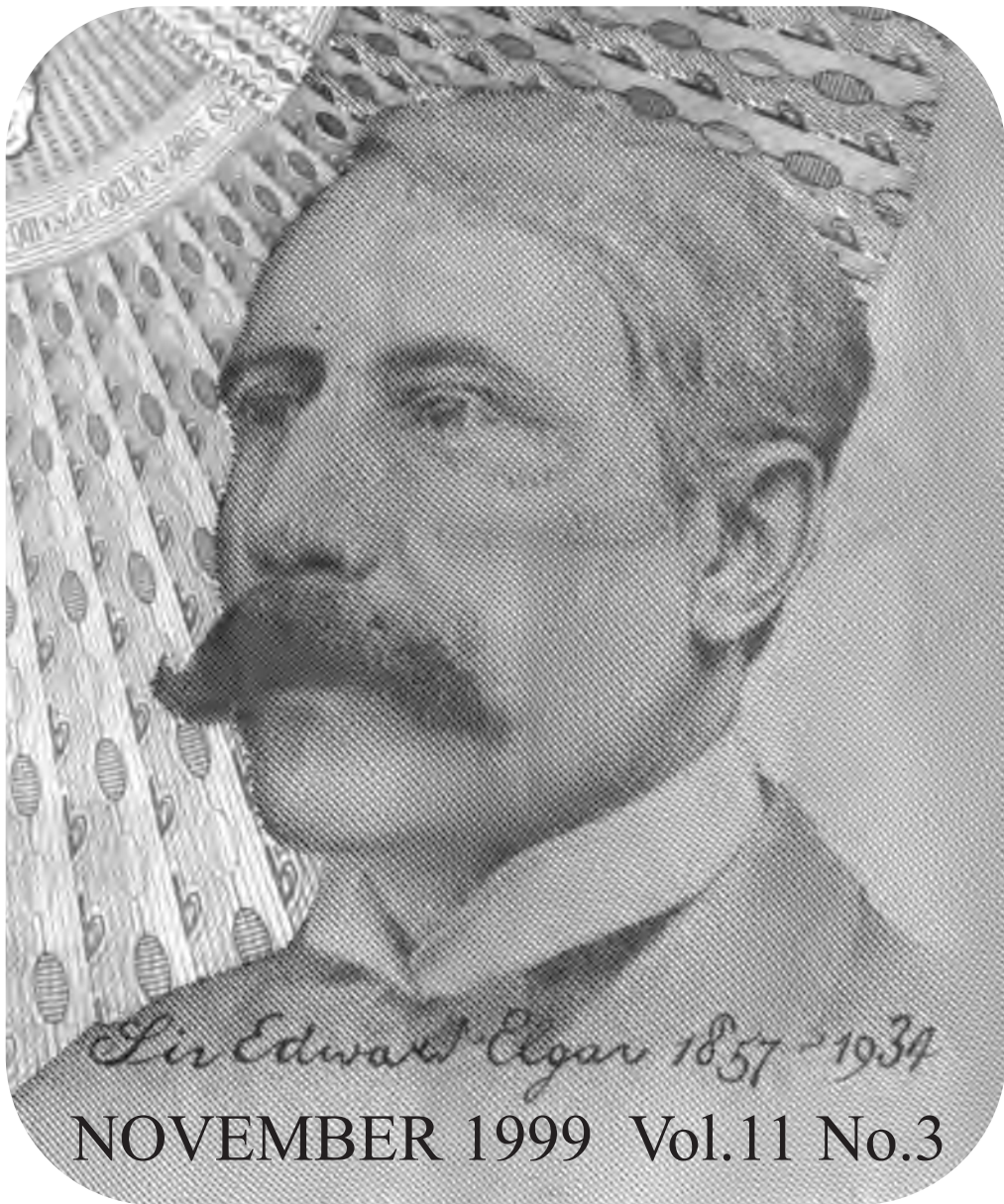


# The Elgar Society JOURNAL



*Sir Edward Elgar 1857-1934*

NOVEMBER 1999 Vol.11 No.3

## THE RETURN OF THE DOVE TO THE ARK

### 'Enigma' Variations a Century on

Jerrold Northrop Moore

The announcement of a new creative presence on the world stage has never been made more brilliantly or completely than by Elgar's *'Enigma' Variations*, a hundred years ago. The *Variations* announced a mature new presence - deftly and graciously acknowledging its roots in the private experience of the man himself, and at the same time anticipating in an extraordinary way the career that was to unfold over the next twenty years. In these ways Elgar's *Variations*, I suggest to you, was and still is without a parallel anywhere in music.

Elgar's private strength - a primary source of his power over those who love his music (as well, perhaps, as over those who used fashionably to hate it) - lies in his strange ability to look both backwards and forwards at once. That is, when you think about it, an essence of musical form, as an art in time. But Elgar's music has this strange way of bringing *together* the Ghost of Christmas Past with the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, as the two faces of a Janus. Elgar's Janus, as it emerges in the *Variations*, shows in one face the human being his friends knew (or hoped they knew). The other face reveals, as I think, his creative aspiration. It is that face, seldom looked at in the context of the *Variations*, that I would like to scrutinise with you today.

This means going right outside all notions of the 'Enigma' as a riddle to *solve*. It means entertaining the thought that Elgar himself might not have known the answer, or any answers, when he first played that music; and (most intriguing possibility of all) that he might have started it *in order* to see where it could take him.

The thoughts that follow are the fruit, such as it is, of my thinking over many years. I make only two claims for these thoughts : one, that they are my own; and two, that they accord with every single statement Elgar made on the subject, early and late, that is known to me.

Elgarians have always known in a rough-hewn way about the *Variations'* beginning. And since 1984, when the *Creative Life* reconstructed the whole chronology, everyone has known the story, as told mostly by Elgar himself.

First, how he came home from a day's teaching on 21 October 1898 'very tired'. Tired and dispirited too, having reluctantly returned to his bread-and-butter teaching after conducting, earlier in the month, a major choral work - *Caractacus* - in its première performance at one of the nation's great festivals, Leeds. Why was he so dispirited about *Caractacus*? What was wrong with it?

Two things. First, as he virtually confessed to Jaeger, it wasn't the symphony he had been longing to write, but only another choral commission. And second, the subject of *Caractacus*, and its hero, had been chosen on a principle different from the way Elgar had chosen all his previous heroes.

Elgar had chosen the Black Knight, the Man who was Blind in *The Light of Life*, and even King Olaf, as figures likely to open aspects of himself he wanted to explore. Not so *Caractacus*, who had arisen as a side-issue of his mother's wish 'to have something worked up' about the Malvern Hills. That wish touched Elgar's deepest response to his home country. But the only *story* well-known for any association with the Malverns was *Caractacus* : a rear-guard, defensive hero, ultimately defeated. Nothing could have been worse for the rising creative artist of forty with fame and fortune still to seek. After conducting the première of *Caractacus* on 3 October 1898, Elgar was remembered by the headmistress Rosa Burley as leaving

Leeds 'with the air of one who has fought - and is inclined to think he has lost - a heavy engagement'.

Now here he was back at home - a rented house literally under the shadow of those same Malvern Hills - back at the teaching which he once compared to 'turning a grindstone with a dislocated shoulder'. He remembered later how, on this evening, he sat down at the piano to extemporise blankly - fingers wandering idly over the noisy keys - and how he was 'interrupted' 'suddenly' by his wife saying : 'Edward, that's a good tune'.

Less attention has been paid to the next line of Elgar's account :

'I awoke from the dream : "Eh? tune? what tune?"'.

These words make it clear that he perceived no musical entity where Alice had heard one.

'She said : "Play it again, I like that tune".

'I played and strummed, and played...'

(struggling to recover what in another instant would have passed over the brink into oblivion)

'and then she exclaimed : "That's the tune".'

Thus *she* identified what *he himself* had never recognised as a 'tune' - a musical entity - at all. Actually it was two tunes, one after the other, then recurring to the first.

It is that music - those seventeen bars, which Elgar tells us stand in the score now just as he played them that night - which constitutes the Enigma. Nothing else. Look at the title page : 'Variations on an Original Theme for Orchestra'. Turn over to the first page of music. What do you see, printed above the opening seventeen bars? Not 'Theme', but 'Enigma'. The puzzle, if puzzle there be, is there.

These circumstances - with any discrete *shape* to the music lying well below the level of its player's conscious thought - make it totally impossible that he could, on that instant, have mounted the *deliberation* needed to shape this music as a cloak to hide any secret polyphony or counterpoint.

When I had reassembled the evidence thus far and published it, therefore, I ventured to imagine that everyone would finally admit that there could be no deliberately hidden counterpoint, and that we must look elsewhere. But no. People went right on loving the idea of a puzzle for themselves to solve - like finding a ticket for the lottery jackpot. So many contrapuntal 'solutions' are still offered that I've had to think there is an interest out there in NOT coming to any final conclusion at all - in keeping the pot boiling, whatever is in the pot.

There *might* have been a *subconscious* (or even semi-conscious) source, lingering at the back of Elgar's mind, vaguely to nudge his musical rumination at the keyboard. That would be less dramatic or 'clever'. Yet again we had nominations: the Credo from Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*; Tchaikovsky's orchestral variations in G (which had actually followed *Caractacus* in the concert at Leeds); even a Requiem Benedictus by Stanford of all people.

When Joseph Cooper pointed to the slow movement in the 'Prague' Symphony (Example 1) by Elgar's adored Mozart, I thought this was most likely to be 'it' - if *it* there was. Mozart's passage contains not only the first figure in Elgar's 'Enigma' pair (A) in Example 2), but also the second figure (B) - and one right after the other, just as Elgar had played his own figures that night. The accumulated resemblances I find compelling.

Looking back, we find the 'Prague' Symphony had also been played at Leeds, in a concert Elgar attended. And not only that. When the *Variations* were finished and played for the first time at a Richter concert in June 1899, there was the 'Prague' again, to finish the whole programme. Mozart symphonies were not played a century ago anything like so often as now. What more likely than that Elgar had passed a quiet request to Richter? Just slip in the 'Prague' at the end of the 'Enigma' concert, and let the audience make what they could of his inspiration. As we realise now, they made nothing.

What do we see and hear in the 'Enigma' theme? Two figures, side by side, opposed to each other as if they would parse the very elements of music itself :

One figure in G minor, the other G major.

One figure leaps, the other steps.

One, without its rests, resolves into three-time; the other is firmly in two.

"What is that?," Alice asked when Elgar had recovered it and played it again. Again Elgar's answer holds a significance beyond the words themselves :

I answered, "Nothing..."

- note that 'Nothing' -

"but something might be made of it".

Example 1

Example 2

It is *Nothing* in itself, he said : not a theme, not an entity, not a cloak. The fact that something might be made of it - that it could be a potential source - renders its Nothing-ness like a black hole in reverse. And if that word 'Nothing', applied to this music later called 'Enigma', means anything, it means (as Elgar said) that 'Its dark saying must be left unguessed'. He never said or suggested that it was a crossword puzzle, or a trick lock waiting to yield its secret at the insertion of the right key.

It was, in fact, not a mechanism at all. On the contrary, it proved to be an organism - capable of receiving life, and then of generating and sustaining new life. Followed by such progeny as the variations which came out of it, the music as a whole makes the ultimate contrast - of *something* appearing where only the *nothing* music had been before.

The story of how Elgar began to invent the variations on his 'Nothing' music, as this friend or that friend might do it - that evening and over the next days - is too well known for me to waste the time of this company in rehearsing it. I ask your attention to just one fact about the individual variations : each one of them uses *both* of the theme's figures in some form. And thus, as Elgar himself pointed out, 'each one attempts a solution of the Enigma, for so the theme is called'.

Yet what is ultimately more suggestive than any individual variation's attempted solution (except the last) is Elgar's impulse to consult his friends - or rather, to consult his own sharp impressions gathered from their separate individualities. So the succession of these variations can reproduce the way in which we learn the world from babyhood - noting this gesture from one person, that from another; and imitating them - but always, in the process, putting them together in an entirely new way, whose *totality* reflects only the person making the selections.

What is more suggestive still - and still less noticed - is how the whole business of making variations lends itself, for a self-taught composer especially, to the gradual evolving of big abstract form. To fill a big form in music ordinarily demands the working out of whole ranges of horizontal and vertical problems simultaneously - in terms of each other. Making variations enables the composer to divide his work into phases. First, he can give his whole attention to each variation - each small structure on its own. When he has enough of these separate entities, or nearly enough, he can then, as a separate process, give his whole attention to their arrangement and ordering.

This means that he can take advantage of induction - of generalising from out of his own separate perceptions thus assembled; and by that generalising, catch sight perhaps of some goal towards which they may seem to be pointing him. Quite possibly it may be a goal he has never recognised or identified before. In this way, the inductive shape of variation-making can encourage discovery and self-discovery.

Elgar arranged his variations in three paragraphs. The first begins with Alice, who had identified the 'Nothing' theme. And the last paragraph ends with 'E.D.U.', a sly reference to her calling him by the German name 'Eduard'. Thus the Finale is not Edward Elgar himself, but Alice's 'Eduard', with all her hopes for his music implicated.

Musically Elgar's original 'E.D.U.' offered a clever, psychologically penetrating climax by setting the primary subject in the major without rests - and so in three-time against a descending inversion of the second subject in 2/2. Three against two cannot finish together : so their ensemble spirals helplessly in smaller and smaller circles - or are they ellipses? (Example 3)

When the Enigma themes cannot finish together, Elgar begins his E.D.U. music all over again. But then it gives out the little whistling figure by which he had summoned his Alice at the beginning of the opening

The image displays a musical score for three systems. The first system is marked 'grandioso' and features a complex melodic line in the upper voice with many accidentals and a more active bass line. The second system continues this texture. The third system is marked 'stringando' and shows a more rhythmic, chordal texture with many upward-pointing stems, suggesting a string ensemble or a specific instrumental texture. The score is written in a standard musical notation with treble and bass clefs.

Example 3

variation : and in she comes, dressed now for this original finale in richer orchestral garb. (Example 4)  
 So 'E.D.U.'s self-portrait showed a man of cleverness, invention, resource, and insight - most keenly of all, insight into his own dependence on his wife.

Yet there was something in this ending that caused Jaeger to feel that it did not fulfil the promise of Elgar's whole induction. After the première, he badgered Elgar to make a new ending - something, somehow, more important. Elgar resisted, but ultimately gave way. *What* had Jaeger heard lacking? *What* had Elgar finally acknowledged?

To begin to answer that, I think we must go back into the penultimate variation, now called *Romanza*. Originally this was to portray Lady Mary Lygon. Later mystifiers have sought to substitute their own nominations; but there is no question of the original identity. Not only do we have Elgar's word for it, but he set the initials 'L.M.L.' beside this music in a page of sketched *Variation-incipits* now in the British Library.

What caused him to substitute for L.M.L. three asterisks and the word *Romanza*? Here one or two puzzle-solvers have gone mad with self-projection. The truth is less immediately picturesque, but of far deeper interest.



We used to hear a tale about Lady Mary having departed by ship to Australia, thus preventing Elgar from asking leave for the use of her initials. Not a bit of it. She was indeed soon to go : everyone knew it, and Elgar set into her music a phrase from Mendelssohn's *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*. But with that, this music - just in front of the 'E.D.U.' self-portrait - goes ice-cold, as if it has wandered across some inaudible barrier into a new place or presence or dimension of feeling. It is the musical equivalent of the experience often told us by novelists, when a character suddenly takes over and wrenches a planned action right out of the writer's hands and sends it in a new direction :

If Elgar had let stand Lady Mary Lygon's initials, or any hint of them, over this music now, all Malvern would never have found the end of it - nor posterity either. No, what had begun as Lady Mary and her voyage had suddenly gone somewhere entirely other - into a new dimension of distance and promise.

Elgar quietly recompensed Lady Mary for his dismissal of her from the *Variations*. He dedicated to her his very next work - which happened to be the set of three little orchestral pieces Op 10, which he finished directly after the *Variations*. No more explicit acknowledgement could be made that Lady Mary had been replaced in Variation XIII. She is replaced, the seriousness and depth of the music tells us, not by another actual woman, but by the very musical presence which the whole of the *Variations* project had been mounted in a sense to induce - an embodiment of something greater, more profound than any gesture from any friend.

I think it was the figure of his muse - the very spirit of inspiration itself - which he could now at long last



Example 4

glimpse. (Ashton's ballet captures this to perfection, with its mysterious clouds - dry ice - half enveloping the tall female figure hovering in tiny steps towards Elgar and again out of his reach.)

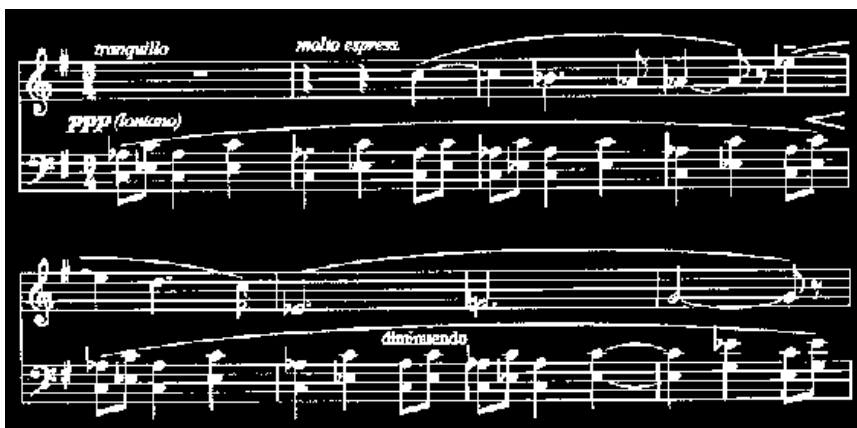
It is the new element, induced not by any apparatus of mythic plot or hero or the claptrap of 'dramatic cantata' - but entirely by this very personal music, by the fibre and sinew of his own melody, his harmony and his rhythms : and by Elgar's *arrangement* of his variations to lead up to the threshold of his 'E.D.U.' self-portrait. All this Jaeger responded to, in criticising the first E.D.U.'s very mixed conclusion.

'E.D.U.' needed a new ending, if he was to answer the fulness of the promise Jaeger heard in this music. E.D.U. needed to be someone whose assertion would somehow be capable of answering the depths of perception suddenly opened out in the penultimate *Romanza*. After his first, instinctive protest to Jaeger (that the original end was 'good enough') did not succeed, Elgar himself found the solution. Again it is a purely musical solution, justifying E.D.U. at last in his own terms. Yet he was honest. This new EDU left virtually all his foregoing music intact - the failed solution of 3 spiralling helplessly over 2/2, the whistle for Alice, and her entry : all still absolutely germane to this portrait. But then :

He takes the two elements of the 'Enigma' theme and sets them - not against each other simultaneously, but once more side by side, in tandem, just as they had appeared at the beginning of all this music. But now, with the first subject set in the major without rests, instead of opposites they become transfigured as two parts in the same greater entity. This announcement he marks with the introduction of the organ for the only time into the score (Example 6 - next page).

That solution of 'E.D.U.' is the true one, for several reasons. First, because it takes two apparent opposites of Elgar's musical expression and transmutes them, through a series of essays and experiments, into a greater unity : a unity never glimpsed in any of Elgar's previous music, good as that was. So the '*Enigma*' *Variations* with its new *Coda* announces that the composer is finally in full control of all the disparate elements that make up his own style and his self-expression. And this had a farther implication for Elgar himself.

