteness. There was clamour for Home Rule in Ireland; the Suffragettes were clamouring for the vote. In December 1910, the Liberals were laying the foundations of welfare-state socialism amid parliamentary opposition of a bitterness never seen through the whole of Edward VII's lifetime. There was the constitutional crisis over the power of the Lords, and the Land Tax began to squeeze the

rich. There was widespread industrial unrest in 1911. World War I was only three years away. All this tension was undoubtedly reflected in the new symphony.

Elgar admitted to his friends that the symphony symbolised everything that had happened to him during the period of its composition (April 1909 to February 1911), and that it was about people and places he knew. At the end of the score - at the bottom of the last page - is written 'Venice and Tintagel'. In Venice, Elgar had been inspired by St Mark's basilica and the square outside, whereas Tintagel was associated with his close friend Alice Stuart Wortley, known to Edward affectionately as Windflower and an inspiration behind the Violin Concerto. She and her husband liked to go on holiday to Tintagel and Elgar visited them in April 1910. Her daughter, Clare, recalled a walk they had enjoyed in the evening sunshine when Elgar was impressed with the lyrical beauty of the countryside and the coastline around Tintagel.

Elgar described his second symphony as 'the passionate pilgrimage of a soul'. The score is headed by a quotation from a poem by Shelley: "Rarely, rarely comest thou spirit of delight!" Elgar wrote of it: "To get near the mood of the Symphony the whole of Shelley's poem may be read, but the music does not illustrate the whole of the poem, neither does the poem entirely elucidate the music". What it does suggest is the music's predominantly restless and tragic character. It is a study in conflict and paradox. Exuberance followed by depression; gregariousness followed by withdrawal; optimism giving way to resigned fatalism and a deep nostalgia for vanished times. Elgar quoted Shelley again to describe his state of mind when he was writing the symphony "I do but hide under these notes, like embers every spark of that which consumed me".

'Song'

*Rarely, rarely, comest thou, Spirit of Delight!
Wherefore hast thou left me now
Many a day and night?
Many a weary night and day
'Tis since thou art fled away.*

(Percy Bysshe Shelley)
(from: Last Love Poems, 1821)

But to the music. The First Movement bursts on us exuberantly in a seemingly endless profusion of themes. The Spirit of Delight motif, a descending figure, is stated right at the beginning in the second bar; it will reappear in many forms throughout the work. After all this energy is spent comes a second group of more lyrical themes, including a dulcet violin melody with horns quietly commenting behind, and a long cello theme tinged with remembrance and nostalgia.

But this calm is soon to be shattered. The music, full of agitation and anger, builds up to a huge climax where the percussion hammers out all peace and serenity. Eventually when all this energy is spent, the music winds down through slow marching chords to a remarkable section at the heart of the movement. Elgar described it to Windflower as "a sort of malign

influence wandering through the summer night in the garden". He also wrote: "The entire passage might be a love scene in a garden at night when the ghost of some memories comes through it - it makes me shiver..." Initially the section is serene and romantic, but then it begins to be shot through with whiffs of ghostly menace which increase, recede and then reappear forcefully to shatter the lovers' dream.

There follows a march with trombones and tuba *pp*. This rises to *forte* before it yields to the recapitulation. The movement, like the whole work, is splendidly, richly orchestrated and skilfully constructed. Elgar uses what Diana McVeagh has described as a 'mosaic' method of construction - a fragment of melody is expanded or transformed into a new theme, which then generates another. Elgar uses great ingenuity in interlocking his material and in sourcing it in a single germinal idea. He once said that all the themes for a particular work "come from the same oven".

On to the second movement. Let us recall the association with Venice and St Mark's Cathedral. The opening of this movement - *Larghetto* - may be an evocation of the interior of the basilica. Then follows a funeral march with its solemn, slow drum taps and heavy brass chords. The textures thin and the mood lightens to an almost pastoral peace almost like a wistful colloquy between two people before the mourning takes on the shape of an elegy that grows ever more intense - a slow chromatic rise through swirling strings to a blazing brass climax. This is music that might have been used in the second Cockaigne Overture that Elgar once contemplated - subtitled 'City of Dreadful Night'.

After the climax, the music subsides and the main themes are repeated again. The movement is in binary form - exposition followed by immediate recapitulation. But this time a lonely oboe threads its way beside the funeral cortege against soft brass, harps and timpani again sounding the off-beats, bassoons and strings syncopating semiquavers in slow motion. This oboe focuses on a private symbolism behind the music.

