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# The Elgar Society Journal

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*The Editor does not necessarily agree with the views expressed by contributors,  
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*Front Cover: Master and pupil – Herbert Sumsion with Donald Hunt – Worcester 1981  
(premiere of 'In exile') (Collection of Donald Hunt).*

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*Longer quotations* in a separate paragraph, *not* in italic, *not* in quotes; please leave a blank line before and after.

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**In footnotes,** please adhere as far as possible to these forms (more fully expounded in the longer version of these notes):

Books: Author, *Title* (Place of publication: Publisher, year of publication), page[s]. Thus: Robert Anderson, *Elgar* (London: Dent, 1993), 199.

Periodicals: Author, 'Title of article', *Title of periodical*, issue number and date sufficient to identify, page[s]. Thus: Michael Allis, 'Elgar, Lytton, and the Piano Quintet, Op. 84', *Music & Letters*, 85 (May 2004), 198.

End a footnote with a full stop, please, and never put a comma before a parenthesis.

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## Editorial

Like the proverbial number 11 bus of old, you wait ten years for a recording of the *Duett for Trombone and Double Bass* and then two come along at once. More to the point, though, one of them is a lollipop added to Barry Collett's new, and very splendid, recording of the Powick music. If you've ignored these pieces until now, thinking them to be mere trifles turned out to order, think again. They teach us much about Elgar's development as an orchestrator, and are highly enjoyable in their own right. I've penned a short essay in this issue to tell you a little about the people involved in music at Powick at the time and, I hope, to whet your appetite for the forthcoming volume in the *Collected Correspondence* series: *An Elgarian Who's Who*.

Donald Hunt knew Herbert Sumsion over many years, and was his assistant at Gloucester Cathedral, so I'm delighted that he has given us his memories of this very fine all round musician. Sumsion was born in Gloucester, was a chorister there and became a pupil of Herbert Brewer. He was appointed organist at Gloucester on the death of Brewer in 1928, retiring in 1967. His association with Elgar, therefore, goes back to the days before the Great War.

The Elgars' use of the initials A.W.B. (sometimes expanded to A.W.Braut), and their meaning, has long been a mystery. Various theories have been put forward over the years, none of them convincing, and in my 'Elgar-English Dictionary' I could do no more than describe the circumstances of their use. Now Lynn Greene has done some remarkable detective work, and her conclusions as to the true meaning behind this code of Alice's I find utterly compelling.

Three essays on Elgar and not a word of analysis of the music! Still, we can always listen to that: I think that was why Elgar wrote it.

Martin Bird

# Elgar's Dream Children

Lynn Richmond Greene

## Introduction

In June 1889, a little more than a month after his wedding, Edward Elgar placed an inscription on his manuscript of *Queen Mary's Song*, a composition from two years earlier. Writing perpendicularly to the music, he added a message to his new wife:

C. Alice Elgar,  
June 14 : 1889. A.W.B!  
from Edwd. E.<sup>1</sup>



These are the exuberant opening lines of a story that appears to end in sorrow. I stumbled upon this story – or at least upon the evidence that suggests this story – quite by accident, while doing research with the aim of writing a historical novel focused on the Elgars.

The fact that I am trying my hand at a novel sometimes surprises even me, but I am driven by love of my topic. My degrees are in music, and I spent many years as a professional cellist. I first encountered Elgar when I heard the Cello Concerto as a teenager, and the overwhelming impression it made on me – listening to a scratchy LP borrowed from the library in my little hometown far across the Atlantic from Elgar's world – has never left me. I vividly remember standing while I listened because I was too excited to sit; I thought it one of the greatest things I'd ever heard. The 'Enigma' Variations came next and led me to a fascination with the composer's

1 British Library, Add. 58053.

life – a fascination that has intensified with time.

One of my more memorable experiences with the Variations was when I first understood how integral Alice Elgar is to 'E.D.U.', Elgar's self-portrait – and, indeed, to the work as a whole. Other aspects of the piece generally receive more attention than its depiction of Alice, but I'm certainly not alone in finding this glimpse into Elgar's marriage intriguing. The conductor Norman Del Mar, for example, said of the first variation, 'The pictures we have of Alice Elgar suggest a homely, old-fashioned lady but the return to the main theme after the brief middle section reveals an unexpected degree of passion in their relationship which quickly and suddenly boils up 3 bars before 4'.<sup>2</sup> Julian Rushton also described the C.A.E. variation as showing 'a passion not normally imputed to Alice'.<sup>3</sup>

C.A.E.'s climactic musical outburst doesn't emerge within a picture of solitary Alice; Elgar included himself as a near-constant presence in his wife's variation. The triplet figure that runs discreetly through C.A.E.'s accompaniment was identified by Dora Penny as Elgar's habitual whistled signal to his wife, 'his call to her' upon returning home.<sup>4</sup> The call reappears quite prominently in E.D.U. – whose title comes from a nickname only Alice used – and it leads into a substantial quotation from C.A.E. [73]-[74]. In the work's first and last variations, then, Elgar didn't picture either one of them without including the other. Moreover, E.D.U.'s original ending fell just seven measures after [76], quite soon after the C.A.E. quotation.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in its first performance the whole piece almost literally began and ended with Alice.

When I first realised these things, I was filled with joy for the woman who apparently was so loved. In time, however, I learned this tender musical tribute is at odds with much that is written about the Elgars' marriage – as the remarks of Dr Rushton and Maestro Del Mar, quoted earlier, make plain. Filled with curiosity about the 'real' Alice Elgar (and sensing glimpses of a playful, intelligent, and passionate companion even in some of the more critical appraisals of her), I became determined to know her through her own words. I read *Marchcroft Manor* first, followed quickly by the narrative poem *Isabel Trevithoe*, as well as other bits of her writing that have appeared in her biography and in other publications. The author who hovered behind these works struck me as bright, funny, and romantic – and I came to like her.

Eventually, because of my great interest in both of them, I felt inspired to examine the Elgars through the lens of fiction. My intended novel covers the years 1886 to 1889, years that are little documented, and my goal for my fictional and speculative vision is to violate no known or knowable facts. Perhaps more than any other spouse in music history, Alice is often credited with 'making' her husband a great composer, so I am mindful of the relationship's historic importance. I've now made repeated trips to England to do research for the book.

This process has led to an unexpected discovery that falls outside the scope of my novel: evidence suggesting the Elgars experienced repeated miscarriages and, like many couples in that situation, felt the effects of their grief for years.

2 Norman Del Mar, completed and ed. by Jonathan Del Mar, *Conducting Elgar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 4.

3 Julian Rushton, *Elgar 'Enigma' Variations* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 34.

4 Mrs. Richard Powell (née Dora M. Penny), *Edward Elgar: Memories of a Variation* (London: Rempoy Limited, 1979, reprint of London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1949), 116. The notion of a whistled signal at homecoming appears to be borrowed from Elgar's own father, whose whistle was eagerly awaited by his family. See Lucy Pipe, *Reminiscences* (unpublished manuscript, 1912), quoted in Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Edward Elgar: A Creative Life* (Oxford University Press, 1984), 10.

5 British Library, Add. 58004 ([http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add\\_MS\\_58004](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_58004)).

I have wrestled with the question of whether to reveal the evidence I've uncovered, for it is intimate. However, I am inclined to believe others should examine and consider this evidence, too, as it sheds light on one of the more important marriages in music history. I hope this essay may elicit understanding and compassion for a couple who are sometimes viewed in unappealing ways: a man who married money (and a doting motherly presence) in the absence of love, a spinster who sacrificed her social class to win a husband she admired (and then restored her former status by pushing him toward honours he didn't want).

In this essay, I challenge these images. My research reveals, instead, a close and loving couple whose relationship appears to have been marked by disappointments of a type that some people never forget. Many elements of the composer's personality – and his wife's, too – can be more easily understood in the context of their repeated losses. While I feel I should apologise for invading the Elgars' privacy, my speculation leads nowhere scandalous. The revelations to be found in this story involve marital and parental love.

### A.W.B. defined

At first glance, Elgar's 1889 inscription on his setting of the 'lute song' from Tennyson's play *Queen Mary* seems a peculiar or even cruel gift for a man to give his 40-year-old bride. The song comes from the play's final act, during which the middle-aged Queen Mary, eleven years older than her king, laments her childlessness and the impossibility of future pregnancy. Menopause is clearly implied, and the song's lyrics include such lines as 'Hapless doom of woman happy in betrothing! Beauty passes like a breath and love is lost in loathing'.<sup>6</sup>

However, Elgar's gift makes humorous sense when one knows the inscription's meaning. I decided it almost by accident during my first trip to the Elgar Birthplace.

At the time, my novel's narrative arc and even its timeframe were not yet defined, for I still had much investigating and thinking to do. I arrived at the Birthplace in August 2011 with note paper that wasn't completely blank: I had turned it into calendar pages, one month per page, for the years 1884-1889 and 1898-1899. I wanted to take notes on a calendar in order to see Elgar's typical weekly schedule, in a really visual way, and get a feel for the day-to-day routine and the things that would have stood out or seemed especially memorable. I spent part of my first day with the diary facsimiles.

The extant diaries only really begin with 1889, and the lack of earlier years disappointed me – but I was thrilled to see how thoroughly 1889 was recorded by Elgar himself. That diary began its life as his property, and the early months are filled purely in his hand. Alice may well have had a diary, too, during these months, but if so, it appears not to have survived. After the wedding on 8 May, Elgar's diary became a shared document, but most of the entries continued to be his.

Once the Elgars were married, a new and recurring entry began to show up in the diary's pages, in Elgar's hand. Starting in July 1889, Elgar recorded 'A.W.B.' for short spans roughly every three-and-a-half to four weeks. The first time I encountered an A.W.B., I was mystified, but when I realised they kept reappearing, I began recording them on my calendar grids. Very soon, I was smiling – because the result looked exactly like so many calendars of mine. I had no doubt what I

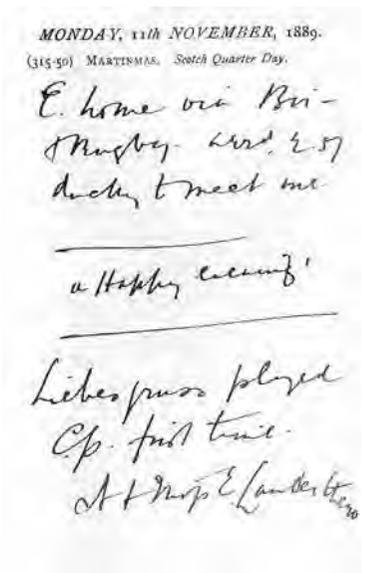


6 Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Queen Mary and Harold* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1908), 184-185.

was seeing: Alice's menstrual cycle. If I had not been taking notes on a calendar – and if I had not been female – I suspect I would not have recognised the pattern. But there it was.<sup>7</sup>

I can only surmise what precise words the letters represent, although I feel quite certain what they mean. 'Alice' seems like part of it because the *A* is always capitalised while sometimes *w* and *b* are not, so my best guess is 'Alice's womanly bleeding'. I suspect most girls are trained by their mothers to keep these health records, and when Alice was 12, her mother was 45. Early in Alice's physical maturation, perhaps two sets of records were being kept in one place; this could explain the need for the *A*. However, it's not necessary to know what the initials stand for. The pattern is evidence enough of A.W.B.'s meaning.

The *Queen Mary* inscription predates the earliest of the diary entries. It was no doubt an intimate joke – and, after five weeks of marriage, was quite possibly Elgar's way of announcing he had deduced the meaning of cryptic initials likely present in Alice's own diary.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to *Queen Mary*, Alice's reproductive years were not over, and the Elgars' journey toward parenthood was joyously beginning.



7 6-8 July, 30 August-2 September, 28-30 September, 25-26 October (Vol. I of the diary facsimiles held at the Elgar Birthplace Museum [hereafter EBM]). There's a missed or unrecorded period in late July/early August 1889. During this time, the Elgars were packing for their brief return to Malvern, so it's very believable record-keeping suffered. An A.W.B. entered by Alice on 21 July and then crossed out suggests this was the case; she appears to have made an effort to reconstruct the record after the fact and later recognised the inaccuracy of her entry.

8 A couple of other A.W.B. notations also appear to contain jokes – or may recall and poke fun at earlier attempts to guess the initials' meaning: in the earliest of his A.W.B. diary entries, Elgar transformed the 'B' into one of his pet names for Alice, 'Braut' (6 July 1889, Vol. I of the diary facsimiles at the EBM), and on one of Alice's poems, she announced A.W.B. discreetly, on the poem's third page, and centred beneath it the word 'wopse' (EBM A-49a).

Indeed, they soon conceived. As Jerrold Northrop Moore has already noted, the diary reported a ‘happy evening’ on the date that *Salut d’amour* premiered at the Crystal Palace, and the name of the daughter born nine months later came from that composition’s dedication (‘à Carice’).<sup>9</sup> The last A.W.B. of 1889 began on 25 October. When I found the ‘happy evening’ occurred just a little more than two weeks later, I saw that Dr Moore’s hypothesis and mine verified one another: the timing was indeed right for fertility. The meaning of A.W.B. seemed further confirmed by its absence during the months of pregnancy and nursing; no more A.W.B.s appear in the diary until 28 April 1891, eight months after Carice’s birth.



As I marvelled at my terribly intimate little discovery, I was particularly intrigued by the fact that A.W.B. was in Elgar’s hand. I didn’t plan to do anything with this knowledge, but I loved knowing it; it confirmed my belief that this man did *not* view this woman as his surrogate mother. I did wonder, idly, why *he* wanted to keep these records. Did he want children? Or want to avoid them? Was he simply fascinated by her femaleness? Or did he record A.W.B. in frustration? I was curious, but I didn’t need to know the answer. I felt assured this was no loveless marriage of convenience – and not only because of the A.W.B. entries. I found much other evidence of joy and intimacy – such as ‘E & A to Midsummer Hill All day[,] Loving & Lovely!’<sup>10</sup> or ‘Both home all day. (two duckies)’<sup>11</sup> – and I felt very glad for them.

On a subsequent trip to the Birthplace, I delved further into the diary facsimiles, and I continued to find much that charmed me. There were shared walks, games, and little messages to one another such as Elgar’s 22 October 1891 entry praising Alice’s new dress as ‘vessy nice and ducky’.<sup>12</sup> A.W.B. returned in 1891, as I’ve mentioned, but it was erratic, and I was not particularly surprised. Alice was in her forties, after all. When I found Elgar’s note ‘still A.W.B. can’t abide’ on the ninth day of an A.W.B. stretch in December 1891,<sup>13</sup> I assumed she was experiencing perimenopausal unpredictability. I chuckled at Elgar’s impatience, but again I was happy for them. A.W.B. did not appear again until midway through 1892, but because of my presumption of approaching menopause, this did not surprise me.

Diary communications from 1892 continued to exhibit tenderness and affection. A charming example appears on 12 June, beginning with an announcement that Novello had accepted the *Spanish Serenade*. Alice recorded their reaction: ‘Delight of Brauts & her darling E’. Elgar later updated the entry, exulting he had scored the *Spanish Serenade* ‘all in one day!’ (and requesting a ‘good boy pease’); in response, Alice added, ‘Sweet kever’.<sup>14</sup> After I openly rejoiced over this entry, museum

supervisor Chris Bennett promptly found a recording of the *Spanish Serenade*, which I’d not heard before, and played it on the spot. I sat in the research room pondering this little entry while listening to glorious voices singing ‘she sleeps, she sleeps, my lady sleeps’ and thinking the Elgars seemed very ducky indeed.

Other loving diary entries from that year include Elgar’s ‘Braut’s own little day (four dovey years ago)’<sup>15</sup> on the fourth anniversary of his marriage proposal and Alice’s ecstatic ‘a most happy day, the most happy day’ on her birthday, 9 October. (He gave her two fresh copies of *Salut d’amour*, the piece associated with the marriage proposal, both with inscriptions dated 9 October 1892.)<sup>16</sup> December closed with Elgar’s message, ‘End of our lovely year. Thank God for my sweet life with my sweet wife Braut.’<sup>17</sup> Alice agreed, adding, ‘It has been more beautiful than ever with my beloved.’

The following year, 1893, was affectionate as well – but in a different way. It began with worries. Alice was ill, mostly confined to bed, for many weeks in January and February. The 1893 diary also revealed something very surprising: beginning in April, she appeared to be no longer perimenopausal at all. A.W.B. was recorded on a regular schedule again, month after month after month. These A.W.B. entries are largely, but not entirely, in Alice’s hand.

Now I was puzzled. I remained certain A.W.B. represented her menstrual periods, based on the timing, but it didn’t make sense that Alice had been perimenopausal and then suddenly wasn’t. I wondered whether Elgar had become lackadaisical about these records in 1891 and 1892 (and wondered what that implied). If he was forgetting to record A.W.B., maybe in 1893 Alice took charge of it – but I couldn’t see why she hadn’t done that earlier, since she did write regularly in the diary about other things.

I had a feeling something about this would shed light on the relationship that is at my novel’s core, so I told my own gynaecologist about my research, about my novel, and briefly about the puzzle I had found. She was willing to offer her thoughts, and we made an appointment to have lunch. In preparation for it, I copied out an A.W.B. timeline and also my notes about the extended 1893 illness, because I wondered what that illness could be.

Indeed, my doctor made some observations about the A.W.B. record that had never crossed my mind. Because I knew the Elgars had one child, I assumed they had one pregnancy. After I listened to her questions and her best guesses, however, much that I knew about Elgar began to seem illuminated by a new and different light.

### *The psychology of pregnancy loss*

The grief of would-be parents following miscarriage has been studied and discussed only in recent decades. One book on the subject, Laura Seftel’s *Grief Unseen: Healing Pregnancy Loss through the Arts*, attempts to explain why even today a lost pregnancy is almost

a secret within a secret. When we stumble into this hidden region, we enter what traditionally have been considered private female affairs: menstruation, fertility, birth, menopause, and the like. Women in many cultures are taught early on not to speak publicly of such things, and so pregnancy loss

9 Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Edward Elgar: A Creative Life* (Oxford University Press, 1984), 142.  
 10 5 September 1889, Vol. I of the diary facsimiles, EBM.  
 11 2 February 1890, Vol. II of the diary facsimiles, EBM.  
 12 Vol. II of the diary facsimiles, EBM.  
 13 17 December 1891, Vol. II of the diary facsimiles, EBM.  
 14 Vol. III of the diary facsimiles, EBM. Martin Bird’s ‘Elgar-English Dictionary’ defines ‘kever’ as ‘clever’ (Martin Bird, ed., *The Elgar Diaries, Vol. I: Provincial Musician 1857-1896* (Rickmansworth, U.K.: Elgar Works, 2013), xv).