His solution to his 'Enigma' had created not a polyphony, but a greater melody. That brings on the



The image displays a musical score for Example 5, consisting of two systems of staves. The first system features a treble clef staff with the marking 'tranquillo' and a bass clef staff with 'pppp (lento)'. The second system features a treble clef staff with 'molto espress.' and a bass clef staff with 'diminuendo'. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Example 5



second revelation, and the return of Elgar's dove to its ark. For *melody* was to be the supreme inspiration for his future music. He had tried for great melody repeatedly in attempting to write a symphony. When he planned the 'Gordon' Symphony in 1899, he sought in vain for a tune big enough to drive him towards the formal revelation. It wasn't strong enough to do that : a year later his 'Gordon' idea went into *Gerontius*. A year after that, when the 'tune that comes once in a lifetime' came to him, he tried to drive *that* to a Symphony - only to acknowledge failure again by using it up in *Pomp and Circumstance* No 1. In 1903 an E flat Symphony project derailed into an almost-too-long concert overture : all because his self-teaching was not yet sufficient.

In 1903 Elgar tried for a different kind of synthesis with his *Apostles* project. That is essentially another story : suffice it to say that he could never identify any later New Testament happening strong enough - and at the same time attractive enough to his music - to shape it as a recapitulation that could answer and cap his Calling of the Apostles, Judas-betrayal, and Ascension. At last he recognised that failure too. And on the day in November 1907 when he wrote to his publisher to renounce and give up completing his *Apostles* trilogy - *that day* he dated the first sketches for his First Symphony.

When Elgar's First Symphony did at last appear in 1908, it was firmly based - like almost all of his prior attempts at symphony-writing - on what his wife called a 'great beautiful tune'. Where had this tune come from? Its opening notes are precisely those which finished the new Coda for the *Variations* in 1899 :

Elgar himself was entirely unconscious of this identity, he confessed, when W H Reed pointed it out to him years later. But there, at the end of the Coda his *Variations* had finally led him to write, was the beginning point of the symphony towards which all his creative life had aspired - and finally pointed him.

No greater tribute could be paid to the inductive power of variation-writing. Brahms as a young man had written set after set of *Variations* - for piano, piano four hands, two pianos, then orchestra - all to induce a symphony. Elgar, at forty-two, needed only one set. Thus it was entirely right that the '*Enigma*' *Variations* première, a hundred years ago, announced a greatness of which the man himself, at the outset of his process of variation-writing, had only dreamed.

*(The above article is based on the text of Dr Moore's A T Shaw Lecture given to the Elgar Society on 5 June 1999 at Great Malvern. The author gratefully acknowledges help from Roger Dubois over the music examples).*

The image displays a musical score for Example 6, consisting of three systems of piano and bass staves. The music is written in a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 2/2 time signature. The first system begins with the instruction *mf subito*. The piano part features a series of chords and melodic lines, while the bass part provides a harmonic foundation with chords and a steady bass line. The second system continues the melodic and harmonic development. The third system concludes with a *f* dynamic marking and an *& c* (and *crescendo*) marking, indicating a transition to a more intense section.

Example 6

---

The image displays a musical score for 'Example 7', consisting of two systems of staves. Each system contains a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The music is written in a single melodic line with various note values, including quarter and eighth notes, and rests. The score includes dynamic markings such as *mf* and *f*, and phrasing slurs. The notation is presented in a high-contrast, black-and-white style.

Example 7

---

## ELGAR'S SEA PICTURES

### A Short History, Interpretation, and Annotated Discography

Roger Hecht

Recently, on an Internet classical music list-serve, someone asked what great works were written one hundred years ago in 1899. Four works were cited. Elgar's *Enigma Variations* was one, but not his *Sea Pictures*,<sup>1</sup> also written in 1899. This has not been an uncommon predicament for Elgar's lone song cycle with orchestra. Though popular with audiences from its première, it has long existed in the shadow of its illustrious predecessor, particularly in the minds of critics. Speaking generally, Michael Kennedy writes :

three of the songs [he doesn't mention which three] hover precariously on the edge of drawing-room balladry and are only kept from toppling over by Elgar's orchestral taste and the performance of a sensitive singer. The work as a whole bears signs of being completed in haste to meet a commission, but its best moments have a real kinship with the *Variations* and the scoring throughout is that of a mature master.<sup>2</sup>

A more specific reproach has been over Elgar's treatment of texts. "[T]he words evoked *orchestral* images and tunes and then had to be fitted in willy-nilly,"<sup>3</sup> Kennedy added. Basil Maine noted "glaring instances of the music ignoring not so much the verse sense as the verbal sense." After praising Elgar's opening of "Sea Slumber Song" - "where a quite undistinguished vocal phrase is made fairly acceptable to us by the orchestral atmosphere" - Ernest Newman found "thoughtlessness in the melodic phrasing."<sup>4</sup> Take this example that he presents from that song three bars after C.

*Isles in elfin light  
Dream, the rocks and caves  
Lulled by whispering waves,  
Veil their marbles bright.*

---

<sup>1</sup> The Editor wrote me that an Elgar Society member "... has pointed out that the original title of the work is hyphenated. You may have noticed that on the title page of the miniature score I sent you. But in letters from Elgar and his wife they never seem to use the hyphen, although there is one to Elgar from Alberto Randegger in October 1900 (in Moore's *Letters of a Lifetime*) which does, and Ernest Newman in his book on the composer always hyphenates when he refers to the piece. No other biographer or writer does, so far as I am aware. My copy of the vocal score does not, although the cover and title page seem to be later additions by the look of them".

<sup>2</sup> Michael Kennedy : *Portrait of Elgar* (London : Oxford University Press, 1968) p 72

<sup>3</sup> Kennedy, *op cit*, noting "Where Corals Lie" to be the exception.

<sup>4</sup> Ernest Newman : *Elgar* (3rd edn., London : John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1922) pp 119-126

<sup>5</sup> Newman praises Hugo Wolf's songs for allowing the "melodic phrase [to ignore] the artificial line division of the poem," adding that Elgar can be "sometimes startlingly bad" in this regard.

<sup>6</sup> "It need not be thought that Elgar was unaware of the rhythmic stress of his native tongue and disregarded them to suit his purpose", Michael Kennedy wrote. "He had pronounced views, as

In Newman's view, there are two clauses. The first runs from "Isles" to "Dream," the second from "the rocks" to "bright." Elgar ends the first phrase at "light," inserting "dream" into the second clause. Then, Newman writes, he comes to a "dead stop, and the verb that belongs to the rocks and caves—the 'veil' of the fourth line—is left stranded, apparently related to nothing." This gives us :

*Isles in elfin light  
Dream, the rocks and caves lulled by whispering waves,  
Veil their marbles bright.*

Elgar's "ear is plainly insensitive to defects of phrasing of this kind; the words have to be made to fit in as best they can." Thus, the singer must decide whether or not to link "Dream" with the "Isles" phrase. ". . . if this is not done with great emphasis the real verbal sense is not conveyed, and if it *is* done with great emphasis, the melodic line is broken."<sup>5</sup> Perhaps Elgar was insensitive to these matters, but I find it curious that he repeated the phrase "Veil their marbles" from Newman's example, as if he were aware of "Veil"'s position and compensated by repeating the words.<sup>6</sup>

A more basic criticism is Elgar's choice of texts. A few, particularly Adam Lindsay Gordon's "The Swimmer" and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Sabbath Morning at Sea," are considered mediocre by many. I have to agree that "The Swimmer" is not great poetry, but I find things to admire in "Sabbath Morning at Sea." But should we even concern ourselves about the quality of the texts a composer uses if we enjoy the music the words inspired? That is a question each of us must answer for him or herself, but there is an interesting twist to the matter. Some people would have it that it is possible for a text to be *too* good. As Elgar himself put it, "... it is better to set the best second-rate poetry to music, for the most immortal verse *is* music already."<sup>7</sup> Nor is that the end of it, for Elgar may have had a practical purpose in mind when he chose these texts. Perhaps he had a story to tell - a story whose narrative was served perfectly by these five poems.

Finally, though not strictly a criticism, some believe there is little flavour of the sea in this work. This may be true, though there are plenty of allusions to the sea, some quite obvious, others more subtle. Then again, if *Sea Pictures* does not quite approximate the portraits of the sea that Debussy, Bridge, Zemlinsky, and Bax gave us, it may be because Elgar was interested in more than tone painting.

---

expressed in a letter to Jaeger written on 26 April 1908 : 'I hold that *short* syllables may be sustained occasionally for the sake of effect just as an actor does". Elgar goes on to criticise the way Hubert Parry set short, two syllable English words. In the same letter Elgar wrote of "one of your best chorus-masters said I knew nothing of writing for the voice *or* choral effect - asked why, he pointed to an ff on a C for sopranos : this sort of thing is annoying as it shews what idiots we write for. If the clown had an ounce of artistic sense he wd have seen that the note was to help the contraltos & to lead into a *diminuendo* impossible to obtain in any other way".

<sup>7</sup> Vera Hockman : *Elgar and Poetry*, 1940. Quoted by Jerrold Northrop Moore : *Elgar : A Creative Life* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1984) p 280.

Arnold Bax felt this way about setting poetry by W B Yeats. "Yet in spite of veneration for Yeats, I have never attempted to set any of his poetry to music; it's too good. The plain fact is that it is sacrilege to tamper with another art. Poetry has its own precise rhythms and intrinsic melody and at its highest should be reverently let alone". [Talk in BBC series 'British Composers', broadcast 6 May 1949, from BBC Sound Archives, disc X 13389. Quoted in *Farewell, My Youth and other writings* by Arnold Bax, ed. Lewis Foreman, (Hants, England : Scholar Press, 1992) p 166].

For now it is enough to say that however one ranks *Sea Pictures* as poetry, it is a worthy piece of music with haunting qualities that grow on listeners who give it a chance. "Sea Slumber Song" is an evocative lullaby; "Sabbath Morning at the Sea" casts drama and loneliness within a warm Wagnerian glow, while "In Haven" and "Where Corals Lie" are seemingly light interludes with deeper overtones. Only "The Swimmer," with its foursquare main theme, pomp and *hauteur* disappoints, and then not entirely. Perhaps a fellow Elgarian said it best when he asked me how anyone who claims to love Elgar cannot love *Sea Pictures*. "It is such a beautiful work," he said. And so it is.

## Background

*Sea Pictures* grew from a song Elgar wrote in 1897 to Alice Elgar's words about a holiday in Capri. The original title was "Love Alone Will Stay," but he published it a year later as "Lute Song."<sup>8</sup> Soon after, Elgar was commissioned to write a song cycle for Clara Butt to perform at the Norwich Festival in October 1899. Early on, he sent "Lute Song" to Novello for their consideration. They returned it with the suggestion that he expand it, perhaps by putting each stanza into a different setting, but Elgar thought that would be too short for a real song cycle. He then got the idea of using "Lute Song" as an anchor around which he would build a cycle of songs about the sea, but he was unsure if he could make this work and cast about for other ideas. To my knowledge, nothing came of this, but it was of no matter. After coming to grips with a problem in composing *Enigma Variations* (to be noted in my discussion of "Where Corals Lie"), the solution finally came to him. "Lute Song" became "In Haven," the second entry of *Sea Pictures*, and Elgar composed the other four songs at Birchwood in July 1899.<sup>9</sup> The cycle was performed as planned on 5 October by Clara Butt with the composer on the podium.<sup>10</sup> R H Mottram, Elgar's host for the festival, described what he saw that evening.

... Elgar's distinguished, hollow chested figure, rather that of a hawk dreaming poetry in captivity, took the baton, and there stood up beside him the majestic figure of Clara Butt, in a wonderful

---

Bax attempted to set Yeats' poetry in his twenties, but suppressed the results. His setting of *The Fiddler of Dooney* was actually engraved, but he replaced Yeats' words on the proof, inventing his own text to make the song *The Enchanted Fiddle*. [Quote from footnote to the above by Foreman].

<sup>8</sup> Though Robert Anderson writes that the music may "go back some eight years more, when it seems Elgar had originally wanted words by Andrew Lang" ["Elgar" in *The Master Musicians* (London : J M Dent, 1993) p 289].

<sup>9</sup> Kennedy, *op cit*, p 72. Though Elgar wrote *Sea Pictures* and *Enigma Variations* during the same year, his friend and confidant, August Jaeger, did not play the same prominent role with the song cycle that he did with the orchestral work. This is mainly the result of a dispute with Novello (Jaeger's employer) that led Elgar to take his work to Boosey and Company. A sympathetic supporter of orchestral musicians, Elgar was incensed over the publisher's demand for additional rent for orchestral parts for an extra rehearsal for the first performance of *Enigma*. He wrote to Jaeger : "Vert [the orchestra manager] has lost heaps over the old gang's orchl. attempts & did the work as a favour - an extra rehearsal cost him £40... & the publishers 'try it on' to get 30/- more out of him - this certainly roused my disgust". As for Alfred Littleton, chairman of Novello, "he said V ought to have gotten the extra rehearsal out of his men for nothing.... I confess the prospect of a rich man seriously considering the fleecing of those poor underpaid overworked devils in the orchestra quite prevented me from feeling Xtian. If that is 'business' - well damn your business - I loathe it" (Moore, *op cit*, p 288). Eventually, Elgar and the firm were reconciled.



Above : This signed card was sent to Elgar and is reproduced by kind permission of the Elgar Foundation. Alice's diary for 11 August reads : "E. in London. Heard C . Butt sing Sea Pictures."

ST. JAMES'S HALL.

MISS

**CLARA BUTT'S**



**. Morning Concert .**

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 7th, 1899, at 3 p.m.

Book of Words, price Sixpence.

N. VEET, 7 Gosh Street, Basington Gardens, W.

Right : First London performance (omitting the third song) : Butt accompanied by Elgar at the piano. It was a sell-out, Jaeger and Nevinson unable to get seats.



dress, the material of which, it was whispered, indicated appropriately the scales of a mermaid's sinuous form. She created at the same time a record, and inaugurated an era. Until then all the stars, Albani, Patti, Clara Novello, Nevada, had appeared corseted "from the knees to the nose" as irreverent rebels put it. But when Clara Butt rose to sing, a dowager aristocrat in the patron's stalls saw what was impending, and remarked audibly to the next bejewelled dowager: "Look, my dear... guiltless of all confinement!"<sup>11</sup>

Later, Elgar wrote to Jaeger that "The cycle went marvellously well, & we were recalled four times - I think - after that I got disgusted & lost count - She sang *really well*."<sup>12</sup> A couple of days later, the two (with Elgar at the piano) performed four of the songs in London. (Butt sang "In Haven" twice.) Ada Crossley sang two of the songs for the Queen at Balmoral Castle on the 20th. From there, the work went on to become one of Elgar's more popular pieces with audiences.

### A Very Personal Analysis and Interpretation

Jerrold Northrop Moore, Norman Del Mar and Patrick Little have written the only analyses of *Sea Pictures* I have come across. I recommend all three highly<sup>13</sup> and will use some of their thoughts here. Moore and Del Mar deal mostly with musical issues. Little has presented an interesting *interpretation* of the work. Rather than summarise it here, I urge the reader to consult it directly, though when appropriate I will point out differences between Little's and my view of a particular item.

*Sea Pictures* consists of five songs scored for a large orchestra of strings, woodwind pairs, two trumpets, four horns, three trombones, tuba, harp, percussion and optional organ. The songs are tied together by several devices :

- The idea of a journey.

---

<sup>10</sup> Though ill the night before, Elgar conducted as scheduled.

<sup>11</sup> Mottram, *Portrait of an Unknown Victorian* (Robert Hale, 1936) p 253, quoted in Moore, *op cit*, p 291.

<sup>12</sup> David Nice : *Edward Elgar : An Essential Guide to his Life and Works* (London: Pavilion, 1996) p 43. Nice tells an amusing story of Elgar's first meeting with Ms Butt. Elgar, appearing at Butt's domicile, was sent away by the singer's companion. Ms Butt did not want her bath disturbed, it seemed. Apparently, it was all a misunderstanding. This occurred in January. By October, it was "call me Clara".

<sup>13</sup> Moore, *op cit*, pp 280-283. Also in his notes to the Lauris Elms recording. Norman Del Mar : *Conducting Elgar* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1998). Patrick Little : 'Songs of Love and Death : Elgar's *Sea Pictures*, Op 37', in *Elgar Society Journal* vol 9, no 4, March 1996, pp 168-176.

<sup>14</sup> All the quoted information about the authors of the texts is from the paper by Patrick Little.

<sup>15</sup> Little finds references to death in this song, as in being lured to one's death as the price for rest and beauty. This might imply suicide, of course, and Little does note that Elgar might at times have been depressed to the point of suicide. I considered suicide as a meaning myself, but eventually turned to the interpretation described herein.

<sup>16</sup> Moore points out that it too is related to the "lute figure". (He also finds "an echo of the

## THURSDAY EVENING, OCTOBER the 5th.

## PART I.

OVERTURE. "MIGNON." AMBROISE THOMAS.

CYCLE OF SONGS. "SEA-PICTURES." (Op. 37.) EDWARD ELGAR.

1. Sea Slumber-song
2. In Haven (*Cappi*).
3. Sabbath Morning.
4. Where Corals Lie.
5. The Swimmer.

*Composed expressly for the Festival.**Conducted by the Composer.*

MISS CLARA BETT.

Trio des Flûtes. "DALL' AURORA" (L'Étoile du Nord). MEYERBEER.

MADAME ALBANI.

Flutes Obligati—MESSRS. A. FRANELLA and H. WARNER-HOLLIS.

SYMPHONIC SUITE "THE SEASONS." EDWARD GERMAN.

1. "SPRING."      2. "SUMMER." (Harvest Dance.)
3. "AUTUMN."    4. "WINTER." (Christmastide.)

*Composed expressly for the Festival.**Conducted by the Composer.*

Interval of Twenty Minutes.

## PART II.

ODE TO THE PASSIONS. WRITTEN BY WILLIAM COLLINS (1721-1759).

Set to music for Chorus and Orchestra by Frederic H. Cowen.

*First time in Norwich.**Conducted by the Composer.*

VORSPIEL UND LIBRETTOD. "TRISTAN UND ISOLDE." R. WAGNER.

MADAME ALBANI.

SCENA. "THE DREAM OF ENDYMION." F. H. COWEN.

*Composed expressly for Mr. Ben Davies.**Words by Joseph Bennett.**Conducted by the Composer.*

MR. BEN DAVIES.

OVERTURE. "DI BALLO." SULLIVAN.

Programme for the first performance

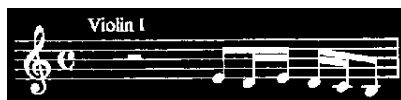
- Frequent quoting of themes from one song in another.
- Wagnerian elements, particularly from *Die Meistersinger*.
- Verbal and musical suggestions of the sea.
- This figure that originates in "In Haven" and runs through the other songs. Moore calls it the "lute figure" and sees it as the musical germ of the cycle:

*Sea Slumber-Song* (hereon *Slumber*). "Text by Roden Berkeley Wriothesley Noel (1834-94) [who]... was educated at Trinity College, Cambridge, and published several volumes of verse, including *Livingstone in Africa* (1874), *A Little Child's Monument* (1881), and *Heights and Deepes* (1885)"<sup>14</sup>

*Slumber* is both a dark portrait of the sea and a lullaby sung by a Mother—the sea—to her child who, in my interpretation, is a traveller upon the sea (though whether the traveller at the moment of the song is a child or an adult is unclear and probably unimportant). *Slumber* is the most restful of the songs, the one where the protagonist is most at peace.<sup>15</sup> The orchestral painting is inspired, with Elgar colouring masterfully with a clarinet here, a flute or horn there, etc., and there are many places where he beautifully matches the sound of the words to their notes, eg "sleep," "sand," "violins," etc. One of the dramatic points of the song is the G on "sand" (and later on "song"). It is the lowest note in the cycle for the singer and is one of the many occasions where telling musical points are made in the low register. The form is a simple ABCAB. A is in E minor, B in E major, and C, most significantly, is in C major. We first hear a variant of the Lute figure in the introduction with the rhythm "slowed down" (Moore) and played evenly to give the effect of sea air or breezes. This figure remains important as an accompaniment throughout the A sections, is recalled in the third song, and serves as a distant suggestion of *Die Meistersinger*.

