



The  
Elgar  
Society

JOURNAL

JULY 2001

Vol.12 No.2

## NIMROD IN THE METRO

### Hearing Elgar in France

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One day, going down the escalator into the metro station near my home in Toulouse, I became aware of a hauntingly familiar music over the public address system... So "out of place" did it seem that I was momentarily at a loss to identify it, like when one has the name of a long-time-frequented street on the tip of one's tongue. Surely?... Yes! It was 'Nimrod' from the *Enigma Variations*. I had heard it at the Gare du Nord in Paris without the same sense of surprise. After all, that was near the platform for the Eurostar. But in the South-West of France it sounded odd. Surely a dinky-scale underground that doesn't even display poems in its carriages had not risen to a cultural link-up with the local symphony orchestra which had programmed the *Enigma Variations* for January 2000? Elgar, it seemed to me, was a little-known figure in France. Did not the local organiser of a Music and Literature Conference in Toulouse confess to a total ignorance of his work?

It seemed to me that, developing from the pretext of a short review of the Elgar concert, it was the time to concretise a long-envisaged project and look at Elgar's current reputation in France by examining some facts, views and prejudices.

To start with, and to be fair, I should like to explode one once-held English prejudice : the idea that Elgar can only be interpreted properly by English musicians. Except in the case of musicians totally unfamiliar with his work, it is an idea intrinsically absurd, when one thinks of Elgar's successful interpreters, for example in Germany within his own lifetime and from relatively early in his career. And then, were not some of his greatest performers on record and in the concert hall, non-British : Richter, Kreisler, Fournier, Tortelier etc.? It was thus without any sense of trepidation that on 13 January 2000, I went to a concert by the *Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse* at the *Halle aux Grains* under Yuri Temirkanov, to hear a programme whose main symphonic work was the *Enigma Variations*. The orchestra had long been familiar with a piece it had included in a concert conducted by James Judd as part of a 'British Week' a quarter of a century before, and it had given it again in the 1989-1990 season. Yuri Temirkanov had, I recall, even played 'Nimrod' as an encore with the *Saint Petersburg Symphony Orchestra* in Toulouse in April 1995.

What was required of me as a critic and audience was temporarily to put aside the memory of the dozens, if not hundreds, of times I had heard the work under such conductors as Barbirolli, and go back to a newly refreshed perception. I say "temporarily" because I found it hard to depart completely from my usual routine when I am about to write a review, which consists of listening to as many different versions as possible. This time the procedure was modified by my going back to recordings, albeit by British conductors (I was cheating a bit!) Boult, Sargent, Handley. I rarely listened to any more, in preference to

a lazily automatic listening to my favourite Barbirolli version. I was also much aided by Julian Rushton's Cambridge Music Handbook (CUP, 1999) which sent me to other sets of variations, in particular Brahms and Parry. The Brahms strikes me by the "classical" nature of its composition; and that the Parry is entitled *Symphonic Variations* (like the Dvořák set) is interesting in the context of an "oeuvre" and a late nineteenth-century period whose composers, Parry among them, often succumbed to the temptation of putting a programme to their music. Elgar is thus situated between two contrasting but, as he proved, not uncomplementary modes of orchestral writing. The *Enigma Variations* would function quite adequately without our knowing anything of the "friends pictured within", because then we should see it for what it is in "abstract" terms, an immense virtuoso piece for orchestra, looking forward more to Bartok's Concerto for Orchestra (in conception rather than in style) than back to the more restrained Brahms. (It is interesting to note that Barbirolli once included side by side in the same Hallé concert Bartok's Concerto and Elgar's *Falstaff*.)

In treating the work as a showcase for orchestra, the Capitole Orchestra were in their element. If there was anything "classical" in Yuri Temirkanov's interpretation, it was in his reminiscences of Beethoven, a founder Romantic breaking open classical forms. So there was emphasis on dynamic contrasts and on tempo changes. The individual instrumentalists, particularly the woodwind and the brass, came into their own within this framework, even though the solo 'cello in Variation XII sounded rather timid, and the strings in general lacking in weight of tone except in 'Nimrod' and the Finale. On the whole, a very balanced view of the score was achieved.

My first real inkling - apart from strains of music in the metro - that I might write about Elgar's critical reception in France came during a comparative recordings programme on 'France-Musiques', the Sunday afternoon 'Tribune de France- Musiques'. It was a tribute to Yehudi Menuhin broadcast on 14 March 1999, during which they played an extract from his recording of the Violin Concerto with the composer. One of the guest critics that day, Jean-Michel Damien, admitted to being moved to tears for the first time in the programme. It became apparent to me that not only should I treat the subject through more "objective" sources heard on the radio and selected from press material available to me, but also and ultimately, this research subject could be the literal *pretext* for studying my own fascination with the music of Edward Elgar. I shall, therefore, deal first with radio material, then coverage of recordings, before attempting to describe my own reactions.

