

In the South (Alassio) op.50

Concert-Overture for Orchestra

Approximate Length: 22 minutes

First Performance:

Date: 16 March 1904

Venue: Elgar Festival, Royal Opera House,
Covent Garden, London

Conductor: Edward Elgar

Orchestra: Hallé Orchestra

Dedicated To my friend Leo F. Schuster

The score of *In the South (Alassio)* can be found online at the International Music Score Library Project (IMSLP).

The year 1904 did apparently not start too well for Edward Elgar. In the preceding years he had been able to notch up his first overwhelming triumphs, starting with the *Enigma Variations* and the *Sea Pictures* (1899), followed by *The Dream of Gerontius* (1900) whose first performances in Düsseldorf (1901/02) marked the beginning of Elgar's international reputation. And with *Cockaigne (In London Town)* as well as the first two *Pomp and Circumstance* marches (1901) the composer seemed to ride a wave of success.

In the meantime, Elgar, a man in his mid-forties, was under huge pressure: he finally wanted to compose a full-scale symphony, an aim which he had attempted for years by preparing sketches. However, he had postponed this venture again and again, continuously eluding every arising possibility of a premiere. But now Frank Schuster, Elgar's friend and patron, had organized a three-day all-Elgar festival for March 1904, to be held at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden and run by the Hallé Orchestra and their conductor Hans Richter, an admirer of Elgar's music and true friend since the first performances of the *Enigma Variations* and *The Dream of Gerontius*. For this festival the composer had promised his first symphony, to be

dedicated to Hans Richter.

To get in the mood and to escape the English winter the sensitive but also hypochondriac composer wanted to spend some months on the supposedly sunny and warm Italian Riviera, as it was a habit for many of his compatriots; and there, eventually, he wanted to start writing his symphony. In November 1903 Elgar and his wife Alice had travelled to Bordighera, a spot they disliked due to the many fellow countrymen ('the place is lovely but too cockney').¹ Therefore, on 11 December, the Elgars travelled eastward on the Ligurian Coast to Alassio where they rented the Villa San Giovanni.

For Christmas, the couple were joined by their thirteen-year-old daughter Carice, accompanied by their friend Rosa Burley. Unfortunately, in spite of the familial harmony, the composer felt rather depressed, suffering from the rainy weather and the cold local winds, additionally dispirited by the apparent failure to begin the symphony. On 3 January 1904, Elgar complained to his editor (at the publisher Novello) and friend Alfred Jaeger (*Nimrod* in the *Enigma Variations*): 'This visit has been, is, artistically a complete *failure* & I can do nothing: we have been *perished* with cold, rain & gales ... The Symphony will not be written in this sunny (?) land. I am trying to finish a Concert overture for Covent Garden instead of the Sym. [original emphasis]² The very next day Elgar sat down and got the overture started, and on 7 February he wrote similar letters to Hans Richter and Frank Schuster, telling them that the symphony could not be written, but instead 'a new Concert Overture "*In the South*" or some similar title ...'[original emphasis]'.³

Inspiration

As soon as the weather brightened up the familial company went on several outings, on foot or by train, and Elgar received various inspirations which materialised in the new composition. On Epiphany, Elgar and Carice took a walk above Alassio to a village called Moglio. The sound of this name stimulated Elgar's playful soul to a pun, and the descending dotted three-tone motif (Mooo-gli-o) became a recurrent theme (rehearsal figure 11).

Another inspiration was initiated by the historic landscape when, three days later,

¹ Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Edward Elgar – Letters of a lifetime* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 140.

² Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Edward Elgar – A Creative Life* (Oxford: University Press, 1987), 425.

³ Moore, *Elgar – Letters*, 143.

Elgar went by train to the neighbouring village of Andora (not to be confounded with the Principality of Andorra!). He walked up to the church of San Giovanni Battista where, close to an ancient Roman military road, he met a shepherd playing the flute and grazing his sheep. This picture is composed as the central episode (fig.20) and as a merciless and gloomy meditation mirroring the grandeur and doom of the Roman Empire. This reflection is at the same time a presentiment of the decline of the British Empire, a loss that Elgar was going to set to tremendously emotional music at the end of the Great War. Elgar remembered in an interview:

‘The shepherd with his flock and his home-made music: the massive bridge and road still useful, and to a reflective mind awe-inspiring: the music developed to paint the relentless and domineering onward force of the ancient day and give a sound-picture of the strife and wars (“the drums and tramlings”) of a later time: streams, flowers, hills; the distant snow mountains in one direction and the blue Mediterranean in the other. In a flash it all came to me – the conflict of the armies on that very spot long ago, where now I stood – the contrast of the ruin and the shepherd – and then, all of a sudden, I came back to reality. In that time I had composed the overture – the rest was merely writing it down.’⁴

The knowledgeable Elgar interweaves this vivid description of musical inspiration with a literary quotation: ‘the drums and tramlings’ is taken from *Hydriotaphia* by Thomas Browne who describes in 1658 the discovery of Roman tombs in Norfolk and the military Roman life in Britannia. On his first visit to Italy, Elgar experiences through his vision the ‘relentless and domineering onward force’ of the Imperium Romanum.