The voice enters on the third bar on an E then jumps a minor third to G.

This minor third appears or is implied as a tangible entity in the first four songs, though not in the fifth in any distinctive way. I am not entirely sure of the significance of this interval - other than for its brooding



tonal colouring - but it is possible that its presence in the first four songs and its nonappearance in *The Swimmer* is one of several methods Elgar employed to set the last song off from its companions.

At B we come to a second major theme, one that pervades much of the rest of the work. I call it the "sea Enigma" in the vocal line.)

<sup>17</sup> If *Sabbath* was the song of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*, Corals has touches of Puccini, particularly in the way it uses a solo violin to reinforce the vocal line (eg, "Thy lips are like a sunset glow") and in the lush scoring over "Yet leave me, leave me, let me go". There is also this figure, a variant of the "lute figure" that is heard often in this song.

The way it is scored and used vaguely reminds me of this little tune from *La Boheme*.

As soon as I heard the line in Corals, I thought of *La Boheme*, but others I've spoken to do not hear this connection. I do not even know if Elgar knew Puccini's 1886 opera when he wrote *Sea Pictures* though Kennedy implies that Elgar knew the opera at some time : "Elgar's world was the world of music... Puccini's *La Boheme*..." (p183). But Kennedy was writing of Elgar several years after *Sea Pictures*. If Elgar did know *La Boheme* at the time he was writing *Sea Pictures*, Boheme's theme of doomed love would seem to reinforce what I find in the last stanza of Corals.

<sup>18</sup> see page 145

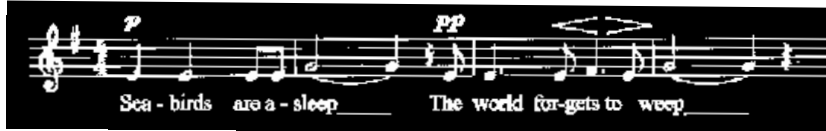
motive".<sup>16</sup>

The figure appears in octaves from the violins down to the basses. Elgar calls for it to be accompanied by a "gong with sponge stick," producing a dull, eerie sound. Correctly executed, the effect is marvellous. It can sound like shifting ocean waves or, with more weight on the downbeat and emphasis on the darker instruments, the mysterious, dredging quiet of the ocean bottom. In its way it captures the sea in those few bars almost as well as some whole works. The first time this passage occurs, the text "I, the Mother mild," seems to have nothing to do with the sea until we recall that Mother *is* the sea, and that the entrance of the sea motive is where she begins her lullaby. (Her words from here until the end of the song are in quotes, implying the opening words were those of a narrator.) The C section (at letter C) brightens the mood by going into C major and by using words like "light," "bright," "glimmers," and "white" before returning to the A-B sections at E. The coda features two *fermata* chords - both appearing before the words "Good night" - that radiate an aura of discovery and light.

*In Haven* (hereon Haven). Text by Alice Elgar. "The only textual changes made... lie in the re-ordering of the first two stanzas and in an increase of sea-imagery". It provides a deceptively light contrast in three short stanzas.



Elgar's orchestration to his wife's brief, simple text is chamber-like and transparent. The Lute figure in its



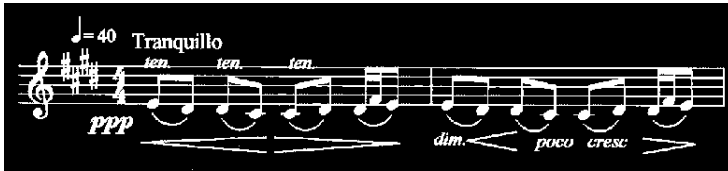
most basic form (quoted above) opens the song. When played with the right shaping and rhythmic emphasis—a little dip in the waves in the cellos followed by rivulets in the violins—it is not hard to imagine a rowboat bobbing gently by a dock.

Because Haven is in C major (the *Meistersinger* key and an important one in *Sea Pictures*), when the voice opens with the minor third from Slumber, we are going from the third to the fifth, rather than the tonic to the third, as was the case in Slumber. Here, the tone is less sombre, the rhythm is less hymnlike than in Slumber, and the line brightens the mood by climbing one more step to A. Elgar emphasizes the phrase "Love alone will [stand, last, or stay]" at the end of each stanza with an octave leap and by

<sup>19</sup> Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia. This reef is actually a line of islands.

<sup>20</sup> Little makes a case that Elgar's early love, Helen Weaver, could also be this lost love. "The reference to love in the past seems surely more likely to have called up images of the lost love Helen [Weaver] in New Zealand, reinforced by the antipodean setting of the poem; because New Zealand is as near to Australia as makes no difference to the average Briton even now, let alone in the days of travel by sea".

<sup>21</sup> Moore, *op cit*, p 263,264.



reversing the order of the minor third to outline a heroic C major chord.

The insistence that love outlasts storms, the sea, and joy—an idea that *seems* to be played out in “The Swimmer”—lies at the core of the cycle. (The question of love *for whom* will be taken up later.) Though it is not clear how as yet, this song with Alice Elgar’s words in some ways parallels the ‘C.A.E.’ variation in Enigma insofar as it comments on the narrative. It may also provide the last word on the cycle.

*Sabbath Morning at Sea* (hereon Sabbath). Text by “Elizabeth Barrett Browning... is a setting of only five of the thirteen stanzas...”

Sabbath is the core of the work and the first real plot progression of Elgar’s story. It is also the most complex of the songs in structure and mood. Browning’s poem is an odd one about a traveller (almost certainly a woman) aboard a ship on the Sabbath. She begins by singing of the sea and her sadness over leaving behind her friends in the church where she normally observed the Sabbath. As her voyage proceeds, she finds strength from a sea that only God could have created and from assurance that God would “assist me to look higher.” All of this suggests abandoning the familiar to seek God, a new life or world, or perhaps something else.

Like Slumber, Sabbath opens with a variant of the “lute figure,” this time an upward A minor seventh arpeggio. It seems to be in C major here and certainly ends in C major after a journey through several keys. For the third straight time, the voice enters in the third measure on an E, now in the form of a recitative. The chromatic vocal line is chant-like, anxious, and sad over departure. We expect to hear the minor third as the melody progresses upward, but it is held back until B and then reversed in order over “onward.” We also hear the sea motive in the middle and low strings (beginning after A on “face” and ending on “onward”) suggesting the sea voyage. Five bars after B, over “parting tears,” we hear the precursor of the song’s two climaxes, the drop of a fourth from C to G, the same notes that open *Die Meistersinger*.

Four bars after C we encounter the sea motive again, first in the violins (over “sight”) and then two bars later, higher in range and more assertively, over “turbulent.” Note the final triplet, a precursor of the two climactic passages coming later on.

Things settle down at D over the words “Calm in a moonless, sunless light,” beginning with the familiar E-G minor third. We hear the sea motive in the violins and then the first appearance by the full orchestra at the *molto maestoso* at E. Compare this passage (noting the presence of the triplet) with the opening of *Die Meistersinger*

At F we get a new, less anxious idea in B major that recalls the singer’s friends back home at church.



The triplet becomes dominant in the strings, who are effectively in 12/8 against the singer's 4/4. Then three measures before H there is this vocal line:

The dropping fourth (in B major) over "voice has faltered" could be another reference to Meistersinger - a humorous allusion to Beckmesser's vocal problems, perhaps. At H the *Quasi Recit.* returns, as the singer reconciles herself to observing Sabbath away from her church, her anxieties relieved by her belief that "God's Spirit shall give comfort".

A great deal happens at the change back to C major during the word "Creator". The dropping fourth from C to G is followed by the A minor seventh arpeggio that began the song. This leads to the triumphant "He shall assist me to look higher". The word "saints" rings out on a high F and is followed by the dropping fourth at the *cantabile ed accel.* The singer becomes agitated at L, singing of the "sea commix'd with fire" while the sea breeze arpeggio that opened Slumber blows with more intensity than ever. The singer extols "the full Godhead's burning" before the orchestra concludes rapturously with strings reaching quietly for the heavens. All this is in the *Die Meistersinger* key of C major. It is the high point of the song and a key moment in the cycle. The singer is ready for the challenge ahead.

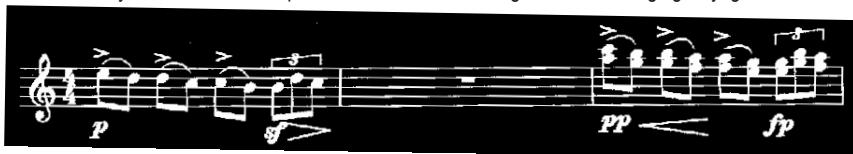
*Where Corals Lie* (hereon Corals). Text by "Richard Garnett (1835-1906),... Keeper of Printed Books in the British Museum. He published a collection of short stories entitled *The Twilight of the Gods*, which Elgar is known to have admired, in 1888, as well as several volumes of original and translated verse."

As I hinted earlier, Sabbath raises the question of whether Elgar's protagonist is male or female. Certainly, Sabbath, the tone of Corals, the gentleness of Haven, and the fact that the songs are written for female voice could lead one to conclude it is female. (We know the narrator of Slumber is female, but the gender of the child, who is the protagonist, is unclear.) Yet it is hard to see the narrator of Swimmer as anything but male, given the character of the music and text. It all might be academic but for the implications of Corals.

Again, we open with a derivative of the Lute figure, this time downward (significantly) to "where corals lie." As in Haven, the accompaniment is delicate, with off-beats in the strings like droplets or mist in the air. We hear the signature minor third from E to G in the opening line, first at 3, then at 1 bar(s) before A (and later when this line repeats). This time it makes up neither the tonic to the third in E major nor the third to the fifth in C major, but rather the fourth to the sixth (and then the tonic) of B minor. Different keys - same old interval.



So why the suggestions of *Meistersinger*? *Die Meistersinger* is about a contest which, in effect, is a trial in which Walther must endure the travails of, and win, a singing contest in order to earn the right to marry Eva. Certainly, we can see the potential for a trial looming in the challenging voyage the traveller



undertakes in Sabbath and continues in Corals to the "land where corals lie."<sup>17</sup>

Thy lips are like a sunset glow



Thy smile is like a morning sky  
Yet leave me, leave me, let me go,



And see the land where the corals lie.

The impression here is that the traveller is leaving a lover behind for good.

Earlier, I suggested that while Elgar certainly picked his poems for *Sea Pictures* for their musical inspiration<sup>18</sup>, he might also have selected them because they supplied the necessary material for a story



he wished to tell. Perhaps none of the poems is more remarkable in this regard than Richard Garnett's "Where Corals Lie." I say this because I think Elgar had a specific destination in mind for his traveller, and he needed a poem that would identify that destination, if not by name, certainly by implication.

So where *do* the corals lie? Under water, obviously. But where, geographically? The most famous location is also the longest coral reef in the world, the Great Barrier Reef off Queensland, Australia.<sup>19</sup> Australia is where Lady Mary Lygon,<sup>20</sup> generally accepted as the subject of the heartfelt, yearning Romanza (\*\*\*) from *Enigma Variations*, sailed with her brother in 1899. Elgar learned of her plans late in January 1899 while working on *Enigma*, and this knowledge deeply affected the nature of the variation he almost assuredly was writing for her. As Moore put it:

Out of Edward's memory came the phrase from Mendelssohn's *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*... Suddenly there opened an immense horizon of friendship and love and longing....

So this penultimate music took its composer too far from this innocent friendship and simple regret at Lady Mary Lygon's departure. He deleted her initials from Variation XIII (and later even contemplated cutting out the Mendelssohn phrase altogether).<sup>21</sup>

But that was not all. Around this same time, Elgar was also mulling over the projected song cycle commission for the Norwich Festival that turned into *Sea Pictures*. I have already written of how he had rejected the notion of using an expanded version of "Lute Song" and was looking for another source of inspiration (including subjects that had nothing to do with the sea).

Yet Alice had identified the *Enigma* that led to the triumph of "E.D.U." Her words to the "Lute Song" might give another hint. If "Love alone will stand," those words could suggest thoughts and feelings elsewhere—when "Storms are sweeping sea and land." So Edward's thoughts could drift towards the spring voyage of Lady Mary Lygon—"the pretty Lady" attracted by his music—whose social rank was far



above Alice's, whose age was a dozen years less than his own. If Alice's "Lute Song" made a "Sea Song," then other poems drawn from other poets (in the manner of Berlioz's *Nuits d'été*) might comment and reflect on Alice's "Lute Song" as the other "friends pictured within" had expanded her perception of the Enigma.<sup>22</sup> [emphasis mine]

So Mary Lygon and her forthcoming sea voyage was on Elgar's mind as he laboured over both major 1899 works. One need not believe Elgar felt a deep passion for Lady Mary to accept the notion that she, or his emotions surrounding her departure, were the catalyst(s) for a story line that would develop into *Sea Pictures*. Elgar was an emotional man who felt losses of friends deeply. He need not have had an affair with Mary Lygon or even fantasized about one - I make no claim about either being the case and have no idea, besides - to have felt her loss just as deeply as he did Alfred Rodewald's, whose death Alice Elgar heard reflected in the *Larghetto* of the Second Symphony.<sup>23</sup> Mary Lygon's departure could easily have planted the seeds of a story in his mind. During my years of trying to write fiction, events in my life more insignificant than his friend's abandoning England for Australia have germinated into story plots. Most of those plots in no way paralleled the events that gave them birth: once a story is hatched, there is no telling where the characters will take it. Usually, no one is more surprised than the author. That said, I do think the narrator of *Corals* is female, and that she, and *Sea Pictures* as a whole, were inspired by Mary Lygon's departure for Australia.<sup>24</sup>

*The Swimmer* (hereon, *Swimmer*). Text by "Adam Lindsay Gordon, who was born of English parentage in the Azores in 1833, went to Australia in 1853 and died there in 1870 at the age of thirty-seven. 'The

---

<sup>22</sup> Moore, *op cit*, p 277.

<sup>23</sup> Kennedy, *op cit*, p 160.

<sup>24</sup> Though I must admit that Lady Mary Lygon's association with *Sea Pictures* just about convinced me that she is the subject of the Romanza.



<sup>25</sup> Little also finds suicide references in *Swimmer*, noting that Gordon was a suicide.



<sup>26</sup> Kennedy, *op cit*, p 101.

<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, at this time Elgar had been married to Alice for almost ten years.

<sup>28</sup> If you'll recall, I never did settle on a gender for the narrator of *Haven*. Viewed in this way, the gender does not matter. The narrator is universal. It is the sentiment expressed by the narrator that counts.

<sup>29</sup> Kennedy, *op cit*, p 114.

<sup>30</sup> This brings up the question of why we don't have more great altos today. I'm certainly not qualified to answer that, but one of my consultants blames the recording industry. He believes that

Swimmer' consists of thirteen stanzas, of which Elgar set the first two-and-a-half and the last two - omitting, that is, eight-and-a-half stanzas in the middle".

Swimmer begins with music that represents the swimmer's plunge to the depths,<sup>25</sup> followed by a triumphant four-bar passage that signifies him rising *from* those depths. (I call this second part the "swimmer's theme.") Here we have two allusions intertwined. The first is underwater (which is also "where corals lie"). Taken alone, that could imply the Swimmer had plunged into the deep and then triumphantly rose to the surface, making *Sea Pictures* a metaphor for averted suicide. I have rejected this notion for several reasons. First, I am convinced there are two characters in this story, and Swimmer, with its entirely different character flavor from what has gone before (and its lack of the signature minor third of the earlier songs) is telling us the story of the second one. Second, I am convinced the traveler is female, and the swimmer is male. Third, the tale of a woman who has abandoned a lover fits well into the type of story that the departure of Mary Lygon might have suggested to Edward Elgar regardless of whether the emotions of that story had any basis in fact. Thus, I see Swimmer as telling about the abandoned male lover's plunge into and recovery from despair over his loss. Such a recovery, especially the one depicted by the stirring tones of Swimmer, suggests great effort and faith in himself during what amounted to a trial. With that in mind, note the resemblance of the swimmer's theme to one of the masters' themes from Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*.

and to a lesser extent the love theme from that opera.

So now the references to *Die Meistersinger*, with all their implications of a trial, make sense.

(Regarding purely musical considerations, I agree with Kennedy that the swimmer theme "is altogether too rigid for its purpose"<sup>26</sup> - certainly when compared with Wagner's endlessly mellifluous lines. Nowhere is this more obvious than at the stuffy skipping rhythms, and nowhere is *that* more obvious than at the tune's first appearance where it cuts off abruptly before the first recit, making for the least polished opening of the five songs.)

And so the trial begins. After the opening, the swimmer encounters broiling seas over a flurry of semiquaver runs in the first violins and violas. He drives through all this, coming eventually upon "waifs" wrecked on the shore. The orchestra sums up with the swimmer theme in inversion before the swimmer treks menacingly upon a "grim grey coast" where battered ships "have lain embedded these long years ten."<sup>27</sup>

Something about these thoughts turns the swimmer's memory to "Love! Love!" as he fondly recalls the days before his lover abandoned him. (This is the first spot in the song where Elgar repeats text.) The orchestra takes up the swimmer theme which here, played under the long notes for "Love! Love!", sounds even more like *Meistersinger*. But there is no triumph yet. The singer's thoughts - "When we wander'd here" - are still on his love. He is not yet free of her. The music grows sentimental before a two-bar phrase

---

higher and lighter voices record better, inducing producers to hire mezzos for roles written for altos. That could apply to *Sea Pictures*. It is certainly true that many of the altos we do have have not recorded it.

<sup>31</sup> A situation that I suspect explains many of Elgar's fast tempos in other works. This is one reason that I question the notion that Elgar's music should be taken fast because the composer himself conducted it that way. Though Moore did note that he thought that "Elgar relished the opportunity to drive everybody hard".

from Corals on the oboe (over “fern and heather”) melds into the following phrase :

This is a variation of the opening diving music and serves to link what has gone before with what is taking place now. (Another link may be the keys. Corals is in B minor, Swimmer in D major - both keys have two sharps.) The swimmer sighs, “God surely lov’d us a little then,” the most touching moment in the song. Memories of those days (“The skies were fairer”) come more into focus when we return to a more blocky, extended treatment of the tune from the middle section of Slumber. Lighter thoughts ensue.

Then the mood tails off without embellishment. Perhaps nostalgia is causing the swimmer to slip back into despair. Renewed determination is required, and so the opening diving music returns, bringing the swimmer back to his initial recit, followed by the chromatic passage of menace. The swimmer theme returns over the words “O brave white horses.” This is the first real signal of triumph as our swimmer drives to a place “Where no light wearies and no love wanes,” a suggestion, and a significant one, of what was stated with such determination in Haven. This second mentioning of love is also the second time Elgar repeats text (“where no love wanes”). Note, too, the climactic *fermata* high A on the word “love” followed by a triumphant D for the final “wanes.” Obviously, this notion of love not waning is very important. (As with Garnett’s “Where Corals Lie,” it is remarkable how well Adam Lindsay Gordon’s oft-maligned poem fits Elgar’s purposes.) Finally, the song ends triumphantly with a near quote of the end of *Meistersinger*.