15 22 September 1892, Vol. III of the diary facsimiles, EBM.  
 16 EBM 1977.1477.1 (violin and piano) and 1977.1393.5 (solo piano).  
 17 31 December 1892, Vol. III of the diary facsimiles, EBM.

becomes just one more female experience to be demurely hidden and downplayed ... Unfortunately, this societal censorship leaves women and their partners with few outlets to express their grief.<sup>18</sup>

A study conducted in the U.S. and published in 1996<sup>19</sup> surveyed 172 women and 21 men who had endured at least one miscarriage; the time elapsed since miscarriage averaged a little more than five years. All but 6% of those surveyed described their reaction to their miscarriages as grief. Nearly half (49%) had flashbacks, sometimes persisting for many years; for these parents, the mean number of reported flashbacks was 105. While 73% felt their religious beliefs helped them, 65% found their own churches and clergy unhelpful and 39% said their beliefs were changed by the experience. Although 72% said their doctors could not give them a reason for the miscarriage, 67% of the parents felt guilty. They continued to think about the loss an average of eleven times per month. They were most likely to dwell on these memories on the anniversary of the miscarriage, on the anniversary of the projected due date, and at Christmas and other holidays. One of the men had flashbacks that coincided with his wife's menstrual periods.

Seftel's book explores such experiences and offers some explanations. The common sensation of guilt is said to stem, often, from

the belief that 'I didn't want the baby enough.' ... Rarely do we hear about the typical feelings that expectant parents experience alongside their joy: worries, fears, and doubts. This common phase of preliminary anxiety may lead a woman and her partner to harbour guilt feelings that they did not want or deserve the pregnancy enough.<sup>20</sup>

The grieving couple often feel 'ashamed of ... their burning envy that others seem to have children so effortlessly'.<sup>21</sup> They may also 'come to believe the world is an extremely hazardous place. ... One woman shared her heightened fears: "At first I was afraid whenever someone left the house that they would die, both children and husband."' <sup>22</sup> Almost all parents who experience miscarriage feel they have few people with whom to share their grief, and 'without outlets to work through these toxic forms of fear and self-blame, women and their partners can remain frozen in this emotional state for decades'.<sup>23</sup>

Using poetry and other art forms as therapy for grief is a theme of *Grief Unseen*. Art therapy is now a formally recognised therapeutic strategy, but Seftel notes many people turn to art as therapy instinctively, on their own. Kim Kluger-Bell, a psychotherapist specializing in reproductive crises, stresses the importance of marking a pregnancy loss in a way that makes it real and tangible, meeting the needs a funeral would generally serve. She notes ...

... different kinds of rituals and ceremonies have worked for different people but there seem to be three basic elements which tend to meet certain universal needs. These elements are *expressing the*

18 Laura Seftel, *Grief Unseen: Healing Pregnancy Loss through the Arts* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006), 16.

19 John DeFrain, Elaine Millspaugh, and Xiaolin Xie, 'The Psychosocial Effects of Miscarriage: Implications for Health Professionals', *Families, Systems and Health*, 14 (Fall 1996), 331-347.

20 Seftel, *Grief Unseen*, 34.

21 Seftel, *Grief Unseen*, 34.

22 Seftel, *Grief Unseen*, 35.

23 Seftel, *Grief Unseen*, 36. The article by DeFrain, et. al., makes a similar statement about 'the malignant consequences of unresolved grief' that occur 'if the loss is not recognised and validated by others' (333).

*hopes and dreams held for the baby who was lost, making an offering of some kind in honor of the lost being, and doing something which signifies one's readiness to let go of him or her.*<sup>24</sup>

Kluger-Bell writes that different people process grief differently,<sup>25</sup> and the most important determinant of the degree of grief felt by the would-be parents is 'what kinds of hopes, dreams, and fantasies were wrapped around that child'.<sup>26</sup> Pregnancy loss can be especially painful, for example, for older couples who viewed the pregnancy as their last chance or for people who had hoped to correct the shortcomings they perceived in their own upbringing. Kluger-Bell says coming to terms with grief is not about ending sadness; it is about learning to live with it.<sup>27</sup>

### *Interpreting the A.W.B. record*

Many couples in circumstances like those that confronted the Elgars in the early 1890s might seek no additional babies, for any of several reasons. Tight finances could be a sufficient deterrent. The mother's age could be another. Childbirth is never completely safe even now (particularly for older mothers), but as a popular reproductive manual of the era made clear, the risks were comparatively high then and especially so for women of Alice's age.<sup>28</sup> Of this, the Elgars appear to have been well aware. During the months surrounding Carice's birth, Elgar confided his fears in letters to his former student Frank Webb. On 29 July 1890, he wrote:

... it is of course a very trying anxious time but, God willing, we hope it may pass safely by & be a blessing to us. I will send you a line when the event is past. ... When you have time, please write again & next time, when less worried, I will endeavour to send you a longer & more newsy epistle.<sup>29</sup>

This was followed on 28 September with:

I am afraid my short note (which must be two months old by this) rather frightened you from writing again. Our time of great anxiety has passed now, Thank God, &, as you may have heard, on Aug: 14 we became the joyful possessors of a little daughter.<sup>30</sup>

For her own part, Alice wrote a will during her pregnancy, a precaution that would offer her widower and child financial protection should she die in childbirth.<sup>31</sup>

24 Kim Kluger-Bell, *Unspeakable Losses* (reprint, New York: Harper, 2000; first published by W.W. Norton, 1998), 138.

25 Kluger-Bell, *Unspeakable*, 142.

26 Kluger-Bell, *Unspeakable*, 127.

27 Kluger-Bell, *Unspeakable*, 132.

28 Around this time, the rates of death for mothers aged 25-35 was said to be 425 per 100,000; for those aged 35-45, 663 per 100,000; for those aged 45-55, 813 per 100,000. See Dr H. Arthur Allbutt, *The Wife's Handbook: How a Woman Should Order Herself during Pregnancy, in the Lying-in Room, and after Delivery with Hints on the Management of the Baby and on Other Matters of Importance, Necessary to be Known by Married Women* (London: R. Forder, 29th edition, 1898), 57. According to McLaren's *Birth Control in Nineteenth-Century England* (see below), this little book was first published in 1887.

29 Percy M. Young, ed., *Letters of Edward Elgar and Other Writings* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1956), 49.

30 Young, *Letters*, 49-50.

31 The will is dated 24 June 1890. Carice was born 14 August 1890.

And yet, despite worries and risks, the Elgars appear to have pursued a sibling for Carice. In the late nineteenth century, medical science mistakenly held that fertility was at its height in the days immediately following menstruation,<sup>32</sup> and for devout couples who wished to limit family size without sinning, in 1881 the Roman Catholic Church began widely publicising the ‘safe period’ that supposedly fell later in the month.<sup>33</sup> One might, therefore, expect a pregnancy-avoidant nineteenth-century couple to practise abstinence during the days just after menstruation, but this, the diaries suggest, the Elgars may not have done. Elgar’s blissful ‘very lovely togesser[,] most lovely evening’<sup>34</sup> falls just after A.W.B. The theory that the Elgars hoped for additional children is reinforced by evidence yet to come.

All of the 1891 A.W.B. entries are in Elgar’s hand, but as I’ve mentioned, there are not many of them.<sup>35</sup> The pattern of menstruation during and following breastfeeding varies from woman to woman and even from pregnancy to pregnancy – and it is possible for a new mother to become pregnant again before she has resumed regular menstruation. Following Carice’s birth, Alice’s cycle did not return to regularity during 1891. Then, near the end of the year, the diary reveals that for at least nine days in December, Alice bled. The approach of menopause can cause such anomalies, and this is what I at first assumed—but Alice’s later regularity negates the perimenopause hypothesis. The prolonged A.W.B. in December 1891 occurred more than five years before Alice’s final menstrual period and only a little more than a year after she had given birth to a baby she had conceived apparently easily. A far more likely explanation is that this was a miscarriage.

Dating the probable beginning of the pregnancy is not possible. The miscarriage was almost certainly an early one, though, for on the fourth day Alice visited one of her relatives, and on the eighth day she was able to perform in a concert as pianist. She did not seek a doctor’s care.<sup>36</sup> But on the ninth day her husband recorded his strong reaction in the diary, underlining the words that I read with a regrettable lack of comprehension when I first encountered them:

‘Still A.W.B. can’t abide’.<sup>37</sup>

Following this, A.W.B. is missing from the first five months of 1892. Nothing else suggests a pregnancy during this time, however. The year began with influenza for both Alice and Edward and continued with stressful events like the sale of Alice’s family home<sup>38</sup> and the deaths of two of her aunts. Flu alone is a sufficient cause for amenorrhoea, and Alice’s ongoing stress may have been cause enough, as well. Or perhaps illnesses and other worries simply caused record keeping to

32 Angus McLaren, *Birth Control in Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1978), 125-126, 131. This misconception can also be found in Allbutt’s *The Wife’s Handbook*, cited earlier.

33 J.F. Porter, ‘The Rhythm Method of Contraception’, *Journal of Reproduction and Fertility*, Supplement, 22 (1975): 91-92.

34 24 June 1892, Vol. III of the diary facsimiles, EBM.

35 There are entries in April, July, and December.

36 *The Wife’s Handbook* urges miscarrying women to contact a doctor but notes that some women do not follow this advice (Allbutt, 16).

37 17 December 1891, Vol. II of the diary facsimiles, EBM.

38 In February 1892, Alice added a codicil to her will indicating income from Hazeldine’s sale proceeds should go to her husband and, after his death, to their child or children, indicating the possibility of further children. A second codicil, added in 1905, identified Carice by name as the only child.

suffer. No certain conclusions can be made concerning the first half of 1892, but menstrual records resume in late June.<sup>39</sup>

On 5 January 1893, days after Alice wrote her year-end diary entry about life with her beloved being more beautiful than ever, Elgar wrote, ‘Dear A. taken unwell in evening’. He left to find a doctor at 11:00. This is the first entry in Alice’s long illness. For many weeks, the diary is dotted with frequent references to Alice’s health. The relevant excerpts follow:

- 6 Jan: Dr. Weir called to see dear A. Snowing heavily[,] E. to fetch Dr. Weir at 8.30 – Dr. Weir came 9.30
- 7 Jan: much snow on ground[,] Dr. Weir called 10.30[,] Dear A. better
- 8 Jan: A. in bed still[,] E. at home
- 12 Jan: Dear A still in bed. ...
- 15 Jan: Dr Weir to see A[,] E. to Mass at 10.30[,] Miss Blanch Hurst called[,] Misses Hilda & Isabel Fitton called
- 21 Jan: A. down to Study. ... Dearest A. had a bad turn.
- 22 Jan: Dr. Weir to see A. – E to Church at 10.30 Connellan[,] A. in bedroom
- 6 Feb: E. to Worcester. A. in dining room. Mrs. Fitton came & then Mrs. Acland –
- 9 Feb: E. in Malvern all day. A. down all day & dined togesser. Bad attack late. Blanche to tea. E. came just to see Brauts middle day.
- 12 Feb: A. downstairs a little. ...
- 13 Feb: E. into Worcester[,] Braut downstairs a little.
- 14 Feb: E. into Malvern. A. attack in morning. Dr. Weir came in P.M. Mrs. Fitton called but Dr. W sent her away. E. to F[estival] C[horus] practise rehearsed Black Knight all by his dear souse. E. just came to see Brauts about 5.30 – vesey dear.<sup>40</sup>

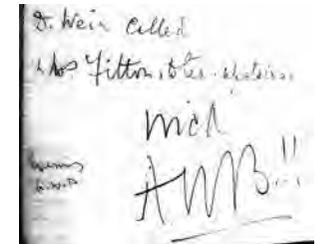
Ordinarily, sickness of this magnitude and duration should suppress ovulation, and menstruation should be absent. However, on the 15<sup>th</sup> there’s a surprising diary entry.

Alice began it much like others from the previous few weeks: ‘E. to Worcester in P.M. but to Eastry in the morning for Trios & luncheon. Dr. Weir called & Mrs. Fitton to tea upstairs’. Added well below the day’s other details, in the bottom left corner of the page, again in Alice’s handwriting, is a small note: ‘Evening A.W.B.’<sup>41</sup>

The intensity of Elgar’s reply is literally visible. In large, barely legible, underlined lettering that fills the date’s remaining white space and overwhelms her discreet note, he cried:

‘nicht  
A.W.B.!!’

Not A.W.B.!! There’s not enough detail in the diary to know precisely what happened to Alice during the weeks surrounding this entry. What were her ‘attacks’ like? What was her illness? At the time she fell ill, her most recent recorded A.W.B. had begun



39 They are absent from July and August, the months of the 1892 Bavarian holiday. I can offer no hypothesis other than the change of routine and focus on other things during their first holiday in the Alps. In September and October, they are recorded at the expected interval.

40 Martin Bird, ed., *The Elgar Diaries, Vol. I: Provincial Musician 1857-1896* (Rickmansworth, U.K.: Elgar Works, 2013), 222-226.

41 Vol. III of the diary facsimiles, EBM.

on 23 October, and the appearance of A.W.B. during the severe illness is not something one would expect to see. This combination of evidence suggests the possibility that Alice was pregnant and either a prolonged illness interfered with the pregnancy or the pregnancy itself was the source of illness. On 15 February, the pregnancy ended. This miscarriage, then, appears to have occurred early in the second trimester. The experience would have been something very different from an early miscarriage and certainly very different from menstrual bleeding, a fact which Elgar's note – scrawled in what is clearly a powerful reaction – seems to express.

After the 15<sup>th</sup>'s dramatic entry, the diary mentions no further 'attacks', and Alice's recovery finally begins. There's no visit from Dr Weir the next day. The diary only tells us, 'E. in Malvern all day. A. upstairs.' On 17 February, the doctor called. Alice's entry for 18 February reads, 'Mr. Basil Nevinson & Mr. Steuart Powell at 11. E. & they played booful trios. They stayed to lunch. Braut not allowed down – Blanche came & sat upstairs & E. made tea – then E. to F[estival] C[horus] meeting at Canon Claughton's but home about 8.30 – vesy dear.'<sup>42</sup> For the next few days Alice stayed upstairs, while Elgar busily prepared for the first performances of both *The Black Knight* and the *Spanish Serenade*:

- 19 Feb: E. in all the morning. Dr. Weir called. E. to Eastry – Mr. H. Walker called.
- 20 Feb: E. to Worcester F[estival] C[horus] rehearsal & of the Black Knight[.] Mrs. Fitton came[.] A. upstairs
- 21 Feb: E. to Mount – & to Worcester. Blanche Hurst came.
- 22 Feb: E. to Worcester in P.M. Mr. Basil Nevinson & Mr. S. Powell at 11 for Trios & stayed for lunch –
- 23 Feb: E. in Malvern all day[;] home just to see a Pearl at 1.30. Vesey dear.
- 24 Feb: E. to Wells – Dr. Weir came & vaccinated darling E.<sup>43</sup> Clare Fitton came (or Thursday?)
- 25 Feb: E. to Worcester 9.20[.] Class &c. Home about 3.30 – not to Gloucester.<sup>44</sup>

The entry on the 25<sup>th</sup> is significant. In his first volume of the Elgar diaries, Martin Bird offers this comment on the 'not to Gloucester' note:

Elgar was due in Gloucester at seven o'clock for the quarterly meeting and social of the local branch of the Incorporated Society of Musicians. ... [T]he published programme showed that he was going to accompany William Mann Dyson ... in two of his songs, *Through the Long Days* and *Is she not passing Fair?* Not only that, he was also going to chair the meeting. I hope he had thought up a good excuse!<sup>45</sup>

I suspect he had good reasons, but would he have told anyone what they were?

By the next day, Alice was at last able to leave her bed. She wrote in the diary, 'A. came down again & hopes to stay down.' This she appears to have been able to do.

After missing a month (common after a lost pregnancy), A.W.B. arrives with a degree of precision one might not always expect from a woman in her mid-forties, proving earlier gaps were not attributable to age: 17 April, 11 May, 7 June, 3 July, 6 August, 30 August, 24 September,

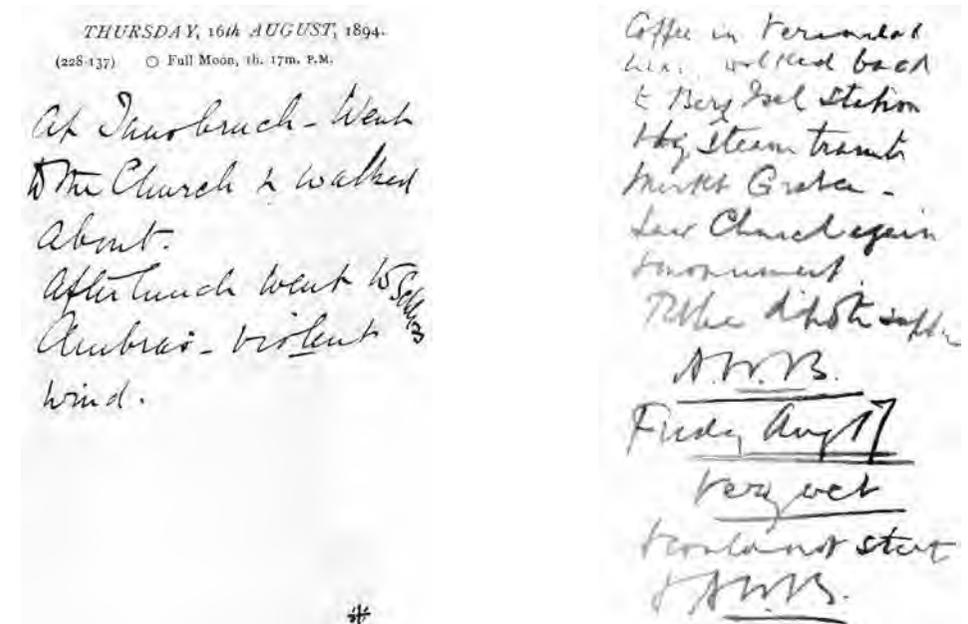
42 Bird, *Provincial Musician*, 237.

43 It's a virtual certainty a vaccination given in 1893 was against smallpox. Thus, Elgar's vaccination seems unrelated to Alice's illness; the diary entries do not sound consistent with a smallpox infection.

