

## The Black Knight, op 25

**A cantata, or choral symphony, for chorus and orchestra, in four movements, based on a text by Ludwig Uhland translated by Henry W Longfellow.**

<b>Approximate Length :</b>	35 minutes
<b>First Performance :</b>	
<b>Date:</b>	18 April 1893
<b>Venue:</b>	Worcester Festival
<b>Conductor:</b>	the composer
<b>Dedicated to:</b>	Hugh Blair, conductor of the Worcester Festival Choral Society

On 8 May 1889, Edward and Alice Elgar married at the Brompton Oratory in South Kensington, London. After returning from honeymoon at Ventnor in the Isle of Wight, Elgar began work on sketches for a major choral work he planned to write. Elgar had inherited from his mother Ann a love of the poet Henry Wordworth Longfellow. Longfellow's book Hyperion contains an impromptu translation of Der Schwarze Ritter (The Black Knight), a poem by the German poet Ludwig Uhland, and it was this that Elgar chose as the libretto for his new work. Not that Uhland's poem was entirely a product of his own imagination : it is based on an earlier German work which tells of events surrounding the second marriage in 1285 of the Scottish king Alexander III, giving the work a medieval British setting.

Elgar planned the work on a considerably larger scale than anything he had previously composed. The poem is in four parts and it was perhaps this that led Elgar to conceive the work as a choral symphony. Certainly there is a far greater emphasis on the orchestral writing than was expected of purely choral works of the time and Elgar was conscious that he was breaking the mould. But national mould-breaking is no easy task for a composer with only a local base from which to attack and in 1889 Elgar was almost unknown outside his native Worcestershire. The work developed little beyond his initial sketches until, in 1892, Hugh Blair, acting organist at Worcester Cathedral and conductor of the Worcester Festival Choral Society, offered to perform the work at Worcester. Elgar completed the work in time for a first performance in April 1893. This was well received. But when Novello's came to publish the work, they insisted that it should be described not as a choral symphony but as a cantata, for that was what the times demanded.

Against the standard of choral writing of the time, The Black Knight undoubtedly represented an important step forward. But this was just the first step along the path that Elgar was to drive British choral music. Set against his later masterpieces, the work lacks finesse. Not that the music should be dismissed in its entirety. The striking opening, based on a theme that Elgar had jotted down as early as 1879, portends the ceremonial style with which Elgar is most widely (and unjustly) associated today. And there are some delightfully lyrical passages, increasingly as the work draws towards its pastoral ending. But this in itself poses something of a difficulty for a work conveying a somewhat gruesome tale of medieval mystery.

The successful first performance was followed by others in 1894 in Hereford and Walsall, bringing Elgar a measure of fame over a wider area. But this encouraging start was not maintained: the work was soon eclipsed by its successors, notably King Olaf, and failed to establish itself fully. It is rarely performed today and remained unrecorded until the Elgar Society's support and encouragement brought about EMI's pioneering 1984 recording.