The 'Tribune de France-Musiques' mentioned above was followed in a short space of time by another in the series devoted to Elgar's Cello Concerto and broadcast on 16 May 1999. What struck me, having lived for years surrounded by French people totally unfamiliar with Elgar, or indifferent to his music, was the absolute normality of the proceedings. While the producer, Gerard Courchelles, admitted Elgar was virtually unknown in France, there was no sense of patronising "talking down" about him, and the main part of the programme carried on as for any other great musician. First of all, however, the evidence of his neglect in France was produced and this neglect discussed. It turned out that between the beginning of 1965 and May 1999, Elgar had featured in broadcast concerts only twenty-three times, an average of less than once a year and a phenomenally small number compared (no figures given) to the English musicians best known in France, Purcell and Britten. The standard Fasquelle *Dictionnaire de la musique* (1961) had only devoted four lines to Elgar. This neglect was put down, by Bruno Mantovani, a composer invited on to the panel that day, to what he saw as two parallel cultures that did not touch. Elgar was a practical and not an institutional musician, which meant that he was not a conservative figure as sometimes thought, but someone whose music was not automatically taught and analysed in a French Conservatoire. Panellist Jean-Pierre Derrien contended that there was not the same conception of musical history in England as in France where, it was to be inferred, much of the effort of French

musicians at the end of the nineteenth century was put into reacting to or against Wagner, whereas Elgar was trying to link English music up with Wagner, and with Brahms. Elgar was often seen in France as a late-born, elegiac and depressive offspring of Brahms : but Brahms had only been discovered very late (post-World War II) in France. Piotr Kaminski pointed out that French music was given a very different reception in England than to Elgar and English composers in France. Rameau and Berlioz had been virtually rediscovered in England.

Prefaced by a short extract from Beatrice Harrison's recording of the Cello Concerto conducted by the composer, the programme proper then got under way. The basic principle is that the panellists listen to extracts from the work being discussed without at first knowing the identity of the performers. Extracts from the following recordings were played, and I have appended in quotes some of the most striking comments :

- 1) Tortelier/ Groves (1988) - "heavy", "lumpy".
- 2) Fournier/ Wallenstein (1967) - soloist "a genius".
- 3) Yo Yo Ma/ Previn (1985) - see below.
- 4) Starker/ Slatkin (1992) - Cellist and conductor "not playing the same concerto"; soloist, like Tortelier in 1), "past it".
- 5) Du Pré/ Barbirolli (1965) - first movement "narcissistic", but the panellists unanimously overwhelmed by the rest, especially the "songlike simplicity", perfectly "poised between romanticism and classicism" of the slow movement.
- 6) Maisky/ Sinopoli (1990) - "neurotic" first movement; lacking in pulsation in an Adagio smacking of "artificial emotion" : "Metro Goldwyn Mahler" !
- 7) Arte Noras/ Jukka-Pekka Saraste (1996) - "depressive" with constant fluctuations, not moulded or mastered as in 5) Du Pré / Barbirolli, ... which emerged as clear favourite in front of Yo Yo Ma, whose second movement the critics found virtuosically "over the top". This was the version played complete at the end of the programme because less well known than Du Pré / Barbirolli, but radio listeners unfamiliar with the composer were urged to acquire the latter, coupled with *Sea Pictures*, as the perfect introduction to Elgar.

As if in remorse at Elgar's neglect by French Radio, France-Musiques broadcast on 23 August 1999 a recording of a large-scale work *The Kingdom*, the 1 August 1999 Prom performance conducted by Sir Andrew Davis. The announcer spluttered enthusiasm as he incited listeners to be carried away by the music, but was rather more sparing with regard to precise background information about the work. Worse, however, was F Castang's cliché-ridden portrayal of Elgar (going back pre-Ken Russell!) for the Promenade Concert broadcast of 22 July 2000 which featured Louise Winter in *Sea Pictures* with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra under Sakari Oramo. In between these two broadcasts, I had started tracking down in fine detail Elgar on radio (including recorded music), on the two main stations for classical music : France Musiques and Radio Classique. (The latter almost exclusively broadcasts recorded music.)

I shall spare the reader a full table of my meagre findings over a test period, 5 May to 1 December 2000. It would look extremely threadbare! By the time I gave up because of the paucity of the results a pattern, however, had emerged. At best, Elgar averaged two broadcast works per week, although for some weeks I could see nothing at all; and even four consecutive weeks in June-July with nothing. What made it worse was that most of the time his music featured in the night-time programme 'Hector', and the sort of

works sounding in the small hours were often the shortest like *Salut d'Amour*, the Romance, Opus 62, and Introduction and Allegro. Some of the chamber music (occasionally, and usually very late), sometimes the *Enigma Variations*, *Cockaigne*, and the Cello Concerto, and sometimes, though rarely, in the morning or afternoon; but never the symphonies, *Falstaff*, or the oratorios (apart from the exception mentioned above) and next to no concerts with Elgar in the prime evening slot of 8 to 11. (Note that although they have in recent years got round to broadcasting some of the Proms, they are rarely broadcast "live", except there was *Iolanthe* on Saturday, 26 August!)

There were no talks or features about Elgar or related subjects and to the best of my knowledge and belief, there never have been. ARTE, the otherwise excellent Franco-German TV Arts Channel has, as far as I know, done nothing although, early in 1995, it did devote a whole evening to Delius, starting (sensibly) with Ken Russell's *Song of Summer* and continuing with a film version of *A Village Romeo and Juliet*. So there is hope yet.

