

The Sanguine Fan, op 81

Music for a one-act ballet

Approximate Length:	20 minutes
First Performance:	
Date:	20 March 1917
Venue:	Chelsea Palace Theatre, London
Conductor:	the composer

Elgar was deeply affected by the First World War. The bombast and swagger of works such as the first Pomp and Circumstance March disguised a sensitive soul and Elgar felt keenly the suffering of the combatants in the conflict, particularly that of the unwilling participants such as the army horses. Naturally, the prevailing mood and conditions did not encourage the composition of great works, although he did eventually produce one wartime masterpiece in *The Spirit of England*. But Elgar did not attempt to turn his back on the war. He played an active part in a number of supporting roles : he became a special constable in Hampstead and later joined the Hampstead Volunteer Reserve; he undertook extensive conducting engagements, touring with the London Symphony Orchestra to raise money for wartime charities; and he composed a number of pieces that could be considered to help the war effort. These included a number of patriotic works such as *Polonia*, *The Fringes of the Fleet* and orchestral accompaniments for three recitations by the Belgian Emile Cammaerts - *Carillon*, *Le Drapeau Belge* and *Une Voix dans le Desert* - but also two significant lighter works : the incidental music to *The Starlight Express*, and a short ballet score, *The Sanguine Fan*.

It was Elgar's close friend and confidante Lady Alice Stuart-Wortley (*Windflower*) that asked Elgar in January 1917 if he would write *The Sanguine Fan*. The ballet was to be included in a matinée performance to be staged in London in March of that year for the benefit of wartime charities. The name derives from the fact that the theme of the ballet was inspired by a scene depicting Pan and Echo that a local artist had drawn in sanguine on a fan. The title is thus incidental to the theme.

Elgar, attracted both by the cause and the whimsical nature of the theme, responded willingly to *Windflower's* request and within a month had composed the original score. After the first performance, which he himself conducted, Elgar added a further piece - a shepherd's dance - which was premièred at a second charity performance in May 1917. Though not throbbing with innovation, this is a pleasant score with strong echoes of Falstaff and less obvious reflections of a number of other Elgar works. However, as so often with gala performances, appreciation of the performance was perhaps not the prime motivation for those who heard the work in March and May 1917. The music failed to captivate them and, though Elgar took part in a studio recording of the ballet in 1920, the work then disappeared from view until resurrected by Sir Adrian Boult over fifty years later. It remains sadly neglected today.