The imagination of the Roman forces is followed (fig.34) by a pastoral scene inspired by the shepherd’s music: ‘The shepherd singing softly his Canto-popolare & the peace & the sunshine once more take the chief place in the picture.’⁵ The ‘Canto-popolare’, a delicate yearning melody, is played by the solo viola.

Completion

Thus the journey which had started as depressingly inefficient seemed to lead to a fruitful end. The score was nearly completed when a letter from London arrived that

⁴ Moore, *Elgar – Life*, 428.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 427.

forced Elgar to a premature cancellation of his holiday as he was invited for dinner with King Edward VII at Marlborough House, his residence as Prince of Wales. This was an event not to miss, as Elgar was very fond of the King who was a connoisseur of art with a distinguished passion for music. Subsequently *In the South* was to be finished when Elgar was back in Malvern; in the evening of 21 February he wrote the last notes and added a dedication on the accomplished score: 'To my Friend, Leo F. Schuster'.

In spite of Jaeger's endeavour time was too short for a normal printing procedure as the Elgar festival at Covent Garden was scheduled for mid-March. Therefore the proof-reading had to be done by the composer himself in the first days of March in order to be able to hold the first rehearsal on 9 March with the Hallé Orchestra in Manchester. As the intended conductor Hans Richter had no time to get acquainted with the score, he had asked Elgar to conduct this piece himself.

So, on the third and last night of the festival the composer conducted the first performance of *In the South*. The size of the audience was not quite as big as for the two preceding concerts when *The Dream of Gerontius* and *The Apostles* had been performed. But the programme consisting of Elgar's war horses (excerpts from *Caractacus*, the *Sea Pictures*, *Enigma Variations*, *Cockaigne*, the *Pomp and Circumstance* marches, all conducted by Richter) and – as a final highlight – *In the South* was enthusiastically applauded and the premiere was highly acclaimed by the press. The Queen was present at all three of the concerts, King Edward at the first two.

In the summer of 1904, on 5 July, Elgar was knighted in Buckingham Palace. Thus, a year which had started in unpleasant conditions had turned to a year of recognition and glory – a fame that would not quit the conductor from now on.

And a few years after *In the South* Elgar carved out his way to his aim of composing: in 1908 he accomplished his first symphony – in E-flat major, in the same key as the overture written in Alassio. The symphony is dedicated to Hans Richter who conducted its premiere, calling it 'the greatest symphony of modern times, written by the greatest modern composer – and not only in this country.'⁶

Form

In the South (Alassio) is by far more than a *Concert-Overture for Orchestra* as Elgar

⁶ *Ibid.*, 546 f.

named his op.50. Due to its length of more than 20 minutes and its thematic texture, it could be appropriately designated as ‘tone poem’ or ‘symphonic poem’. Perhaps Elgar wanted to avoid these appellations to evade any conflict with Richard Strauss’s contribution to this musical genre – especially as Strauss had composed an expansive so-called Symphonic Fantasy in four movements *Aus Italien* op.16 (1886). Elgar’s relation towards the successful German colleague was not unclouded, in spite of their mutual respect: in 1902, after the *Dream of Gerontius* in Düsseldorf, Strauss had distinguished Elgar by raising his glass ‘to the welfare and success of the first English progressive, Meister Edward Elgar’,⁷ whereas Elgar admired thoroughly the dexterity of ‘Richard the Lionheart’ (as he called him). At the same time Elgar was suspicious of Strauss’s excessively well-polished musical surface.

Elgar’s overture can roughly be divided into five parts: exposition – *Moglio*-episode – Roman vision – ‘Canto-popolare’ – recapitulation.

The beginning of *In the South* cannot deny a proximity to the fizzy starts of Strauss’s *Don Juan* or *Ein Heldenleben (A Hero’s Life)*. It is an elaborated version of a motif that Elgar had sketched in the guestbook of his friend George Robertson Sinclair, organist at Hereford Cathedral, in 1899. Sinclair (and his bulldog Dan) had already been depicted as ‘G.R.S’ within the eleventh of the *Enigma Variations*. And the exuberant opening of the overture has its nucleus in the guestbook where the dog lover Elgar signed it as ‘Dan Triumphant (after a fight)’.