But our own quest does not end with that last stinging chord in D major. What is this business of no love waning about? The swimmer’s trial has been over the *loss* of a love and was about recovering from that loss. Certainly, the song is not implying that after all this, “Mary” returns to him. What kind of drama is that? Besides, I can find nothing in any of these poems to suggest such a return. So what love is it that never wanes?

For the answer, we must go back to the song that started the whole thing : “In Haven,” with text by Alice Elgar, where the message is that “Love alone will last” etc. Seen through the lens of what has transpired since we listened to “In Haven,” we may now suppose that the swimmer had more than one woman on his mind. One of them was gone. The other, his until-now true love, remained and may, in fact, be the narrator of “In Haven.” But the swimmer would first have to cast off his feelings for his departed before he could return to his true love. This he accomplished in Swimmer, after which he would find, indeed, that “Love alone will stay” (as opposed to leave, as the traveller had done).

But why, with all the references to *Die Meistersinger* where so much that applies to *Sea Pictures* is in C major, including the end of the opera, with C major implying stability and a certain straightforward quality, and C Major being the key of the seminal “In Haven,” does Elgar end his triumph (Swimmer) in D major, a key with the same signature of the B minor of Corals? Has Elgar taken his swimmer into a different world with this key change?

I see two possibilities. In the first, the swimmer does not remain in this other world for long. The sentiment of the seminal “In Haven” is that true love is everlasting and that sentiment is the point of *Sea Pictures*.<sup>28</sup>

---

It is that sentiment to which “Edward” returns - and to his true love. The pull is that strong.

The other possibility is that the swimmer gets over his despair but never his love for the woman he has lost, and so he does not return to his original love. There are two reasons to support this ending. 1) The cycle ends with Swimmer, not Haven, which one would think would be the case for the above story line to work. That said, it must be admitted that, musically, Haven would not make such a good final song. 2) “Love alone will stay” could apply to a state of mind and emotion, not to a character. Love stays, but the lover can leave.



Elgar wouldn't be Elgar if everything were clear.



Jerrold Moore in his notes to the Lauris Elms disc reviewed below wrote that *Sea Pictures* may have been a work that Elgar had to write before taking on the journey through death described in *Dream of Gerontius* a year later. I believe this is true and that *Sea Pictures* was a necessary companion to *Enigma Variations*. Enigma was Elgar's extroverted paean to friendship and his confidence in his abilities. *Sea Pictures* was his inward testimony to redemption and love and perhaps other things, as well. It may also have represented a clearing of his mind. All of these things had to be intact before he could take on the subject of life's greatest mystery - death and God.

Finally, please keep in mind that much of what I have written here was out of fascination, interest, and a sense of fun. Lest one think I am convinced of the accuracy of all this and do not recognize the dangers of speculation upon an artist's motives, I'll conclude with this exchange between Jaeger and Elgar. Elgar had just completed *Gerontius*, and Jaeger was writing an analysis for the first performance. Upon reading it, Elgar wrote several comments, including this one:

My wife fears that you might be inclined to lay too great stress on the leitmotif plan because I really do it without thought - intuitively, I mean. For instance, I did not perceive till long after it

was in print that 'In Thine own agony' & the appalling chords I last bar p. 150 || 3rd line, bar 2, p. 154 [sic] introducing & dismissing the Angel of the Agony were akin but they are, aren't they?<sup>29</sup>

Maybe Elgar just liked the sound of D major.

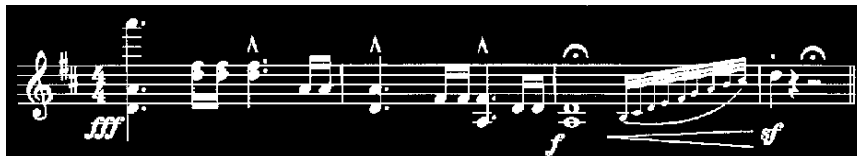
## The Recordings



Below are assessments of sixteen full recordings of *Sea Pictures*, plus a few historical partial readings. Before proceeding, please understand that I am not a singer but a trombonist. Vocally oriented though the trombone is and as interested as I am in opera and vocal works, I am not acquainted with the intricacies of vocal technique. Therefore I sought the help of Wendy Heller, a professional singer and musicologist, plus an orchestral musician friend who has loved and concentrated on the intricacies of opera and singing for forty years. I also thank Richard Burns, an Elgar Society member and specialist in 78 recordings, for his insight, for loaning me recordings, and for making several tapes for me. I am also grateful to my wife Mary, a violist, who has read through this manuscript several times. It was Mary who first saw the link to Mary Lygon.

Earlier, I discussed Elgar's treatment and phrasing of texts, but there are musical and vocal problems to consider. Elgar wrote this cycle for Clara Butt, a real alto who, from the evidence of her recordings of Corals, had a huge range and the ability to articulate text clearly throughout that range. This is apparently the voice Elgar had in mind for this work, and is what *Sea Pictures* requires if all its aspects are to be realized in performance. In other words, *Sea Pictures* is difficult to sing. Much of the writing is low and hard to project, particularly through a large orchestral fabric, but there is a lot of high tessitura too, particularly in Slumber and Sabbath. There *are* a lot of vowels that are difficult to differentiate (note the varying degrees of success the singers have with "land"), so it is important to express consonants clearly if the singer is to project. Elgar doesn't always make this easy and, to this extent, the criticism of his setting of words is justified.

Take the sea motive passages in Slumber. The thick orchestra is full-octave strings supported by



basoons, horns, harps, and percussion. Most of the vocal line is in the middle register at *pp* with a lot of vowels. At the end of the phrase when the singer has to intone "Hush thee" on low B's - not easy in any case - Elgar adds more woodwinds. True, the orchestra is marked *ppp*, but even when the dynamic is executed, and often it is not, this is a lot for a singer to cut through. This may be an extreme example, but it is not the only one, and we don't have many Clara Butts around today to carry this kind of thing off with aplomb. For the most part, our choice is between thicker-toned altos who have the "voice" for the

role but find difficulty projecting the text (and often don't have the best and most nimble *legato*), and mezzos who can carry the text, have a nice fluid *legato*, but lack the big sound and powerful low register. This difficulty is built into the work and represents a challenge to performers that is rarely met to the fullest.<sup>30</sup>

**Janet Baker**, m-s (John Barbirolli, London Symphony) + *Cello Concerto*

EMI CMS 763185-2 (UK); 56219 (US)

This is the most famous and respected modern recording of *Sea Pictures*. Mezzo or not, Baker has the voice for it. Her mid-range is powerful, her low notes are focused and expressive, and she is not only solid on top, she is flexible with her colouring there. Her singing is brilliantly concentrated and focused. She sustains the line beautifully, with wonderful expression and points of phrasing. Baker does not have the power and sheer panache Butt had, and she sings with more reserve, but she is the closest we have had in recent years to someone who can bring out all the aspects of this music. Barbirolli matches her approach and understanding. His tempos are quite slow, sometimes too slow, his orchestral sound is dark and weighty, and his manner is loving, gentle and very serious.

The opening orchestral music is slow and expands impressively. Baker's high Ds in the A sections before the low Gs are fine and delicate, with the low notes clear and well placed. Toward the end, over "slumber song. My slumbering song" Baker is outstanding, colouring her high notes, then darkening the low ones. Barbirolli contrasts by allowing the violin lines to get a little bright. His dark colouring and weight are perfect in the sea motive.

In Haven, Barbirolli and his players catch the sea feeling well, and the song has a sustained, relaxed feeling. It is very deliberate and serious, comporting with the idea that there are no "light" songs in this cycle.

Baker is slow at the outset of Sabbath, not just for musical feeling, but for the drama. Her pointing of the text is sharp and understanding, tempo changes are well carried out, and she has great concentration. As the song proceeds, we feel her determination and sense of expectation, so that the final climax and deliverance is well prepared.

Corals *seems* slow at the outset, but it isn't: the feeling is more a matter of weight than tempo. The orchestra is unusually heavy and dark, with the cello *obbligato* more pronounced than usual. Baker's rubato is well-conceived in all the songs, but here she shapes the deceptively simple lines with even greater understanding.

Swimmer is disappointing. The swimmer theme is more lyrical than surging - nice in its way - but it sets the stage for a too slow and too soft performance, even though Baker's diction and determination are there. The performers seem unsure how to cope with the at times corny nature of the libretto. Their solution to soften the line doesn't quite work. For the answer to Swimmer's mysteries, we might turn to Della Jones or Lauris Elms.

**Della Jones**, m-s (Charles Mackerras, Welsh National Opera Orchestra)  
+ *Songs from Starlight Express, Dream Children*; Constant Lambert: *Rio Grande*

Decca 452324

This is an ideal partnership of conductor and singer. Mackerras and Jones excel in character development, and it is no surprise that this is the most dramatically interesting of all these recordings. Emphasizing the narrative over the impressionistic or romantic, these performers turn each song into a little scene. Mackerras's style is typically angular. You hear it in the opening quavers when he brings out each beat just a little rather than run the notes evenly together, emphasizing the fourth beat of the first measure of Corals, etc. Tempos are slightly fast, and the orchestra has cut and thrust, especially in the dramatic and stormy moments. Jones uses her light mezzo with great understanding of the text, sometimes to the point of breaking into speech for a note or two. (I mean this in the positive sense: there is nothing *unmusical* about her singing.) This is not a gorgeous voice, and one would think it out of place in this music, but it is very attractive, with good high notes that she darkens as she holds them out, and chesty lows that she does not push too hard. Jones has presence, balance, and a sense of text and drama. Not only does she differentiate vowels, her strong consonants help her project.

Slumber is the weakest song, probably because it is the least dramatic and most romantic. It also benefits from a darker voice, especially over the "sea music," where Jones's light voice sounds out of place over a weighty orchestra. Mackerras's faster tempo and angularity work less well here than in the other songs, as well. All that said, this is good, and Jones sings with real lyricism.

Haven is better, which is to say it is excellent, aided by Jones' light, deft voice and Mackerras's adding a bit of nervousness and uneasiness.

Sabbath plays well to Jones' word pointing and Mackerras' detail and subtlety. There are too many fascinating moments to cover here. Jones makes the *quasi recit* a real event; the way she steps up the mood at "The new sight" is remarkable and effective. The *Molto maestoso* is nice and broad, with a well judged tempo that doesn't go limp. The *tranquillo* at "And kneel where once" is nicely turned and shaped. The *Grandioso* is bold and exciting, and we sense a powerful sea when the opening motif of the work enters at "And on that sea."

Corals is quick and light, with real panache. Jones almost dictates, "Yes press my eyelids closed" - more so than when similar music is heard in earlier verses. She takes especial, dramatic - and unusual - care at the *stringendo* in her phrasing of "But far the rapid fancies fly," finding drama and tension here and in Haven that eludes most singers.

Swimmer lets out all the stops. Mackerras may indeed see the opening music as a storm: there is real thunder in those tympani - an effect that is repeated when this music appears at L. The swimmer theme surges at a quick tempo, and Jones sallies forth. She flies in the face of the dynamics after E (a dictated, firm "A grim grey coast") and later in similar music at M. These sections are written *p* with a later crescendo and are usually taken somewhat hushed, but Jones and Mackerras hold nothing back, turning the passages from mysterious to defiant. Performers have tried different approaches to this song, but none is so forthright and dramatic as this one.

Jones is no Clara Butt, Janet Baker, Gladys Ripley, or Muriel Brunskill. If you must have a dark mezzo

---



or an alto in this music, this is not for you. But this recording has something to say about this music. It is exciting, gripping stuff, and the ending not only hints at *Die Meistersinger*, it replicates its style.

**Birgitta Svenden**, m-s (John Carewe, Nice Philharmonic)

+ Mahler: *Kindertotenlieder*; Zemlinsky: *Six Songs*, Op. 13

Forlane 16642

Svenden has a dark, beautiful voice with a flowing legato and a fine ear for line and phrasing. Her vibrato is subtle, reinforcing the longer notes well without being obtrusive. She hits the low notes, but she doesn't push them or have real power down there, and she is very smooth approaching high notes. This is pure singing - as opposed to dramatic expression. Carewe and his French orchestra (which sounds surprisingly German) support her well. Svenden is observant of relative dynamics, particularly crescendos and diminuendos (not all these performers are), though she doesn't drop to a *piano* as often as she could. Other recordings have more expression, drama, insights, textual subtleties, and low notes, but if you want to bask in the opulence of sound and colour, Svenden serves well. On the down side, her accented English impairs diction, and she has trouble differentiating her vowels. You notice these problems in the faster music, particularly in *Swimmer*, where things tend to congeal at times.

*Slumber* is slow, expressive, lyrical, and beautifully paced. The sea motive is not too heavy and moves with just the right give and take. It is not overly dramatic, nor does the mood vary much at "Isles in elf" - I don't mind this - but things broaden nicely from the "Good nights" to a last chord that is beautifully darkened by glossy bassoons.

The performers pick up the spirit in *Haven*. One might think Svenden's style too lush for this music, but her joy of singing and Carewe's light, rhythmic accompaniment win out. This is one of those times when it is better to listen and enjoy than to analyze.

Carewe paces *Sabbath* without rushing or dragging, while the orchestra creates a nice Wagnerian glow. Again, I point to the lack of soft singing and subtlety and note that in this, the most narrative of all the songs, Svenden is more of a singer than a storyteller, but again, this is beautiful singing. As in the end of *Slumber*, she responds to the *Grandioso* with some nice broadening of tone and pace.

*Corals* is slow, but Svenden's performance works, not because she bends the music to her style, but because she adapts her style to the music - even more so than in *Haven*, which is saying a lot. There is a real sense of commitment and no awkwardness. The performance is almost hypnotic.

The opening to *Swimmer* is impressive with good *sforzandos* in the second and fourth measures. Svenden's entrance is strong, but her lack of softer singing and dramatic flair cause a problem at "Grim grey coast," as does her lack of a powerful low register. This is a bad place to have both these problems. We get some strength and excitement later on, but we could have used both earlier: lyricism is not enough in this song. Her problem with her vowels in the fast music is most noticeable here.

Lauris Elms, c; (John Hopkins, Sydney Symphony, March 1976)  
+ Ernest Chausson: *Poeme de l'amour et de la mer*, Robert Pikler conductor

RCA GL40749 (LP)

The Australian contralto, Lauris Elms turns in a nice performance. She has a fine alto, with some caramel coloring, though her vibrato can throb annoyingly, usually on a single note. Her voice is heavy, but she varies it well to suit the music and text. Thus, she sounds lighter in Haven and Corals, and her words become clearer in the narrative sections of Sabbath. Hopkins and the Sydney Symphony provide reasonable, though not world class accompaniment. Tempos are slightly fast, but with the exception of a few hurried phrases, they keep things moving. This is a version to relax and listen to, not analyze.

Slumber is on the dark side because of Elms' vocal quality, but it moves along. She sustains the syllable "Elf" just before the sea motive, and the latter has plenty of energy and forward motion. The first time we hear her ability to change vocal quality is at C ("Isles in elf") where she lightens her step and brightens her tone to create interest. Toward the end, she supplies some drama in "Hush me," though Hopkins hurries some of the *colla partes*.

The mood is lighter in Haven. There is a deft spring to the orchestral rhythm, and Elms' dark contralto negotiates the music well. The only problem is her first "Love alone" phrase where her vibrato is too intense on the word "stand." The problem doesn't recur on the later "Love alone"s.

Sabbath is not too slow. Elms takes care with the narrative, and, like Della Jones, she tries to deliver the text. Her enunciation is not as clear as Jones', and she is not so intense dramatically - she never approaches speech the way Jones does - but her singing is more lyrical, her vocal quality richer (though not necessarily better). Elms is good at creating muted anticipation, eg the way she picks up effectively at the *Piu Mosso* ("The new sight"). This change can feel perfunctory and unnatural, but with Elms the spirit changes as well as the style, and it is effective. (The ability to respond emotionally as well as musically to instructions in the score and the text pervades this performance.) The orchestral interlude at E is marchlike and less flowing than on some recordings, but it is in character with the rest of the song. An interesting interpretive point occurs at the word "higher" at the *Grandioso*. Though of two syllables, "higher" takes up just one dotted minim. Most singers emphasize the syllable "high," making it slightly louder and longer than "er." Elms does the opposite for no reason I could see until she reached the minim *fermata* high G on "burn." Most singers air out the *fermata*, but Elms takes the note almost in tempo, as if making a point not to overdramatize *anything* in this music. The ending is another of those places where Hopkins could afford more patience.

Corals replicates Haven's nice springy rhythms, lighter vocal tone, and forward motion and Sabbath's hushed expression and storytelling. Again, I was impressed with the performers' ability to execute commands in the score without drawing attention to them, eg the nice *stringendo* over "rapid fancies fly" just before E.

Many performances of *Sea Pictures* run aground in Swimmer, often taking a strikingly different approach from what went before. Not so here. There is still no overdramatization, and the text is phrased and delivered rather than hurled heroically or throttled. "A grim, grey coast" (E) and "One gleam like a bloodshot sword blade" (M) are delivered with that same hushed expectation and anxiety I mentioned earlier. This is one of the few performances that brings out the lyricism in this music without losing drive. Nor does Elms strut haughtily on such dotted rhythms as "the gusty reins." She also observes the *pp* dynamic at "Love! Love!" There is some nice orchestral detail, eg the sharp brass semiquaver between C and D. "Only the crag and the cliff to nor'ward, The rocks receding and reefs flung forward." The ending

is appropriately fast and exciting, and there is no organ.

This is a good performance, modest yet hardly self-effacing in its scope. I have said a lot of positive things about it, but overall it lacks that *je ne sais quoi* of the best readings. I wonder what Elms would give us with a more insightful conductor. Nevertheless, if you are looking for a straightforward, yet sympathetic reading by a contralto and can tolerate a bit of vocal heaviness and occasional pushy vibrato, this recording is worth seeking out.

Linda Finnie, c (Bryden Thomson, London Philharmonic) + *Music Makers*

Chandos CHAN 9022

This is a broad, orchestral-style reading. Finnie is not eclipsed by the players behind her, but the tone is set by Thomson's long lines, sustained phrasing, moderate tempos, and symphonic approach.

Slumber is a natural for this style. It has a sense of mystery, and the sea section is murky, more broad than heavy, and remarkably disciplined in sustaining the slow tempo. Finnie creates tension by holding back, covering her voice and staying almost hushed. Her enunciation is not the best, but her tonal shading compensates in this song. The final E minor chord has the weight and darkness of the deepest ocean.

Haven works unusually well, given Thomson's approach and Finnie's broad tone quality. Finnie's continuing to rein in and cover her voice helps, but you get the idea that she is holding something back, too.

We start to find out what that is in Sabbath. This song needs more expression and drama than the symphonically-oriented Thomson gives it. At the same time, Finnie "lets go" a bit, allowing us to hear the quirks she had been hiding until now. The opening is rich but the accented D over "weary" (after B) is too heavy. On that same D over "sunless" (after D) she sounds like a boy soprano, fitting, perhaps, given the word. Just before the *molto maestoso* her sound becomes chesty, and I hear her pushing. The interlude is very dramatic but not out of place. Finnie's vibrato gets more noticeable as the opera singer in her begins to break out, though at "He shall assist" there is a strange lack of exhilaration. The final chord ignores the *pp*. It is almost accented, and completely drowns out the harp.

