

The Starlight Express, op 78

Incidental music to the play by Violet Pearn,
based on the play *A Prisoner in Fairyland* by Algernon Blackwood,
comprising orchestral entr'actes and songs for soprano and baritone soloists:

Baritone Songs :

To the Children
The Blue-Eyes Fairy
Curfew Song (Orion)
Night Winds
My Old Tunes
They're All Soft-Shiny Now

Soprano Songs :

I'm Everywhere
Oh Stars, Shine Brightly
We Shall Meet the Morning Spiders
Dandelions, Daffodils
Laugh a Little Every Day
Oh, Think Beauty

Duet : **Hearts Must Be Soft-Shiny Dressed**

Approximate Length: 60 minutes

First Performance:

Date: 29 December 1915
Venue: Kingsway Theatre, London
Conductor: Julius Harrison

The First World War was at its height when Elgar was approached in November 1915 to write the incidental music for a play to be staged in the West End of London at the end of the year. The play, *The Starlight Express*, had been adapted by Violet Pearn from the novel *A Prisoner in Fairyland* by Algernon Blackwood. As demanded by the times, the story is a nonsensical piece of escapism. A family of children, trapped in the oppressive world of adults, forms a secret society whose members collect stardust and live in star caves. They seek to rescue their parents from an earthly existence and eventually succeed, taking them also to a star cave.

The story contains strong similarities not only with J M Barrie's *Peter Pan* but also with Elgar's own childhood musical fantasies from which he subsequently extracted the two *Wand of Youth* suites. Perhaps not surprisingly, therefore, Elgar initially chose simply to recast this youthful music a second time, setting words to the tunes to form the incidental music to the play. Once seized with the task, however, Elgar continued to write much new music and, in a hectic period of little over a month, produced almost 300 pages of score.

The first performance took place on 29 December 1915 but the play was not a success and ran for only a month. Elgar blamed the stage settings which differed considerably from his preconceptions - at two days' notice he refused to conduct at the first performance. But, in reality, much of the blame must be placed on the storyline which lacks the charm of Barrie's work. Today it appears contrived, trite and dated. It has rarely been performed since, with a BBC radio reconstruction of the play in the early 1960s a notable exception.

The music survives, however, with several recent recordings currently available. Though often regarded as lightweight theatre music, like the Humoreske Broadheath and Wand of Youth suites before it the music embodies an intricacy and polish that places it on an equal footing with the best of Elgar. It demonstrates his mastery of the orchestra and ability to turn superficially harmless little tunes into something quite compelling.