This first theme is in one of Elgar’s typical *Nobilmente* moods in triple *forte* (fig.6) until the wide-ranging *Moglio*-episode (prepared four bars after fig.10) spreads a bucolic idyll by interweaving the idiomatic motif between winds and strings.

Elgar’s vision of the bygone Roman Empire constitutes the central part (fig.20); prepared by bawling trumpets, this episode is indicated *Grandioso*. The proceeding threat of a powerful and enormous army is depicted by archaic harmonies and open fifths.

The following section (fig.34) represents the peaceful antitype of the ‘Canto popolare’. The solo viola pays a deliberate reverence to Hector Berlioz’s symphony *Harold in Italy* (1834), where the Protagonist, embodied in the viola, is depicted on a walking tour through Italy. (Elgar was influenced also by Berlioz’s literary model, Lord Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* – see below.)

⁷ Michael Kennedy, *The life of Elgar* (Cambridge: University Press, 2004), 85.

The last section (fig.40) resumes the initial theme as a recapitulation. Elgar interlaces it with a reminiscence of the *Mogli*-motif and even makes the *Nobilmente*-theme reappear – although in contrasting dynamics, this time *tranquillo*, *ppp* and *dolcissimo* (fig.51). And, rather soon, the overture is led to a comparatively laconic end.

Arrangements and poetic fusions

In 1904 Elgar immediately arranged his ‘Canto popolare’ for various instruments to secure a second life for the melody as a piece of chamber music. Even more, the literary-skilled composer underlaid the alleged shepherd’s tune with stanzas by the romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, entitling this hybrid *In Moonlight*. (It can be assumed that Elgar was aware of Shelley’s untimely death, only 29 years old, drowning in the Ligurian Sea.) Shelley’s verses are taken from *An Ariette for Music. To a Lady singing to her Accompaniment on the Guitar*, and the last stanza invokes a distant idyll merging music, moonlight and love:

Though the sound overpowers,
Sing again, with thy sweet voice revealing
A tone
Of some world far from ours,
Where music and moonlight and feeling
Are one.

In his autograph score Elgar recorded more secret literary stimulations; on the one hand these are verses by Alfred Lord Tennyson (from *The Daisy*) which underline the Arcadian character of the Italian landscape:

What hours were thine and mine,
In lands of palm and southern pine,
In lands of palm, of orange blossom,
Of olive, aloe, and maize and vine.

On the other hand (and as mentioned above), a strong association arose from Lord Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, the literary inspiration for Hector Berlioz’s *Harold*

in Italy:

... a land
Which was the mightiest in its cold command
And *is* the loveliest ...
Wherein were cast ...
... the men of Rome!
Thou are the garden of the world.

Brutal force and charming grace – these two contrasting poles of Roman history and Italian presence are most beautifully merged and united in Elgar’s overture.

Elgar’s recording

We have one recording of *In the South* which Elgar conducted in two portions in 1921 and 1923.⁸ In Hayes, now part of the London Borough of Hillingdon, the recording pioneer Emil Berliner had his company His Master’s Voice (HMV). (These studios were later transferred to Abbey Road; this eventually world-famous venue being inaugurated in 1931 by Elgar himself.) In Hayes, Elgar recorded *In the South* in December 1921 and October 1923.

Due to the limited playing time of a record it was, also for Elgar, a common procedure to amputate the work to tape with more or less severe cuts. Interestingly, Elgar’s recording suffers from only seven very small cuts which don’t represent a significant distortion. The fact that Elgar’s own recording of 16 minutes is considerably faster than today’s modern recordings (of 21-22 minutes) is not due to the (in this respect) negligibly tiny cuts, but to his incredibly fast tempo.

It is a common fact that composers are not necessarily the best performers of their own work: Elgar refuses his own music any sumptuous bloom even though his score is overflowing from sentiment, and at the *Nobilmente* and *Grandioso* sections he hurries away.

All historic recordings of this time suffer from very poor orchestral sound, as even large-scale works could only be recorded with one microphone; a small amount of musicians had to gather in front of a huge funnel. The sound spectrum is nevertheless thrilling and fascinating as we cannot perceive a voluminous orchestra

⁸ *Elgar conducts Elgar – The complete recordings* (Music&Arts CD-1257 [4 CD]).

sound, but the sum of single instruments and musicians and their musical and technical abilities. The Leader (Concertmaster), for example, sounds very close and of stupendous virtuosity. This makes the prestidigitation Elgar requires from the first violins individually perceptible and compels our profound admiration – even 100 years after *In the South* has been recorded under Elgar's baton.

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