44 Bird, *Provincial Musician*, 227-228.

45 Bird, *Provincial Musician*, 228.

9 November.<sup>46</sup> The next is 3 January 1894.<sup>47</sup> Therefore in December 1893, their fifth December as a married couple, Alice was presumably not pregnant – though she may have spent the month wondering about the possibility. Of the four prior Decembers, she appears to have been pregnant during all but one. (That one, their second December together, marked their first Christmas with then four-month-old Carice.) This strikes me as significant, for Elgar's well-known difficulties with December – and holidays generally – resonate with the reactions reported in the 1996 miscarriage study. In the case of the Elgars, each December brought not just a Christmas without the envisioned brood, but also the memories of at least three pregnant Decembers, including the anniversary of the 1891 miscarriage.



Alice diary entry and Edward notebook entry for 16th August 1894 - see fn. 47

46 Bird, *Provincial Musician*. These entries were made sometimes by Elgar, sometimes by Alice.

47 This entry marks the first time Alice used a new form of notation for her menstrual periods. During the Elgars' Bavarian holiday in the summer of 1894, they kept separate notebooks. Elgar's Bavarian diary records A.W.B. in two consecutive months, but Alice's diary, on one of the same dates, uses a symbol that looks like a '+' with dots in the four quadrants. Many thanks to Martin Bird for spotting this symbol, recognising it as something he had seen before, and diligently searching for all other occurrences! Alice first used it in January 1894, and it reappears month after month until her periods begin to taper off in 1895 and eventually end in 1897. My best guess at a reason for the change is that Carice was likely learning the alphabet and A.W.B. might prompt her to ask a question or say something in public that would be awkward to handle. (See the brief discussion of Carice's education, below. She was reading by the age of four.) The diary appears to be something that was left open, as entries frequently appear to be a form of communication between the Elgars.

Like its earlier counterparts, the 1893 diary contains evidence of great affection, but a theme begins to develop during this year: reluctance to be separated, or fear of separation. Examples include 'E. went down to meet A. to station & Brauts fled down to fetch him back – & prevent feeling misy'<sup>48</sup> or 'E. to Malvern at 8.45. E. & A did not like being sepasated'<sup>49</sup> or 'E. into Malvern & then to the Wells. A. drove with him – so as not to be so long sepasated.'<sup>50</sup> The theme of misery at separation can be found thereafter in the diaries. Alice's year-end note in 1894 actually concludes with the words, 'Thank God for not letting us be sepasated & for all our beautiful days togesser in this year, & for my dear one's booful music'.<sup>51</sup>

Alice's anxious or miserable diary entries describe an emotional state which was noticed (and corroborated) by others. Carice described her mother: 'One could hardly get an answer about anything and until his telegram came saying he was safely in London – or wherever it was – she was terribly on edge. ... If she ever allowed herself to throw off this terrible worrying, she could be a most delightful companion, but unfortunately this did not happen often.'<sup>52</sup> That her anxiety appears to have developed following the miscarriages (and particularly following the long and perhaps frightening illness) seems congruent with Seftel's findings noted earlier. Further, Kluger-Bell tells us this fearfulness is often worse for those who experience repeated losses.<sup>53</sup>

Rosa Burley first met Alice in July 1893, and she thought Alice appeared older than her years.<sup>54</sup> If I am correct about the miscarriages, Alice was no doubt not only grieving and suffering from anxiety but probably also *feeling* particularly old. Her advancing age made future children increasingly unlikely. This combination, grief coupled with the sense that one has missed one's last opportunity, is noted by Kluger-Bell as particularly difficult to overcome.<sup>55</sup> All of Miss Burley's accounts of her early interactions with Elgar – such as his awkward request for a cutting of flowers to take home to his wife<sup>56</sup> or her conviction that he lacked a sense of humour<sup>57</sup> – take on a different flavour when one considers what he and Alice were enduring privately at the time.

Further, Miss Burley's impression that Alice was extremely class-conscious – a description of Alice which seems to colour many subsequent writings about her and which *seems* supported by Alice's few visits to Elgar's sister Pollie Grafton – may be a misinterpretation drawn from that same absence of understanding. Contrary to Miss Burley's assertion that Alice 'refused to have anything to do with [the family music shop] or with her husband's relatives',<sup>58</sup> during the years of her marriage Alice did pay calls – sometimes by herself – at the homes of Edward's parents and his

48 29 May 1893 (Bird, *Provincial Musician*, 242).

49 5 June 1893 (Bird, *Provincial Musician*, 242).

50 7 June 1893 (Bird, *Provincial Musician*, 246).

51 31 December 1894 (Bird, *Provincial Musician*, 320).

52 Quoted in Percy M. Young, *Alice Elgar: Enigma of a Victorian Lady* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1978), 149.

53 Kluger-Bell, *Unspeakable*, 136.

54 Rosa Burley and Frank C. Carruthers, *Edward Elgar: The Record of a Friendship* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1972), 58.

55 Kluger-Bell, *Unspeakable*, 146.

56 Burley, *Record*, 29.

57 Burley, *Record*, 37.

58 Burley, *Record*, 148.

sister Lucy Pipe. She wrote affectionate letters to Ann Elgar, calling her 'dear Grandmama', and she once travelled alone to Worcester to persuade an overworked Dot Elgar to come away with her for a rest.<sup>59</sup> She attended a Ledbury flower show with Lucy.<sup>60</sup> She wrote letters to Pollie throughout the rest of her life and welcomed Pollie as a houseguest. But she does indeed appear largely to have stayed away from the homes of two of Elgar's siblings – and these happen to be Pollie and Frank, the two who had no difficulties having children. This can perhaps be understood in light of the observations of Seftel and Kluger-Bell.

The 1894 menstrual record was uninterrupted and largely quite regular; both Alice and Elgar participated in recording it. Beginning in 1895, however, Alice's periods became fewer and more erratic. On an A.W.B. day during that year's Bavarian (and Tyrolean) trip, Elgar hiked alone to the Kitzbüheler Horn.<sup>61</sup> Two days later, he returned to the Horn and took Alice.<sup>62</sup> A faded pencil draft of poetry in Alice's hand commemorates the day. The sketch is clearly unfinished and far from polished. Headed 'On the Kitzbüheler Horn' and beginning 'Nought broke the summer silence of the heights', it describes a narrow chapel. What apparently happened there is recorded in the sketch's final lines:

Then my beloved placed his hand in mine,  
And said, 'Whatever Love I gave to thee  
What fealty I gave thee O my wife,  
Thy thoughts, thy touch move closer enter twine [sic]  
My being every day, perfectly  
Our souls, God grant in death and life'<sup>63</sup>

Diary entries from earlier in the year had also offered glimpses of domestic happiness: Alice was surprised on their wedding anniversary by 'sweet flowers for Braut on breakfast table',<sup>64</sup> for example, and there were many shared, intimate walks. Elgar helped Alice choose a new dress for the trip to Bavaria.<sup>65</sup> And Elgar made one of the year's most interesting entries when proofs of Alice's translation of E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Ritter Gluck* arrived. He wrote, 'Pussy proofs of dear A's translation of "Ritter Gluck" came' – and pasted a snatch of printed German into the diary which read, 'Mit dem ersten Kusse wird die Frau zur Königin gekrönt.' *With the first kiss, the woman is crowned queen.* He added beneath it, 'wopse!'<sup>66</sup> This is a bit of celebrating and cheerleading of the sort Alice usually performed. The Elgars appear to have believed in, and encouraged, one another. Indeed, before she met Alice, Rosa Burley already knew Elgar 'had a great admiration for [his wife]. He told me that she was a good linguist, that she was interested in literature and that he wanted us to meet as he felt we should appreciate each other'.<sup>67</sup>

59 EBM L9904, letter from Edward Elgar to Pollie Grafton, undated but written from Craeg Lea.

60 13 August 1891 (Vol. II of the diary facsimiles, EBM).

61 18 August 1895 (Bird, *Provincial Musician*, 465).

62 20 August 1895 (Bird, *Provincial Musician*, 465.)

63 EBM A-128.

64 8 May 1895 (Bird, *Provincial Musician*, 340).

65 12 July 1895 (Bird, *Provincial Musician*, 350).

66 17 February 1895 (Bird, *Provincial Musician*, 325).

67 Burley, *Record*, 51.

But in June 1895, Elgar wrote a song called *After* (Op. 31, No. 1) whose lyrics, by Philip Bourke Marston, evoke the separation anxiety that had by then become a recurrent feature in the diaries:

A little time for laughter,  
A little time to sing,  
A little time to kiss and cling,  
And no more kissing after.

A little while for scheming  
Love's unperfected schemes;  
A little time for golden dreams,  
Then no more any dreaming.

A little while 'twas given  
To me to have thy love;  
Now, like a ghost, alone I move  
About a ruined heaven.

A little time for speaking  
Things sweet to say and hear;  
A time to seek, and find thee near;  
Then no more any seeking.

A little time for saying  
Words the heart breaks to say;  
A short, sharp time wherein to pray,  
Then no more need for praying;

But long, long years to weep in,  
And comprehend the whole  
Great grief that desolates the soul;  
And eternity to sleep in.<sup>68</sup>

It is hard to imagine Elgar had never thought, as time went by, that perhaps the alternative to Alice's lost pregnancy during her prolonged 1893 illness was the loss of Alice herself. In writing this song, he seems to have peered into that alternate reality. As Robert Anderson put it, 'the second stanza almost prophesies Elgar's devastation after his wife's death. The song starts with the tender simplicity of folksong; but at the third verse words "long, long years to weep in", Elgar's agony surfaces, and for the first time a song approaches the level of the best partsongs'.<sup>69</sup>

In October 1895, four months after *After* and just two months after the scene in the chapel, Alice wrote a poem entitled 'Sighs in Summer' which seems to express the worry that she was a cause of disappointment and sadness to her husband (although it's certainly possible this poem was nothing beyond an effort to create song lyrics):

Across the trees and hilltops  
The summer breezes sigh,  
They scatter shining dewdrops,  
But sleep when night comes nigh.

They wake at dawn and murmur  
And whisper low to me,  
"Dear eyes which shine in fervour  
Are watching long for thee."

Do eyes so sweet watch dreary,  
Nor close in gentle sleep?  
Do tears like raindrops weary  
Sweet eyes that vigil keep?

The fitful breezes utter  
No word to soothe my fear,  
But sighing softly, mutter,  
"How sweet the rose each year."

I haste and ask the swallow,  
And ask the honeyed bee,  
Marked they sweet eyes grown hollow,  
Eyes tear-stained, did they see?

They neither pause nor hearken,  
Nor birds nor winds can dream  
What cares my heart can darken  
Though summer reign supreme.<sup>70</sup>

Alice's menstrual records continued to be kept until the final entry on 25 April 1897, less than six months before her 49<sup>th</sup> birthday.<sup>71</sup> At almost precisely this time, Elgar accompanied Gertrude Walker in the first (perhaps only) performance of his song *Roundel*.<sup>72</sup> Nothing suggests Elgar ever sought to publish this song, and the only existing manuscript copy of it is not in Elgar's hand.<sup>73</sup> The lyrics, taken from Algernon Swinburne's *A Baby's Death*, begin with the words 'The little eyes that never knew light' and conclude with the lines 'No tears, like those in ours, bedew/The little eyes.'

This song, like *After*, recalls Seftel's words about the tendency of grieving people to seek solace in art. As John Norris recently observed, 'Elgar seems to have had something of a fascination with infant mortality: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem *A Child Asleep*, from which he selected verses for his song [of the same title], depicts a child which is in all probability dead rather than sleeping.'<sup>74</sup>

68 First published by Boosey and Co. in 1900.

69 Robert Anderson, *Elgar* (London: J.M.Dent, 1993), 289. *After* is also the song which prompted the behaviour that so shocked a young Adrian Boult at one of Frank Schuster's dinner parties in 1904, when Elgar remarked that his evening was spoiled. (Moore, *Creative Life*, 449.)

70 EBM A-65. On the typed copy of this poem, which would have been made considerably later, Elgar appears to have answered her concerns with a scribbled note: 'If zu smells sis, zu'll find it's not fesh! grh!'

71 Notes from Martin Bird.

72 Robert Anderson, 'Gertrude Walker: An Elgarian Friendship', *The Musical Times* Vol. 125, No. 1702 (Dec. 1984), 698.

73 EBM MS105. The copyist is unidentified. The date of composition is uncertain.

74 John Norris, 'Tales from the Complete Edition – 8: An Unexpected Coda to the Four Lost Songs', *Elgar Society Journal* Vol. 18, No. 2 (August 2013), 23, footnote 1.

In light of the apparent miscarriages, Elgar's fascination is not mysterious. Between 1891 and the end of Alice's fertility, the diaries suggest two lost pregnancies (December 1891 and February 1893) and present other gaps in the menstrual record whose causes cannot be guessed with much certainty. Meanwhile, during these years Carice Elgar grew from an infant into a young girl.

### *The Elgars as parents*

In the Elgarian literature, the Elgars' parenting skills are never given high marks, so it may surprise many readers to learn they wanted more children. A full exploration of their parenthood of Carice is far beyond the scope of the current article. However, at least a brief excursion in that direction must be made. There is ample evidence both partners loved children.

That Elgar was an affectionate father, though often absent, is captured in his letters and postcards to Carice.<sup>75</sup> The nature of his love seems to have been both playful and pedagogical. This combination is brilliantly displayed within a long letter written from Capri in 1907. In it he not only details daily events in high hilarity (as he describes, for example, pinching Alice's leg under the table during a skirmish over whether to observe meatless Fridays) but also sends Carice a research assignment that will connect her to her parents' experience ('I want you to look out lizards [(l)ucertole] there is a special one which lives only on the Faraglioni rocks here[.] Please see to this & report.').<sup>76</sup> A more compact example of his nurturing style is an early letter to his niece Madeline Grafton, written precisely one month after he inscribed his joyful 'AWB!' on *Queen Mary's Song*, when he was still only imagining fatherhood. It is worth reproducing whole:



(Arthur Reynolds Collection)

My dear Madge,  
I was so glad to get your letter & have kept it to look at 'till you send another.

It must have been rare fun riding in the Hay-cart. How I should like to have been with you, like we were in the straw last year. Do you remember that? How Uncle Frank & I made holes to tumble in. What fun you will have with May when she comes home. Perhaps I shall come to see you then.

Now dear Madge, you must work very hard at your lessons & writing. I liked your letter very much & next time you must write it all yourself & if you are very busy & good I am bringing you a 'writing case' like mine! that is a blotting-paper-pad to write on with little thin pockets for note-paper & envelopes & things like that.

Now goodbye dear Madge. Aunt Alice & I send you a kiss apiece.

75 See the Elgar Birthplace Trust's *Dear Carice* (Worcester: Osborne Heritage, 1997) and Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Letters of a Lifetime* (Rickmansworth, UK: Elgar Works, 2012).

76 EBM L95. Published in Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Letters of a Lifetime* (Rickmansworth, UK: Elgar Works, 2012), 211-213. (Pages 185-186 in the first edition published by Oxford University Press, 1990.)

Your loving Uncle  
Edward<sup>77</sup>

That Alice wholeheartedly endorsed both the message and the kiss is abundantly clear from her collection of writings at the Elgar Birthplace Museum. A stunning number of her early works (prior to marriage) are children's stories. These are marked by a humour reminiscent of Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies*, and they have Kingsley's seriousness of purpose, too. Many of Alice's stories teach scientific principles. Further, a constant theme (in her fiction for adults, as well) is an absolute rejection of the class system and of her upper-class family's prejudices.<sup>78</sup> Finally, in almost all her writings, Alice champions education, and in particular greater educational and career opportunities for girls.

This last is a prominent theme in both of Alice's longer published works for adult readers, *Isabel Trevithoe* and *Marchcroft Manor*. A contemporaneous review of the narrative poem *Isabel Trevithoe* reveals her ideas were seen as cutting edge: 'there is a strong vein of original thought in the production, which reflects with great accuracy some of the leading currents of modern social speculation, and especially the tendency to elevate the standard of female education and to widen the arena in which our sisters may exert the powers with which they have been endowed'.<sup>79</sup> The sort of education Alice deplors in the pages of her novel *Marchcroft Manor*, whose girls were gently but ineffectively taught by governesses in the home, is the sort of education the child Alice Roberts received. Her brothers were sent to schools. Alice was not. She was reared and educated by the family's servants, but her own intelligence and curiosity spurred her to a variety of accomplishments. When Alice was eighteen, she travelled to Belgium, where she studied music. In her twenties, she pursued a serious interest in geology, and she began to produce literary and scholarly writings. She attended lectures and read widely, and thus she gave herself, in adulthood, educational opportunities her governess could not have provided.<sup>80</sup> When *Marchcroft Manor*'s Julian De Tressanay complains, 'There must be something radically wrong in women's education',<sup>81</sup> he is speaking the thoughts of his creator.

77 EBM L9953, dated 14 July 1889.

78 This is most pointedly illustrated in a piece called *Marian's Party* (EBM A-11) but perhaps most succinctly in the children's story *On the Wings of the Wind* (EBM A-15). In *On the Wings of the Wind*, a sleeping (dreaming) seven-year-old boy is taken by the wind on a tour of the planet. At one point in the tale, as they visit North America, he learns something shocking that upsets all the conventions he had been raised to accept. The wind assures him he is related to all the human beings in the world, including the people of Nova Scotia and even the 'Esquimaux':

Johnny was a good deal frightened & rather angry at being told that all the people he saw were his relations; his father & mother often talked about their family & considered themselves superior to most of their neighbours, and now, to be told that the inhabitants of Nova Scotia were his cousins. He was quite offended. ...

'You funny little manikin,' [the wind] said, 'it is of no use trying to understand all the foolish fancies that you have down on the earth. ...

'All you men are so full of your own conceits. You think you are the finest creatures in the world & the only ones of consequence, but there never was a greater mistake.'

79 *Greenock Telegraph*, 9 January 1879. (Preserved in EBM A-154.)

80 Young, *Alice Elgar*, 39.

81 C.A. Roberts (later C. Alice Elgar), *Marchcroft Manor* (London: Remington & Co., 1882), Vol. I, 115.

Similarly, while Elgar later seemed proud to be able to claim he was his own music teacher, as a young man he had not *intended* to be thoroughly self-taught. He saved his money (but not enough) to try to attend Leipzig Conservatory—and also to study violin with Adolphe Pollitzer in London, which he could afford to do sporadically. He taught himself to compose because that was the only path available. Later in his life, Elgar’s passion about the need to offer Worcester children a better chance at formal musical education became a message in his ‘Freedom of the City’ address in 1905: ‘What are you doing for any other boys? If you know any boys that are musical, or girls for that matter, are the musical conditions any better than they were 40 years ago?’<sup>82</sup> Rosa Burley remembered that during Elgar’s Malvern years he sometimes complained bitterly about his lack of academic training.<sup>83</sup> It seemed to be an early handicap whose burden he always felt.