In fact hope resurfaced on the evening of 1 March 2001, when France-Musiques broadcast a recording of a concert given on 23 February in the Salle Pleyel, Paris, including Elgar's Violin Concerto with Frank Peter Zimmermann and the Orchestra Philharmonique de Radio France under Gary Bertini. The announcer, Philippe Hersant was soberly precise in his presentation of Elgar's work : background, performance history of the Concerto, and the formal shape of the piece were set out aptly and succinctly; no clichés, not even for them to be "knocked down" afterwards. Elgar had achieved, albeit temporarily, "normality" again, something not even always guaranteed Wagner or Richard Strauss these days!

The performance started cautiously in the opening orchestral section and only began to gain in impact with the entry of the soloist. From there on Zimmermann seemed to lead while Bertini followed. Perhaps this caution was due to the orchestra's unfamiliarity with the work(?). Also, the orchestral sound was somewhat recessed, leaving the violin in front. (The Salle Pleyel has recently been renovated, and so the sound engineers may still be having balance problems with the hall.) Zimmermann gave a virtuoso's performance but still achieved great inner feeling in the slow movement. The only disappointment was his playing of the accompanied Cadenza, though this may have been due to balance : I was unable to hear the *Pizzicato tremulando* sufficiently well, thus missing the chill of tension which usually comes over me when I listen to this music.

I was even less entranced by a performance of the Cello Concerto by Truls Mørk with the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France under Paavo Järvi on Friday 13 April (just at the time I was drafting the final version of this article) - not a "good" Friday for Elgar. The announcer, Martin Kaltenecker, seemed to view Elgar as no more than a musical eclectic, owing his success to over-indulgence in pomposities. The Cello Concerto he saw as a relief from these, but in labelling it a "retrospective" work largely based on self-quotation, he seemed not only to contradict himself but to have somehow mixed it up with *The Music Makers*. The acoustics of the Salle Pleyel - the sound engineers made one feel one was sitting in very cheap seats a long way away from the performers - did not enhance a basically light-weight and "pretty" reading by the soloist (lack of tone in the opening recitative) especially of the first movement. It made for little contrast with the second and seemed fragmentary and to be inspired by Elgar the miniaturist. Unfortunately, Mørk was not always together with the orchestra which Paavo Järvi was, not always successfully, trying to slow into a more weighty utterance. Mørk seemed, rightly, to imply that the slow movement is the emotional epicentre of the work but was not always convincing in his execution of it. He sentimentalised it in his early phrasing, which however improved after the first orchestral tutti. The tempo was again pulled about by a soloist preventing the orchestra from "universalising" emotion properly. The final movement was too "classical". The opening was played like a traditional slow introduction. Then, again the much too "prettified" solo playing seemed to be racing through the music,

making it sound oddly banal. Sometimes slowing, he played everything up for “emotion”. The performance often appeared to equate slow tempi with “feeling” and fast tempi with superficial jollity. It was not the sort of thing to convert anyone to authentic Elgar.

To give an account of the recorded music scene as related to Elgar in France, I used as a basis the review section of the classical music monthly, *Le Monde de la Musique*, over roughly ten years from September 1991 to the time of writing (April 2001). This fairly exhaustive and wide-ranging magazine contains news and views about music in France plus in-depth features about composers, artistic movements, composers, individual works, performers etc. In no time over that period was Elgar (or any other British musicians unless you count Handel) specially featured. Nor can I remember any such feature pre-1991, although there have been articles about “off the beaten track” composers such as Korngold and Zemlinsky.

As far as CD reviews are concerned, coverage of Elgar releases during the last decade has been quite extensive, with a slow, but steady, increase not only in coverage but also in informed interest. On the whole, the reviewing followed only releases on to the strictly French market, so that a high percentage of Naxos recordings received a review. For example, in June 2000, John Tyler Tuttle gave the Naxos Elgar-Payne Third Symphony a very favourable write-up. The Andrew Davis version, however, never merited a mention (probably never released in France except as an “import?”), let alone the premiPre of the work in London. This is indicative of a general tendency. Older versions, which are standard for British music-lovers (Boult, Barbirolli, etc) are fairly rarely mentioned, although there are some notable exceptions : John Tyler Tuttle in March 1994 on Sargent’s 1945 *Gerontius*, and in August 1997 on Boult’s *Falstaff* (both on Testament), even if the reviewer is very defensive about the former and especially about Heddle Nash! Some reissues of interpretations of “French” interest come up as well : the Monteux account of the *Enigma Variations* (February 1998), and the Navarra/ Barbirolli Cello Concerto (April 2001).

Reviewing EMI’s ephemeral reissue series ‘Composers in Person’ featuring the *Enigma Variations* and *The Planets*, Philippe Venturini (October 1993) remarks with regret that the ‘Elgar Edition’ has not been distributed in France by EMI International, which just about sums up the state of affairs as far as public demand and distribution are concerned. Otherwise a reviewer sometimes seeks a reference point outside both Britain and France : Olivier Bellamy in his September 1991 review of the reissue of Toscanini conducting the *Enigma Variations*. As I have indicated before, very little seems to be done to educate public taste about Elgar. While a reviewer is entitled to his opinion, it does not much help when Pascal Brissand (June 1992) refers to Janet Baker as “too sugary” when comparing her *Sea Pictures* with Kerstin Meyer and Felicity Palmer. What is often lacking is informed opinion and even when a (presumably British or American) reviewer like John Tyler Tuttle seems to know his stuff, the space allotted for a review remains damagingly short. Attempts to set the cliché-clicking record straight have to be reduced to a sentence or two. John Tyler Tuttle (October 1997) on the Maggini version on Naxos of the String Quartet and the Piano Quintet with Peter Donohoe (my translation) :

