

Symphony No 3, op 88

A symphony for large orchestra in four movements :

1 - Allegro Molto Maestoso; 2 - Allegretto;

3 - Adagio; 4 - Allegro- Finale .

Anthony Payne's Elaboration on the Sketches :

Approximate Length: 55 minutes

First Performance:

Date: 15 February 1998

Venue: Royal Festival Hall, Waterloo, London

Conductor: Andrew Davis

Orchestra: BBC Symphony Orchestra

In later life, after Alice's death, Elgar became a close friend of the playwright and critic George Bernard Shaw. By this time, Elgar had largely given up composing. He felt that his inspiration had gone and his music to be out of sympathy with the mood of the times. Certainly, there were far fewer performances of his major works than twenty years previously, and when he did again turn his hand to composing, he usually turned for inspiration to his early sketchbooks (the 'Shed' books) or the works of other composers (his orchestration of works by Bach, Handel and Chopin). Around 1930, however, a sense of motivation returned. In quick succession, he completed The Severn Suite, a fifth Pomp and Circumstance March and the Nursery Suite. Then, encouraged by Shaw, he began work on a third symphony.

It was early in 1932 that Shaw first suggested to Elgar that the BBC should be asked to commission a symphony. Shaw then promptly began negotiating on Elgar's behalf for them to do so. The year culminated with an Elgar festival of three broadcast concerts to commemorate the composer's seventy-fifth birthday and, at a dinner held at the end of the festival, the BBC announced the commission for a fee of £1,000 plus £250 per quarter. This was an eagerly anticipated development, and injudicious and contradictory remarks by Elgar encouraged frequent wild speculation about the progress of the work : one minute it was reportedly almost finished, the next Elgar was denying any likelihood that he would ever finish the work.

Work proceeded fitfully, partly because Elgar decided to work in parallel on an opera, The Spanish Lady, but also because his health was failing and he lacked the stamina and powers of concentration of his productive years. He nevertheless assembled an extensive collection of sketches for the work and would summon his friend Billy Reed, long time leader of the London Symphony Orchestra, to try out the sketches with him. With Elgar at the piano and Reed on violin, they would play through the sketches with Elgar shouting out guidance to Reed and extemporising bridging passages. In this manner, they would on occasion play what Reed took to be the complete symphony, though it remains unclear whether Elgar was committed to those passages he had yet to commit to paper.

All was in vain, however, for, in October 1933, Elgar was diagnosed as having terminal cancer. The combination of increasing pain and the effects of the medication he was receiving made it difficult for him to continue work on the symphony. He composed only a few scraps more. He continued to talk about the work but in an increasingly confused manner. On one occasion, close to tears, he thrust a sheet of music into Reed's hands with the words "This is the end, Billy"; the end of what - the adagio, the symphony, his life? - was not clear. On another occasion, in remarks to his doctor subsequently recorded by Jerrold Northrop Moore, he appeared resigned to the likelihood that someone would complete the unfinished work after his death. But the most vividly recalled remark he made to Reed during a particularly incoherent spell in December 1933, some two months before his death : "Don't let them tinker with it, Billy - burn it!"

Reed didn't burn the sketches. After all, if that had been Elgar's true wish, he could have burnt the sketches himself. But, encouraged by Shaw, Reed committed his reminiscences of his times with Elgar to a book *Elgar as I Knew Him*, published in 1936. Reed included in the book not only several pages of sketches for the third symphony but also the instructions Elgar had given him for playing them and his remarks on where each sketch fitted into the overall scheme for the symphony. By doing so, Reed presented his readers with both a challenge and a dilemma, sparking a controversy which continues today. Was it possible, using Elgar's sketches and Reed's recollections, to reconstruct the entire symphony essentially as Elgar had envisaged it? And was it morally right to do so in apparent contradiction of Elgar's wishes as encapsulated in his request to Reed not to let anyone "tinker with it"?

Both aspects intrigued and exercised a number of distinguished composers and musicologists, including Anthony Payne. Payne first came across the sketches in the early 1970s and worked on the jigsaw puzzle fitfully over the next twenty years or so, attempting to arrange the collection of unordered sketches into something approaching a coherent whole. In the mid-1990s, the BBC commissioned Payne to present a programme on his work on the symphony. The Elgar trustees agreed to the inclusion of a performance of the sketches in this programme providing that no attempt was made to extend or elaborate them. A recording of the programme was issued on CD with the October 1995 edition (volume IV number 2) of BBC's Music magazine.

And there matters might have rested were it not for the limitations of copyright. Copyright protection of the sketches ends in 2004. Recognising that they would then be powerless to stop anyone "tinkering" with the sketches, in early 1997 the trustees agreed to commission Payne to complete an authorised reconstruction of the symphony. Predictably, announcement of the commission rekindled the controversy, bringing to the fore firmly entrenched views from both sides.

Clearly this cannot be the definitive work that Elgar would have written, but Payne claims that, by careful scrutiny of the sketches and interpretation of Reed's remarks, he has managed to complete the symphony with the structure Elgar had intended and with a minimum of invention. The symphony is a less flamboyant work than either of the first two symphonies, but distinctively Elgar nevertheless. And, as in all his later works, Elgar draws on earlier compositions, notably in this case on *The Banqueting Hall at Westminster*

from Arthur which provides the main theme for the second movement. Only the sketches for the fourth movement appear to represent wholly original composition, although Payne has himself included brief excerpts from *Arthur and Sir Bedivere*.

The world première public performance of the work, appropriately performed by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, took place on 15 February 1998 at the Royal Festival Hall, Waterloo, London, to near- universal critical and public acclaim. A recording of the work by the same orchestra plus an extended talk by Payne on his work in completing the symphony, was issued on two separate CDs on the same day. A further performance is planned for the 1998 season of Promenade Concerts, with a North American première in Philadelphia in November 1998 and many other performances during the year now planned, including performances in Norway, Belgium and Slovenia.