So this was the couple who brought Carice into the world and tried without success to supply her with sisters and brothers. As the only child, Carice became the sole repository of all her parents’ aspirations for their children. Some glimpses of these dreams show up in the published correspondence. One hint comes from Elgar’s 1905 letter asking Frank Schuster to serve as Carice’s guardian ‘in case anything happens to blot us both out’.<sup>84</sup> Elgar assures Schuster that Alice’s cousin William Raikes would handle ‘the legal and money business neither of which would trouble you in any way, but we should feel that you know our feelings as to education, art & society better than anyone else & might be able to advise wisely if need were’. The postscript to the letter reads, ‘Carice is growing into a big woman now & seems to have very strong characteristics: no genius but clever’. The family’s emphasis on education also appears in a letter Alice wrote to August Jaeger a couple of years later: ‘Carice has just learnt to ride a bicycle & enjoys it so much but of course has not very much time as she is very busy with studies.’<sup>85</sup>

Carice was indeed intelligent. She was reading by the age of four because Alice herself taught her daughter at the earliest opportunity. Once Carice was in school, Alice became a supplemental instructor on weekends, providing Bible lessons to learn, poetry to memorise, and an ear to listen to Carice’s piano playing.<sup>86</sup> It’s not hard to imagine Carice’s accomplished parents anticipated they would produce brilliant offspring and tried to ensure there were no impediments to her success.

However, Carice appears not to have shared her parents’ extraordinary ambitions. While Elgar is supposed to have told his mother he wouldn’t be satisfied until he received a letter from abroad addressed to ‘Edward Elgar, England’, there’s no record Carice ever expressed any desire of that sort. Instead, she was described as easily flustered when attention was drawn to her.<sup>87</sup>

Her own perception of her childhood seems defined by a sensation of having been excluded.<sup>88</sup> She knew from an early age to be quiet in order not to disturb her father’s work. Her bedroom was near or in the servants’ quarters. Near the age of eight she was sent to a boarding school and during the next six years spent more time with the school’s headmistress, Rosa Burley, than with

82 *The Worcestershire Echo*, 12 Sept. 1905, quoted in Moore, *Lifetime*, 189. (Page 165 in the first edition.)

83 Burley, *Record*, 147.

84 EBM L6924. Published in Moore, *Lifetime*, 186. (First edition: 162.)

85 EBM L8855. Published in Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Elgar and His Publishers* (Oxford University Press, 1987), Vol. II, 673.

86 Young, *Alice Elgar*, 137-140.

87 Moore, *Creative Life*, 711-712.

88 For fuller details about Carice’s recollections of her childhood, see Young’s *Alice Elgar* or Jerrold Northrop Moore’s *Spirit of England* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1984).

her parents.<sup>89</sup> Today, our hearts break for her.

However, many aspects of her childhood were commonplace for the age. In Victorian England few parents (in any economic class) did much child care at all, and children whose families could afford a nurse typically lived with the nurse in her wing or floor of the house, removed from the parents.<sup>90</sup> This was believed to be beneficial: ‘children were separated from adults to give them a sheltered and structured routine and to train their character’.<sup>91</sup> Elgar’s own mother, apparently an anomaly, was actively engaged in childrearing – but even she sent her children away to the countryside, without their parents, during the summer months or when she ‘was particularly busy in the shop in High St.’<sup>92</sup> There, they stayed not with family members but with friends.

Further, the Elgars gave Carice something denied to both of them, something highly prized and once available only to upper-class boys: education at an excellent boarding school. This was not just any boarding school but one near home, with her father on the faculty. By actually living at the school, Carice would no longer have to tiptoe around her father’s need for quietude. I suggest the Elgars did what most parents try to do for their children: the best they know how. But it’s not surprising a child might not have understood this – or might have wished her parents’ efforts had taken a different form – and Rosa Burley did describe little Carice as wearing a look of ‘profound sadness’ and ‘unnatural ... resignation’.<sup>93</sup>

No doubt many other children of Carice’s acquaintance in Malvern spent little time with their parents. However, many of them knew the companionship of siblings. Despite the Elgars’ efforts to give her a privileged existence, Carice’s loneliness and visible sadness must have been a perpetual reminder, to her parents, of their ‘failure’.

### *Losses memorialised*

In 1901, Elgar and Alice spent the last half of the meaning-laden month of December in Düsseldorf with Jaeger for the German première of *The Dream of Gerontius*, separated from their lonely eleven-year-old, who received a German postcard of rabbits around a Christmas tree as a festive greeting from her father.<sup>94</sup> According to the diary, the Elgar family was reunited on 4 January 1902, and on 14 January, Elgar completed his two-movement suite entitled *Dream Children* (Op. 43), after an essay by Charles Lamb.<sup>95</sup> He had begun the work years earlier.

Unlike most of Elgar’s pieces, it bears no dedication. It seldom receives much commentary, but Percy Young called its movements ‘two of the most exquisite pieces ever written’,<sup>96</sup> and Robert Anderson has described it as ‘heartrending’ and ‘ghostly’ with an ‘air of grief and strange unreality’.<sup>97</sup> Elgar appears to have regarded the work as something intensely private. When music

89 Burley, *Record*, 179.

90 Sally Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996), 146.

91 Mitchell, *Daily Life*, 146.

92 Moore, *Creative Life*, 33, footnote 1.

93 Burley, *Record*, 30.

94 The postcard is reproduced in the Elgar Birthplace Trust’s *Dear Carice*.

95 Martin Bird diary transcript.

96 Percy M. Young, *Elgar, O.M.* (London: Collins, 1955), 277.

97 Anderson, *Elgar*, 364-365.

journalist F.G. Edwards asked for information about *Dream Children* in 1907, Elgar replied rather unhelpfully:

Now as to *Dream Children*; I really can tell you nothing! They (or it) were (or was) written for small orch: as published; the pianoforte solo is an arrangement. They were (or it was) written long ago, or rather sketched long ago & completed a few years back. I really know nothing of the first performance & I have never heard them (or it).<sup>98</sup>

Nearly twenty years later, in 1926, Ivor Atkins asked about programming *Dream Children* at the Three Choirs Festival, but Elgar replied, ‘I do not want them or it done.’<sup>99</sup> Atkins eventually talked Elgar into allowing the performance, which Atkins conducted because Elgar insisted upon that, and Wulstan Atkins commented later, ‘Why Elgar had reservations on its being included in the Friday evening concert, for which it proved ideal, I have never understood.’<sup>100</sup>

Wulstan’s father may have grasped the reason. Ten days after completing *Dream Children*, Elgar played it for Atkins, who ‘came & stayed to dinner’.<sup>101</sup> I cannot prove Elgar confided his family tragedies to Ivor Atkins, but a strange message he sent to Atkins following Wulstan’s birth suggests he may have. In the difficult month of December, in 1904, Elgar sent these words of congratulations: ‘I am so very happy about the new arrival & envy you your son – alas! I receive in this world all that I never want or wish for.’<sup>102</sup> If Atkins did know about Elgar’s losses, then Elgar was writing to someone who understood his meaning – and we should not regard the letter as a horrible insult to Carice. Though admittedly awkward, the remark is a reminder of how deeply Elgar felt Atkins’s good fortune, an illustration of the intensity of his congratulations upon a successful live birth.

Atkins never forgot the small work from 1902, even if Elgar sometimes pretended to have put it out of his mind.<sup>103</sup> If Atkins was trusted with the significance of *Dream Children* and he guarded it as a secret, this only serves to reinforce the messages contained in the writings of Seftel and Kluger-Bell. Ivor Atkins passed along, to his son, the story of Elgar’s broken engagement to Helen Weaver – but not this story. Perhaps the taboo surrounding the private feminine world of pregnancy and miscarriage did make these particular and profound losses truly ‘unspeakable’.

When F.G. Edwards unwittingly asked questions too close to this topic, Elgar was uncooperative. However, while Elgar may have declined to elaborate much on ‘it’, he could and did tell us something about ‘them’. An extract from the final lines of Lamb’s essay graces Elgar’s composition as an epigraph. I reproduce it below as it appeared in the 1902 solo piano arrangement, published by Joseph Williams Ltd. of London and preserved at the Elgar Birthplace. It speaks to us very eloquently. The emphasis, in italics, is Elgar’s:

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98 Moore, *Publishers*, Vol. II, 673-674.

99 E. Wulstan Atkins, *The Elgar-Atkins Friendship* (Newton Abbot, U.K.: David & Charles, 1984), 393.

100 Atkins, *Elgar-Atkins*, 394-395.

101 24 January 1902, Martin Bird diary transcript. The fact that this visit included a hearing of *Dream Children* is recorded in Atkins, *Elgar-Atkins*, 61.

102 Atkins, *Elgar-Atkins*, 125.

103 In fact, Ivor Atkins arranged *Dream Children* for organ. His arrangement was published by Schott & Co., London, in 1912.

\*\*\* And while I stood gazing, both the children gradually grew fainter to my view, receding, and still receding till nothing at last but two mournful features were seen in the uttermost distance, which, without speech, strangely impressed upon me the effects of speech: “We are not of Alice, nor of thee, nor are we children at all. \*\*\*\* We are nothing; less than nothing, and dreams. *We are only what might have been.*” \*\*\*<sup>104</sup>

### *Acknowledgments*

I wish to express deep thanks to Martin Bird for generously, cheerfully, and tirelessly responding to my every request for help in searching the diaries (and for discovering Alice’s ‘+’ signs); to Dr Mary Kirk for conferring with me, stimulating my thoughts, and first pointing out the likely miscarriages; to the medical historian James Hanley for kindly answering my questions about vaccines; to all the Elgar scholars cited within (and many others who are not) for informing and inspiring me; and especially to the Elgar Will Trust for permitting me to quote from the Elgars’ letters, diaries, poetry, and other materials. I also owe gratitude to the Elgar Will Trust for permission to reproduce images from the Elgar family diaries (originals now in possession of the University of Birmingham’s Cadbury Research Library Special Collections) and the inscription on the manuscript of *Queen Mary’s Song* (original held by the British Library). Finally, I want to acknowledge the marvellous Elgar Birthplace Museum – in whose research room I’ve read and read, helped (both there and in many trans-Atlantic emails) by the tremendous expertise and kindness of Sue Fairchild and Chris Bennett.

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104 EBM 1977.1393.11. Comparing this epigraph to the published essay, it is clear the asterisks are used as ellipses.

## Herbert Sumsion – Personal reminiscences of a remarkable musician

### Donald Hunt

Herbert Whitton Sumsion was born in Gloucester on 19 January, 1899, one of a family of eight children. Their father was employed in a clerical capacity at the Gloucester Docks and there is the charming story of the family walking in crocodile to Sunday worship at the little Mariners' Church on the dockside – Herbert's first experience of church music! There appears to have been little musical background from either side of the family, yet most of the children had an appreciation for it and, in addition to Herbert, Corbett – the eldest – became a composer of some ability with a large number of miniatures in print. I well remember singing Evening Canticles in B flat by C.C. Sumsion when I was a cathedral chorister. Another son, Wilfred, was an accomplished organist. The father died when Herbert was six resulting in the family being reliant upon Corbett to sustain them, but Herbert's emerging talent was sufficient to encourage the family to make the financial sacrifices of entering him for the cathedral choir at Gloucester. He passed easily enough – his perfect pitch would have been a bonus point – becoming an outstanding singer and eventually an articulated pupil to Herbert Brewer, the cathedral organist, from whom he received lessons in organ playing and accompaniment as well as harmony and counterpoint – a sort of musical apprenticeship that was an exclusively cathedral enterprise, largely funded by trust funds which were produced for selected pupils where there were perceived to be financial restrictions. Herbert Howells and Ivor Gurney were notable recipients of this training as were a succession of pupils, such as the writer of this article, who went on to become cathedral organists themselves.

Choristership carried with it an education at the King's School at Gloucester and Herbert proved to be as diligent in his academic work as with his music. By all accounts his keyboard skills were exceptional and at an early age he also began to display evidence of compositional ability, although he would never talk about these early attempts, and none have come to light. In addition to his progress with the piano he also showed such talent with his organ playing that by the age of fourteen he was playing the organ at Brookthorpe Church, a few miles to the south of Gloucester, making the journey on a bicycle.

As a chorister Sumsion would have experienced the Three Choirs Festival at first hand, although it was not until 1913 that he was involved, when he would have witnessed Elgar conducting his Symphony No.2 and *The Dream of Gerontius*, as well as Saint-Saëns directing his new oratorio *The Promised Land*. There would also be all the standard fare that epitomised the pre-war festivals. The festivals were abandoned during the period of the war but Sumsion continued his studies with much zeal, obtaining his ARCO in 1915 and the ARCM and FRCO with the Turpin prize a year later. In 1917, at the age of eighteen, he was commissioned into the Queen's Westminster Rifles, seeing active service on the fields of Flanders. Only in his later years did he begin to relate his

harrowing experiences of that time, some of them demanding great personal bravery.

Sumsion's return to Gloucester in 1919 saw him immediately appointed assistant organist to Brewer, a post he was to hold for three years, resulting in personal contacts with the likes of Elgar and Vaughan Williams, both of them making a profound impression on the young musician. He often used to relate his first experience of meeting Elgar when, after playing for a rehearsal for *Gerontius* (at the time still a young articulated pupil), the composer came across to him to shake him by the hand and nod his appreciation. Sumsion felt that Elgar was a very shy man and did not often make such a gesture. In 1920 he was awarded the external degree of Bachelor of Music from Durham University; the work that he submitted for his exercise is not known, although it may well have been one of his earliest documented works from that year – the Violin Sonata in E or the piano variations on the folk-song *I will give my love an apple*.

It was from this period of his career that Sumsion acquired a liking for the art of piano accompaniment, an enthusiasm he retained for the remainder of his career; there are still those who recall his amazing rapport with the many singers and instrumentalists who regularly performed for the Gloucester Music Club. As a young student I frequently turned the pages for him at these concerts and I never ceased to marvel at his ability to anticipate every move, including some horrendous errors from the artistes that he was accompanying. I well remember an occasion when a singer became horribly out of tune in an unaccompanied passage, only for the undeterred accompanist to calmly transpose the remainder of the song down a tone without a single hesitation, and still follow her whimsical interpretation. I am convinced that Sumsion, a supreme accompanist, could have made as great a name for himself as Gerald Moore, if he had so desired. His piano playing was very important to him and he claimed to play Mozart daily to keep his technique in good shape. In later years OUP published his valuable book on technique, which was widely used for many years.

In 1924 Herbert Sumsion was appointed organist at the fashionable Christ Church, Lancaster Gate, in London, at the same time undertaking the challenge of directing the music at Bishops Stortford College and becoming an assistant instructor at Morley College, a non-vocational adult educational centre in London. In spite of this busy schedule he found time to take lessons in conducting from Adrian Boult at the Royal College of Music, where he also established a close friendship with R.O. Morris, the professor of harmony and counterpoint. This latter association was to have a direct influence on the next stage of his career for, when Morris was appointed to a similar post at the Curtis Institute of Music at Philadelphia, USA, in 1926, he took Sumsion with him as his assistant. Although he could not have anticipated it, Sumsion's sojourn in Philadelphia was to be a short one, but it did provide the opportunity of meeting his life's companion and one, who although not particularly musical, would have the greatest possible influence on his career. He married Alice Garlich in Philadelphia on 7 June, 1927.

It was inevitable that Sumsion's particular talents would ultimately draw him back to Britain and, having accepted the post of organist and master of the choristers at Coventry Cathedral early in 1928, he and his wife were planning to set sail when the news broke that Sir Herbert Brewer had died suddenly. It was widely believed that, shortly before his death, Brewer had told the Dean of Gloucester that he wished Sumsion to succeed him. Certainly the Cathedral authorities dismissed the claims of several prominent musicians who were canvassed for the post, making immediate advances to their counterparts at Coventry for the release of the musician that they coveted. The request was readily granted and the Sumsions arrived at Gloucester at the end of June 1928, just in time to shoulder the responsibility of a Three Choirs Festival a few weeks later. His appointment even produced letters to *The Times*, the first suggesting that the appointment would 'cause some

surprise to musical people outside Gloucester', but the response (also from an unidentified writer) stated that 'Mr Sumsion has three excellent qualifications...he is young, he was brought up in Gloucester Cathedral, and he has been away from it.' The writer goes on to remark that 'he should bring the vigour of new ideas back to his work in the West of England, where new ideas on the art of music are certainly needed'.<sup>1</sup> The young Sumsion, with limited conducting experience, was certainly faced with a formidable programme that had been planned by Brewer, but it is now a fact of Three Choirs history that he achieved many triumphs, prompting the famous remark from Elgar<sup>2</sup> that 'what at the beginning of the week was an assumption has now become a certainty!'<sup>3</sup>

To Gloucester Cathedral and the Three Choirs Festival Herbert (or John as he was known to his friends) Sumsion devoted his life's work. His talents must have been sought elsewhere and indeed at one period of his career he contemplated returning to educational work, but his heart was really at Gloucester and in the glorious countryside that bred him. It was his work with the Three Choirs Festival that will surely preserve for Sumsion a sure and distinguished place in British musical life. His vision in matters of programme planning, together with his skill of direction in a wide spectrum of works, made him one of the most successful conductors in the long history of this Festival. Additionally, in administrative terms he and Alice must take much credit for the strong position the Festival now holds in the hard and competitive world of music-making.

John Sumsion had a special sympathy for the works of English composers stemming from the Elgar and Vaughan Williams traditions, and how wonderful it was to share with him in his latter years reminiscences of a whole generation of famous musicians. He was also responsible for bringing works of lesser-known composers to the attention of the British public. Great choral works such as Holst's *Choral Fantasia*, Finzi's *Intimations of Immortality*, Howells' *Hymnus Paradisi* and other important new works received their premières at Gloucester during his tenure of office, but the 'traditional' Three Choirs works were not neglected and, under Sumsion, received performances that were imaginative and secure. Naturally he was particularly at home with the Elgar oratorios, having witnessed the composer directing his own works, as well as enjoying his friendship. After Elgar's death a Sumsion performance would invariably attract the comment that 'it was as if the composer himself was conducting'<sup>4</sup>; this was particularly true of the memorial performance of *The Kingdom* in 1934. It was clear that Elgar's memory would be safely preserved in Three Choirs annals while Sumsion remained at Gloucester. Interestingly he appeared less at home in Elgar's orchestral repertoire, yet, by contrast, presented some outstanding performances of Sibelius symphonies. In truth he was essentially a choral conductor; he understood so well the needs of the amateur singer – a lead was never missed, the facial expressions were always encouraging and, above all, there was always a feeling of security and well-being, unless it was going out of tune! For the most part he despaired of composer/conductors and would frequently be

1 *The Times* 7 April 1928

2 Related in W.H. Reed's book *Elgar as I knew him* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1936)

3 Reviewing the Festival for *The Musical Times* Vol.69 (1928) Harvey Grace wrote: Mr. Sumsion ... was an immediate success, above all in the manner of inspiring confidence. His manner was quiet and unobtrusive – there was even a likeable touch of diffidence – and his beat generally firm and clear. One felt that his quiet efficiency and his evident hold on the choir were the best of guarantees for the future of Gloucester's share of the Festival.