Corals is square. Elgar's delicate off-beats in the violins are too literal and require more lift. Everything is smooth, but the singing and playing could be lighter. The music right before the end is a little too passionate and overstates the Puccini qualities.

The opening turbulence of Swimmer is effective, and it's nice to hear the tuba dive in the fifth measure. The swimmer theme is smooth, but not without direction, and Thomson's broadening takes some of the bluntness off the dotted rhythms. The song sounds less pompous this way. Unfortunately, Finnie lets down the side. Responding to the words, perhaps, her operatic tendencies take full wing and much of the vocal line sounds forced. Still, there are good moments, particularly at "Love! Love!", the recall of the Corals line, and the softer passages where Finnie adopts the more restrained, covered approach she exhibited in Slumber.

**Margreta Elkins**, m-s (Werner Andreas Albert, Queensland Symphony)

+ Respighi: *Suite in G for Organ and Strings*

ABC 38545 (LP)

This has some strengths, not enough to stand up against the better performances, but it is worth acquiring if you come across it at a reasonable price and like the unusual coupling. Elkins has a nice lyrical mezzo, quite dark but expressive, marred by a bit of pushing from the throat that produces a shake in her vibrato. She is at her best in Haven and Corals. Albert keeps a steady tempo (the opening bars in Corals are strikingly literal) that gives Elkins room to expound naturally on the text. Nothing is pushed or forced. Her voice is big, yet her natural way with a phrase allows for intimacy. Slumber displays many of the same strengths, with a similar natural flow and expression. All that holds it back is some orchestral brightness early on, and boomy tubbiness in the "sea motive" (caused mainly by the sound). Sabbath is intriguing. The tempo is slow, the pacing and phrasing very even. You feel Albert's control and Elkins' ability to sustain - there is more tension here than in the other songs - but the approach remains understated and never pushed. The effect is relaxed and hypnotic. It would have been fascinating if the tension could have been sustained until the end, but the song founders at the second recit at H ("And tho' this Sabbath comes to me"). Elkins' sense of phrasing is not quite enough in this more declarative music, though she recovers at "He shall assist me to look higher." The ending is quite atmospheric, as Albert keeps the orchestra down to allow the harps to come through. Swimmer is unremarkable. It is not overly lyrical or overly dramatic - just average.

**Rosemarie Lang**, m-s (Hans-Peter Frank, Helsingborg Symphony)

+ Wagner: *Wesendonck Lieder*; Nystroem: *Songs at the Sea*

BIS 530

This is both a frustrating recording and an indication that one can take this Wagner thing too far. Though a mezzo, Lang has a full, rich tone that she places well, and she is good at using her chest voice to cover her lack of big low notes. She resembles a mezzo Birgit Nilsson but without the ringing clarity, assertiveness, and command. Frank conducts in the lush German tradition, bringing out the Wagnerian qualities of Elgar's music with full sonorities and slow tempos.

Nevertheless, this is not a great recording of *Sea Pictures*. Lang sounds uncomfortable with English and with the work in general. Her diction is poor, and her heavy German accent covers and colors the words, eg "corals lie" becomes "corisslie." She sounds insecure and reticent, holding back to the point where she is sunk into the orchestra. I wonder what would have happened had she sung in German because she is a different singer in the *Wesendonck Lieder*. Now she resembles Nilsson with some of that command and assertiveness. Frank does not always help matters with his slow, sometimes erratic tempos, and a full, loud (though sonorous) orchestra.

Slumber is slow and gentle, with nothing exaggerated. It is the best of the five songs. The sea section is heavy going, with a lot of weight on the beat, but it's not bad, and the last chord has dark resonance. Haven is rather fast and mundane. With such light orchestration, the singer is the star, yet Lang is as reticent here as everywhere else. Her best note is the last held note, something we hear happen again in Swimmer.

Sabbath displays Lang at her worst. Her enunciation and singing is deliberate and pedantic in the recit. and she hoots a bit for added drama in other spots. "And now Sabbath" is too deliberate, and "He shall

assist" is stuffy and slow. The whole thing is erratic, uncertain, and lacks passion. Frank's conducting is sometimes quite good but is more often broad and uncertain. The Teutonic orchestral tone is beautiful and sonorous, with smooth, golden brass, making the interlude and ending the high points.

The words need to be understood in Corals, just as in Haven, for again the singer is the star. Unfortunately, they are not, and "corisslie" and the like are hard to ignore. The tempo is fast, and the way the string offbeats are handled produce an inappropriate "doo-wap" effect.

Swimmer is little better. The opening music plods with too much weight on the downbeats, and Lang heaves and hauls at her entrance. Her diction problems are exacerbated by a song that is difficult enough without the words being mush and sunk so far back in to the orchestra. The word "sheet" is slightly rushed, like an appoggiatura. More serious problems occur with excessive slowing down before "To gulfs foreshadow'd". Lang hangs on to the last high A ("love") forever, and the way she lands on the final D ("wanes") sounds like sheer relief at making it to the end. On the other hand, Lang is very effective with "Babble and prattle," lightening the mood considerably, and she is positively insightful in the way she sets off "God surely lov'd us a little then" - very touching. When she can express the words, she is effective. The string phrasing and blend is gorgeous before E (after "foam"). Unfortunately, Frank's final ritard is so exaggerated as to be ludicrous.

Judging from her fine performances on the rest of the disc, Lang is a good singer, but *Sea Pictures* is a work that neither she nor Frank was ready to record.

**Felicity Palmer** c, (Richard Hickox, London Symphony)+ *Music Makers*

EMI CDC 747674-2

After a great start in Slumber, this starts falling off in Sabbath. Slumber is slow, soft in textures, almost floating in the breeze - a most gentle lullaby. Very nice. Palmer is a solid singer who projects the music and words, if not with great inspiration, then with real understanding and a very consistent, warm sound. I like the way she gives full value to the crotchet F ("and") before G ("sins"), and the way the first violins sustain the "sea motive" over the first "Good night's" so the mood is not lost too soon. On the other hand, the sea motive proper is muddy, and the last chord reflects Hickox's concept of balances throughout: it is a bit top heavy.

Haven is just as well sung, but too slow, forcing Palmer to be very measured in her phrasing. Still there is that beauty of tone.

The introduction to Sabbath is awkward, and Palmer starts to sound stressed in such loud passages, as "The new sight, the new wond'rous sight!" Hickox's increasingly slow tempos do not help, and as the song goes on, he gets slower until the thing starts to bog down. We barely hear the harps three measures before the end, and not at all after that.

The trend continues in Corals: too heavy from the start, with little light in the opening rhythms.

Swimmer is awkward at the beginning, but the real problem is the stress of this difficult music on Palmer's voice, though she is fine dramatically.

---

This is not a bad performance, but a little less weight in Haven and Corals, and some more movement in the tempo from Haven on could have produced something remarkable from these veteran musicians.

**Yvonne Minton**, c (Daniel Barenboim, London Philharmonic) Sony SMK 58929

Barenboim's way with Elgar is slow, with moulded phrases and concentration. Lines float as if in a dream - in fact the songs *sound* like dreams - and Minton's sound blends well with the interpretation. Her dark, caramel voice is restrained, never pushing until Swimmer. She doesn't enunciate the words so much as she forms them (clearly), adding to the sensation of otherworldliness. Slumber goes well within this concept. It is slow and steady, weighty in the sea section with firm downbeats.

Barenboim adjusts well for Haven, lightening the orchestral parts so they sound delicate, even fragile. Even the *obbligato* violin is very soft. Minton opens up only at "Love alone will stand," and then within the concept of the rest with no forcing of the held notes. The ending is feathery in the high violins.

Sabbath is very slow while maintaining tension at the onset. With a few trenchant exceptions (particularly at "The new sight" where Minton brightens considerably), it gets slower as it proceeds. Rather than experiencing joy over finding God at sea, Minton is more rapturous in quite a religious interpretation. Before the first orchestral interval, there is a considerable retard that could scuttle things but for the performers' ability to maintain intensity. The interval itself is broad and flowing in the best Wagnerian manner. From "And kneel" on, Minton grows more devout with some wonderful phrasing, until "He shall assist." She is confident but not exuberant. Again, no forcing. The ending comes with a huge ritard.

Anything after this could be anticlimactic, and so Corals proves to be. It's not that poky, though it is on the slow side. The problem is, where Minton needs to lighten her voice, she if anything darkens it - or so it seems within the orchestral context. She even turns operatic and begins to swoop a bit, producing a slight honk in her voice. It is a strange, even perverse approach, and is the first stumbling block in this performance.

Things get worse in Swimmer. The orchestral introduction is at a normal tempo. Then things slow down drastically at the swimmer theme, a phenomenon repeated every time it is heard. Barenboim obviously sees something very romantic in this theme, but his treatment is perverse. Minton is a different singer now, much more assertive and at times brighter. She overdoes the expression, pushes and swoops. At the "grim grey coast" music she is marked, strict and pedantic. The reminiscent music in the middle is a little better because the performers go back to what worked in the first three songs, but when the opening music returns, the problems do too, ie the very slow swimmer theme and the overdone and pushed triumphant music.

**Bernadette Greevy**, m-s: (Vernon Handley, London Philharmonic)

+ *Pomp and Circumstance Marches*

Classics for Pleasure CFP 9004

The kind of probing Handley does in Vaughan Williams and the drama he finds in Bax bog down *Sea Pictures*. Greevy has a good voice for the work with ample range on top and bottom. Her diction is good, though she does have a problem with long "e"s, but that is not at all upsetting.

Slumber is beautiful. Handley's slow tempo imparts a religious, mysterious feeling to the song, as the singer probes her most inner thoughts. The sea motive's powerful downbeats stir the ocean floor, and the violin arpeggios are soft lyrical breezes. As the song proceeds, the slow tempo weighs things down

a bit - a trademark of this performance - but Greevy's phrasing and the nice orchestral textures keep that from being serious. This is dreamy and sleepy, a real lullaby.

Haven is good, too. Greevy is lyrical, and the song flows, with a softly rocking orchestra. The long notes are beautifully phrased and held.

Sabbath begins slowly and does not pick up much at the *Piu Mosso* ("I bow'd down"). The ritard at C (the opening motif) is very retarded. "Calm in a moonless" plods. The ritard at G is not only big, it's premature, starting awkwardly at the triplet a beat before it's written (at "fal'ter'd") The failure to show some exhilaration at "He shall assist" adds to the lethargy. This is not the *Liebested*, but it almost sounds that way. It just gets slower and slower. Before long, the singer is not strengthened by her resolve, but simply weary and dragging herself to the finish. All this is more Handley's doing than Greevy's.

Corals goes quite well. I like the way Greevy brightens her sound, depending on the text. She is very expressive at times, coming close to speech to good effect, with some excellent low notes.

The turbulence at the opening of Swimmer is flat, and the tempo is slow. There is no sense of powerful rising from the ocean, and in a performance full of long ritards, there is an unwritten and unnecessary one just before the singer's entrance. As things go on, the tempo gets even slower. The motif from Corals over "fern and heather" is so slow it is almost unrecognizable. At "The skies were fairer," the tempo is so stretched and slow that Greevy resorts almost to hooting to make her phrases. "Love! Love!", which should be an emotional high, falls flat orchestrally and vocally. By "Brave white horses," she seems hung out to dry and tries to do too much with the words. This swimmer sinks long before the ending.

Too bad for Greevy. She does a good job, but Handley undermines her severely in Sabbath and Swimmer.

---

**Kirsten Meyer**, c (John Barbirolli, Halle Orchestra) + *Symphony 1*

Intaglio INCD 701-1 (UK) 2970 (US)

This 1970 performance was both Barbirolli's last recording and his penultimate live concert : the conductor collapsed during rehearsal but he did manage to lead the concert. The next night he conducted Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony*. Four days after that, he was dead of a heart attack. Though he certainly didn't show it in his performance of *In the South* from the same concerts, Barbirolli's poor health or a sense of oncoming doom may be revealed by a slowish *First Symphony* and more so in this sombre *Sea Pictures*. Tempos are very slow, textures are thick and weighty, and his manner is *extremely* serious. Kirsten Meyer is a true alto with a dark, complex, caramel sound, a big middle register, and a lot of weight, and good range and power. On the down side, she sounds past her prime with a too-fast vibrato that can honk on some high notes, her diction is not the best, and when she sings upward intervals, you can hear the efforts in her leaps.

Slumber sets the pattern for the performance, though it is carried out to a greater extreme later on. A fairly comfortable orchestral introduction is followed by the singer's entry and a slowing of the tempo. It is hard to tell why this happens: Either Barbirolli feels the vocal music needs to go slow, Meyer simply refuses to adhere to the set tempo, or Barbirolli is having trouble with ensemble. Later Barbirolli's sea motive is heavy on the downbeats, making for a very heavy sea. He does this with Baker, too, but not as much. Interestingly, the C section is at a pretty good tempo, but the rest slows back down again. Still, this song is not that bad because it relies on sound, something Meyer has to a good extent.

In Haven, the "lute motif" in the violins fails to entirely come through the light woodwind covering (not a problem with the Baker) and is slow. Meyer enters and seems to slow the tempo slightly herself, with Barbirolli following her. The tempo stays put after that, but I get the idea that singer and conductor are not of one mind here. Meyer is very stern on the held notes but she almost has to be to sustain them at this tempo. Through it all she displays some nice sensitivity.

Meyer's difficulty in expressing the text and her occasional wobble in the lower middle register is a greater problem in Sabbath. This one drags a bit too, seeming to get slower as sections go on, without the requisite sensation of awe and wonder. The tempo picks up at "The new sight," and the orchestral interlude is steadier yet, but things slow down again when Meyer re-enters. Again, I get the feeling that singer and conductor are not seeing eye to eye. This continues until "He shall assist," which is better, but not particularly passionate. "And on that sea" drags some, before Barbirolli rushes the last couple of measures as if in a hurry to get things done with.

Corals is like Haven. The opening is slow and sloppy in the orchestra, Meyer and the flutist have trouble blending, and things plod from there. And yes, orchestral passages hold their tempo better than the vocal ones, though the dragging is nowhere nearly as serious here as it was in Sabbath. The ending is very nice. There is something very touching in Meyer's voice in these two "lighter" songs. Heavy though her voice may be, she seems to feel them more intensely than the others.

In Swimmer, Barbirolli establishes a free-flowing rubato at the beginning, but when Meyer enters, we get the dragging and uncertain coordination between singer and conductor yet again. "And strong winds treading" over the semiquavers in the strings is awkward, with the strings sounding unsure at so slow a tempo. "Grim grey" has no real intensity, and things really slow down before "Love! Love!" So it goes right to the end where Meyer's final notes are not quite together with the orchestra. It is not just the slow tempo that's the problem through all this, it's the lack of intensity.

A frustrating performance, then. Both singer and conductor have something to offer in this music, but not together, and in Meyer's case, possibly not at all, given her tendencies to drag (which I do think are more her fault than Barbirolli's. I cannot be absolutely certain about this last point, but it sounds that way).

**Jan Wilson**, m-s (Nicholas Palmer, Altoona Symphony Recorded at a live concert in 1997) + Kalinnikov: *Symphony 2* ASO

This is the only American performance in this survey. Wilson has a big, rather dusky voice, but it is hard to assess it beyond that because of the recorded sound and what I suspect is hall resonance adding weight to her mid-low register and placing her too far forward, obscuring details in the orchestra. It seems as if the engineers couldn't control the hall acoustics (the venue sounds like a gym), and you can hear them riding the gain down during the loud music at the end. Occasionally, it sounds as if reverberation were added (though this too could be hall resonance).

As for the performance, there are problems with horn intonation around H in Sabbath, and the trumpet gets blatty just before the *Grandioso*. Even so, the Altoona Symphony does a decent job, though it is no competition for the other ensembles covered here. Palmer's mainstream interpretation is bothered by flatness of dynamics - most of the performance is around *mf* - with little attention paid to subtleties. He also adds some strange retards in the clarinet solo just before the end of Corals and when that same motif reappears in Swimmer.

The audience probably got a better sense of this performance than I did. I trust they enjoyed it, but this issue has too many superiors to have much standing as a recording.



## Historical Recordings

**Gladys Ripley**, c (George Weldon, Philharmonia Orchestra. From 78s recorded in July 1946)

C 3498-3500

**Gladys Ripley**, c (George Weldon, London Symphony) + *In the South*.

MFP 2093 (UK) Capitol P18017 (US) (Mono LP)

Ripley's two recordings were made a few years apart, the second probably to take advantage of the new LP medium. Ripley was a light alto with a clean, slightly dark tone, especially in her first recording. Others would make more of the words and observe the dynamics more closely, but not all of them had such a wonderful sound.

Ripley's two recordings differ in tempo, conducting style, and vocal quality. Weldon's tempos were quicker and tended to push at times in Ripley I, perhaps because of the four-minute side lengths of 78s (though two of the songs went over one side anyway). The rhythms were sharper, and Weldon made more of the accents in the orchestra. The remake is more romantic and lush, often much slower, and always more rounded - as if the performers felt able to relax without the time constraints of 78s. Ripley's vocal quality is slightly more spread and covered in her second recording.

In *Slumber*, Ripley I is haunting and her low G's nicely resonant. Weldon's sea is a bit heavy, with emphasis on the downbeats, and his *sforzandos* are quite marked, but overall the reading is straightforward. Everything is slower, more lyrical and more relaxed in Ripley II and the sea section is a lot calmer. Overall, I is strong and lyrically robust: II is dreamier.

*Haven* differs sharply between the two versions. I is faster, more vigorous, and with a lot of motion, too much for such a delicate sing. II is more relaxed and less rushed.

*Sabbath* works well in Ripley I. The opening is eloquent, she does more word painting than in the other songs, and there is a nice sense of drama and storytelling. Weldon adds several ritards before the end of sections that work well. My one criticism is that the *molto maestoso* and the similar music near the end are too legato. The structure loses a moment of contrast, and the assuredness in the text is mitigated. Ripley II is slower and more flaccid, with a more drastic legato at the *molto maestoso*. Things tend to wander here. There should be some energy when the singer discovers that she can worship outside her church; what we get here is excess piety. Worse, the slow tempo tends to expose a slight (but tolerable) wobble in Ripley's voice. Ripley I is the choice.

*Corals* suffers from too fast a tempo in I. It sounds hurried, rushed, even nervous. The Puccini-like passages need to have a sense of lingering charm, and they don't. Ripley sings well, but there are moments at the ends of phrases when she is uneasy approaching the cadences, probably because of Weldon's hurrying. Weldon gets his tempos right in Ripley II. This is a fine reading by all parties, with a dance feel that is most appropriate.

Ripley I's *Swimmer* is fast, dramatic, and urgent. Ripley II is much less surging and driving, with the opening softer, calmer, and less threatening. The vocal line is more lyrical and softer, the ritards, marked in I, are even slower. In Ripley I we have a strong young swimmer contending with some rugged elements. The swimmer is older in II, but the weather and sea are less threatening. The earlier reading

is more in the spirit of Elgar's writing, but those who find the song strident may prefer its successor.

**Muriel Brunskill**, c (Unnamed orchestra and conductor, recorded November 1926) + other Elgar excerpts from 78s including the 1916 "Where the Corals Lie" by Clara Butt Dutton CDAX 8020

Brunskill has a beautifully dark and resonant alto. Though she (or the conductor) takes a slightly weighty, square-phrased approach to the songs, she has more high overtones than usual, creating an interesting balance and a lot of different colours. She is surprisingly modern, with few old-fashioned vocal affectations, and she pays especial attention to diction. This might have been one of the best versions, but Brunskill is let down a bit by a conductor and orchestra (particularly an occasionally sour oboe and some blatty trombones) who are not as flexible and full-toned as she is.

