

The College Hall

Edward Elgar

*In December 1929 Elgar moved into 'Marl Bank', the house on Rainbow Hill, Worcester where he would live for the remaining years of his life. Once again a Worcester resident, he provided the introduction to his old friend Hubert Leicester's book *Forgotten Worcester*, published in 1930. (The introduction is reprinted in Percy M. Young's *Letters of Edward Elgar* (London: Bles, 1956), p. 303–5.) The following year he wrote this short piece for *The Three Pears* (*The Illustrated Worcestershire Magazine*, no. 6). His reminiscences of College Hall, part of the King's School, Worcester, include anecdotes about its use as a concert venue and a tribute to the composer Alexander Mackenzie (1847–1935). This is believed to be the first time the article has been reproduced in its entirety since its original publication.*

I often speculate as to the effect on my fellow townsmen of the old buildings with which they are brought into contact daily. The College Hall is a favourite subject for meditation with me, carrying, as it does, the happiest memories of great music, with a halo of the Middle Ages combined with an odour of sanctity which even the sacrilege of the reformers has not wholly destroyed.

I do not know when the College Hall was first used as a concert-room, but the date could be discovered from programmes of meetings of the Three Choirs.

Many of the greatest artists of European reputation have appeared in this Hall. Paganini, I believe, gave his concert in the upper room of the old Guildhall, but names of equal celebrity appear in the programmes of the Musical Festivals here.

A ludicrous incident occurred in, I think 1848, when Lablache, the most celebrated basso of his day and Madame Alboni, an equally famous contralto, sang a duet at one of the Festival concerts in the College Hall. My father was playing in the orchestra and his copy of the programme is now in the Cathedral musical library. At the conclusion of the duet, amidst thunders of applause, the two great artists hand in hand and bowing profoundly retrograded to the exit. Both were of affluent proportions and they became inextricably fixed in the doorway and no amount of wriggling could free them. The applause continued and the artists continued to bow but they could not get away. My father said the lady looked pathetically to the instrumentalists but no mere second violin had sufficient courage to wrench a world-famous prima-donna out of the difficulty. The matter was eventually settled by several of the stewards.

The Hall was a wonderful setting for classical music. With the small Mozart orchestra the acoustics were perfect, and the venerable building looked very striking amongst the old elms of the College Green. I remember particularly the concert given in 1881, when Mackenzie's cantata *The Bride* was produced. To young musicians this was the greatest event in English music. Mackenzie, a native of Edinburgh—(his history is too well known to be retold here)—was a friend of the d'Egville, the celebrated musical family, some of whom were settled in Worcester, and came with a great reputation as an instrumentalist and composer. My meeting with the great man was the event of my musical life. Several young musicians, Charles Hayward of Wolverhampton and myself among the number, were continually repressed and even reprimanded for an alleged ignorance of harmony. I should have added my old friend F. Wadely's name to this list, save for the fact that in his case his skill as an organist outweighed the supposed harmonic deficiencies of the violinist. It was believed by most professors and

amateurs of that day that no one could understand harmony unless he played the organ or the pianoforte; 'Elgar's boy (meaning me) cannot possibly know any harmony because the instrument he plays (the violin) sounds only one note'. We had been accustomed to perform compositions by Sir Frederick Ouseley, Dr Philip Arnes and others of the organists and professors of music, who furnished meritorious works for festivals, but they lacked that feeling for orchestral effect and elasticity in instrumentation, so obvious in the works of French, Italian and German composers.

The coming of Mackenzie then was a real event. Here was a man fully equipped in every department of musical knowledge, who had been a violinist in orchestras in Germany. It gave the orchestral players a real lift and widened the outlook of the old fashioned professor considerably. *The Bride* was a fine example of choral and orchestral writing, had a rousing reception and was the first of a long series of great works.

I had the honour to meet the composer the following morning and actually shook hands with him at Sansome Lodge. I need not say how Mackenzie went on to write operas and orchestral works, eventually giving up one side of his career to become head of the Royal Academy of Music. Here he identified himself with everything that was great and good; at his retirement he received many honours and affectionate remembrances. I was at the meeting when Sir Hugh Allen, in making a presentation, said—'the letters R.A.M. which for more than a century have meant "Royal Academy of Music" can now take on an added meaning—they may well signify "Remember Alexander Mackenzie".'

These letters had, and still have a deep significance for me; they altered my outlook on artistic life. As a young man with ambitions, irritated by the attitude of the learned professors, I had decided, with youthful conceit, that never would I take any degree or other honour. This resolve was broken when I received a charming letter from the principal of the Royal Academy of Music (Sir Alexander) offering me the Hon. R.A.M.; this could not be refused and the honour had a peculiar satisfaction for me, as it came from one who had himself been a violinist.

Having accepted this distinction, I could not logically refuse such things as came my way, and such things have come in a somewhat bewildering succession to this date.

Such are my thoughts when I pass the College Hall and I am glad to have an opportunity to pay this tribute to the revered head of our art in this country, to my old friend Sir Alexander Mackenzie.