4 This statement has never been documented but was freely used in the years following Elgar's death. Sumsion's reaction to this was to say that 'it was second nature to me to perform his works as he would have done, and it never occurred to me to do otherwise.'

found standing with his back to one of Gloucester's great Norman pillars, unseen by the audience, but on hand to give a reassuring glance – or direction – to the choir if things were getting out of hand. There was the occasion at the 1931 Festival when Elgar lost interest conducting *The Dream of Gerontius* just prior to the final *Praise to the holiest* chorus because a soloist had 'come off the rails'; Billy Reed, leading the orchestra, sensed what was happening and held things together on the stage while Sumsion directed the choir from behind the pillar without a copy and apparently not missing a lead. Elgar returned to earth as the chorus finished. Another occasion was when Kodály was conducting his challenging unaccompanied work *Jesus and the Traders* at the 1937 Festival. The chorus had found the work difficult and, sensing their fragility, Sumsion joined the chorus basses (he actually had a good voice); as the performance began to disintegrate, mainly due to the conductor's poor direction and pitch falling at an alarming rate, he saved the 'sinking ship' by singing a crucial bass lead solo at the correct pitch. Equilibrium was restored and the piece reached its conclusion without further mishap, although a member of the chorus fainted from fright!

I suppose Sumsion will always be linked with the group of cathedral organists who occupied their benches for long periods of the last century; one thinks of Walter Alcock of Salisbury, Ivor Atkins of Worcester, Edward Bairstow of York, Conrad Eden of Durham, Gordon Slater of Lincoln, Heathcote Statham of Norwich and others. In truth Sumsion was different. For a start he was by all accounts a much better executant than most of the others. I remember being overwhelmed by his virtuosity in such works as the Reubke<sup>5</sup> Sonata, now sadly neglected, various works of Max Reger and the Liszt *Fantasia and Fugue on BACH*; there was no 'fudging' – every note was in place and executed with rhythmic precision. He had little sympathy with the growing 'authentic movement' and consequently his Bach was rendered in the most romantic style, but who is to say that it was not effective or satisfying; this style certainly suited the Gloucester organ of that time, as well as the ambience of the building. His fabulous recording of Elgar's Sonata is still the model for many of us; it was recorded on extremely cold nights (reputedly in one take) in early January 1965 with Sumsion apparently wearing an overcoat and a trilby hat! This was John showing practicality, and not in any way being eccentric, for Gloucester Cathedral was like a refrigerator in winter months.

Sumsion's manual technique was based on pianoforte skills, the acquisition of an exceptional legato technique not being a prerequisite in Gloucester's generous acoustic, but his pedalling was strictly instep with knees pointing inwards together with equal distribution of toe and heel, and woe betide any pupil who strayed into too many consecutive toes or found himself in a bandy situation! His pupils were brought up on a package of Bach, Mendelssohn, Rheinberger, Parry, Stanford and Whitlock<sup>6</sup> and, as a reward for good work, an occasional foray into the realms of souped-up early English repertoire – arrangements of Boyce, Greene, Stanley and the like. French music was rarely on the agenda; 'no decent technique required for it' was the Sumsion conclusion.

Accompaniment for services was high on the list of Sumsion's priorities. As we have already noted, he was a highly-skilled piano accompanist and this same degree of brilliance extended to the organ seat. He rarely indulged in the fashionable over-elaboration of word-painting in the Psalms

5 Julius Reubke, German composer and organist. After a period of study at Berlin he became a pupil of Liszt, during which time he wrote his two major works: a Piano Sonata and the *Organ Sonata on the 94<sup>th</sup> Psalm*, both works generally considered to be pinnacles of the Romantic era. Reubke died in 1858 from tuberculosis at the early age of twenty-four.

6 Percy Whitlock (1903-1946), English organist and composer. He studied with Vaughan Williams and his numerous compositions for the organ give evidence of this, although the influence of Elgar is also discernable. From 1930 he was organist of St Stephen's Church in Bournemouth, later combining this with the post of borough organist.

which was the stock-in-trade of that generation of cathedral musicians, preferring a more sensitive approach and encouraging expression and rhythmic flexibility from his singers; he never drowned his choir, except when there was a danger of collapse! When I became his assistant it became clear to me that he was bored with the endless round of psalmody and, when he considered that I could be entrusted with the accompaniment, he rarely turned up until the first lesson was in progress; he always timed it to perfection, although a verger told me that he would often stand in the transept and listen. He was never an exhibitionist and this showed in his playing as well as in the fact that, even when it became fashionable, he was rarely seen conducting his choir in a service. He preferred the less distracting procedure of beating time by the senior choristers, while he kept a watchful eye from the organ loft. My abiding memory of chorister days was to see his head just about the level of the organ-loft curtain during responses and any other unaccompanied music, although the latter was a comparative rarity.

During my time as his assistant I often felt that John Sumsion's work with the Cathedral Choir had been a disappointment to him. He seldom enthused and had little patience with the increasing 'tricks' – as he called them – of choir training. The choristers were subjected to occasional vocal exercises, but generally much greater attention was paid to matters of musicianship, rhythmic accuracy, secure intonation and, above all, ensuring that the service music was absolutely safe. A bad mistake would invariably mean 'staying in' after the service, not to correct the error, but to prepare for something else the next day. His discipline was not of the traditional type and was always tempered with kindness and concern for the singers under his care; he had that rare gift which made people want to do well for him.

He certainly had to contend with difficulties of recruiting suitable lay clerks, especially during the Second World War and for a period after it; nor would he have been helped by the lowering of status of the King's School by the Dean and Chapter which had a damaging effect on the quality and quantity of chorister recruitment (even though I was one of them!). Add all this to the appalling apathy of the clergy must have been so frustrating to such a sensitive musician. In spite of these factors his demands for high standards never faltered and he should be given more credit than is often accorded to him for what he achieved with inadequate materials and conditions.

Having been his chorister, articulated pupil and assistant I have a strong personal reason for gratitude to John Sumsion. Of course his influence over my formative years was considerable but, even now, I am still conscious of the strength and wisdom of his guidance. I frequently ask myself 'what would John Sumsion have advised me to do with this' or recall his many words of recommendation for the performance of Elgar's music. To be appraised of 'what Elgar would have done here' or 'just look closely at the orchestration and see Elgar's markings to give a phrase or even a solitary note prominence'; and, of course, the matter of tempi, were gems that he passed on – but only when asked. He always urged me to pay attention to those numerous markings that Elgar uses in vocal and instrumental parts; 'they are there to be observed' was Sumsion's firm directive. He was always critical of the slack rhythms often employed by solo singers in Elgar's works and was also quite critical in conversations with me of what he had perceived to be the composer's slackness in not paying more attention to precise ensemble, feeling that too often the texture was unnecessarily 'muddy' and that, as a result, conductors were too ready to believe that this was the correct way to perform his music. Conversations did not really extend beyond the oratorios, although many of Sumsion's advisory comments applied just as much to Elgar's general repertoire. I felt that he was not greatly enamoured with the lighter works and certainly didn't care for *The Light of Life*, which he considered was too uneven and too geared to the Three Choirs tradition, rather than seeking to be innovative, unlike *King Olaf* and *Caractacus*, both of which he

admired, but never to my knowledge performed. *King Olaf* still awaits a Three Choirs première which, in these days of 'anything goes' in sacred surroundings is a disgrace. I know that if opinions and traditions had been different in Sumsion's day that both of these works would have been in his programmes. I have often wondered why *The Music Makers* never featured in a Gloucester programme during his time, for he loved the work, giving me enormous help when I was faced with conducting it for the first time. Although Sumsion was a regular visitor to Three Choirs in his retirement years he never attended a performance of an Elgar work. I can fully understand that. The music meant so much to him and he had done it all in his own – and Elgar's – way; he could satisfactorily rest on his memories. However, Alice did tell me that he had listened to some of my broadcasts of Elgar's works from Yorkshire and the Three Choirs, but I never knew what he thought of them. I just hope he recognised that his valued advice had been put into practice; that would have pleased me most of all.

Some years ago, while preparing Sumsion's formidable organ piece *Introduction and Theme* for a recording, I had the humbling experience of the composer's presence behind me directing operations and advising me on technique and interpretation very much as he had done forty years earlier. It caused me to recall his illustrious, yet demanding, teaching that I now know was a privilege to receive. I well remember those outbursts of dismay when technical advice had not been followed – an angry shout from the adjoining room, where my mentor was having breakfast and I was endeavouring to play a Mozart Sonata, 'if you put your thumb under on the A you wouldn't make such a hash of it', or when a composition (much admired by the writer!) was dismissed in a flash with the comment 'too many modulations on the first page'. I am not suggesting that his teaching was negative; indeed, he greatly encouraged creative activity. I am sure that many choristers who passed through his hands will share my indebtedness for his teaching and encouragement; the number of his boys who became professional – and amateur- musicians is a testimony to his inspiration and persuasive personality.

In later years when I went to visit him at his home in the Cotswolds he always asked me to bring my latest compositions. We would have a session when he showed me his new works, sometimes playing them, and then asking me to play mine. I don't think he enjoyed mine all that much as there were too many unresolved – or in his opinion, unnecessary – discords. I also remember that there were occasions when he would say 'that sounds rather like my style', which obviously gave him pleasure. These were indeed moments to treasure, while my wife, Jo, and Alice were banished to another room to put the world to rights.

As would be expected Sumsion's own compositions owe a particular allegiance to the pastoral school of English composers. Inevitably Vaughan Williams was a major influence, as well as being a personal friend and, of course, there was Gerald Finzi, who had been a close friend from their early days at the RCM. Sumsion was no mere imitator of these two but a significant contributor in his own right to that lyrical style which represents such an important development of British music at that time.

The Sumsion and the Finzi families spent many happy times together and I know that John was devastated when Gerald died so young, even though it was not unexpected. Herbert Howells was another close friend, although musically not so related in style. It was a combination of Sumsion and Finzi who persuaded Howells to send a score of his *Hymnus Paradisi* (Sumsion had suggested the title) to Vaughan Williams who, sensing its unique qualities, encouraged the composer to allow its performance. Sumsion obliged by programming it for the 1950 Three Choirs Festival. *Hymnus Paradisi*, a deeply moving tribute to the composer's young son, emerged as one of the great British choral works of the last century.



(above) With Billy Reed – Gloucester 1928  
(right) With Ivor Atkins, Elgar and Percy Hull – Hereford 1933  
(below) With Vaughan Williams and Finzi – Gloucester 1950



(above) Worcester 1957 – Douglas Guest, Melville Cook, Herbert Sumsion, David Willcocks, Percy Hull, Harold Darke, Douglas Fox  
(below, left) Studio portrait – early 1970s  
(below, right) 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, at his Cotswold home



Sumsion wrote a vast amount of practical church music, much of which is widely used and appreciated today from cathedral to small parish church choirs. His *Evening Service in G* of 1935 has achieved immortality in the cathedral repertoire and is still in the top ten of most used canticles. Many a chorister will remember it with affection, not least because of the resemblance of a prominent phrase in the *Nunc Dimittis* to a popular ditty of the time<sup>7</sup>. I am sure John never realised the similarity but, as choristers, we took great care to stifle our mirth at this point lest the master's wrath should descend on us! He often used to say that he wrote this setting because 'there was a shortage of worthwhile services to sing.' Sumsion in A and Sumsion in D, as well as Sumsion in G for treble voices and men's voices, appear regularly on cathedral lists, and Sumsion in F is used in places where the Book of Common Prayer has not been discarded. There are anthems in abundance, ranging from the dramatic *They that go down to the sea in ships* (1979) to the deeply moving *In exile*<sup>8</sup>, an unaccompanied double choir setting of Psalm 137, written for me and first performed at the 1981 Worcester Three Choirs Festival to considerable acclaim. Most of these anthems were composed during Sumsion's long and fruitful retirement at his idyllic home on Rodborough Common. There are also several carol arrangements, but his most effective seasonal offering is a poignant setting of *Watt's Cradle Song*, written in 1941 for his sons who had evacuated with Alice to the United States for the early part of the war. This gentle carol enjoyed much popularity for a number of years and was even taken up by some distinguished solo singers, including Kathleen Ferrier, who I remember singing it as an encore at a chamber music concert in Gloucester.

The organist too has benefited from Sumsion's compositional skills, for he has left a large number of works to enrich the repertoire. It is true that most are miniatures, only the previously-mentioned *Introduction and Theme* being on a large scale, but all are so carefully crafted and ideal for service use. It is also possible to put several together to form a 'suite' of pieces for a recital. The majority are reflective, but there is an occasional hint of grandeur, as in the brilliant *Ceremonial March*, written when he was in his late eighties. He claimed to have written this to provide an alternative to endless performances of Elgar's *Imperial March*, which was brought out at every conceivable civic occasion in George Martin's fine arrangement. I was privileged to give a first performance of the *Ceremonial March* and other works from his late musings, again under his eagle-eyed supervision. He was clearly well-pleased with these and other pieces from his emeritus years.

An area of his compositional repertoire that is less-known but equally significant is his chamber music, most of which was written in the early part of his career, when one suspects that he was toying with the idea of making composition his principle occupation. The earliest of these works show more of a leaning towards the Romantic style with their classical forms and harmonic language, but also have an interesting approach to rhythmic flexibility and metric freedom together with much use of small motifs and a predilection for 5 in-a-bar. Gradually the move towards a modal language can be perceived as he begins to acquire a more personal idiom. It would be reasonable to suggest that these compositions stand comfortably besides similar works by the likes of John Ireland and Frank Bridge. Other early works include a Sonata in E Minor for violin and piano, a String Quartet in G, an *Idyll* for two pianos, together with several works for solo instruments, including the charming *Mountain Tune* – his first essay for solo 'cello, but later

7 'ave a banana!

8 This was Sumsion's only major *a cappella* work; unaccompanied singing was a dangerous occupation for him, as he could never trust choirs to sing in tune. He found poor intonation a painful experience.

arranged for string orchestra and also for the organ. This work was reviewed in *The Musical Times*<sup>9</sup> as 'very attractive, scholarly and melodious, combining good taste with good manners.'

For some unexplained reason Sumsion abandoned chamber music from his oeuvre in 1942, but not before he had written what is arguably his finest work in this genre, the Sonata for 'cello and piano in C minor, a very 'English' work in four neatly-wrought movements. It was given its first performance at a National Gallery concert in wartime London on 21 January 1942 and was well received, the distinguished critic F. Bonavia writing<sup>10</sup> that it was the work of 'a serious musician'; he was particularly impressed with the slow movement which 'held our interest from first to last'. Ernest Bradbury of the *Yorkshire Post*<sup>11</sup> was equally thrilled with the work, also expressing delight at the 'haunting' third movement, when it was given its first airing in a revised form at the 1981 Three Choirs Festival (in the same programme as *In exile*). A year later Sumsion returned again to chamber music, after a break of forty years, with his Piano Trio, written at the request of the Painswick Chamber Music Society. This three-movement work is quite capricious and unlike any of his other secular works; if anything he is harking back to his early years. Yet, even if it breaks no new ground, it deserves – with the 'Cello Sonata – to have a regular place in the chamber music repertoire.

I have always been particularly fascinated by his orchestral works, all written before the early 1930s. He showed me the scores – as part of my tuition in orchestration – on several occasions, but my questions for their non-appearance, at least at Three Choirs, for which two were specially written, produced negative responses such as 'others have done it better'. I was particularly taken with his first orchestral work *Lerryn* (1924), inspired by the countryside around the village in Cornwall of that name where he was holidaying. It is a fine score, showing a mastery of orchestration and a major advance in construction and language (even a welter of dissonances) from his other works of this period; it reminds me very much of Arnold Bax's *Tintagel*<sup>12</sup> or Malcolm Sargent's *Impressions on a Windy Day*<sup>13</sup>; yet more than in any other of his works I see the influence of Elgar. I asked him if I could include the Overture in my 1981 Festival programme, but he prevaricated and eventually said that he could not find the orchestral material. I never discovered why he was so reticent about this and his other orchestral works. The other major orchestral works are *At Valley Green* and the Overture, *In the Cotswolds*, both of which received their première at the Three Choirs Festival in 1929 and 1930 respectively. These works pay homage to the English pastoral style of the time featuring more than a nod in the direction of Vaughan Williams with their element of folk song and musical pictures of rural England. Given the passage of time these works could well stand on their own and be less tied in listeners' minds to the apron-strings of Vaughan Williams; they are the showcase of a fine, perceptive – and modest – musician, who, it would appear, felt overshadowed by the presence of the icons of the time. I have had the privilege of editing and originating all these works in recent years, but only *In the Cotswolds* (which the composer often referred to as *A Cotswold Overture*), has received a performance.<sup>14</sup> None of these works were offered when Sumsion was asked to choose a work to celebrate his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday at the 1989 Gloucester Festival;

9 Vol.81, No.1168 (1940)

10 *Daily Telegraph*, 22 January 1942.

11 26 August 1981

12 written 1917-19

13 written in 1921

14 at the Elgar Society's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary concert in 2001

instead he asked me to orchestrate his *Introduction and Theme*, which unfortunately received a very perfunctory performance by an unsympathetic conductor and orchestra.