Slumber is good, though Brunskill rushes the triplets on "shadowy sand," as though she did not want to risk exaggerating a spot where most altos like to open up. The sea motive separates the beats noticeably and plods heavily the first time it is heard: it is ~~smoother later on~~. The purely orchestral retard before E (the return of the A section) sounds out of place given Brunskill's middle-road approach.

Brunskill sings very well in Haven. Her clean voice and nice way with the words balance the slow tempo very well. She lightens her tone beautifully on the long high notes at the end of each verse and never forces.

Sabbath starts awkwardly in the orchestra, though it is interesting how much the conductor brings out the sea motive in the low strings after Brunskill's entrance. Brunskill sings lyrically without exaggeration or underlining. She treats this very dramatic song less like an aria and more as an art song - good idea. At "He shall assist," Brunskill, brightens her tone and sings out less dramatically than most, but this is consistent with her overall approach and works well, as does the subtle increase of tempo to the end. The high G over "burn" is typically clear-toned.

Corals is similar to Haven. Note the *portamento* in the cello *obligato*.

The orchestral opening to Swimmer is choppy and awkward, and remains so through the Swimmer theme. The tempo is quick when the singer enters and remains so. It moves quickly and lightly at "A grim grey coast," allowing Elgar's chromaticism to supply the air of danger until a big ritard at the *colla parte* ("They have lain embedded"). The music that follows "Love! Love!" takes on a more heavenly cast than usual and is very effective. The sigh at "God surely lov'd us a little then" is not so much a sigh as a girding of strength. The music from Slumber is taken slowly and is sustained and lyrical. When the opening (to Swimmer) orchestral music is repeated, it is much slower and smoother than before. From here to the end, Brunskill sounds more determined and carries through without exaggeration. The ending is marred by an excessive ritard that seems out of place.

**Leila Megane**, c (Edward Elgar, Royal Albert Hall Orchestra, Recorded from November 1922 to January 1923) + Handel-Elgar: *Overture in D minor*, Bach-Elgar: *Fantasia and Fugue in C minor*  
"The Elgar Edition, Vol VI" Pearl GEM 115 EWE 1 GEMMCD5 9951/5

We often hear how conductors studied Elgar's recordings of his own work and either modelled their performances after his or at least learned something from them. I have to wonder if anyone has done that with *Sea Pictures*. Certainly, I can think of no performance like it. As you will see, there are reasons why one might not model a performance on it, but some conductors surveyed here could have learned a few

things from it.

From the Elgar recordings I've heard, the composer has earned his reputation as a "fast" conductor. This *Sea Pictures* is no exception. It is *very* fast. It certainly clears the cobwebs after so many painfully slow readings, and reveals some phrasing insights impossible to realize at very slow tempos. It misses a lot, too, particularly in atmosphere and emotion.

Not all of this speed was the result of artistic choice. Jerrold Moore's notes provide fascinating insights to the problems encountered in making this recording. Some of the songs required multiple takes over a few sessions: that, and the large orchestra tended to tire Megane a bit. The final issue included the *Slumber*, *Sabbath*, and *Swimmer* from November and *Haven and Corals* from January. *Sabbath* and *Swimmer* were taken at fast tempos to get them on one side of a 78.<sup>31</sup> Finally, "pianissimos had to be coarsened in order to be caught by the recording equipment."

One thing is clear, regardless of equipment. If Elgar was thinking of Wagner when he made this recording, I don't hear it. Whether that was by artistic design or forced by the circumstances of the recording, I don't know.

*Slumber* is interesting in its way. Elgar moves right along without ceremony so phrasing is continuous and sure. Even so, the centre section is square and almost blunt, and there is some hurrying into the second sea motive and at the "Good nights." Still, the performance is not without rubato, particularly in the way Elgar slows down for the sea motive and in a few other places.

*Haven and Corals* are strongly affected by the equipment's problems with pianissimos. Both songs are taken very fast, and the soft opening measures to both are so bumptious in the orchestra - *Corals* less so - that they approach an organ grinder/oom-pah quality. Because both songs were combined on one 78, the second verse of *Corals* was cut for space reasons. Time problems or not, Elgar does take his ritards in both songs, not as emphatically as some, and in such a way that they are more a part of the overall tempo scheme than we sometimes hear.

Elgar had to hurry *Sabbath*, but with interesting results, given how successful he was in making the narrative come across as interesting and meaningful. The fast tempo helps in a way - refusing to poke along always helps the telling of a tale - but there is more, and most of this is encompassed in Elgar's ability to maintain his rubato well within the narrative and musical structure. This is no mean trick. Through all this, the singer is more assured and stronger than usual. She is more a master of her fate, less a wandering recluse looking for religious rapture. Elgar's ending reflects this: it is more crisp than massive.

As if *Swimmer* does not present enough problems, it too was plagued by length. The "brave white horses" were race horses in this recording, and you don't get hung up on pompous skipping rhythms when you speed by them as Elgar does here. He doesn't even let up at the dramatic "grim grey coast" passage (though there are places here and there when the tempo relaxes a bit). I can't say it works exactly, but it's not stuffy, and there is a certain excitement in all this, but the song really is hurried, and that is hard to ignore. The ending is crisp and certainly not heavy or overly triumphant.

Because this recording is so marked by the circumstances of its making and the tempos, I have not mentioned Leila Megane's contribution, perhaps unfairly. In fact, she stands up very well. She is a solid alto with a fine range and a real sense of the lyrical line. Her ability to sustain and suspend a line is helpful in maintaining stability with these fast tempos. Given how little time she has to make her interpretive points, she does very well both in expressing herself and staying with Elgar's tempos (though she is breathless at times in *Swimmer*).

## Partial Historical Recordings

**Clara Butt**, c (“Where Corals Lie”, no orchestra or conductor given, recorded 1912) from HMV 03299: LP HLM 7025

**Clara Butt**, c (“Where Corals Lie”, Hamilton Harty, no orchestra given, recorded 1916 at about a semitone below pitch) + other restored Elgar excerpts, including *Sea Pictures* with Muriel Brunskill CDAX Dutton 8020

These are the only recordings I know of Butt singing this music. Dutton has done a marvellous job restoring the obviously noisy original. Butt’s voice sounds huge and warm - more so than on the 78s. She has a nice lyrical top end, and she can really belt the low notes. Just listen to “All the land where the corals lie” before E in the 1916 recording. She also likes to roll her “r”s. Her general approach (and the conductor’s) is a fast tempo at the beginning of verses, with retards before each ending. And she seems to be having a good time.

I wonder why Dutton didn’t restore the 1912 performance. Butt sounds a little brighter and sweeter on that one (perhaps because of the lowered pitch on the 1916 recording). Her singing sounds more natural, less mannered, and the vibrato is more relaxed. The big low register is there, though she doesn’t vamp as much. Not that I don’t like both of her excerpts, but where the 1912 has an advantage is in the conducting. There is a very nice, lilting bounce in the off-beats, the balance between the shifting tempos is more assured, and the ending is smoother and more delicate.

Careful listeners will catch the absence of the harp and the use of the clarinet to play the last harp triplet (but not the four demisemiquavers) before the *fermata*. Because the clarinet adds a *fermata* to the final B, this brightens the sound of the final chord. (Elgar did not use clarinets in the last measure.)

Note: the back of the CD mistakenly gives the date of the 1916 recording as 1920.

---

## Summing Up

Elgar’s *Sea Pictures* is a fascinating piece to study, as well as fine music. I have touched on a few of its mysteries, but something tells me there are more here if you want to pore over this score. As for recordings, I would want Baker, Brunskill, and Ripley (especially 1946) for their understanding of the tradition, excellent singing and sheer sound; Jones for a marvellously insightful rendering of the text delivered in a small voice that she adapts well; Svenden for her lyricism and flow; and those delightful Butt excerpts, both for their historical import and for what they tell us about what we are missing in altos these days.

In addition, there is the marvellous Palmer Slumber, Thomson’s symphonic approach, and Elms’ decently insightful reading. As with most works, the definitive recording of *Sea Pictures* has yet to be made. For those who like to combine traits of different performances to produce an ideal, the job is simple here. Take Janet Baker’s recording and redo the last movement. Or match Clara Butt, Muriel Brunskill, or Leila Megane (it would be nice to hear her under better circumstances) with Barbirolli, Mackerras, Carewe, or Adrian Boult. Ironically, I know of no recording of *Sea Pictures* led by Boult, and he is one of the greatest Elgarians of all.

## Bibliography

- Anderson, Robert. *Elgar*. New York. Schirmer Books. 1993.
- Bax, Arnold. *Farewell, My Youth and other writings by Arnold Bax*.  
ed. Lewis Foreman, Hants, England: Scolar Press., 1992.
- Del Mar, Norman. *Conducting Elgar*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1998.
- Kennedy, Michael *Portrait of Elgar*. 3rd Edition.  
London: Oxford University Press. 1987.
- Little, Patrick. 'Songs of Love and Death: Elgar's *Sea Pictures*, Op 37',  
in *Elgar Society Journal*, Vol 9 no 4, March 1996, pp 168-176.
- Moore, Jerrold Northrop. *Elgar, A Creative Life*.  
Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1984.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Notes to recording of *Sea Pictures* by Lauris Elms. RCA.
- Newman, Ernest. *Elgar*, 3rd ed., London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1922.
- Nice, David. *Edward Elgar, An Essential Guide to his Life and Works*.  
London: Pavillion. 1996

Also consulted were Elgar biographies by Diana McVeagh, W H Reed, and Reed's *Elgar As I Knew Him*, among other short works, including the record jackets on the recordings.

---

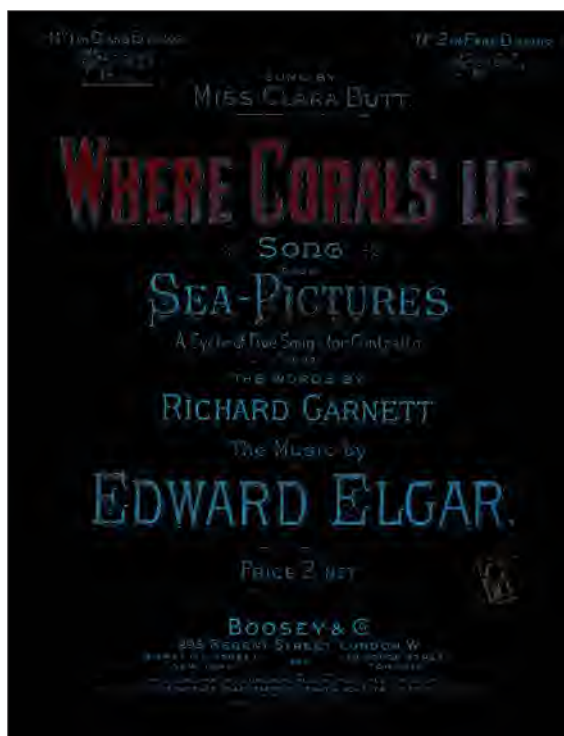
---

---









*The five songs were printed separately (as here) with the soloist's name as a testimonial. Note the hyphenated title of the work.*

## “OH! THAT SHEFFIELD CHORUS”

### *King Olaf at the 1899 Sheffield Festival*

Geoffrey Hodgkins

One of the joys of life is finding treasure in unpromising places. Whilst on holiday in the West Country last year, I came across in a second-hand bookshop at a reasonable price a leather-bound Souvenir Book of the 1899 Sheffield Festival. It was a limited edition, having been presented by the Festival Association to “members of the Voluntary Chorus”. My copy belonged to William Darbyshire, one of the basses, and was personally signed - as presumably they all were - by the Association’s President, the Duke of Norfolk, who also wrote a letter of appreciation to the choir. “The success achieved by you... three years ago has been repeated with an even more emphatic power, and the fame of the Sheffield Chorus has now been built up as one of the glories of our City”.

There had been triennial festivals at the Three Choirs towns, and at Birmingham and Norwich, from the eighteenth-century onwards (Chester also dates from this time but went into abeyance in 1829 and was only resumed in 1879). The late nineteenth-century was the heyday of such events in this country. In particular the prosperous industrial towns of the Midlands and North of England sought to outdo each other in prestige, and a music festival was an ideal method of raising the wider profile of the town. Many of the towns had new large town halls to provide the venue. The Leeds Festival was the first of the new crop in 1858, followed by Bristol (1873) and the North Staffordshire at Hanley (1888). Other festivals were begun at places such as Bradford and Huddersfield, but failed to establish themselves for whatever reason.

Sheffield had a large auditorium, the Albert Hall, built in 1873 (with a large and expensive Cavallé-Coll organ added the following year). But more important, it boasted in Henry Coward the finest choir-trainer of his time, and he built up the Sheffield Musical Union into a formidable choral unit. However, the actual spark for the Sheffield Festival was provided by Joseph Platts, the secretary of the St Cecilia Society, who had attended a Handel Festival at the Crystal Palace in early 1895 and as a result suggested to several local worthies that Sheffield might do something similar. The idea was well-received, plans were immediately put into effect, and it was decided to give *Elijah* on 10 October 1895 under Coward’s baton. The choir numbered 300; the soloists included Medora Henson and Ben Davies. The concert’s success persuaded everyone involved to proceed with a full scale festival the following year. August Manns was engaged to conduct, and his Crystal Palace Orchestra provided the accompaniment. Coward, of course, was chorus master. The 1896 Festival was held over two days, 13-14 October, with concerts morning and evening. The principal choral works were *Elijah* (again), *The Golden Legend*, Parry’s *Job* (conducted by the composer), and Berlioz’ *The Damnation of Faust*. Other works included the *New World* and *Pastoral* symphonies, Saint-Saëns *Le Rouet d’Omphale*, and works or extracts by Grieg, Wagner, Handel, and Coward himself. Soloists included Charles Santley, David Bispham, Ella Russell, Ada Crossley and Plunket Greene. The success of the Festival, it was universally acknowledged, was based on the outstanding choral singing. The *Musical Times* correspondent reported that “the volume of full, rich tone it gave forth was astonishing, while so easily was the effect produced, even in *fortissimo*, that one felt a capacity for still greater sonority in reserve... I have heard no better sopranos and basses anywhere, and only on rare occasions have I heard the equals of the tenors and contraltos<sup>1</sup>. All the soloists were full of superlatives about the choir; Medora Henson “declared that in *The Golden Legend* she had been so deeply moved that she felt unable to sing the solo following ‘O pure in heart’”. There were suggestions that the Chorus be established as a permanent body, but the Committee,



*The Sheffield Chorus of 1899  
(below) with (left) their  
chorus master, Henry  
Coward.*



no doubt anxious to preserve high standards, wisely declared : "It has been agreed that the Chorus of 1899 must be elected by another musical test".

Arrangements for the 1899 Festival were made during 1898 and were complete by the autumn. Manns and his orchestra were again engaged, and Dvořák promised to write a choral work, "but subsequently it was found impossible to complete this for the date". The festival was extended from two days to three. On the Wednesday morning, 11 October, *Messiah* was to be given; in the evening, Elgar's *King Olaf*, and miscellaneous works. On the Thursday, Saint-Saëns *Samson and Delilah*, Liszt's *Die Lorelei*, and Schumann's Piano Concerto were to be given in the morning; while the evening concert consisted of *The Golden Legend* and the *Choral* Symphony. Friday morning's concert consisted of Parry's *King Saul*; while in the concluding concert the main item was Mendelssohn's *Hymn of Praise*. Soloists appearing at Sheffield for the first time included Edward Lloyd, Andrew Black, Marie Brema, Clara Butt, and William Green.

The Souvenir Book is enlightening when it comes to describe the selection of singers for the choir. Voice tests, before a panel of seven people chaired by Coward, took place on every Saturday afternoon and evening for seven weeks! Over 600 applied to sing, but nearly 300, "many of which would doubtless have done admirably in Festival work" were passed over. The final total was 347 who had "secured the necessary number of marks to qualify". This comprised 95 sopranos, 82 contraltos, 80 tenors and 90 basses. Rehearsals began on 16 January, and from then until the Festival in October, "with a brief holiday-rest", there were up to three rehearsals per week, "all being occasions of enjoyment and musical uplifting to the individual singers".

The anonymous writer of the introduction to the Souvenir Book was in no doubt as to the outcome, and his lyrical enthusiasm reached global proportions :

It is not for this pen to enlarge greatly upon the Festival proper. Most of the space at disposal in this Souvenir is devoted to the opinions of musical experts, who came to our city to criticise. Those men of music and men of letters have had experience of the greatest carnivals of song that the world has known. Some of them came here jealous of the status of the cities of their own habitation, whose festivals during the last half century have been the redeeming features of the musical history of England. Yet the tribute of these gentlemen of the Fourth Estate is a mighty unison of the highest praise, an exhaustion of the vocabulary of superlatives... Mr Manns... declared that they would be guilty of injustice.. if they failed to pronounce it the most gifted and highly cultured choir they had ever heard and that the world had produced... In the most vigorous fortissimo there was never the semblance of roughness nor trace of harshness. Never from first to last was there evidence of lack of homogeneity in expression; not a crescendo, not a diminuendo that was not as gracefully done and as effectually as though it had been the artistic production of one voice. Quality of tone appeared to be the beacon continually before the choralists, purity and power were combined, and the most delicate and ravishing shades of expression that the mind of man could conceive, or his ear and heart desire were produced and re-produced. Admirably indeed did the principals acquit themselves; splendidly, with a few exceptions, did the orchestra contribute its share to the success of the whole, although a few additional rehearsals would have improved the instrumentation; right well did Mr Phillips discharge his work at the console of the grand organ; but by universal accord, by vote of skilled musician and of unskilled enthusiast alike, the honours of Sheffield's Festival must be showered on the feet of Dr Coward, and the unsurpassing able army of singers of the city whom he had so marvellously trained.

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Scholes, Percy A (ed) : *The Mirror of Music* (Novello & OUP, 1947) p 45

<sup>2</sup> Moore, Jerrold Northrop : *Elgar and his Publishers : Letters of a Creative Life* (Clarendon,

Elgar was to conduct his own work, and went to Sheffield on 17 July 1899 for a rehearsal. "Glorious reception & rehearsal", wrote Alice, though she must have been recording her husband's reactions, as he went alone. His comments are found in a letter of 20 July to F G Edwards, Editor of *The Musical Times* :

I went over to Sheffield to conduct a festl. rehearsal - do you know that the chorus is absolutely the finest in the world! Not so large as Leeds but for fire, intelligence, dramatic force they are electrical... for the first time in my life I've heard my choral effects (Olaf) & very terrifying they are.. Laus Deo! (& Cowardus)<sup>2</sup>

With this letter Alice sent Edwards some press cuttings about the rehearsal, and in Elgar's next letter ten days later acknowledging their return he was still enthusing about his experience : "Oh! that Sheffield Chorus"<sup>3</sup>. On 20 July he had also written to Jaeger:

I went to Sheffield & heard that Chorus & was lifted into the seventh paradise : never you complain of my choral effects again - they're grand & mighty when properly sung & by Heaven I've never, never heard anything like that chorus... Coward must be a genius to get the dramatic force & perception:- it is simply marvellous & colossal<sup>4</sup>

He also enthused to a reporter from the *Sheffield Independent* :

The entire chorus tells the tales that are given in 'King Olaf' as though it believed them. The basses and tenors shout out their determination with realism that is startling in its vehemence and fierceness. A chorus that can sing as the Sheffield chorus has done to-night when the Festival is three months ahead is capable of great things.<sup>5</sup>

The Sheffield Festival came very soon after the Norwich Festival, where Clara Butt had given the première of *Sea Pictures* on 5 October. On the 7th she sang four of them again in London (with Elgar accompanying on the piano), and two days after that the Elgars went to Sheffield. Alice's initial reactions were not good. "Horrid hotel [the Wharnccliffe], no one to meet us. Went to Hall after dinner, refused admittance at first. Banquet at 10. but did not go". The following day there was an afternoon rehearsal for *King Olaf*, "wonderful chorus" was Alice's only comment. Elgar decided to miss the evening banquet as he was not feeling well.