The French listener for whom the name of Elgar conjures up pompous marches and the thunderous echoes of an empire in decline must acquire this disc.

precedes a brief but precise summing-up of the compositional history of Elgar’s chamber music. Similarly, Patrick Szersnovicz, even though this distinguished music writer seems more at ease talking about Pierre Boulez or about composers of the great German Classical and Romantic tradition, does his best to situate Elgar within the musical context of his time. It is quibbling to note that over the years Szersnovicz sometimes paraphrases himself, but he is at least always at pains to try and characterise what marks Elgar out from his contemporaries and yet what places him firmly within a “great tradition”; for example,

the opening of a review (April 2001) of the André Navarra Cello Concerto on Testament :

Part of a tradition extending through Wagner, Brahms and Richard Strauss, the prolific work of Edward Elgar (1857-1934) is the expression of a particularly English sensibility transcended by the composer's own personal genius. Elgar reveals himself to be a much more complex artist than he seems and his last works reflect a little known aspect of his personality. His last great score, the magnificent Cello Concerto in E minor, first performed in 1919, is more austere and concise than its counterpart for violin and figures among the most successful of the genre together with the cello concertos of Haydn, Schumann, Saint-Saëns, Lalo, Dvořák, Shostakovich, Zimmermann and Dutilleux.

At least, this version will be temporarily available in France, but in a country where EMI brings out a Jacqueline Du Pré box set featuring the same concerto (conducted by Barbirolli) with the general title 'Les Introuvables de Jacqueline Du Pré', one never knows what will be available for long. If I take a look at the two FNAC stores in the two French cities I know best, Toulouse and Paris, I see that the "classic" versions of Elgar, the ones by Barbirolli and Boult that I grew up with, are generally only available in Paris. In Toulouse, one has to take "pot luck" among recent issues. This is partly just one further unfortunate feature of a market economy that favours quick-selling novelties over established versions of repertoire. (A recent feature about bookshops in *The Guardian* called it the preference for "buyers, not browsers".) It is not a state of affairs which fosters education. For education in the deepest sense of the word depends on a process of constant psyche-aesthetic renewal in the course of a personal itinerary.

"But there is a curious quality in Elgar's music which, for those who love it, gives it a unique place in their hearts : it transcends mere music and becomes part, almost, of the bloodstream; it gathers personal associations which the passing of the years make more poignant, and although the poignancy seems at times unbearable, the music then becomes a solace, a renewing stream."

(Michael Kennedy, *Barbirolli. Conductor Laureate*, MacGibbon and Kee, 1971)

This is a very apt statement, in fact one which describes something of the Proustian process of artistic creation, whereby remembrance of the past through the literary work both arrests and subsumes time's flow.

Since entering adulthood, I have always been fascinated by questions of aesthetic taste. Rather naVvely put, why does one like one "thing" (composer, painter, poet) and not another? Especially when there is no objective, aesthetic reason to prefer one to the other. Why do I personally have little interest in Bach, while being intellectually capable of recognising his value, and while at the same time being enthralled by Elgar (to the extent of preferring his orchestration of Bach to any "authentic" Baroque version!)? The only answer I have come upon - perhaps naVvely again - after years of troubled reflection, is that, inescapably influenced by patterns experienced in the womb and in early childhood, a human being desperately wants to maintain or break away from these patterns, and sometimes wants to do both things at once. An artist is constantly trying in his work to balance childhood etc. patterns with his adult life-experience.

Thinking about Elgar and his music for this article has made me wonder about the precise nature of my relationship to the composer, my attraction to whom has never decreased over the years, many of which have been spent, regretfully, away from England. Absence from England has possibly even increased my love of his music, has given it a mythical, symbolic, even a talismanic quality. I always play Elgar just before going on a journey (often to England, the only place I ever much want to go to now) and frequently the First Symphony or pieces associated with travel in my mind, Introduction and Allegro and *In the South* as well as, more recently, the reconstructed Third Symphony. If I am asked who is my favourite composer, I often reply facetiously : the one I am listening to at the moment. I am in fact passionately

fond of most “classical” music from Haydn and Mozart, through the great Romantics, Wagner, post-Romanticism and Mahler, Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky, the Second Viennese School, Delius, Vaughan Williams, Britten... The complete list would be too long. But the point is I find no difficulty in going from Schoenberg to Elgar (and back) and am very interested in contemporary music : Boulez, Ligeti, Ferneyhough etc. etc., which might not apparently “fit” with Elgar.

