

The Banner of St George, op 33

A ballad in two scenes for chorus and orchestra, to a libretto by Shapcott Wensley.

Approximate Length : 30 minutes

First Performance :

Date: 18 May 1897

Venue: St Cuthbert's Hall Choral Society, London

Conductor: Cyril Miller

1896 was an important year in Elgar's development, with premières within a few weeks of each other of his two most substantial works to date: *The Light of Life* on 10 September and *King Olaf* on 30 October. Both works considerably enhanced his provincial reputation, but he still lacked the same level of recognition in London and still spent a considerable amount of time giving music lessons to make ends meet.

1897 was to be Queen Victoria's Jubilee year. Hoping to profit from celebrations to be held throughout the country (and, indeed, the Empire), the publishers Novello's commissioned a range of works of varying styles and standards of complexity. Hoping to capitalise on the growing popularity of their young new composer (for Novello's had published both works premiered in 1896), they turned to Elgar to set to music a libretto they had already commissioned from one Shapcott Wensley. Elgar readily accepted, returning sketches for Novello's approval (and also writing the *Imperial March* for the Jubilee celebrations). This was somewhat out of character for Elgar - perhaps financial benefits weighed uppermost in his mind - for, while he regularly accepted commissions for choral works, the subject and libretto were usually of his own choosing. Not until *The Crown of India* in 1912 would he again take on a commission to set to music a libretto specified by the commissioning body.

Shapcott Wensley's libretto is solid and uninspired and Elgar's music, while lyrical and avoiding the excesses of bombast that the occasion perhaps expected, fails to overcome the libretto's limitations. After *The Light of Life* and *King Olaf*, the work is a disappointment, rising above the mundane only in a rousing epilogue. It is therefore somewhat ironic that, in the prevailing carnival atmosphere, critical appraisal was set aside: both this work and the *Imperial March* were warmly received in London, considerably enhancing Elgar's status there and setting the scene for the triumph of the *Enigma Variations* two years later.