For a time after the Second World War things appeared to be on an upward curve for Sumsion. His wife and family were back to their home in College Green, the cathedral music was improving, the choir school had a new lease of life, the Three Choirs was back on course and, of course, there were the additional pleasures of the golf course! He was not yet fifty and no doubt began to consider his future and whether or not he would be fulfilled if he stayed at Gloucester; inevitably there were rumours from time to time of his interest in moving away. I think it was common knowledge that he was tempted to move to Westminster Abbey sometime in 1941 but, because of a number of concerns, he declined the offer. (I have good personal reasons for being relieved that he did, for I would not be writing this now if he had!). By 1950, with the retirement of Ivor Atkins and Percy Hull, he had become the senior conductor of the Three Choirs and had presided over a highly successful Festival that year, clearly welcoming on board his younger colleagues, Meredith Davies and David Willcocks, both of whom made a striking impression in their respective ways at that year's event. Yet the press and public were beginning to question the value and standards of the Three Choirs. A new generation of trendy Festivals was springing up around the country and the 'authentic movement' was beginning to cause a stir. That Sumsion was not too enamoured with the latter was clear in his determination to continue playing Bach in the now 'old-fashioned' romantic way, and to perform the baroque works in a heavily-orchestrated, steady-paced manner, including the use of the piano for continuo. Early music hardly came into his equation at that time. I found it interesting that he ignored the publication of the enlightened new edition of *Messiah*, even though it was edited by a personal friend, Harold Watkins Shaw.

At a local level there was a new Dean, a man of firm views with a fair musical understanding who was determined to raise the standards of all aspects of the cathedral life and worship, which had seriously stagnated through the war years. He immediately instigated unheard of staff meetings, including a regular meeting with the cathedral organist to discuss the choir and music. Sumsion was not pleased and it was painfully obvious that an uneasy relationship existed between them in spite of the fact that the Dean, although dictatorial, was really anxious to support the music. No one really knows if it was the local problem, the national musical trends or just a need for a change that caused Sumsion to apply for the post of Principal of the Scottish National Academy of Music in Glasgow which became vacant in 1953; he was unsuccessful. Shortly afterwards he applied for an academic post at the Royal Northern College of Music, only to be rejected again. By that time I had left Gloucester for pastures new with John Sumsion's blessing and a veiled hope that one day I might succeed him, so I was only able to keep in touch from a distance. He generously came to play for me on numerous occasions in Torquay (where he opened the new organ) and Leeds, where his fine recitals attracted large and enthusiastic audiences. On one occasion he also played organ continuo in *Messiah* at Leeds Town Hall with a 200-plus choir and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic; it was a time when I was endeavouring to bring some semblance of authenticity to these annual jamborees in the area and feeling rather pleased with the results. At the end of the performance I expected some form of congratulation, but the only response I received from my former master was 'it was rather fast!' To be fair he expressed warm praise for the performance to his hosts on the following day, so I took it that he was only keeping my feet on the ground, as he had in my earlier times with him. He was very astute in these matters and was very wary of what these days we call 'whizz-kids'.

At Gloucester things continued as normal, including a succession of successful Three Choirs, while his colleagues were changing with some regularity: Douglas Guest and Christopher Robinson

at Worcester, Richard Lloyd and Melville Cook<sup>15</sup> at Hereford, the last-named a former pupil and assistant of his at Gloucester. Whether or not Dr Sumsion<sup>16</sup>, as he now was, still sought opportunities elsewhere is not really known, but he certainly accepted the large number of engagements that came his way during this period. There were organ recitals, festival adjudications, accompanying, examining<sup>17</sup> and a full programme of teaching, but little composition and virtually no guest conducting outside his home territory. He had been Director of Music at Cheltenham Ladies' College from 1935, a post he held until his retirement from the Cathedral, and was an examiner and a prominent member of the council for the Royal College of Organists for many years. At home he was the conductor of the Gloucester Choral Society and the Gloucestershire Orchestral Society, was a guiding light of the Gloucester Concert Club and the Cathedral Recitals and a practical friend to other musical organisations. For an example, he agreed to be President of the St Cecilia Singers, a group of young singers that I formed in my late teens, regularly accompanying us and never missing the annual dinner! He was indeed the supreme *Kapellmeister* of Gloucester. For all this he was rightly honoured in 1961, first with an Hon FRCM and then with a CBE, an honour that was long overdue but, in the eyes of so many admirers locally and nationally, it was not enough. Although he was obviously thrilled to be the recipient of the honours he was nevertheless not the sort of person who set out to acquire them or be disappointed if they had not been offered. Even so, Sir Herbert Sumsion strikes an amiable chord!

Dr Sumsion directed his last Gloucester Festival in 1965, the announcement of his retirement coming rather unexpectedly two years later – he had written to me prior to the announcement suggesting that I apply for the vacancy when it was advertised. This I duly did following a meeting with him, but it proved to be a bad mistake. The Dean subsequently wrote to me to say that I would not be shorted-listed, the reason given was that I had not had an Oxbridge education! (I have kept the letter for posterity). I was naturally disappointed but, in a way, not surprised. In fact better things lay in the future and, when I was appointed to Worcester, John's letter of congratulation was among the first to come through the letter-box. Our association resumed from where it had left off twenty years earlier. John gave me so much assurance for the challenges that lay ahead and was especially encouraging in his support of my work and programming of the Worcester Three Choirs Festivals, attending selected programmes in all of them until the 1990 Festival. He and Alice had moved from College Green to their beautiful Cotswold home with its view from their huge garden looking across the hills and valleys. It was here that he continued to teach and, perhaps more importantly, return to serious composition. How could he not be inspired by such a beautiful pastoral countryside that so often cries out to us through his music?

In 1967 he was appointed a professor at the Royal College of Music, where he taught theory, composition and organ, travelling to London twice a week until 1974. He relished this opportunity, especially as it gave him the chance of renewing friendships with old colleagues such as Herbert Howells. Being a big fish in a small pond like a cathedral city can be a lonely existence, a fact that I can personally vouch for.

I have already referred to the recording that was made in 1983<sup>18</sup> at Worcester: a tribute to

15 It was Dr Cook's translation from Leeds Parish Church to Hereford that opened the door for the writer of this article to travel on the same main line, ultimately ending up at Worcester in early 1975.

16 He had received the Lambeth Doctorate in 1947.

17 Sumsion was an examiner for the Associated Board for over thirty years and was still marking theory papers until his late eighties.

18 Hyperion CDA66078; re-issued on the Helios label CDH55009.

Herbert Sumsion and friends (Finzi and Howells); it was commissioned by the Finzi Trust and Joy Finzi was there, together with John, for all the sessions. We frequently had to wait for them to stop talking between ‘takes’! Herbert Howells had died earlier in that year, which made the recording of two of his motets even more poignant. Worcester was again honoured in 1989 when the BBC invited us to present a programme to mark John Sumsion’s 90<sup>th</sup> birthday; it was relayed on the actual day. A year later he and Alice moved to Frampton-on Severn to live in accommodation adjoining the home of their youngest son, Richard. Occasional visits found them both just as mentally alert as ever, always ready to reminisce and, in the case of John, to thirst for musical news and gossip – and still give advice. He talked freely of musicians who had been part of his life, including Elgar. I have already alluded to some of the musical aspects of their association, but it was also entrancing to hear his personal views and stories of the great man. Alice always liked to tell the story of shortly after their arrival in Gloucester there was a knock at the door and, after answering it, she called out to John that there was a tramp with a bunch of flowers; when he came to the door he immediately recognised that the tramp was no less than one Sir Edward Elgar, dressed for walking. The friendship that developed between them was largely confined to Festival times when the leading musicians set up house parties, although there must have been correspondence and discussions between them on matters of programming and interpretation. Elgar certainly admired John’s work and felt that his music would be safe in the younger man’s hands. John obviously found Elgar a very complex personality, saying that he could one minute be the life and soul of a party and then almost immediately become neurotic and irritable, frequently leaving the party and taking himself on solitary walks. He also said that Elgar was inclined to express regret that he had agreed to conduct a particular work, or that he did not rate it any more, and that he could be very over-sensitive with his performers – but they all loved him, whatever was his mood. John and Alice often mentioned a happening (it think it must have been at the 1932 Worcester Festival) when Elgar set out for his late-evening constitutional and had not returned by midnight. The other residents of the house party became concerned and a search-party set out to find him. In the meantime he was returned to the house by a doctor who, finding him collapsed in the High Street, had taken him home and treated him before returning him to Castle House in College Green. Elgar apparently swore them all to secrecy and conducted the next day as if nothing had happened. The Sumsions were always surprised that the story had never been leaked. I heard many stories from John of personalities and musicians of whom Elgar expressed opinions (I wish had taken recording equipment with me as there were so many fascinating tales), but one that I have always found interesting was Elgar’s prediction that ‘the young Sargent’ would develop into a better interpreter of his music than Boult who ‘was taking his music too slowly’.

John Sumsion himself was a very quiet man, some feeling that he was difficult to get to know, yet those of us who were fortunate enough to qualify as a friend or an accepted colleague found him to be a man of great charm and warm affection – and humorous. He was fairly intolerant of those he perceived to be charlatans but generous in the extreme to those that he trusted and shared his artistic enthusiasms. What stood out most of all about his character was his modesty; he was undoubtedly a genius, and he must have realised it, but he could never have been accused of letting anyone else know. On the face of it he did not possess a strong belief as his church-going outside the organ loft was fairly non-existent, yet no one could have composed so much sacred music that spoke so strongly and with such sensitivity for the text if they lacked faith and a deep understanding of the liturgy.

Herbert Sumsion died on August 11<sup>th</sup>, 1995 at the age of ninety-six. I was privileged to be asked by the family to play at his funeral, a serene act of celebration for his life and work, at Frampton

Church. Alice, his soul mate of nearly seventy years, survived him by two years. The window in Gloucester Cathedral commemorating a ‘Composer and Cathedral Organist’ (wording chosen by the family) is an apt memorial to a man who brought so much that was good and beautiful to that lovely building and the God that it celebrates.

I end these reminiscences with words that I used in the obituary I wrote for *The Independent*<sup>19</sup>, as I believe they are just as relevant now as they were then:

‘His death brings an end to one of the last direct links with the Elgarian era. To have had him around for so long was a great source of inspiration and comfort to those of us who have had the responsibility of continuing a great tradition – a tradition which he himself graced with such sincerity, distinction and quiet eloquence.’

This essay has been compiled from an article I wrote in 1999 for *The Organ* magazine commemorating the centenary of Herbert Sumsion’s birth, numerous programme notes, the obituary for *The Independent*, and various other notes, references and observations that I have documented over the years.

D.H October 31, 2013

*The conductor Dr. Donald Hunt, OBE, was organist at Worcester Cathedral from 1976 to 1996. A Vice-President of the Elgar Society, he has been deeply involved with the music of Elgar all his life, and was the driving force behind the 150<sup>th</sup> Elgar Anniversary Festival at Worcester in 2007. He is editing Vol.13 of the Complete Edition, devoted to the Part-songs, available in the summer.*

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19 17 August, 1995

## Powick People

### Martin Bird

This short essay on Powick Asylum and some of its people has been written to coincide with the release of Barry Collett's CD of the music that Elgar wrote for the Asylum (SOMM Recordings SOMMCD252, reviewed in this issue), which has at last been recorded by a fully professional group of musicians. It is an adjunct to Andrew Lyle's comprehensive essay written to coincide with the publication of Volume 22 of the Elgar Complete Edition, which he edited,<sup>1</sup> and to Barry Collett's essay of a decade earlier.<sup>2</sup>

The County and City of Worcester Pauper Lunatic Asylum was opened in August 1852 with Dr. John Robert Grahamsley as its resident Medical Superintendent. Although still in his mid-twenties, he had previous experience at Perth and at the Royal Morningside Asylum, Edinburgh. Within two years, however, he was dead, having taken poison. It was thought that rumours concerning the work of the Matron, his sister-in-law, whom he had reported to the Visiting Committee of Magistrates, had 'preyed upon his mind'. She was said to have 'by little acts of insubordination evinced a disregard and contempt for his orders'.<sup>3</sup> The verdict, rather ironically, was 'Temporary Insanity', and *Berrow's* added that he was 'much esteemed' by the Committee 'and we may say idolised by the unfortunate creatures who were under his charge'.<sup>4</sup>

He was succeeded as Superintendent by James Sherlock (1828-1881). Sherlock was quick to exploit the benefits of music therapy to the patients, and established a band staffed from the attendants at the Asylum, which contributed to the weekly entertainments for the inmates, as well as a singing class. By the end of the 1860s the Powick connection was an integral part of the musical scene in Worcester.



- 1 Andrew Lyle, 'When I was at the Lunatic Asylum...': Elgar at Powick, 1879-1884, *Elgar Society Journal*, Vol.15, No.3, (November 2007), 13-28.
- 2 Barry Collet, A Strange Apprenticeship – Elgar at Powick, *Elgar Society Journal*, Vol.9, No.6, (November 1997), 284-295.
- 3 *Worcestershire Chronicle*, 9<sup>th</sup> August 1854.
- 4 *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 12<sup>th</sup> August 1854.

Perhaps one of the most efficient remedial agents in the treatment of those mentally afflicted is cheerful music; it will therefore matter of no surprise that Dr. Sherlock, of this institution, avails himself of this powerful aid in the active means employed by him. Amongst the attendants and several of the inmates he has organised a singing class, which has for some time been under the care of Mr. Langdon, of this city, choir-master, On Wednesday night they made their second appearance before a larger audience than their usual hearers, being in the habit of aiding in the entertainments given every Friday evening in the recreation room ... Mrs. Langdon accompanied the vocal music, performing an unusually difficult task in a very efficient manner; while Mr. Langdon ably conducted and contributed in no small degree to the success of the concert.<sup>5</sup>

Frederick Langdon was born in Bath in 1827 and had come to Worcester in the 1850s. He was a band master and a lay clerk at the cathedral. His first wife, Anne, died in 1859 and he married again in the 1860s. His second wife, Marie, was a pianist and their daughter, Evelyn Cherie Langdon (1871-1951), studied singing at the Royal Academy of Music. Frederick died in 1875, now working as an hotel keeper in Hatton, Warwickshire.

County and City Asylum.- A concert to mark the conclusion of the indoor musical season took place on Tuesday evening. Mr. Langdon, the conductor, remarked, before its commencement, on the programme adopted, that he desired to show the progress the choir had made in sacred music, and had therefore introduced a short selection of church anthems for performance ... We consider so long a programme, unrelieved by instrumental pieces, a dangerous experiment, yet strange to say everything was listened to and enjoyed ... We congratulate the choir most heartily on their success; they are without exception the best amateur choir in the county.<sup>6</sup>

Despite his experience as a band master, Frederick Langdon did not conduct the Asylum band.

On Wednesday night last, Dr. Sherlock, the respected head of the Powick Lunatic Asylum, gave his annual ball and musical and dramatic entertainment to the inmates of that institution, to which a large number of friends and those immediately interested in the asylum ... were invited,

The first part of the programme consisted of a selection of vocal and instrumental music, alternatively with dancing. The vocal music was given under the direction of Mr. Langdon (Worcester), ... all of which were rendered most creditably by the choir, which was composed of the attendants of the institution, who under the competent direction of Mr. Langdon, have made considerable progress in their acquaintance with music. ... A brass band, composed also of attendants, was stationed in the gallery, and under the direction of Mr. Roberts, played the programme of dance music, and interpreted an overture, Nicholson's "Jubel March", with considerable skill and effect.<sup>7</sup>

John Roberts was born in Kemerton, Gloucestershire, in 1831, the son of George Roberts, an agricultural labourer. He trained as a carpenter, came to Powick as its carpenter soon after it was opened, and remained there until his death in 1898.<sup>8</sup> After Elgar's appointment he became his assistant.

After Langdon's departure another lay clerk, Oliver Millward, took over the choir, and Amelia Pullen became accompanist.

- 5 *Worcester Herald*, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1868.
- 6 *Worcester Herald*, 15<sup>th</sup> May 1869.
- 7 *Worcester Herald*, 6<sup>th</sup> February 1869.
- 8 Not June 1887, the date given in Lyle's article.

Concert at the Asylum.- On the evening of the 18<sup>th</sup> inst, a vocal entertainment was given at the County and City Lunatic Asylum, for the benefit of the inmates of that institution. Mr. Millward conducted, and Miss Pullen accompanied on the piano-forte; the other performers were officers and servants of the institution.<sup>9</sup>

Oliver William Millward was from Birmingham, the son of William Millward, a sawyer, and trained as a jeweller. He came to Worcester in 1866 and sang in the Cathedral Choir until his death in August 1898. Elgar knew him well, and recalled that although ‘Mr. Millward and he were bitter political foes, they never allowed that to interfere with their friendship in the Glee Club’.<sup>10</sup> Charles Pratt Green, (1852-1950) a Malvern wine merchant, remembered him.

Oliver Millward, a sufferer from asthma, came from York Minster, the more northerly climate was too rigorous for him. He was a true bass, of rare volume and quality and extraordinary compass. A colleague, discussing him in the after years, assured me that he could “cut capers on top B flat”. I have heard no finer bass, and I have heard not a few in my time.<sup>11</sup>

Millward’s younger brother, Arthur, a London jeweller, wrote to Elgar in 1905.

Dear Sir,  
Kindly allow me ... to say how much I am obliged for your kind remarks (on your returning thanks at the presentation of The Freedom of the City of Worcester being conferred on yourself), referring to my late brother, as “one of the best of men”.

It was truly true and I am sure you merit our very best thanks. May I ask you to accept a Photo of Oliver Millward which will be forwarded to you in a few days, if you will kindly accept same.

Yours faithfully  
Arthur Millward<sup>12</sup>

Amelia Pullen (1836-1914), daughter of John Pullen, a Worcester grocer, was a piano and a singing teacher, and a published composer. William and Henry Elgar were quick to exploit her achievements.

New Music. “Polka Brillante”. Elgar Brothers, Worcester. A composition worthy of its name, being both brilliant and elegant, by Miss Amelia Pullen, of this city, a young lady who has rendered good service at many of our musical entertainments. The polka is dedicated to her pupils who, with her numerous friends, will no doubt appreciate this sparkling composition, and by their patronage make it a success.<sup>13</sup>

The Elgar brothers, like many Worcester musicians, were staunch supporters of music at Powick.

Worcester County and City Lunatic Asylum. Messrs. Elgar Brothers, assisted by several musical

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9 *Berrow’s Worcester Journal*, 27<sup>th</sup> January 1872.

10 *Worcester Herald*, 19<sup>th</sup> February 1910.

11 *Berrow’s Worcester Journal*, 21<sup>st</sup> June 1941.

12 Elgar Birthplace Museum letter 5091, 14<sup>th</sup> September 1905.

13 *Worcestershire Chronicle*, 4<sup>th</sup> July 1866.

friends, kindly gave a concert at this institution for the entertainment of the patients on Wednesday night ... Several visitors from the neighbourhood and Worcester also expressed their approbation of the excellence of both the vocal and instrumental performance ... Messrs. Elgar have for several years past given an annual concert for the delectation of the inmates. Dr. Sherlock, at the conclusion, expressed his thanks to those gentlemen for their valuable assistance.<sup>14</sup>

The programme included overtures by Bellini and Rossini, and ‘My sweet Dorabella’, from Mozart’s *Così fan tutte* – the source of Elgar’s pet name for Dora Penny.