When I began to become seriously interested in Wagner, some thirty-five years ago, I was obscurely aware that what I was listening to in *Tristan und Isolde* was “passion”. When, some years later, I experienced in love relationships feelings of passion akin to “love-death” and Tristan’s anguished wait for Isolde, I recognised them as being the same as what I had always heard and felt in the music. Wagner had “got it right”. Listening to his work again after the events in question still stirs the same feelings allied to a kind of solace. A very similar psyche-aesthetic phenomenon affects me with Elgar. Many (about forty) years ago, when I was first drawn to his music, I can remember being literally frightened by the intensity of the opening of *Falstaff*, which I first heard immediately after the Toscanini *Eroica*. The music was overpowering. It was touching areas of myself I did not know existed; revealing potentialities, it was unleashing obscure forces. For the first time I understood what our English master had said about Shakespeare’s character : that far from being a clown-like Father Christmas or a Mr Pickwick, Falstaff was a deeply, ambiguously and seriously disturbing figure. And I can also remember the ‘Pizzicato tremolando’ section of the Violin Concerto’s accompanied Cadenza as being like the sweating suspense of waiting for the conclusion of the big film as a little lad. Then the return of the opening theme on the orchestra : the hero and his beloved have been saved; everybody’s safe home.

What is less certain than with the Wagner example I have given, is how to “label” these Elgarian feelings now that I have felt them as an adult with life-experience. I could on one level assert that the feelings are connected with my country. This is a certain but nevertheless incomplete answer, and one hard to define. I associate Elgar with my love of England, in a similar way to Dickens and the English language. Perhaps at a naïve level, I associate Elgar with my vision of a British bobby at Dover when I first came back to England from France and on my way to my parents’ : I was back home, I was “safe”, it was the best place for me to be. (Something like the Barbirolli story about arriving back in wartime Britain - Player’s cigarettes and a pint of warm bitter.) There is nothing chauvinistic, jingoistic or Imperialist about this - just a sense of home.

Perhaps - to attempt a sharper definition - the answer is connected with an interesting main thesis in Jerrold Northrop Moore’s *Edward Elgar, A Creative Life* (Oxford University Press, 1987, p 34 ff, and various references passim): that a central feature in Elgar’s music is the pattern first set out in the ‘Broadheath’ tune. A pattern is established, intuitively recognised, but not worked out until years later. I have known the phenomenon in my own critical appreciation of literature : “the penny drops” years after reading a book. One hasn’t reread *Little Dorrit* since one was fourteen, but one suddenly understands the prison symbolism. Elgar has built such an evolving pattern of appreciation, a pattern linked (parallel to Mahler to whose music I was drawn only a few years later) with the manic-depressive nature of his work, mood swings within a far more ordered symphonic structure than, for example, Tchaikovsky’s. What appeals to me, again as someone who has grudgingly lived outside England but has never ceased to love his own country and its real achievements, is Elgar’s sense of exile within his own land : the lower-middle-class Roman Catholic who broke into the upper reaches of society - through ART, Music - but who never forgot his origins, and was forced to see society both from the inside and the outside; an uncomfortable position psychologically, very similar to that of a foreigner. Everything appears strange, but strangely close. It is a Dickensian child’s eye view, the maintaining of a childlike innocence that means the world keeps seeming inexplicable and absurd. It is Shakespearian, containing the dramatist’s ability to make one empathise with characters, attitudes and emotions that are not one’s own.

With Elgar - to quote some of my favourite lines from T S Eliot, 'The Dry Salvages' in *Four Quartets* - there is

...music heard so deeply  
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music  
While the music lasts.

When 'Nimrod' began to sound out 'nobilmente' in the metro, it was the light of life from another, distant, but familiar world, piercing glass that was literally "stained". It was the sun that once awoke the now dead soldier in Wilfred Owen's *Futility* :

Always it woke him, even in France.



## MEMOIRS OF A YOUNG SINGER

### Ruth Newcomb Moore

*[Mrs Moore was born at Croydon in 1914. She trained as a shorthand typist, and joined the Croydon Philharmonic Society choir at the age of 20. She sang with them until 1943 when she moved to Sussex. In 1938-39 she had been a member of the Chorus at Covent Garden. Her memoirs consist of a typescript, written later and presumably based on diaries which appear to be no longer extant. They are selective and sometimes the dating is vague or missing, yet they can be verified from the events they describe. The following extracts relate primarily to Elgar performances, and there have been minor editorial amendments to punctuation, and to paragraphing. Footnotes are also editorial. Mrs Moore died in December 1999, and her writings have kindly been made available by her widower Mr Laurence Moore. Thanks are also due to Mr Dennis Bird, the Editor of the magazine of Shoreham Parish Church, who published extracts last year, and who drew the attention of the Society to Mrs Moore's memoirs. - Ed.]*

*Mrs Moore's love of music began at an early age. She first heard Heddle Nash sing - in La Bohème at the Lewisham Hippodrome - in 1928, when she was 14. She was present at the third Croydon Triennial Festival concert on 10 November 1931 when Elgar conducted The Dream of Gerontius (with a certain Vera Hockman among the violins). Ruth was so impressed by Nash's singing that she wrote to him, and received the following reply.*

November 20/ 31

Dear Miss Price *[her maiden name]*

Thanks for your cheery letter. The critics seemed to think that my Gerontius was about the worst thing I have done. So for that reason I shall remoise it and make it the best in the country. It was a first performance with a voice crippled by a heavy cold.

With regard to the 'Bohème' aria ['Your tiny hand is frozen'], I have recorded it at least three years ago. The Columbia Company are cutting down their output of new records owing to bad conditions in the market. I expect therefore that I shall never hear it myself. With a gramophone company, Art is ruled by Business...