It is worth remembering that although *King Olaf* was performed on the first day of the festival, the same singers had already given *Messiah* in the morning! Alice was present for the second part of that concert, and they both attended the tea-time reception at the Town Hall, "very amusing" according to the diary. The Souvenir Book's account of the concert begins with the soloists. Alice Esty was "dramatic and effective throughout"; Edward Lloyd sang Olaf "as only he can"; while Charles Knowles' voice was "very effective in Thor's [Ironbeard's] music". This was slightly at odds with Elgar's assessment to Jaeger after the final rehearsal : "Lloyd. Very good. Knowles - frightened. Esty - worse!"<sup>6</sup>

---

1987) vol 1, p 131

<sup>3</sup> *op cit.*, p 134-5

<sup>4</sup> *op cit.*, p 132

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Moore, *A Creative Life* (OUP, 1984) p 287

<sup>6</sup> [11 October 1899] Moore, *Elgar and his Publishers*, p 142

The Book continues : "Chorally, the performance was one of the finest of the Festival, the ballad 'The Guests were loud', the descriptive chorus 'King Olaf's dragons take the sea', and the charming Epilogue were outstanding features of excellence which will not be forgotten. The orchestra, however, erred on the side of over anxiety to give colouring to the voice numbers, the result being that some of the items suffered". This was more in accord with Elgar from the same letter: "Chorus. superlative. Orch. - v.middling", and Alice Elgar's diary : "Superb chorus, indifferent orch."

The Book reports glowing praise for the Sheffield chorus from a large number of newspapers and journals. *The Musical Times* said :

The choral merits of the work more especially were impressively demonstrated... The rendering of the choruses more than satisfied the composer... Mr Elgar's stirring strains provided a fine outlet for the dramatic instincts of the choir. The singers liked the work, and the composer was not at enmity with the singers, judging from what he said to them after the performance, and from their reception of the composer-conductor.

The *Musical Courier* picked up on an aspect of Elgar's conducting mentioned by many others over the years : "... by his nervous tension [he] aroused the chorus to their best efforts". It too singled out 'The Death of Olaf ["King Olaf's dragons take the sea"] and the Epilogue for special mention. "It is impossible to exaggerate the wonderful fire and intelligence with which [the choir] sang", it concluded.

Local pride swelled in the *Sheffield Telegraph*, calling the performance "a musical picture that for dramatic effect and musical aptness has rarely been surpassed". The Epilogue was once again mentioned, especially 'As Torrents in Summer', where the critic spoke of "the divine sweetness of the music... The audience would gladly have heard it again, but its position forbids an encore". Three other reports praised the same section : the *Sheffield Independent* asserted that "the choristers did not sacrifice the pitch in the slightest degree"; while the *Pall Mall Gazette* called the effect "literally overwhelming. Here, when the orchestra for the moment deserted the voices it was more possible than at any other time to judge the beauty of these effects, which could only have been won out of hard work, hard persistence, and original musical talent". The *Scotsman* said that "... the unaccompanied chorus was the finest thing of the day".

The *Leeds Mercury* sportingly acknowledged the merits of the performance of their local rivals, which "... more than fulfilled expectations. The chorus fairly revelled in their task. Thor was made a thunderer in truth, and the wild elemental feeling that characterises so much of the music was seized upon and illustrated in a way that is not soon likely to be equalled". A similar reaction to 'The Challenge of Thor' had been observed by William McNaught, the experienced choir-trainer, educationalist and competition adjudicator, who had been in the balcony with Coward and a few others during the final rehearsal on the Tuesday afternoon. Coward later described what happened :

When the chorus sang the first bar, with its test of attack in the staccato notes, he gave a slight start and looked at his score. The second bar seemed to impress him still more. At the third and fourth bars he seemed to quiver. At the words 'I am the Thunderer' he gave the book a bang with his closed fist, passed his fingers through his hair, turned to his colleagues and said, 'Well! This beats all I have ever heard'.<sup>7</sup>

From his choice of metaphor, the critic of *The Musical Age* was possibly still reliving his experience of the *Sea Pictures* première of six days before.

---

<sup>7</sup> *The Musical Times*, vol XLI, July 1900, p 450

It is said that every tree has its own peculiar tone, and that a good woodman can tell the various forest trees by the sound of the wind among their branches. So every sea-beach has its own peculiar sound, and Mr Elgar knows them all. It is his thought of the sea, which is always finding its way into his music, expressed as only an academic and popular musician can express it. He interprets 'the murmur of the shell'. And the Sheffield chorus got the tones of the sea in their voices. Sweetly and touchingly, impressively and powerfully dramatically they responded to the calls he made upon them.

The *Daily Telegraph* critic drew attention to the unfamiliarity and difficulty of *King Olaf* :

The chorus gained a second triumph [i.e. after Messiah]... for here was a work unfamiliar and full of pitfalls for unwary feet. The Sheffield singers never tripping in my hearing, they played their part through the drama with surprising readiness and confidence, always true in entrance to the fraction of the second, true no less in intonation, true, likewise, to the spirit and purport of the scene.

Other publications were equally eulogistic. The *Morning Advertiser* reporter had not been present at the morning concert.

Leeds I have always considered to be superlatively good, in fact to be infinitely superior to anything that can be heard in any other part of the country; but Sheffield has come upon me tonight in the nature of a delightful shock to my aesthetic emotions.

"Not many familiar with *King Olaf* would have believed this fine work could have been invested with such force and clearness", said the *Daily News*. The *Morning Herald* affirmed that "the chorus... deserved all the flattering marks of approval that were lavished upon it"; while the *Birmingham Post* stated : "The chorus equalled its work of the morning, and higher praise it is impossible to give". 'Staccato' in the London *Star* wrote : "*King Olaf* put the chorus to a very severe test in the matter of variety of expression, but they stood it triumphantly. The choruses have probably never been so well sung. Sung as it was tonight, it attracts by the beauty of its themes, impresses by its sincerity and strength, and interests by the unflinching wealth of ingenuity lavished on it".

"Keen enjoyment was demonstrated at the close", said the Souvenir Book, "when Mr Elgar was enthusiastically recalled". The *Musical Courier* noted that "... at the close of the performance of *King Olaf* Mr Elgar complimented the chorus upon their fine singing, and said that they had observed every mark of expression in the score in their singing of the choruses. He also congratulated Dr Coward upon his work in training the members of the choral body...". The second part of the concert included Mozart's E Symphony; the 'Air de Poppée' from Rubinstein's *Nero* sung by the soprano Lilian Coomber; the 'Prize Song' from *Die Meistersinger* sung by Edward Lloyd, "winning rapturous applause"; and Elgar's *Imperial March*, which had an "adequate and artistic interpretation by the orchestra". This second part of the concert was conducted by Manns.

The success had been physically demanding on Elgar, who was still not properly fit. "E. very exhausted", wrote Alice. The following morning she went to the first part of *Samson & Delilah*, accompanied by Mr E Willoughby Firth, one of the Festival Secretaries. The Elgars left for Settle at 1.30 for a four day break and were met by Dr Buck.

The rest of the Festival was received with equal acclaim, although there was a feeling that the Choral Symphony had been heard in better performances (but it needs to be remembered that it formed the second half of a concert which began with Sullivan's *The Golden Legend*!)



Three of the concerts were attended by a full house (1,648 seats), predictably *Messiah*; *Hymn of Praise*; and *The Golden Legend*, a work which enjoyed something of a vogue for the twenty or so years after its première at Leeds in 1886, and which for this festival had been sold out weeks in advance. Probably musical conservatism and 'fear of the unknown' were responsible for the empty seats at the three other concerts. Of these *King Olaf* was the best attended (1,536), followed by *King Saul* (1,498) and *Samson & Delilah* (1,373). The Festival made a profit in the region of £1,000.

---

As a postscript, it is worth noting that the Elgars must have made only a passing acquaintance, if any, with two of the Festival's patrons, the Rt Hon Charles Stuart Wortley and his wife Alice, who, however, were also present at the next Sheffield Festival three years later. Then began a long-standing friendship between the four of them. As Elgarians know, Alice Stuart Wortley became a major creative stimulus to Elgar, particularly in the Violin Concerto. In the 1902 Festival, in which Henry Wood took over from Manns as conductor, Elgar conducted only the third complete performance in this country of *The Dream of Gerontius*; and the première of the *Coronation Ode*, which should have been given four months before, but which had been postponed because of the King's illness.

One final thought. It is worth comparing the choral effects achieved here under Coward with the shambles at Birmingham almost exactly one year later at the première of *The Dream of Gerontius*. One wonders how the latter work might have been initially received had it been a Sheffield commission.



## MUSIC REVIEW

Sea Pictures [sic] (new edition). Pomp & Circumstance Marches Nos 1-5. Cockaigne (In London Town) concert overture.

London, Boosey & Hawkes, 1999. *The Masterworks Library*.  
ISMN M-060-11023-8

Boosey & Hawkes have recently published a rather handsome volume in their 'Masterworks' series. The larger size makes for easier reading, and is a companion volume to the Elgar/Payne Symphony No 3. The volume brings together works which were, in 1941-42, published in the Hawkes Pocket Scores series, the first and last being reversed in the original sequence. *Sea-Pictures* was published as H.P.S no 7 in 1941, the print being rather small, and this also applied to the *Pomp & Circumstance Marches* and *Cockaigne*.

*Sea Pictures* [sic] is described on the title page as being a "new edition". The work has been re-engraved, the German and French texts removed to leave only the original English text. The poems originally were printed to precede the music of each song, whereas they now follow the preface by Malcolm MacDonald. In this reprint, No 5, 'The Swimmer' has lost the line of asterisks which follow the fourth line of verse three of the poem to show the omission of the remainder of the verse and verses four to eleven of the poem. Comparison of the poem as printed (in my copy of the *Poems* of Adam Lindsay Gordon, published in Melbourne 1919) show there are changes to the original poem - the final verses of the poem : "See! girt with tempest... The strong winds treading the swift waves sunder the flying rollers with frothy feet"; and the final verse, penultimate line : "through straits forbidden". The change from "See" to "So" by Elgar should have a footnote giving the original word which is connected to the previous verses which Elgar did not set. The word "sunder", printed as "under", completely changes the meaning of that and the following line, between which there is no break. It is not treading the waves down; the strong wind divides the "flying rollers". There is an accent on "un-" which should read "sun-" which fits the strong accent at the beginning of the second half of the bar.

The *Pomp & Circumstance Marches* were, in addition to the full scores, published in miniature score format, the print being rather small. When re-issued in the Hawkes Pocket Scores series, the size of print remained the same. They were re-issued in a larger size volume in 1977 as H.P.S 905 which made them easier to read. In this new reprint the text is larger, and it would have been an ideal chance to insert bar numbers, but this has not been done. The first edition of March no 1 has the copyright date of 1902 and plate number H.3413. The H.P.S no 2 re-issue of 1941 has also "Copyright renewed 1929 by Boosey & Co Ltd". The renewal date was not printed on the 1977 issue which has a different plate number (B. & H. 20362). On this new volume we have the copyright date as 1901; the renewal date is not included.

Malcolm MacDonald in his Preface states that Elgar sketched but did not complete a sixth *Pomp & Circumstance* march. Percy Young arranged and orchestrated from sketches "a complete, if unscored work... which is now published as Military March no 6", and published by Boosey & Hawkes in 1956. This is none other than the *Empire March* of 1924, but Percy Young does not connect the two in his notes in the full score.

The overture *Cockaigne* was published in 1901, full score and parts, and a miniature score was also published. The overture is printed on pages 3 to 70, and no instrumentation is given on the verso of the title-page. When the work was published in the Hawkes Pocket Scores series, no 1, pages 3 and 68 to 70 were re-engraved. In comparing the two printings of page 3, the reference to the piccolo has gone and the percussion is now printed on a single line not staves. Page 27 has now added to "Bells and Triangle", "(Sleigh Bells)". Pages 67 to 70 of the original edition has the organ in the wrong position, between the tuba and timpani, and is now marked "ad lib". As the organ is "ad lib", the low A on organ pedals in the final bar on p 67 is missing when there is no organ, the tuba being used as a substitute for the missing note, but this can depend on what the conductor wishes to do with this note. When pages 68 to 70 were

re-engraved, the organ was left in the same position; this could have been corrected, as could p 67. In an attempt to reduce the number of staves, it now becomes very congested.

The current reprint of the miniature score is of this text, but for the first time, facing page 3, we now have the "Instrumentation", plus "Duration: 40 minutes". I do not know where they got this figure from; the BBC Orchestral Catalogue gives the timings as 13½ to 15½ minutes. The new 'Masterworks' volume is an exact reprint of this miniature score, including this "Instrumentation" page. This should have been corrected, the first edition text should have been used, the organ on the last four pages placed in its correct position, the instrumentation and the duration carefully checked.

What, on the face of it, could have been a useful and reliable volume is spoilt by the printing of H.P.S no 1 uncorrected and without bar numbers.

Arthur D Walker

## **BOOK REVIEW**

St George's, Worcester 1590-1999, by Father Brian Doolan.

*Archdiocese of Birmingham Historical Commission Publication no 12, 1999.  
35 pp, illus. £3-00. Available from the Birthplace (add 30p for p+p)*

This is a delightful little book, full of interest, written by the current priest at St George's. After a short introduction, the history really begins around 1540, at that turbulent time of the Reformation. In the repercussions following the failed Gunpowder Plot, two priests and a lay brother were discovered in hiding in Hindlip House just north of Worcester in 1606 and were executed. They were Jesuits, Worcester being the first place in England to receive the ministry of Jesuits. (The Protestant Bishop of Worcester Hugh Latimer is mentioned, although not the fact that he too was put to death in the Catholic Mary Tudor's reign!)

The opening of the first public Catholic chapel in Foregate Street in 1686 was made possible by that fact that the Catholic King James II was on the throne. When the King visited Worcester the following year the Mayor and Aldermen escorted him to the chapel and then retired to 'The Green Dragon'. The Chamberlain's Book at the Guildhall records "a charge of 2 shillings made on the city funds for their drinking ... during the time of Mass".

The book has many such interesting vignettes. Soon names familiar in the Elgar story begin to appear - the Berkeleys of Spetchley, for example. St George's Church dates from 1829, consecrated only three months after the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Act. That opening sermon lasted one hour and twenty minutes! As Elgarians will know Elgar attended the school in Britannia Square run by Miss Walsh, who "used to rise very early on Sunday morning for a round among the poor Catholics of the town. Thus she obliged the sluggards to leave their beds and prevented them from missing Mass". That school closed soon afterwards, but in 1892 a 'Catholic Private School for Girls' was set up by the Misses Mary and Blanche Grafton, of the family of Elgar's brother-in-law William.

Two final points of interest. At the centenary service for St George's in 1929, Elgar's *Ecce Sacerdos Magnus* was played as the procession entered the church. And Father Thomas Knight, who gave Elgar a copy of Cardinal Newman's poem for a wedding present, and to whom Elgar dedicated his four Litanies of the Blessed Virgin Mary, died in 1899. Could the priest's death have nudged the composer back towards *Gerontius*?

The many illustrations are reproduced beautifully - some in colour - and this little book is well worth getting, providing as it does significant background information to the Elgar story.

## RECORD REVIEWS

Violin Concerto in B minor, Op 61. With Bruch : Violin Concerto No 1 in G minor.

*Yehudi Menuhin (violin), London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Sir Edward Elgar and Sir Landon Ronald (MONO - Recorded in 1932 & 1931)  
Naxos Historical 8.110902*

"... there is so much ripe fiddling that one can well sit back, add the glamour of imagination, and wish the youth a long life in which to ripen in heart and spirit. If that ripening grows as surely as his fiddling skill, he will be a great man..." So wrote W R Anderson in typically direct fashion to welcome, as he always did, the latest Elgar recording (*The Gramophone*, November 1932) and now we can reflect on that long life, completed and nobly spent in the service of music and of humanity. I trust the day never comes when this special, indispensable recording is unavailable; EMI, of course, includes it in *The Elgar Edition* and it is also coupled to the Cello Concerto as a single CD, but this super-bargain version on the international Naxos label is welcome. (The six 78s originally sold for 36 shillings, a week's wages for some in 1932). Elgar's urgent conducting and his young soloist's ardent, unselfconscious eloquence are a classic of the gramophone, but they claim no exclusive rights; this intensely personal music belongs to the world and to any other violinist who can meet its challenge. Even Menuhin made a new recording in stereo (a thoughtful version with merits of its own) and the catalogue now offers many other fine performances by the finest players. Were it not rather long for convenient programming, who can doubt that Elgar's concerto would now be as popular as Max Bruch's inescapable First, with which this Naxos release is most appropriately coupled?

Menuhin was even younger in 1931 when he recorded the Bruch concerto, with Landon Ronald (a stalwart Elgarian) his attentive conductor. A little subdued, a little too carefully prepared, this early recording of a much-recorded work had very few predecessors in the studio, but they include (using the acoustic process) soloists like Albert Sammons and Fritz Kreisler. The latter's unissued version survives only by way of battered, but unique, test pressings found in Elgar's own record collection. Naxos, however, has found beautifully smooth Victor commercial pressings from America for this release, from which the noted transfer engineer, Mark Obert-Thorn, has extracted truthful and undistorted sound which is as fine as I have heard from original records now nearly 70 years old. There are no "right" ways to transfer old recordings and if you can put up with the scratch and the side changes, nothing quite equals the warmth and presence of original 78s. However, Mr Obert-Thorn includes only a little scratch and quite a lot of the impact and spacious sound of the LSO in both works, while the CEDAR technology at his disposal does not intrude. Menuhin's tone and playing, particularly expressive in the Adagio of the Bruch, sound more affecting than ever and on rehearing these recordings in such sound I have fallen in love with them all over again.

It remains only to mention that Naxos Historical (surely 'Historic'?) provides comprehensive notes (thankfully in one language only) graced by a photograph of the soloist in middle age. Malvern is once more "moved" to the West Country, however! Of course you all have this heart-warming performance in *The Elgar Edition*, but as a supplement to that the new transfer is well worth its modest price and can be most cordially recommended as an advertisement for how good "historic" recordings can sound, as a souvenir of a famous collaboration and an irresistible advocate for Elgar's magnificent concerto itself.

Michael Plant

The Songs of Edward Elgar.

Catherine Wyn-Rogers (mezzo-soprano), Neil Mackie (tenor),  
Christopher Maltman (baritone), Malcolm Martineau (piano)  
Somm SOMMCD 220

Once again we have an enterprising record company to thank for a delightful CD. The illustration chosen for the cover is charming, colourful and atmospheric and that could be said of the songs. All of us will have our own favourites among the 23 songs on this disc and I have to admit that they are a mixed collection in terms of quality.

