

# The Spirit Of England, op 80

A cantata for soprano, full choir and orchestra.

<b>Approximate Length:</b>	27 minutes
<b>First Performance:</b>	
- <b>Parts 2 and 3:</b>	
<b>Date:</b>	3 May 1916
<b>Venue:</b>	Leeds Choral Union, Leeds
<b>Conductor:</b>	the composer
- <b>Complete work:</b>	
<b>Date:</b>	4 October 1917
<b>Venue:</b>	Birmingham
<b>Conductor:</b>	Appleby Matthews
<b>Dedicated to:</b>	"The memory of our Glorious Men, with a special thought for the Worcesters"

Laurence Binyon, the noted war poet, worked in the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum. The head of department, Sir Sidney Colvin, was a good friend of Elgar. When, late in 1914, Binyon published his collection of war poems, *The Winnowing Fan*, Colvin suggested to Elgar that he should compose a war requiem which captured the spirit of Binyon's poems.

Elgar was deeply affected by the suffering caused by the First World War and readily accepted Colvin's idea, selecting three of Binyon's poems - *The Fourth of August*, *To Women* and *For the Fallen* - to set to music. Elgar had not progressed very far, however, when he met Cyril Rootham, director of music at St John's College, Cambridge. To Elgar's consternation, Rootham revealed that he too was setting *For the Fallen*, and, moreover, for Elgar's own publisher, Novello.

Elgar recognised the dilemma facing him. *For the Fallen* was to be the climax of his work and he could not contemplate recasting it to exclude the poem. Yet by continuing, he would invite inevitable comparisons between the two settings, accusations of capitalizing on another composer's ideas, and Rootham's displeasure. Elgar prevaricated until prevailed upon by Colvin and others to proceed with his original plan.

This was not the end of Elgar's problems. Elgar felt a lingering debt of gratitude to the German nation for championing his early works, most notably *The Dream of Gerontius*, and he found it hard to set some of the harsher words in *The Fourth of August*. This led to the second and third parts being completed and premiered in May 1916 when the first part was still some way from completion. Eventually Elgar found the resolve to continue, taking the work through to completion one year later.

Until recently, the first full performance of the work was believed to have taken place at a Royal Choral Society concert at the Royal Albert Hall, London on 24 November 1917.

However, newly uncovered evidence published in the November 1996 issue of the Elgar Society Journal shows that Elgar himself had conducted a complete performance of the work in Leeds some three weeks earlier. However, even this performance was preceded by a complete performance in Birmingham on 4 October 1917, conducted by Appleby Matthews, a notable local musician who, three years later, founded the orchestra that was to become the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra.

Although *The Spirit of England* has never gained the popularity or status of the major choral works that preceded it, in musical terms, though considerably shorter, it is their equal. In addition to his normal practice of drawing on sketches jotted down some years earlier, Elgar also included quotations and parodies of phrases from *The Dream of Gerontius*. Written at a time when the nation might have expected some rousing patriotic tunes in the mould of the *Pomp and Circumstance* marches, Elgar demonstrated remarkable restraint, capturing well the sadness and desolation of war without becoming maudlin. It is an underrated piece, a precursor of the introspective chamber works that soon followed.