Best wishes,  
In haste,  
Heddle Nash

*At that time the Croydon Philharmonic Society was a choir with a high reputation thanks to its founder and conductor, Alan Kirby.*

Croydon Phil. Audition. 4 October 1934.

Today has been a real red-letter day. I was quite calm and collected all day until I was sitting in Lyons at Croydon waiting for 7.30; there I experienced quite a nervous panic, but when I managed to conquer it, it never came again and I was in quite a reasonably quiet frame of mind as I approached the Hall. Just as I turned to go in the door, who should I see but Mama and Dada! Bless them for their thought - who but they would have thought of such a thing? I had no idea they would be there and the sight of their familiar faces worked wonders. What is more they had brought me a sprig of white heather to wear, for luck! As I went in the door, Mama's parting words met my ears: "Mr Crane thinks you ought to pass". No one could have had a more heartening send-off. I had to wait a little while in the ante-room. Mrs Kirby had met me at the door, a delightful lady, as I had thought. Two people sang before me; the second one, I know, hadn't got her song into her blood and it was a little ragged, through nervousness I expect. This rather encouraged me! My turn came at last. A little, plump man with a round, kind face and a bald head ushered me in. A rather grave,

somewhat distinguished man was at the piano - Mr Kirby, I thought. The jolly little man went and sat in the front, I stood just in the middle of the platform and began my song. It was a success. I did everything I had wanted to : kept my head and remembered every inflection I had arranged beforehand. The hall was wonderful to sing in,<sup>1</sup> the acoustics almost sang for you, there was no effort needed at all and my voice rang right into the rafters and echoed there. How it sounded to Mr Kirby's experienced ears I don't know, but it was certainly as good as the others I heard.

Then the solemn man got up from the piano and gave place to the other, who gave me a horrid little piece of board, with a horrid line of music on it, which I had to sing correctly at first go. This was the real ordeal. I sang it half-way through, lost myself and was kindly told to begin again. Next time it didn't go so badly, and then he said, if I sang it once more, could I do it better? So I did - thank goodness I pick up tunes so quickly! It went a little better, but it was my ear that helped me, not my eyes. Then I had to sing two scales, both very high and both of which I managed quite easily, to my great surprise. And then he said, "Thank you; now will you wait in the other room, please?" As I went out I stole a glance at the solemn man, who smiled rather diffidently at me. So I went outside, where by now a large crowd of members had gathered (it was rehearsal evening), and after waiting a little I was asked to sign a slip and was given my number. In short, I had passed! To my surprise the jolly little man was Mr Kirby all the time - the dignified one a mere accompanist! (Mr Ball).

Mr Kirby is a Beecham *en miniature*. He wields a baton it is a sheer joy to sing to; has a caustic wit and a dynamic personality. I've never met anyone quite like him; he's amazing, and I'm just longing to see him again. He has about the worst voice in the world and declaims the solo parts, soprano, baritone, anything, with great gusto to give us our cues, ending up with a yell where we have to come in. His manner and expression are so spirited and humorous that I dared not look for fear of laughing! But he's the reason why the Croydon Phil has a good reputation. Everyone at home was overjoyed at my success and I was more than that - being able to please them.

11 October 1934.

Tonight has proved how wonderful it is going to be to me to belong to the Croydon Phil. After working on part of *Merrie England*, we started in earnest for the [Elgar] Festival with the *Music Makers*. Already I feel the spirit of Elgar in that music, although we have only taken a part of it. Mr Kirby told us several interesting facts about it; it embodies quotations from his principal works. Elgar's music is like no other; it has an idiom all its own. I felt I could love it when I heard that wonderful *Dream* early in the year, and now, by this great opportunity for study, I shall realise part, if not all, of its fascination. I know so little that my ignorance quite overwhelms me; it will be an inestimable privilege indeed. The thought of our approaching study of *Gerontius* fills me with happy anticipation. Mr Kirby knows and loves Elgar well and he will be able to tell us some of the little secrets of the music which the listener hears but does not realise. For instance, Elgar uses a device for emphasising a certain word which takes the form of a slight but definite pause before it - such a little thing - but how effective it is. Oh, and a hundred other things I shall learn this winter which will open a new world to me. I was longing to go again this evening and see Mr Kirby, he's so marvellous. I know I shall soon swear faithful allegiance to him, he's like that. He can be quite a tyrant, but how different he is at other times. I'm certain he loves his work and I think he's proud of his chorus.

Later - This evening we came to what I have been longing for and what made me decide to join the Croydon Phil this winter : *Gerontius*. Mr Kirby was absent this evening and the substitute was a Mr Booth. I was disappointed at first as I wanted Mr Kirby particularly to take us through *Gerontius* for the first time, but now I am glad to have known this man. I took to him immediately; he was elderly and of a simple manner in a rather old-fashioned way, and he worshipped Elgar. He knew him. He has known *Gerontius* since 1909 and it has proved a great spiritual help and inspiration to him, particularly through the war, he said. When he was thanked for coming, he said that thanks were due to us, as he felt he was only alive when going through an Elgar work. An interesting piece of

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<sup>1</sup> This was North End Hall; the Fairfield Hall was only built in the early 1960s.

information was that he asked Elgar which tenor he preferred in *Gerontius* - Gervase Elwes or John Coates, and Elgar said John Coates, as he seemed to get just the spirit that Elgar felt himself. When the work was first published the last big song 'Take me away' was omitted and a friend of Elgar's said he supposed Elgar left that out because no one could adequately set that text to music. Elgar took that as a challenge and wrote the piece which is now included. Mr Booth was privileged to see the first pencil draft of this.<sup>2</sup> We went through all the chorus parts and I am now in the joyous state of hovering on the edge of knowing them; memories were revived with a wonderful thrill. To think that I shall know all this glorious work for always now.