The main delight for me in playing this CD was that it opened up new avenues to walk down in terms of going to my reference books to add to my knowledge of Elgar. Among the poets whose words are printed in full in the excellent booklet are some whom I have never heard of and whose words, frankly, are rather "twee". The settings are also of variable quality but all are lovely to listen to - what more need one ask of a song! The songs are performed in chronological order beginning with *The Shepherd's Song* from the 1880s, moving through Elgar's musical development to the two songs from *The Spanish Lady* (1932-33). We are so fortunate to have four excellent performers all together on one disc. I particularly enjoy the mezzo voice, and Catherine Wyn-Rogers is a beautiful example of a rare voice which always pleases. My favourite song is *Speak, Music*, words by Arthur C Benson - a joyous song, full of truths for me.

This CD would make a lovely Christmas or birthday gift for fellow-Elgarians as well as for friends who may appreciate being introduced to this neglected genre of a great composer.

Wendy Hillary

The Complete Organ Works.

Michael Gassmann at the organ of the *Liebfrauenkirche*, *Günterstal*  
Telos TLS 019

Despite Elgar's close association with the organ his compositional output was a mere 70 minutes, convenient for a modern day CD. His father was a long-term organist at St George's Church in Worcester and Elgar himself later served in the same post from 1885-1889. "I HATE it", he told Charles Buck, "the choir is awful & no good to be done with them". Yet as a boy he taught himself the instrument and, when deputising for his father, explored the quasi-orchestral effects he could achieve on the instrument as well as playing transcriptions such as the March to the Scaffold from Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* (rather inappropriately for a baptism). Of the five works featured here only a couple were originally conceived for the organ and they stand head and shoulders above the rest, particularly the G major sonata of 1895. It has a quasi-symphonic four-part form and reveals Elgar as a burgeoning symphonist. The striking feature of Elgar's sonata is its relatively light textures, compared to the more cloying writing of Parry and Stanford. It was Parry who wrote that "the capacity for holding indefinitely any number and any combination of notes is the source of the organ's being the mightiest of all means for tremendous effects of harmony, and this quality is essentially the most important element in organ style". It is technically extremely demanding and its first performer, Hugh Blair (assistant organist at Worcester Cathedral), had a mere four days to prepare it with disastrous results. Michael Gassmann has no such problems on the Freiburg organ (built 1973/1983) and the highlight of his performance is the final Presto.

The second sonata is a modified transcription of the orchestral version of the *Severn Suite* made, with Elgar's concurrence, by Ivor Atkins in 1933. It works less well, particularly its peremptory final movement, a coda lasting barely 100 seconds. Some of the *Vesper Voluntaries* (the other original organ work) hold one's attention, the *Loughborough Memorial Chime* is a curiosity of little consequence, the early *Cantique* has immense charm. Throughout Gassmann plays with devotion, considerable skill and a clear understanding of Elgar's style (his

dissertation 'Edward Elgar and the German Symphonic Tradition' must have helped); the organ has a bright sound though not imbued with quite enough of the solid textures of the Victorian era instruments, but the disc is worth having for the Organ Sonata no 1 alone.

Christopher Fifield

The Dream of Gerontius, Op 38.

*Janet Baker (mezzo-soprano), Richard Lewis (tenor), Kim Borg (bass),  
Sheffield Philharmonic Chorus, Ambrosian Singers,  
Hallé Choir and Orchestra conducted by Sir John Barbirolli  
EMI CZS 573579-2 (2 CDs)*

This well-loved 1965 set has already appeared on CD, ten years ago at full price. It is now available at mid-price and has been digitally re-mastered at Abbey Road Studios by Paul Baily. I guess for many like myself, this was the first recording of the work that they heard. Its reputation as a classic recording is well-deserved; first of all, for the intensity of Barbirolli's reading. He was deeply committed to this work, and it shows. He also had the advantage of two of the finest soloists to have recorded their respective roles - Janet Baker and Richard Lewis. Possibly Lewis lacks the subtlety of Heddle Nash, but his is a very intelligent reading, and he carefully follows the composer's markings. This is particularly noticeable in the quieter passages, where some other soloists forget they are not in the opera house and sing everything at an unremitting *forte*. Baker is of course superb throughout. The Angel's Farewell has to my mind never been sung better; and another highlight for me is the stigmata passage ('There is a mortal'), where Baker's supremely expressive delivery is matched by the searing tone Barbirolli wrings out of his violas and cellos. The Finnish bass, Kim Borg, has been vilified by many writers over the years, and frankly he is not very good, though possibly not quite as bad as sometimes described.

The combined choruses give their all, too, which produces more memorable moments, although there is also some quite harsh tone in one or two places. The re-mastering has failed to correct the imbalance between the two choirs in the eight-part section after fig 89 in Part II. The first choir is much clearer than the second here, the second tenors in particular being virtually inaudible. But generally the sound is excellent, the orchestra and soloists especially well captured. At mid-price this represents good value, though the first CD only lasts 39 minutes; whereas the Boult re-issue of the same work from the same company also contained *The Music Makers*. Nevertheless, a work which all Elgarians will want to have, a worthy celebration by EMI of the Barbirolli centenary.

The Editor

Cello Concerto, Op 85. With Britten : Cello Symphony, Op 68.

*Truls Mørk (cello), City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra  
conducted by Sir Simon Rattle  
Virgin Classics 7243 5 45356 2 8*

Elgar is not the sort of composer whose metronome marks provide only puzzles, such as Beethoven's efforts with his nephew Karl. Tovey maintained that all composers marked their music too fast. With Elgar this is not so. The figures are eminently practical; if his performance practice sometimes diverged from the printed page, his 'telephone numbers' still deserve the most careful attention. It so happens that the 9/8 Moderato of the first movement is without metronome marks; elsewhere Elgar is meticulous and clear. The two Jacqueline du Pré versions perfectly demonstrate the rightness of Elgar's judgment. The

first, instinct with the discipline of William Pleeth as teacher and the vast experience of Barbirolli on the rostrum, is a model of musical integrity, with wondrous gifts dedicated to the composer's service. The second, with classical poise a prey to emotional over-indulgence, is moving enough as a last will and testament; but Barenboim sends one straight back to Barbirolli and then to Beatrice Harrison and Elgar himself.

What of the Norwegian, Truls Mørk? This is an accomplished performance, but at the same time wayward. Gareth Lewis reviewed an earlier CD in January 1992; my admiration for Mørk's Elgar is cooler. The start is very deliberate and the approach to the Moderato so pensive as to raise doubts whether the concerto will proceed further. It does, but the Moderato gives the curious impression of two tempos in play, Mørk's and Rattle's. Rattle is always the faster, but of course there is compromise when both are engaged. To return to Elgar's precision : it is no bad thing to start a crescendo or diminuendo where Elgar wants it, to press on or hold back according to the letter of the score. Too often Mørk blurs these distinctions and has less convincing schemes of his own. That said, there is some magnificent playing. The Adagio is finely controlled and deeply felt, with only the end too slow. The final pages of the concerto, always a testing moment, are neither perfunctory nor sentimental. Mørk manages only a touching eloquence.

The Elgar makes no telling case why Rattle should leave the CBSO and move on to Berlin. Nor, in a different way, does the Britten. The coupling is indeed adventurous, as Ian Lace mentioned in July. The previous soloist was Rostropovich, in a live recording (Revelation RV 10100). The largest of the works Britten wrote for Rostropovich, the Cello Symphony is a virtuoso piece for all concerned. Restless and aggrieved, the work gives the orchestra every opportunity for brilliant display. Rattle and the CBSO are in masterful control. The Adagio has bars of heart-easing beauty, but much of the work is gruffly scored, with pounding timpani hardly tamed even by the cello cadenza. The design of the work is clear enough, with an Allegro maestoso in sonata form and final passacaglia separated by a worried little Presto and the fine Adagio. There is endless fascination in Britten's quicksilver invention, and here conductor and cellist are magnificently at one. The heavy scoring can give problems in the concert hall; on disc the often fierce interplay of soloist and orchestra can be effortlessly managed. It may be that both Mørk and Rattle enjoyed the technical challenges Britten constantly provides and relished solving the fiendish problems of the work rather more than attempting the supreme musicianship Elgar demands. The result is an outstanding Britten but an Elgar that needs repondering.

Robert Anderson

Enigma Variations, Op 36 (arr for piano); Concert Allegro, Op 46, and other piano works

*María Garzón (piano)*  
ASV CD DCA 1065

Considering the relatively minor nature of Elgar's piano works - only three shortish works from his most creative period - they have been served quite well on disc. In 1971 John Ogden recorded the *Concert Allegro* and some smaller pieces. Then in 1977 came John McCabe with the unwisely-titled 'The Complete Piano Works' (Prelude PRS 2503), followed ten years later by Peter Pettinger (Chandos CHAN 8438) with even more pieces, including the original version of the *Sonatina* (1889) as well as the later 1931 revision. Two discs from 1990 - Alan Gravill on Gamut and Christopher Headington on Kingdom - both included several Elgar pieces. Then in 1994 Anthony Goldstone played Elgar's own Broadwood piano in a recording of the *Enigma Variations* and several other works (but not the *Concert Allegro*) on MRCD 94001. Now the young Spanish pianist María Garzón, on a disc sponsored by the Elgar Society and the Elgar Foundation,



has recorded the *Variations* and ten other works. The *Variations* arrangement (Elgar's own) claims on the booklet cover to be a "world première recording"; only inside is it qualified as "the first recording of the... arrangement... on a full size piano".

In Mrs Gaskell's *North and South*, the heroine's mother asks at one point : "Who on earth wears cotton that can afford linen?" This question came back to me as I listened to this recording of the *Variations*. The glorious orchestration, with which we are all familiar, is sorely missed; and the limitations of the piano, most notably its inability to sustain notes without *tremolo*, and to play fast pasages with the speed of the strings, is glaringly obvious. The *allegro* variations are much slower than usual, and Elgar cuts the cascading string passages in 'Troyte' (after fig 26), at the end of 'G.R.S', and at 75 in 'E.D.U'. The lack of string timbre impoverishes 'R.P.A' and 'B.G.N' especially. The most successful variations are the quieter ones where the scoring is sparer - 'Ysobel', 'W.N'; and 'Dorabella', where the soloist plays with a clever and effective use of *rubato*. The lack of volume becomes apparent as early as the climax of 'C.A.E', which is disappointingly feeble. It goes without saying that none of the above is the fault of the soloist - who plays with great skill and commitment in what is a demanding work - but is due to the limitations of the instrument. I would like to report that I heard fresh insights from a performance as different as this, but sadly I cannot. As a final example, the climax of 'Nimrod' (fig 36) is marked '*f*legatissimo'; quite impossible on a percussive instrument such as the piano.

We are on much surer ground with the rest of the disc. The pieces are nicely played, although they are mostly too short to allow any real interpretive element to arise. Señorita Garzón plays the biggest work, the *Concert Allegro*, well enough without challenging the versions by Pettinger, Ogden, or particularly McCabe. There is a charming account of *Salut d'Amour*, a piece which for all its dozens of recordings, has not often appeared for solo piano.

I wish I could be more enthusiastic about this disc, which is very enterprising, but I guess for most people it will have little more than curiosity value. There are some excellent notes from Relf Clark, the London Branch secretary, although Sherridge is hardly a cottage; and I rather suspect a missing prefix where the *Concert Allegro* is referred to as "this usual work".

The Editor



## LETTERS

From : J R Hammond

Charles McGuire rightly points out that Elgar considerably abridged Cardinal Newman's text of The Dream of Gerontius, and in doing so heightened its dramatic qualities. There is a good deal of dross in the original poem which Elgar wisely decided to omit, concentrating instead on the essential narrative: the story of one man's journey through death to the life hereafter.

Surely the essence of what Elgar has done is to highlight the resemblance between the poem and a Requiem Mass? All the central elements of a Requiem are present in The Dream of Gerontius : Kyrie Eleison, Gloria ('Praise to the Holiest'), Credo ('Firmly I believe and truly'), Benedictus ('Praise to his name') and Agnus Dei ('Be merciful, be gracious').

If we think of Gerontius as being, in a sense, Elgar's Requiem, then this helps us to accept the work for what it really is - a deeply moving elegy for a human soul.

---

From : Michael Trott, Chairman, West Midlands Branch

I have discovered that Elgar's letters to Miss Martina Hyde are now in the possession of AT Shaw's son, Timothy. Martina Hyde (1865-1937) was one of Elgar's violin pupils, who with Winifred Norbury helped to found the Worcestershire Philharmonic Society in 1897. Elgar was invited to become the WPS's first conductor, and he corresponded with Miss Hyde in her capacity as joint honorary secretary with Miss Norbury.

There are over a hundred items, mostly undated and of no significance, dealing with matters such as the hire of parts and engagement of musicians. Some have been published, notably in Percy Young's Letters of Edward Elgar (1956); these are in the collection.

Timothy Shaw does not know the circumstances of how the letters came into his father's possession. Presumably after Miss Hyde's death the letters were left to a relative, who gave them to A T Shaw as Chairman of the Elgar Society some time in the 1950s. Can any member shed light on this?

---

From : Arthur D Walker

The autograph of the Enigma Variations clearly shows  $Q = 52$  for 'W.N.'; and this was reproduced in the first issue of the full score. Elgar revised his score before publication, as can be seen in the first page of 'C.A.E.' which has been reproduced in My friends pictured within, showing changes to the second violins and violas. Page 63 of the autograph shows some changes in the third bar, but the metronome mark is untouched. In Norman Del Mar's Conducting Elgar, p 10, the Variation is "beaten in 6 at  $\text{e} = 104$ , as later authenticated by Elgar himself although it is not in any score". A footnote by the editor refers to the 1985 Eulenburg score. It was already printed in an issue of the full score published between 1949 and 1985. This Eulenburg issue is a reprint of the Novello miniature score with a Eulenburg cover.

The footnote appears in the following forms, the source being copies in my own library :

No.8. The metronome mark  $Q = 52$  is wrong. Elgar's own recording is played at  $\text{e} = 104$ , and

it would appear that when altering the metronome from  $\Theta$  to  $\Omega$ , he inadvertently divided by 2 instead of 3. The traditional tempo is so well known that the misprint has hitherto escaped notice. Novello & Co., Ltd., October, 1949

*This printed footnote is pasted into my copy of the full score printed c. early 1930s, and has numerous performance markings. This Variation is marked "In 6" by a previous owner.*

*The earlier of the two Eulenburg issues, Novello edition, with Borough Green address, has the metronome mark changed to ( $\Theta = 104$ ) with the following footnote :*

\* The composer's recording is played at  $\Theta = 104$ , but the MS. and previous editions are marked  $\Omega = 52$ . It would appear that when altering the metronome from  $\Theta$  to  $\Omega$ , the composer inadvertently divided by 2 instead of 3. Novello & Company, Ltd. October 1949

*At the foot of the page, after the date, is the number 17096, this being the plate number of the arrangement for two pianos by W McNaught, published in 1945. The full score has no plate number.*

*This footnote is printed in the piano arrangement, also with the Borough Green address.*

*The 1985 issue by Eulenburg is a reprint of the earlier issue, and the footnote is as follows:*

The composer's recording is played at  $\Theta = 104$ , but the MS. and previous editions are marked  $\Omega = 52$ . It would appear that when altering the metronome from  $\Theta$  to  $\Omega$ , the composer inadvertently divided by 2 instead of 3.

*The footnote now carries no date.*

---

*From : Philip Scowcroft*

*A footnote to my article on Elgar in Crime Fiction (Vol 7, no 6), relative to Judith Cutler's Dying on Principle (Piatkus, 1996). Ms Cutler is a Trustee of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra's Benevolent Fund, and the heroine of her books, college lecturer Sophie Rivers, sings in the CBSO Chorus (thinly disguised in the book), but is apparently not a big Elgar fan. As early as page 1 we encounter a reference to "a not very exciting performance of a not very exciting work - Elgar's The Music Makers". To ram home the point, only a few pages later Ms Rivers is discussing the concert with a fellow chorus member who says,*

*"It's not very good Elgar, is it? Not really his best? Oh dear, I mean -'  
I [Sophie Rivers] shook my head to encourage her. 'Lousy Elgar'".*

*The first speaker is murdered very shortly after. Coincidence, perhaps, but we may feel she was destined for a sticky end.*

---



## 100 YEARS AGO...

After the Three Choirs, Elgar got down to correcting proofs of *Sea Pictures*. This work received a successful first performance at the Norwich Festival on 5 October. Clara Butt's dress was intended to simulate the effect of a mermaid. Elgar wrote to Jaeger: "The cycle went marvellously well & 'we' were recalled four times... She sang really well". Two days later, in the St James' Hall London, Clara Butt sang four of the songs with Elgar at the piano. Four days after this came *King Olaf* at the Sheffield Festival (see separate article). Elgar's health was not good all this time but once again the performance was a great success. He told Jaeger that the chorus was "superlative", but the orchestra "v.middling". After the concert he and Alice had a few days rest with Dr Buck in Settle, from where Elgar went to Windsor for a concert of his music on the 18th.

The disagreement with Novello had been settled, and the firm were printing the full score of the *Variations* and the *Three Characteristic Pieces*. On 23 October Richter gave the second London performance of the *Variations* which further helped to establish the work and its composer's reputation. A 27-year-old aspiring composer attended and was greatly impressed by what he recalled as "... something new yet old - strange yet familiar - universal yet typically original, and at the same time typically English". His name was Ralph Vaughan Williams.

Both Edward and Alice were ill this autumn, and he had to go to Leeds on his own on 6 November for a concert which included excerpts from *Caractacus*. While still checking proofs of the *Variations*, Elgar was beginning to compose his work on the life of Christ for the Birmingham Festival in 1900. On 15 November he sent a sketch to Jaeger: "Here's Judas! & another scrap". Jaeger responded positively to this news that the work was under way, but Elgar's letters betray some anxiety. The big problem concerned the libretto - there wasn't one. He turned to Edward Capel-Cure, librettist of *The Light of Life*, and now a vicar in Dorset. Capel-Cure came to talk to Elgar on 5 and 6 December; they were "vesy busy" according to Alice's diary. There are no diary entries for the last three weeks of the year - often a sign that things were not well in the Elgar household. It seems likely that the realisation that he could not hope to complete such a gigantic scheme led him to resign the commission (he later told Jaeger it was for financial reasons, but that sounds like a lame excuse). On New Year's Day 1900 G H Johnstone of the Birmingham Festival "came to lunch & arranged for E's work Birmh Fest. Deo Gratias". The next day "E. sent telegram accepting terms. Began again at former libretto". This is a reference to *The Dream of Gerontius*, which Johnstone realised was the only practical proposition at this increasingly late stage. He knew that Elgar had already worked on reducing the poem, and persuaded the composer that the Catholic nature of the work would not prove a difficulty with the Festival Committee. As Rosa Burley states, this had been Elgar's original preference, but he had shied away from it through fear of Protestant hostility. Although the commission was now definitely settled, the business had touched on Elgar's insecurity, and he wrote to Jaeger on 4 January: "I'm working like a — fool. & get kicked for my pains & - or pleasures - I don't know which they are." On 12 January he went to the Birmingham Oratory to see Father Neville, Newman's friend and executor, to seek permission to abridge the poem.

# The Elgar Society Journal

107 MONKHAMS AVENUE, WOODFORD GREEN, ESSEX IG8 0ER

Tel: 020 8506 0912

Fax: 020 8924 4154

e-mail: *hodgkins @ compuserve.com*

## **CONTENTS**

**Vol.11, No.3**  
**November 1999**

### Articles

The Return of the Dove to the Ark	134
Sea Pictures	144
'Oh! that Sheffield Choir'	180
Music Review	188
Book Reviews	189
Record Reviews	190
Letters	196
100 years ago...	199

\*\*\*\*\*

*The Editor does not necessarily agree with the views expressed by contributors nor does the Elgar Society accept responsibility for such views.*