Elgar was appointed Bandmaster at Powick in January 1879, succeeding his violin teacher, Frederick Spray, who had died on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1878 at the early age of 56. The post had not been advertised.

[He was] the leader at all our concerts, and a musician of no mean order. For a number of years past Mr. Spray had been in delicate health, having suffered from an affection of the lungs, but he was able to attend to his professional duties up to the week of his death – in fact, he was present at the rehearsal of the Worcester Musical Society on Wednesday night week, and it is supposed that it was while proceeding home from that rehearsal that he caught the cold that produced inflammation of the lungs, and terminated fatally three days afterwards. His kind and genial manner won for him the respect and esteem of a large number of friends who deplore his loss ... Mr. Spray leaves a widow and five children of tender years to mourn their irreparable loss.<sup>15</sup>

Musical Worcester was both saddened and shocked, and various tributes, verbal and musical, were paid to his memory at concerts over the next few weeks. The Cathedral Organist, William Done, co-ordinated a memorial fund for his widow and children, to which Elgar subscribed. The effect on Elgar, however, was significant. From being a well-regarded number two in Worcester’s orchestral circle, he found himself the leader, in more ways than one, whenever an orchestra was required. To read the Worcester papers of the late 1870s and early 1880s is to realise quite how significant this transformation was, and rarely would a month pass without his name being mentioned two or three times either as player, conductor or, increasingly, composer. His social standing, too, was on the up. Music in Worcester was organised by people of influence and importance, and patronised by the local gentry. If the time had not yet come for Elgar to move in these circles on equal social terms, at least he did move in them when it came to music, and was highly respected.

Basil Maine, whose biography of Elgar was written with unprecedented help from the composer himself, had this to say.

He visited the asylum once a week to coach each member of the band in the rudimentary technique of his instrument. After they had made sufficient or perhaps less than sufficient headway, he conducted programmes for the sole benefit of the patients. The governors of this asylum were among those enlightened people who recognise the beneficent effect of music upon health. It was perhaps not altogether their fault that the composition of the band was, to say the least of it, unorthodox. The young bandmaster was required to conduct and compose for a combination almost as strange as his audience. The band included two cornets, a euphonium, a bombardon, flute, clarinet, two violins, double-bass and piano. For some obscure reason, the governors of the asylum had implicit faith in one particular type of composition. It was the quadrille, they were convinced, that gave most pleasure to the patients. Whether they arrived at this conviction by a referendum or by intuition or merely

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14 *Worcestershire Advertiser and Agricultural Gazette*, 10<sup>th</sup> February 1877.

15 *Worcestershire Chronicle*, 30<sup>th</sup> November 1878.

by observation is not clear. Whatever their reasons, quadrilles were what they chiefly required of their bandmaster. Spite of the ill-balanced combination of instruments, Edward Elgar was sufficiently ready of wit and invention to give them all the quadrilles they wanted. For his trouble, he received five shillings a set.<sup>16</sup>

In a letter to Frederick Edwards, editor of *The Musical Times*, written in September 1900, Elgar says ‘I fear my tunes did little to ameliorate the condition of the unfortunate inmates’.

Elgar's duties did not extend to presiding over the regular winter series of concerts promoted by the Asylum rather than given for the Asylum. They remained in the hands of Millward and Miss Pullen.

On Thursday week, the 6<sup>th</sup> inst, the second of the winter season concerts was given at the Asylum, the performers, with one or two exceptions, being, as usual, officers or attendants at the institution ... Mr. Milward conducted with his usual ability, and Miss Pullen presided efficiently at the pianoforte.<sup>17</sup>

From 1881 Jessie Holloway (1864-1932) took over as accompanist. Her father, William, was resident engineer at the Asylum. A member of the Worcestershire Philharmonic Society orchestra, several of the Powick pieces are dedicated to her.

In 1881 Dr. Edward Marriott Cooke (1852-1931) was appointed Medical Officer and Superintendent at the Asylum in succession to James Sherlock. Cooke had trained at King's College, London, qualifying in 1873, and then worked as an assistant at Powick for a time before going on the Medical Register in 1874 and becoming MRCS in 1875. In 1878 he was appointed Superintendent of the Wiltshire County Asylum, thus meeting the criteria set by the Committee of Visitors ‘That looking to the size of Powick Asylum the committee think that no candidate should be elected who has not already given proof of his ability to be at the head of a county Asylum’. He stayed at Powick until 1898, when he was appointed a Commissioner in Lunacy.

Marriott Cooke was a singer and took part in Worcester amateur entertainments. In 1879 he married Mary Anne Henrietta Cecil Brooke-Pechell (1851-1927), the daughter of George Samuel Brooke-Pechell, Bart (1819-1897). She was described in the *Lancet* as ‘an accomplished pianist and singer, whose gentleness and charm helped to mitigate the asperities of asylum life’.

Elgar met the Cookes again in March 1921, on the very day that Carice told him of her engagement to Sam Blake.

Quiet morning in – Cold wet windy day. Car at 3. Went to see Uncle Lindsay [MacArthur]'s pictures at the Leslie Thomson's studio, nice half-hour there – went on to see Sir Marriott Cooke & Lady Cooke in a flat in Coleherne Court [South Kensington] – Very interesting – as he had been head of Powick Asylum years ago – & Father & he had not met since – they were much interested talking over old times & the extraordinary changes in their lives & positions. She had known Mother through the Hursts about 1887. Quiet evening with slides. Told Father about SHB. Very sweet & dear.<sup>18</sup>

The Hurst sisters, Laura (1833-1934) and Maria Blanche (1839-1945), lived in Powick. They were the daughters of Rev. John Hurst. Old friends of Alice, they were frequent visitors to Forli.

Marriott Cooke wrote to Elgar in 1928.

16 Basil Maine, *Elgar, his Life and Works* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1933), Vol.1, 36.

17 *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 15<sup>th</sup> March, 1879.

18 Carice Elgar diary, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1921.

My dear Elgar,

I am deeply grateful to you for your sympathy with me in my great sorrow, and for your tender and laudatory allusion to my dear Wife conveyed in your most kind letter of February 2<sup>nd</sup>.

For four years she had been in a precarious state of health but the end, from heart failure, came quite suddenly.

We had been married nearly 49 years and throughout that long period she had been my constant loving companion and helpmate. Her death has been a terrible blow to me. You, unfortunately, have had the same awful experience and know what it is.

I was sorry that your daughter was perturbed about the card which she sent at Xmas. Knowing how easy it is to miss an announcement, I concentrated my mind on the thought how kind it was of her to have the wish to remember us.

Thank you I am well, as I hope you are, and am still able (at 76 years of age) I am thankful to say, to take an interest in my work as an unpaid Commissioner of the Board of Control.

I hope you received the message of Congratulation which I sent you on your receiving the K.C.V.O. It much gratified me.

My kindest remembrances to yourself & your daughter in case she is with you.

Yours most sincerely  
Marriott Cooke<sup>19</sup>

Elgar resigned his position in Powick in October 1884, although he continued to support the music there. On 19<sup>th</sup> May 1885 the Worcester Amateur Instrumental Society, of which he was conductor, gave a ‘very successful and much-appreciated concert’ at the Asylum.

The audience consisted of 300 patients, the medical and general staffs, and about 50 visitors from the neighbourhood. The programme included vocal as well as instrumental music, and was arranged so as to present a pleasant variety. The band thoroughly entered into their work, and rendered the pieces selected with admirable feeling, accuracy, and energy, receiving throughout the evening hearty and well-deserved applause. The favourite piece amongst the instrumental music was, without doubt, the march ‘Pas Redouble’, by Mr. Edward Elgar, the conductor, which certainly merited the enthusiastic reception and encore which it received. Mr. Singleton Graves' flute solo was most creditable to him, and was one of the favourite pieces of the evening. The part songs by Messrs. Barry, Weaver, Fleet, and Stoye were very pretty indeed, and obtained several encores. Mr. Stoye sang with his usual power and effect, and Mr. Fleet received a hearty encore for Pinsuti's ‘Last Watch’, for which he gave ‘The distant shore’. At the end of the programme Dr. Cooke tendered to Mr. Elgar, the conductor, and the members of the society, the best thanks of all present for the excellent and enjoyable entertainment they had given, and said he considered it an act of true charity to afford the patients of the Asylum an opportunity of hearing such excellent music.<sup>20</sup>

Winifred and Florence Norbury were among the visitors present, and Florence wrote in her diary that the concert was ‘... delightful ... they played some lovely things very well, notably Balletmusik from Rosamund, Overture to Semiramide & Fest Marsch by Raff.’<sup>21</sup>

19 EBM letter 5390, 9<sup>th</sup> February 1928.

20 *Worcester Herald*, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1885.

21 Kevin Allen, *Gracious Ladies* (Alverstoke: Kevin Allen, 2013), 294.

Elgar was succeeded at Powick by two members of another Worcester musical dynasty, the Quartermans. Head of the family was Arthur Richard Quarterman (1841-1888), organist, conductor and member of the local Glee Clubs from the 1860s on. Comments such as 'Mr Quarterman presided with his wonted ability at the piano-forte and harmonium' and 'Mr H. Elgar presided at the harmonium, and Messrs. Quarterman and Elgar at the pianoforte, Mr Elgar wielding the baton' appear frequently in the local newspapers. In 1888 he was appointed Professor of Music at the High College, Port Elizabeth, Cape Town, and left England in April with his daughter Amelia and son Percy, sadly dying in December of that year before he could be joined by the rest of his family.

Percy had been appointed bandmaster in succession to Elgar, and he in turn was succeeded by his younger brother, Arthur, a viola player and, later, a Tutor at Malvern College.

Other people connected with Powick kept in touch with Elgar over the years. Rev. Alfred Bond (1841-1910) was chaplain at Powick in Elgar's time. His son Charles Hubert Bond (1870-1945) studied at Edinburgh University and at King's College, London, qualifying in medicine in 1892. He specialised in mental health and in 1912 was made Commissioner in Lunacy and in 1914 a Commissioner of the Board of Control. He was appointed CBE in 1920 and knighted in 1929. He wrote to Elgar in 1931 about the Powick days. His letter has not survived, although Elgar's draft reply has.

Dear Sir Hubert Bond,  
I am sorry your letter has been overlooked.

It was kind of you to write: your letter revived pleasant memories of old days at Powick when your father was chaplain.

Believe me to be  
Yours very truly<sup>22</sup>

Letters from two other Powick colleagues survive in the Birthplace archives. Joseph Herbert, an attendant and the double bass player at Powick, wrote to Elgar in 1905 from Brighton ...

Sir Edward Elgar  
Perusing the Standard today I find the following paragraph

(In praise of Dr Elgar Greatest composer – also Elgar will overshadow everybody, Herr Kresslert)

I have made an attempt before to congratulate you, but did not complete it, now my opportunity has come. No doubt you will be surprised, from an old attendant at Powick Asylum, used to play Double Bass with you in the Band.

May you live to enjoy the great Honours you have bestowed upon you is the wish of one, who then was young, and reads with delight the critics on your great compositions

I remain  
Yours faithfully  
Joseph Herber<sup>23</sup>

... and Charles Yates (1860-1935). Yates was born in Bradley Green, Redditch, Worcestershire, the son of John Yates, a smallholder. He worked at Powick in the 1880s before joining the police

22 EBM Letter Book 261, 12<sup>th</sup> September 1931.

23 EBM letter 9162, 4<sup>th</sup> October 1905.

force. After leaving the police he returned to Bradley Green and took up farming. He sent birthday greetings to Elgar in 1927 and 1932.

Dear Sir Edward Elgar,  
I noticed in the London Paper that your Birthday was to day, & pardon me writing to wish you many happy returns of the day.

I am Charles Yates who at one time was market man at The Asylum Powick & had the pleasure of driving you from there to Worcester after the Ball.

I am a small holder today & am quite well & hoping this will find you the same.

Yours very sincerely  
Charles Yates<sup>24</sup>

*'An Elgarian Who's Who', compiled by Martin Bird, the latest volume in the series Edward Elgar: Collected Correspondence, will be available after Easter from the Elgar Birthplace Museum (see enclosed leaflet). It contains brief biographies of every person (to say nothing of two dozen assorted dogs, a horse, a donkey, two rabbits, a guinea pig and a toad) mentioned in the Elgar diaries or with whom Elgar corresponded.*

24 EBM letter 5541, 1<sup>st</sup> June 1927.



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## CD REVIEWS

**Music for Powick Asylum: *L'Assomoir* – Five Quadrilles, *La Blonde* – Polka, *Blumine* – Polka, *La Brunette* – Five Quadrilles, *Helcia* – Polka, *Die Junge Kokette* – Five Quadrilles, *Maud* – Polka, *Menuetto*, *Nelly* – Polka, *Paris* – Five Quadrilles, *A Singing Quadrille* – Five Quadrilles, *The Valentine* – Five Lancers.**

**Andante & Allegro for Oboe & String Trio, *Duett* for trombone & double bass, Fugue for oboe & violin.**

Innovation Chamber Ensemble conducted by Barry Collett

I suppose it's a question of accepting the opportunities on offer: Bach was offered Leipzig and composed a weekly Cantata, Haydn was offered Esterházy and composed a weekly Symphony, and Elgar was offered Powick and composed a weekly Quadrille. So the cookie crumbles. But I'm quite sure Elgar learned as much about orchestration, form and practical music making from this early opportunity as did Bach and Haydn.

Elgarians will forever be in Barry Collett's debt for his persistence and determination in ensuring that the Powick music saw the light of day. The tale was retold in the December issue of the *Journal*: one that not only involved getting the original parts into a performable state, but then performing the music and recording it with his own Rutland Sinfonia.

I must admit to having a soft spot for that earlier recording. Just as one gets a buzz from hearing Bach performed on 'original instruments', in Rutland there is the charm of hearing the music performed on 'original players', a mixture of amateurs and professionals who, with the best will in the world, don't always play together or with unanimity of intonation. But life moves on, and here we have a fabulous and self-recommending CD: a first recording of the Powick music as edited by Andrew Lyle for the Elgar Complete Edition, played by the Innovation Chamber Ensemble – instrumentalists from the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra – conducted by Barry Collett.

As well as the Powick music, there is the Fugue for Oboe and Violin, and the trombone and double bass *Duett*, both of which were included on the Rutland recording, as well as two movements for Oboe and String Trio, recorded here for the first time.

As a bass player I listened first to the *Duett*, and will admit to being a little disappointed, not only with the lack of pizzazz but with the recorded balance. While you can hear every breath the trombonist takes, the poor bass player seems to have been put in an adjoining room. Any bass-playing Elgarian (I can't be the only one) should hear BRIDGE 9163, 'Dialogues with Double

Bass', featuring players from New York's Metropolitan Opera, to see what the piece can sound like; but that's a minor quibble.

I will admit to being completely bowled over by the two movements for Oboe and String Trio, written, presumably as a largely family affair, when Elgar was around 20. I wasn't expecting 'mature Elgar', of course, but neither was I expecting music of such high quality, distinctly Elgarian in its manner and turn of phrase. It is quite wonderfully played by Victoria Brawn and her colleagues – treasure indeed.

But to get back to the Powick music, the *raison d'être* of this disc. We have here all the music that has survived in a performable state, that is to say, everything that was on the early recording plus the *Menuetto* and the *Singing Quadrilles* which now receive their first recording.

The *Singing Quadrilles* in the Complete Edition are published as 'sketch scores', but the music is complete: Elgar just never got round to copying all the notes into repeated sections. They are based on familiar nursery rhymes and other tunes, and all are quite delightful.

In his music for Powick Elgar never quite sorted out his repeats, *da capos* and *dal segnos*. I've seen the original part books, and they are indeed a mess. Quite correctly, Andrew Lyle gives us exactly what Elgar wrote in the Complete Edition: equally correctly, Barry Collett gives us what Elgar meant and what makes musical sense in the recording. It is all beautifully played with grace and poise, but above all with humour and affection. Even with the limited resources at his disposal, young Elgar displays a natural ear for orchestration, and true knowledge both of his instruments and his instrumentalists. One can just imagine the smiles on the faces of Powick's flautists and, especially, euphonium player, as they played their parts for the first time. This may have been music intended to sooth the troubled inmates, but it must have been a joy to those attendants who played in the band in addition to their normal duties.

Barry has said that his 'argument that the country dances of Haydn, Beethoven and Schubert hardly detracted from their masterworks seemed to convince a few of the Trustees' that the Powick music didn't deserve to be hidden from public view. Quite right, but it shouldn't be forgotten, either, that this music from 1879 to 1884 comes plumb in the middle of the period when Viennese dance music reigned supreme. Worcester seems to have stumbled on its own Johann Strauss II, and I long for the New Year's Day when we hear not the *Tritsch-Tratsch* Polka but the *Nelly* Polka from the Vienna Philharmonic.

There's an obvious risk of 'sameness' from listening to endless quadrilles – much as there would be from listening to 104 consecutive Haydn Minuet and Trios, or a disc of Bach Chorales – and there's an equally obvious answer: don't. This is a disc to be dipped into and savoured all the more. It is beautifully recorded, and Siva Oke is to be congratulated once more on her willingness and ability to produce discs of supreme quality. I hear that her next Elgar project is due to be recorded this month – I can hardly wait.

Martin Bird

When I reported on the recording sessions for this disc I emphasised why this music is important. Put simply it showed Elgar learning his trade: the tradesman's son at work, earning a modest living (£33 per year) and working out how to compose for a variety of instrumental groupings. Aged 21 he was appointed Bandmaster to the Powick Asylum in January 1879. Here was a regime that had adopted (for the time) an advanced treatment for patients incarcerated in an asylum when, weekly, 'amusements' were organised that were capable of realising 'a ... curative influence ...'.

Little of what you hear sounds like the Elgar we know but that really does not matter for this is music that began to make him what he became. The *Menuetto* is recorded for the first time and contains a theme used in the *Severn Suite* nearly 50 years later. There are other surprises: the pre-Powick *Andante and Allegro* for oboe and string trio from the teenager Elgar begins, as Andrew Lyle writes in his notes: '[with] a serene cantilena worthy of Bellini'. Then there are the 'Five Quadrilles' entitled *A Singing Quadrille* where Elgar weaves Nursery Rhymes into dances that must have delighted his audience and players at the time. These have not been heard in at least 140 years and were more likely never performed, so any 'delight' is for us only!

Elsewhere you will hear the first use of 'Wild Bears' from the *Wand of Youth* music but otherwise you can play this music to anyone you know and I think it unlikely they would guess the composer.