25 October 1934.

Each time I go to the Phil rehearsals I love it all more and more and think how lucky I was to have the privilege of joining. I can hardly realise it yet that I do belong and when I think of the future, with its possibilities, well I hardly *dare* think! There was good news this evening for us on the waiting list; as there is to be only a small orchestra this time, there may be room for all of us. Mr Kirby had had a promise from Sir Edward German that he will be present if his health permits, so he wants this performance to be an exceptionally fine one.

Then we sang a little more of *Music Makers*. I shall be an Elgar admirer for ever by next May, for Mr Kirby instils some of his love and enthusiasm of Elgar into me when he tells us things about the music so that I am afraid almost to sing it, it requires so reverent a touch.

We had the final rehearsal tonight at North End Hall (*Merrie England*). What hard work it is singing on that platform, there seems to be no resonance somehow but I expect it sounds all right from the front.

(After the performance) An entirely new experience for me - to take part in a public performance, to make music for the enjoyment of others; what a great joy and privilege this is; I hardly feel worthy, but to feel that one is giving music to those who, presumably, love it, when the love of music absorbs one, is a very great thing. Being in the top row, I was the first lady to go on, and what a thrill surged through me as I mounted the platform - it was a wonderful moment. Mr Kirby's comfortable familiarity was a spur and momentum and didn't he work hard!

30 November 1934.

There was quite a small gathering at rehearsal last night but we started on *The Kingdom* and managed quite a lot of it; I of course floundering all the ~~time, as I know not a note~~ of this work. It appears to be in Elgar's usual vein, that is, it resembles *Gerontius* in style. Mr Kirby said of us, who hadn't sung the work before: "I envy you, you have so many surprises in store". He said it would appear scrappy in form at first, but would gradually unfold its beauties like a marvellous flower. He is so naVvely sincere in the way he says this, I know he means every word; I wish I could let him know I understand his feelings. I admire him more and more and for this reason I am awfully glad that the Chorus is a fine one; he most assuredly deserves the best it can give in return for his hard work and devotion to every little detail. He thanked us, not effusively, but quite simply, for our splendid work on Tuesday. He had received words of praise from all quarters on our part in the proceedings, in particular from a head of the famous firm of Chappell's and a friend of Edward German's, who said it was the most perfect performance he had heard.

23 December 1934.

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<sup>2</sup> Though this vignette is broadly accurate, it is worth correcting the errors. Elgar never proposed to omit 'Take me away'; it was always going to be used in the work. However, it is true that "a friend of Elgar's" (Jaeger) succeeded in persuading the composer to write a more passionate setting of the words (see Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Elgar and His Publishers*, vol 1, pp 191 - 209).

<sup>3</sup> Actually 45

I must mention that Mr Kirby took us for the first time through *Gerontius* on Thursday. He proved the tyrant I had expected. We were all very apprehensive when he announced the Demons' Chorus! If only I knew the notes I could do more, but I feel just as though I'd been thrown into the sea and told to keep up as best I could! *Gerontius* is a tractless ocean to me now, but here and there I am on firm ground already. But that Demons' Chorus! I wonder why Elgar insisted on female demons! It would be so nice to sit and listen to the men going through the mill! I do sincerely hope I get an opportunity to hear *Gerontius* soon, it will help me so. I have received a Christmas card from Mr & Mrs Kirby, which I feel is an honour.

[no date, early 1935]

I had a great time at the Croydon Phil New Year's party yesterday and I was greatly looking forward to it. Everyone is so nice, I'm proud to be amongst them. At supper I had the great good fortune to be sitting next to Mr Kirby. He was most solicitous for my welfare and asked me how I was getting on in the chorus. This was just the opportunity I longed for, to tell him exactly what it means to me to belong, but as usual on such occasions, one never says quite the right thing, ~~and I said something~~ about it being "most enjoyable" - and oh, it's more than that! ... Then they talked about Elgar, his magic as a conductor of his works. Mr Kirby said he could feel it when speaking to Elgar - he corrected himself - "when he spoke to *me*", he said, laughingly. "Elgar was a terrible conductor", he said, "but when he conducted his *Gerontius* the effect was magical." I told him I heard Elgar conduct *Gerontius* at the Triennial Festival. We were all in agreement that there is no great Elgar conductor today except perhaps Landon Ronald. Mr Kirby was horrified at the suggestion of Adrian Boult and I told him of the marvellous performance I heard at the Albert Hall last year, under Dr Boult. He listened attentively. I don't think I've ever met a less conceited man than Mr Kirby. For him to listen to *my* opinions! When one thinks of all he knows about things. His intimacy with Elgar's works and understanding of them. I think it was wonderful of him to be so kind and friendly, and I esteem him more than ever now. He took part so seriously in all the games. One was a darned competition for the men, and to watch him trying to thread a needle was a jest, it was as though it was the most important thing in the world!