EDWARD ELGAR of Broadheath
3rd June, 1931



*Alexander Mackenzie.
Courtesy of Lewis Foreman.*

The Seeds of Greatness

Ian Parrott

Professor Parrott is a vice-president of the Elgar Society, and last appeared in these pages with an article on The Apostles in the July 2003 edition. 'The urge to produce some Elgariana has hit me again!' he writes, so it is a great pleasure to welcome him back with a piece in which he describes how the mature hallmarks of Elgar's musical style can be traced back to earlier works, specifically the First Organ Sonata.

When I was learning the organ more than seventy years ago, my enlightened teacher, Dr Henry Ley, put me on to parts of the Elgar Organ Sonata, op. 28 of 1895. At that time—as most students, who think of music only as something to be played—I was more concerned with the fingering in the right hand of the *allegretto* second movement. Those who are more inclined to slouch as armchair listeners will remember the confidently optimistic bombast of the opening phrase of this work (not unlike a theme in Puccini's *Tosca* of three years later):

Ex. 1



The image shows two musical staves. The top staff is labeled 'Elgar' and shows the beginning of a melody in G major, 2/4 time. It starts with a quarter note G, followed by quarter notes A and B, then a quarter note C with a fermata, and then a quarter note D. The bottom staff is labeled 'Puccini' and shows a similar melody in G major, 2/4 time, starting with a quarter note G, followed by quarter notes A and B, then a quarter note C with a fermata, and then a quarter note D. Both staves have a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#).

I must confess that I then thought of the *Andante espressivo* third movement as rather dull typically Victorian (the melody is quoted in full in Robert Anderson, *Elgar* (London: Dent, 1993), p. 399). Now, however, I believe it is this very movement that shows the seeds of greatness being sown while the unrecognised composer was still living in Malvern. This may be observed not only in the melodic development but in its form, where we glimpse a version of Elgar's much more mature thinking in the wonderful slow movement of the Violin Concerto (1910). In both it is as if the composer starts fairly routinely but then, as the inspiration flows, so the music becomes more ecstatic—and more characteristic. Indeed, it is very often a 'second subject' which shows the strong individual personality of the composer. This is particularly true of the *Presto (comodo)* finale. What a marvellously exuberant theme it is, starting with the dropping fourth of the opening of the sonata (Ex. 1). It blossoms out with a rising ninth, but later it becomes a rising *tenth!* Has Elgar ever exceeded this in his exultant leaps?

Ex. 2



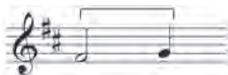
The image shows a single musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of two flats (Bb, Eb). The time signature is 2/4. The melody starts with a quarter note G, followed by a quarter note F, then a quarter note E. It then rises to a quarter note G, followed by a quarter note A, then a quarter note B. The melody continues with a quarter note C, then a quarter note D, then a quarter note E. There are dynamic markings: *mf* above the first measure, *f* above the second measure, and *f* above the third measure. There are also some slurs and accents.

But it is the slow movements which are drawing my attention at present.

In the case of the Organ Sonata the beautifully whispered opening of the second subject, *ppp*, in the unlikely key of F sharp minor, has two notes, the sixth and fifth of the scale, which appear in the reverse order in many parts of the Violin Concerto.

The beginning (a) and the answering end of the concerto (b) show this prominently.

Ex. 3 (a)



(b)



However, some of the very greatest of Elgar appears in the *second* subject—yes!—of the slow movement, where we are not surprised to observe the word '*nobilmente*' as a contrast to the '*semplice*' of the *first* subject:



Ex. 4

So, second movements may start with a somewhat bland and often diatonic idea which leads then to a more impassioned second subject. Does this not suggest that there is an increase in inspiration as Elgar warms to his unfolding music?

The Violin Sonata (1918) is exceptional in its second movement in that the soaring diatonic second subject follows an almost trivial ballet-like first idea which for a change is chromatic!

Another Elgarian fingerprint may be noticed in the Organ Sonata: a sort of lingering between two chords. Here, in the second movement, *Allegretto* (Ex. 5), Elgar returns, after a second inversion dissonance, to his first chord. Almost shyly he introduces an idea, where he returns to a chord with one other chord between:



This is something of which the composer must have been rather fond, since it is very similar to an idea he'd used in the *Wand of Youth* music (see my *Elgar, Master Musicians* (London: Dent, 1971), p. 91).

This movement's second subject, incidentally, uses the notes in a way which seems to foreshadow the Violin Concerto, starting with the fifth and sixth notes of the key:



Moreover, the second chord in Ex. 5, marked with an asterisk, is derived from a second inversion dominant seventh, as also is the first chord of Ex. 4 in the concerto. I'm sure the textbook he'd read as a boy would suggest caution with second inversions, so of course he threw caution to the winds, didn't he? He was clearly sowing the seeds of future personal greatness in the Organ Sonata.

IAN PARROTT is a composer, author and a vice-president of the Elgar Society. He was Gregynog Professor of Music at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth for over thirty years. His biographical study Elgar was published in the Master Musicians series in 1971; his latest book, an autobiography, was published in 2003 by the British Music Society.