I can claim a modest part in the journey that culminated in this recording. Shortly after I reformed The Elgar Complete Edition I asked Andrew Lyle (the other unsung hero of the recording) if he would consider editing the music for the edition, subject to the agreement of the General Editor. In his notes for the recording Andrew makes the point that 'the real champion of the revival of this repertoire is the conductor on this recording, Barry Collett'. There is little doubt that Barry's devotion to this music has led, after many years, to this fine recording. You will hear the music played (better I suspect than Elgar could have ever imagined) by players largely drawn from the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra who bring a charm and the necessary lilt to pieces that might otherwise stay earthbound.

This is a fascinating and charming insight into how a self-taught composer began his journey to greatness. It is also thoroughly enjoyable and, I guarantee, will make you smile. Now could there be a better reason to buy this CD?

Andrew Neill

### ***Dream of Gerontius, Symphony No. 1***

Michelle Breedt (mezzo-soprano), Peter Auty (tenor), John Hancock (bass), Collegium Vocale Gent, Royal Flemish Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Edo de Waart



Pentatone  
PTC 5186 472

A preamble: as a young music student and avid listener, I was always puzzled by the lack of Elgar performances from the great European conductors. Admittedly he stood outside of the main Germanic school of composers, but so did Grieg in Norway, Dvorak in Bohemia, Rachmaninoff in Russia and Saint-Saëns and Fauré in France, and it didn't seem to hinder performances of their works. It wasn't as though Elgar's music was parochial or nationalistic, rooted as it was in the Germanic/Central European traditions of composition.

And it was enormously popular throughout Europe and America before the First War. Of course, after that war times were very different, and the rich, late-Romantic idiom of Elgar and others was out of tune with the times. A lot of Elgar's performers and supporters too had died during the war or shortly afterwards, so there was no performing tradition, except in this country. So a whole generation of conductors emerged who did not conduct a note of Elgar, including Karajan, Klemperer, Böhm, Kleiber and Furtwangler. Of course a few had always championed his music, including Toscanini and Eduard van Beinum, albeit with a limited repertoire. I thought, and still do, that Elgar would not be properly appreciated again until performances, and particularly recordings, were issued by foreign companies. Things improved in the 1970s led by Georg Solti and Daniel Barenboim who championed a wide range of Elgar's music, not only in this country but across Europe and America, although their recordings were mostly with English orchestras. Evgeny Svetlanov, Gennadi Rozhdestvensky, André Previn and Giuseppe Sinopoli kept the torch burning, and recordings of foreign orchestras started to appear, usually with English conductors – Colin Davis with the Dresden Staatskapelle and the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra spring to mind.

But how times have changed! A glance at my record shelves reveals Elgar CDs from Poland, Spain, Finland, Holland, Germany, Austria, Italy, Russia and Kazakhstan. Latest to arrive is Sakari Oramo's superb Second Symphony with the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra (BIS 1879) which should be in every Elgarian's collection.

Belgium has not notably been in the forefront of Elgarian endeavour, despite a fine First Symphony five years ago from Martyn Brabbins and the Flemish Radio Orchestra (Glossa OCDSA 922204) – although a quick look at the Diary Dates on the Elgar Society's website revealed several Belgian performances over the next few months. Now comes this double CD album recorded in the fine new concert hall in Antwerp, with a Belgian choir and orchestra, a Dutch conductor, German mezzo-soprano and American bass. Only the tenor soloist is English.

The superb chorus is the renowned Collegium Vocale Gent, hitherto chiefly known for its performances of early music, but here substantially increased

in size. Its contribution is probably the finest choral singing on any Gerontius recording, the semi chorus having an ethereal tone which contrasts well with the warmth of the main chorus. Everything is beautifully controlled from the great climax of the Angelicals chorus down to a hushed pianissimo when necessary – utterly secure and finely balanced. The orchestra too is alive to every detail of Elgar’s magical scoring, and the warm yet spacious recording captures everything wonderfully well. Edo de Waart is no stranger to Elgar’s works, and he shapes the score with full understanding of its myriad moods. The orchestral prelude is solemn and reverent, with the organ making its presence felt. Small details emerge well, the gleam of the trumpets sustained pianissimo as the arpeggios change from G# minor to E major at Fig.60, or the dramatic build-up of tension at Fig.119 as Gerontius goes before his God. de Waart ignores the *stringendo* marking here, keeping the rhythm steady, but it does emphasize Elgar’s grindingly dissonant chords. The following startling *fffz* chord makes its full effect.

I long to hear the part of Gerontius sung by a Wagnerian heldentenor. Peter Auty isn’t that, being recognisably in the English oratorio tradition. His top range thins at times of stress, although the climactic “Take me away” is thrillingly done, and he sings with sincerity and great attention to the words and musical phrasing. Michelle Breedt again sings with feeling and attention to detail, but there is a small vibrato in her voice that I don’t care for, although the top of her range is secure and accurate. The tempo for the final Angel’s Farewell is a well-judged flowing speed, but I have heard more rapturous accounts of the Angel/Gerontius duet in Part Two (Fig.26). The bass I do not like. John Hancock sounds to my ears unsure and under-powered. The Priest and Angel of the Agony need to have much more of a commanding presence than this.

So, a more than acceptable performance with some lovely moments. Listen to the female chorus and harps as the Angelicals chorus comes into view. But as well as religious mysticism and devout emotion the works needs some operatic fervour, and I could do with more of that at times.

The coupling is a substantial one, the First Symphony, thus neatly coupling Elgar’s greatest triumph with his greatest flop at the premières. I doubt whether many people will buy a double CD just for the Symphony as there are so many good alternatives, but this is a fine performance, proving what a fine orchestra the Royal Flemish Philharmonic is. It boasts mellifluous and well balance woodwind, excellent brass, and the heavy brass never overpower the texture, and warm but agile strings. The recording is again excellent, allowing all details of Elgar’s intricate scoring to emerge clearly – the muted horns near the beginning, for instance. The first movement’s tempi seem to me to be admirably judged, and awkward corners, like the change to triple time (Fig.17) and back again to the tempo of the introduction, is well managed. If the movement lacks some of Solti’s tension it is nonetheless a fine achievement. The following scherzo shows the busy detail of the string writing cleanly recorded, and the bass drum is particularly well caught. The slow movement emerges with gravitas and heartfelt emotion, but is never

sentimentalized. The finale is taken at a good purposeful speed, the playing is splendid and the work ends with a fully triumphant peroration.

If neither of these performances would be my absolute first choice, I nonetheless welcome them warmly as sane and convincing interpretations of Elgar’s great scores, and more than that they are a welcome reminder of the increasing international interest and respect for our greatest composer.

Barry Collett

## Symphonies Nos. 1 and 2

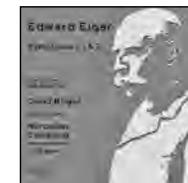
Transcribed and played by David Briggs on the organ of Worcester Cathedral

Elgar Symphonies transcribed for the organ? An heroic undertaking, certainly – but why? Don’t we have enough superb recordings of the real thing?

The art of transcription of orchestral and vocal music for organ or other keyboard instruments has a long and rich history, stretching back to Bach’s arrangements of instrumental concertos by Vivaldi and others, and to the florid keyboard versions by Andrea Gabrieli, Peter Phillips and others of madrigals by contemporaries, to give just two examples. The evident primary purpose was to broaden the availability and appreciation of these pieces of music. But behind the utilitarian motive must have lain the conviction that the value and appeal of a musical composition need not be confined to the ensemble originally chosen by the composer, which raises interesting questions about the essence of music and the way in which it speaks to us.

A century and more ago, an organ recital – especially if given by one of the great virtuosos of the day such as W. T. Best or Edwin Lemare – would have prominently featured transcriptions of spectacular orchestral works, mainly from the 19<sup>th</sup> century symphonic or operatic repertoire. In the days before recording, this introduced such music to audiences (e.g. in Town Halls) who would otherwise have little opportunity to hear it. Lemare in particular, while including works by Bach and other generic organ compositions in his programmes, insisted (given the heritage of organ music, controversially!) that organ repertoire could not compete with the music then being produced for orchestra or even piano, and that audiences demanded the latter. He also enthusiastically embraced contemporary developments in organ design and construction, which led to ever larger Romantic monsters with registers purporting to represent orchestral instruments, means of expression through swell boxes, and aids to registration which facilitated rapid and kaleidoscopic changes of sonority. The pop-star status which he achieved vindicated his approach!

The mid-20<sup>th</sup> century brought a reaction. The rediscovery of the purity, clarity and brilliance of organs from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, mainly but not exclusively from Northern Europe, and of the corresponding rich repertoire, led to many organs being built, or rebuilt, on neo-classical lines. Many of



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these were musically successful – others less so. But rare indeed, 30 or 40 years ago, was the recitalist who would champion transcriptions against programmes centred on Buxtehude, Bach and De Grigny ... and while these developments enthralled and inspired a new generation of organists and organ enthusiasts, the general music-loving public who had flocked to hear the showman recitalists of yester-year stayed away.

Nowadays the pendulum has swung back towards the centre, in terms both of organ design and repertoire. The best modern organs – of which the new instrument by Kenneth Tickell in Worcester Cathedral is emphatically one – combine classical and Romantic/symphonic influences to create an instrument with a range of tone colour as broad as that of a symphony orchestra, and – thanks to modern electronic stop-control wizardry – the possibility to use it with the utmost flexibility and artistic subtlety. This is amply demonstrated by the CDs under review.

David Briggs is a leader among the current generation of recitalists, many of whom perform their own transcriptions to great acclaim. His Elgar transcriptions join those of symphonies by Mahler, Tchaikovsky and Schubert and works by Ravel and Grieg, among others. They are entirely convincing, not as an attempt to reproduce the impact of the orchestra, but as a means to convey Elgar's musical argument in a new, valid and equally expressive medium. The tonal palette of the Worcester organ is admirably diverse and comprehensive, with a glittering classical chorus, a large number of characterful reeds and at least three types of string tone which, with octave couplers, make a lush, warm blanket of sound. It is an ideal instrument for these works. How appropriate, in Worcester of all places ...

In his sleeve note, David Briggs talks about the art of transcription; 'knowing what to leave out is central to the technique'. Organists will be interested, when listening to the CDs, to follow the extensive extracts from the scores helpfully provided at [www.david-briggs.org](http://www.david-briggs.org). It is a measure of the skill of the transcriber that even the most awe-inspiring climaxes, while certainly far from easy, remain technically accessible – at least to some.

Performances of great vigour and virtuosity, but also of great sensitivity and understanding of Elgar's ever-changing moods: a splendid new instrument in a fine, resonant acoustic well-captured by the engineers. These CDs are a welcome addition to the Elgar discography.

Andrew Carter

## LETTERS

*From Julian Ruston*

### ***Pedants' corner?***

Perhaps the Journal should imitate those of its contemporaries that include in the correspondence a 'Pedants' corner'. Here is my two pennyworth from the December issue.

First pennyworth: *Caractacus*. Bryson Mortensen is right to emphasize the pastoral element, to which Elgar himself drew attention. But he claims that Diana McVeagh in discussing the *Serenade for Strings* 'cites Elgar's tempo markings (*piacevole*) as evidence that his music portrays the pastoral'. She does not. In one sentence she notes its pastoral quality. In the next she mentions that Elgar first used *piacevole* here, having perhaps found it in a Beethoven violin sonata he had recently played; there it's applied to a movement that might have been headed 'Tempo di Minuetto'. For *piacevole* my dictionary offers 'pleasant, agreeable ...', qualities no less available in the salon than in the country.

Dr Mortensen associates Hans Keller's identification of a folk-like element in Elgar with the *Serenade*; but on the page referred to Keller discusses, and quotes, *Introduction and Allegro*. This of course doesn't deprive the *Serenade* of a folk-like quality, arising partly from the D natural at the top of the opening melody, in E minor a flat or 'modal' seventh (while the viola chunters along using 'tonal' D sharp).

I wish he would spell out how he thinks the 'Modern Britain' motif might be derived from the 'Mistletoe' motif. 'Mistletoe' (or 'oak') is an arpeggio, in triplets, descending; 'Modern Britain' also uses triplets, but they are characterized by an upward thrust (incidentally the motif begins a bar earlier than the music quoted). And does 'Mistletoe' appear 'at least once in every scene'? If so, I've missed it (and so, I think, did Elgar), and I'd value a correction to the thematic table referred to in footnote 17.

And finally ... G major as a pastoral key might refer to a good deal of music including Elgar's, but aside from the obvious fact that it's not intrinsically more pastoral than, say, C (the 'Pastoral symphony' in Handel's *Messiah*) or D (the Beethoven sonata known as the 'Pastoral', Op. 28), Beethoven's Sixth Symphony, as I'm sure many readers will have noticed, is in F. Key qualities are disputed among musicians. Elgar had read Berlioz's treatise which describes how keys sound on violins: in Mary Cowden Clarke's translation (published by Novello) G major is 'rather gay', E minor 'screamy', and both are 'slightly commonplace', the E minor adjectives seeming particularly unfitted for Elgar's beautiful *Serenade*.

On a totally different topic, Tony Jones writes about a possible 'Carice' cipher in the 'Enigma' Variations. In common with many other 'solutions' this concerns only the notes of the theme and so doesn't deal with a lot of other clues, misleading or otherwise, that Elgar left. And interestingly this 'Carice' idea, involving upward transposition of the theme, isn't new. Two earlier versions are mentioned in my 1999 book on the Variations (pp. 70–1), and come from excellent musicians, Geoffrey Poole and Christopher Seaman. That the same idea seems to have occurred independently to three people might perhaps be held to lend it some credibility. This is my second pennyworth: why should the cipher-challenged Dora Penny be expected, 'of all people', to have spotted it?

**Richard Strauss**

Browsing in *Letters of a Lifetime* I once again read the brief correspondence with Strauss, early in 1922, when Strauss came to London for the first time after the war.

Elgar made a point of expressing a warm welcome and Strauss replied with equal warmth. Ten days later Elgar entertained Strauss to lunch, along with Shaw and a number of other musicians, two of whom spoke fluent German. The occasion shows both men at their best and one regrets that they met so rarely.

Nobody however seems to have noticed that in the last sentence of his reply Strauss made a terrible *faux pas*. He gave his best respects to Elgar's wife.

But by then Alice had been dead for nearly two years, and although there is no reason why Strauss should have known, Elgar must have had the very difficult task of somehow explaining without creating awkwardness. If he had simply let the mistake go he would only have put Strauss in danger of repeating it face to face.

Did he let Strauss know himself? Or get someone else to drop a hint, which might have been more tactful?

I wonder if anyone has any more information.

*Editor's note:*

Strauss was in London to conduct a concert at the Albert Hall on 17<sup>th</sup> January with the London Symphony Orchestra. Elgar wrote on 12<sup>th</sup> January and Strauss replied – in German – the same day. Elgar attended the concert with Charles Alice and Clare Stuart Wortley, Charles's sister Margaret Talbot, and Seymour Leslie. In a letter to Carice on the 18<sup>th</sup> Elgar says that 'Strauss had a great reception last night', but gives no indication that the two had met. The luncheon was on 23<sup>rd</sup> January at the Solitaire Club. The guests, in addition to Strauss and his wife and Bernard Shaw, included Max Mossel, Felix Salmond, Victor Beigel, and Adrian Boult.

In a letter of 13<sup>th</sup> February to Edward Speyer, Elgar says 'I saw much of Strauss & gave lunch for him with Shaw etc'. Speyer replied: 'Being too old to face the dreadful weather then prevailing to go to town to greet Strauss, I wrote and tried to get him here, but to my regret he replied it wasn't possible, his son had got jaundice, etc.' As Strauss in his reply to Elgar on 12<sup>th</sup> January had said 'Unfortunately my son is ill and during the next few days it will be difficult for me to be away from the hotel' it seems likely that Speyer had written at much the same time. Perhaps it was he who broke the news of Alice's death?

## 100 YEARS AGO ...

Alice's opening words in her diary for 1914 were 'Pray this may be a happy year for E. & C. & all beautiful things'. January started with a number of lunches, formal and informal, for Professor Sanford Terry from Aberdeen, for Ivor Atkins, who was having a new year break in London, and for the officials of the Union of Graduates in Music, to which Landon Ronald was also invited. His reply to Elgar's invitation was redolent of the times: 'I should be glad if you would commemorate the year for me by always from to-day calling me by my Christian name as my few real friends always do. You & Lady Elgar may not care to do so, but I suggest it.' He had known the Elgars for four years!

On 9<sup>th</sup> January Adolf Brodsky came to Severn House '& to our joy & surprise, Dr. B. played the whole of the Concerto. E. played piano most booful'. After lunch next day 'A.S.W. came & played the lovely Piano Concerto piece'. He was working, too, on a number of choral songs and on the psalm 'Give unto the Lord'.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> 'he went to hear the orch. play Carissima for Gramophone – Much amused': his first recording session. Three days later, while Carice was at the theatre seeing *Mr. Wu*, Alice read Elgar her story from the 1880s, *Two Summers*, and 'regretted muss not to have written more. Consoled by wise dictum "the care of a genius is enough of a life work for any woman"'.

February saw continued work on the choral songs and psalm, and on a 'dear violin piece': *Soupir d'amour*, published as *Sospiri*. Apart from that there were frequent concerts, theatre trips, dinners ... and winter colds.

In March Elgar signed 'a stirring manifesto protesting against Home Rule' for Ireland: 'So glad ... his heart was in it from the first', said Alice. She noted, ruefully, a few days later that he was 'much inclined to play with anything to avoid working at Anthem'. The 19<sup>th</sup> found him Manchester conducting *Falstaff* and the 'Variations' with the Hallé.

On the 30<sup>th</sup> he and Alice travelled in a 'horrid little steamer' to the Isle of Man, where they stayed at Government House. Elgar was adjudicating at the island's Musical Competitions.

April seemed to be filled more with amusements than music: the Sunday flying displays at Hendon ('saw looping loop'), 'busy carpentering', and, and the end of the month, visits to the annual Shakespeare Festival at Stratford-upon-Avon with the De Navarros. The month ended with the first performance of 'Give unto the Lord' at St. Paul's Cathedral, on the occasion of the 260<sup>th</sup> Festival of The Sons of the Clergy. The choir numbered 250, and was accompanied by full orchestra. 'Give unto the Lord' was the anthem. The service opened with Sullivan's *In Memoriam* overture, and closed with the 'Hallelujah' chorus. The preacher was the Archdeacon of Sheffield, and 'there were suffragist interruptions before and after the sermon'!

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