

The Spanish Lady, op 89

An unfinished opera in two acts with a libretto by Sir Barry Jackson, based on the play *The Devil is an Ass* by Ben Jonson

Approximate Length: 45 minutes (completed)

Elgar seriously considered composing an opera on a number of occasions but always claimed to be held back by the lack of a suitable subject and librettist. Perhaps the most promising collaboration involved no less a personage than Thomas Hardy, the celebrated Wessex novelist, as librettist. But they could not agree on a subject, Hardy wanting to base the plot on one of his own short stories, Elgar seeking something nobler and more heroic. Eventually, the outbreak of the First World War put paid to the collaboration.

In his last years, Elgar, living in virtual retirement in Worcester, established a friendship with Sir Barry Jackson, artistic director of the Malvern Festival. This friendship, plus encouragement from George Bernard Shaw, led Elgar to resurrect a much earlier idea for an opera based on *The Devil is an Ass*, a play by Ben Jonson satirising Jacobean society and mores. Elgar settled on the more operatic title of *The Spanish Lady* and set to work on sketches for the opera. At this time, he was also working on the Third Symphony and would summon Billy Reed, his long-time friend and leader of the London Symphony Orchestra, to Worcester to play through the sketches of both works with him. But in reality, little of originality emerged. The sketches for the opera were little more than reworkings of earlier pieces : from the *Shed* books, unused material from the oratorios and *The Crown of India Suite*, and various abandoned works. Elgar died leaving both the opera and the symphony unfinished.

While this may be regretted in the case of the Third Symphony, the same cannot be said of this work. Elgar issued no embargo on *The Spanish Lady* and, with the consent of Elgar's daughter Carice, Dr Percy Young arranged and orchestrated the sketches Elgar left behind to create a self-standing 45-minute long work. In this, Dr Young was much helped by the fact that Elgar had all but completed the libretto, drawing on material from within and beyond Jonson's play. Dr Young's reconstruction has recently been recorded and was issued on CD with the October 1995 of BBC Music magazine. (The disc also contains Anthony Payne's talk on the Third Symphony.) But the recording tends to strengthen the hand of those who believe that, by 1930, Elgar's creative powers had all but evaporated. As Elgar's only attempt at an opera, the work has an obvious novelty value, but it fails to inspire