Elgar is mourning not only Edward VII here but also a friend who had died some years earlier. Alfred E. Rodewald was perhaps the nearest to Elgar's heart of all his friends. Rodewald was a textile magnate born in Liverpool. He lived for music. He made the Liverpool Orchestral Society good enough to play the works of Elgar, Richard Strauss, Wagner and Tchaikovsky. He and Elgar probably first met in 1899. Elgar often stayed at his home, and Rodewald and his players were rewarded with the premiere of the first two Pomp and Circumstance Marches; the first ('Land of Hope and Glory') is dedicated to Rodewald. It was Rodewald who organised the collection of money to buy Elgar his Cambridge robes and who offered to commission a Symphony from him. He died suddenly in November 1903 - a few months later Elgar made sketches for this *Larghetto*.

Then the 'City of Dreadful Night' chromatics rise again through an even richer texture. As the summit of all this emotion is reached and as the descent begins, just before the delight motif sounds quietly again, it is like, in Elgar's words, "a woman dropping a flower on the man's grave". The music draws quietly to a close as we sense the funeral cortege fading into the distance.

The opening of the third movement, Rondo, takes us back to Venice. The inspiration is the Piazza San Marco - the square outside St Mark's. We have stepped out of the shadows of the basilica into the dazzling sunshine of the piazza, where clouds of birds rise, wheel and settle again, where Elgar would have heard the tunes of street musicians.

After all this exuberance comes a pastoral echo of his earlier symphonic poem, In the South (also called *Allassio*). From this serenity the music grows ever more agitated, until we come to one of the most extraordinary outbursts in all music: a relentless beating that Elgar described to an orchestra thus:

"I want you to imagine that my music represents a man in a high fever. Some of you may know that dreadful beating that goes on in the brain; it seems to drive out every coherent thought. This hammering must gradually overwhelm everything. Percussion, you must give me all you're worth! I want you to gradually drown the rest of the orchestra."

The quotation from Maude which is given below is apposite too, where the hero's frustrated love turns into a fantasy of his own burial.

'Maude'

*Dead, long dead,
Long dead!
And my heart is a handful of dust,
And the wheels go over my head,
And my bones are shaken with pain,
For into a shallow grave they are thrust,
Only a yard beneath the street,
And the hoofs of the horses beat, beat,
The hoofs of the horses beat,
Beat into my scalp and my brain...*

(Alfred, Lord Tennyson)

There is yet another significance. Elgar had been in Rome in early 1908 working on the First Symphony when there had been a general strike and a public protest. The troops had been called out and they had fired on the crowds. One man was killed. Shortly afterwards Elgar came on the scene to see the piazza still occupied by the troops and bullet holes in the walls. This had made a deep impression on him - so this music could be an agonised reaction to sudden death and possibly a recollection of his agony at learning of the sudden death of Rodewald.

Afterwards the music returns to conflict between the first and second subjects culminating in an ear-splitting stroke which brings the movement to a close.

The First movement may be viewed as a conflict between past and future, while the Second movement speaks of sorrow and remembrance, and the Third of manic despair. The Finale turns to look back over golden years that would never return. It is a movement full of

confidence, colour and aspiration. All the conflicts and problems of the first three movements have been smoothed out.

The movement opens with a broad theme moving at walking or breathing pace - life continues after all the drama of delight, sorrow and self doubts. This theme then merges into the next subject which Elgar named 'Hans Himself'. Hans is of course Hans Richter the conductor, and so another friendship is commemorated here. Richter was an indefatigable supporter of Elgar. He had conducted many first performances including the Enigma Variations, The Dream of Gerontius and the First Symphony. Illness had, by this time, caused him to retire from the podium. Here Richter is portrayed in typical Elgar noble mood.

During the development, a contest develops between the 'Hans' motif and another plunging figure first noticed in the First Movement. Suddenly a piercing trumpet call is heard which is held through the bar. Interestingly, in the gramophone studio the London Symphony Orchestra's first trumpeter, Ernest Hall, held this supreme note longer. When Elgar asked him why he had done it, he said: "I was so pleased to get the note, I didn't like to leave it". Elgar replied, "I intended to write it so but thought it would be too high to hold". So it became a tradition which every trumpeter would be proud to inherit.

But the Second Symphony was not a success. The hall was less than full (the admission prices were very high). People were caught up in the excitement of the Coronation of George V (less than a month away) and were expecting something glorious to celebrate the new King, instead of Elgar's questioning and introspection. It was not until after the First World War, when it was championed by Adrian Boult, that the Second Symphony came into its own. In March 1920, Boult gave a magnificent performance, revealing its full stature, to a much more appreciative audience. Alice Elgar was just in time to hear it and share in Edward's delayed triumph. She died just a few weeks later.

Perhaps there is another reason why the reaction of the 1911 audience was subdued. Instead of a confident ending, the closing pages are quiet and reflective. This glowing epilogue comes after the final big climax (which, by the way, sounds magnificent if it also includes an organ). The 'Spirit of Delight' theme from the opening of the symphony mingles with the simple descending steps figure that had first occurred to Elgar in his childhood. High strings and soft woodwind with the rich colours of central brass, slowly bring the work to a radiant close. It is a golden sunset and a glorious farewell.

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