Oh, *Gerontius* is difficult! Mr Kirby works so hard and with such great patience, he deserves success in his efforts if anyone does.

21 March, 1935.

We seemed to get on well this evening. ~~At the end Mr Kirby gave us~~ a little homily, it was really beautiful and left me burdened with a great responsibility. He said that we, as music-makers, have a message for our audience at the Festival. We are to show them the marvel of Elgar's music as it has never been revealed before. Nine out of ten performances of *Gerontius* and *The Kingdom*, he said, mean just nothing. They must be sung right from the heart, and if we do that, then they will sound as they were intended to sound. It is so wonderful to *give* music, more wonderful than to hear it, especially such music as this. I feel all unworthy, but I'll do my part. His intense sincerity impresses me tremendously and I do wish he could know that I feel exactly as he does about it all.

11 April, 1935.

The Festival drawing so near now, it's only three weeks. We worked on *The Kingdom* tonight. I don't think I have ever come away from rehearsal ~~without some fresh discovery~~ - some new treasure revealed. It is a wonderful thing what this great music holds, and how strange it is that it keeps its secrets from you for so long. I have far from plumbed the depths of these treasure troves yet. I shall be sorry when we finish working on Elgar, although I expect whatever we work on, be he as great, the same joys will be in store.

Sunday 28 April 1935.

Dedication Service for Elgar Festival. There was a fine organist who played the Prelude to *The Apostles*. We

had the great privilege of hearing Mr Reed play *Chanson [de] Nuit* and *Chanson de Matin* - here was a master in complete sympathy with his subject; he probably knew more about them and their author than anyone now living. Mr Basil Maine spoke.

5 May 1935

*Gerontius* is over, and it nearly spelt tragedy for me! For I came within a near fraction of missing it! Traffic jams were the reason, and after a frantic rush I arrived at the Hall just in time to throw off my coat and follow the last of the chorus on to the stage!

... As for the work itself its magic is indescribable. I heard it complete for the first time that afternoon (at rehearsal) since I have learned it. It has a haunting beauty, ineffably sad. We were lucky to have the greatest Angel of this time, Astra Desmond. We have many beautiful contraltos but is there another whose voice quite so perfectly fits the part as hers? It is in itself a lovely voice with a plaintive note in it which matches Elgar's mood to perfection. She is a mezzo, with no tremendous power but a compelling sweetness and purity and her high A was glorious. Roy Henderson, too, was perfect. From an artistic point of view, Steuart Wilson gave a fine performance, but his voice is always threatening to let him down; he cannot give full play to moments of emotion; his high notes are not easy, but for all that I admire him, somewhat against my will, I'm afraid! I had never seen him before and he surprised me by being remarkably handsome and most fascinating in his manner. Tall, slim, with a fine manly profile, a quizzical eyebrow and humorous mouth; clever and perhaps a little eccentric, was my summing-up. All three of them took a great interest in the performance and there was much discussion between them and Mr Kirby upon various points.

Thursday 9 May 1935.

Mr Kirby is the essence of dignity on the platform, his old Thursday night self is almost submerged, but sometimes it crops up to urge us on, and just before 'The Marksman' [from the *Bavarian Highlands*] he clenched his fist and sort of shook it at us and looked as though to say "Come on now, remember all I've taught you". It was a spur, and at that moment I felt I'd have done anything for him!

Friday 10 May 1935.

Tonight we had a piano rehearsal of *The Kingdom* and he spoke to us for a little about the Festival so far. Criticisms had been good but one, *The Times*, had said that *Gerontius* was "straightforward rather than subtle" - to say that after all he had told us about seeing visions and singing from our hearts - those revelations he had talked to us about! I felt after Gerontius, that it had been a fine performance, but I didn't think there had been any revelations, not that *Gerontius* needs them so much as *The Kingdom*. Anyway, to my intense joy and relief he is pleased with us. And who cares what a critic says? What does anything matter, so long as he is pleased? He deserves all, more than we could ever give him. I think a choir of angels would be worthy of him, but not us mortals. He said he was prepared for *Gerontius* to be the weakest performance, but he said, "It was magnificent". We made all those little points which mean so much and that he had drummed into us so untiringly. He thought we came through *The Music Makers* well. That's right - I know I "came through it" - I didn't soar over it! There was a little anxious moment, but considering the chorus had never sung it before, it was well done. He read us a letter re *Gerontius* from Basil Maine, which was nothing less than an effusion but, I hope, a sincere one. So we shall get a good notice in *Musical Opinion*! He finished by saying that now we have done so well we mustn't go home thinking "Oh, we're a jolly fine lot, etc" that would ruin *The Kingdom* tomorrow. And he asked us to please sing from our hearts tomorrow, to lift it up out of the ordinary into the sublime. I shall, and how could anyone in that chorus, having any sort of a heart, resist that injunction?

Quote from A J K : "This is not going to be a *concert* - it is going to be an *EXPERIENCE*".

Saturday 11 May 1935.

This day has been an important landmark in my life. It is a day I shall look back upon with perhaps a little sigh of regret for joys that are past. The air was electric tonight as we sat on that platform. I knew then, without a doubt, that it was going to be a great performance, each one of us had made up our minds to make it so and that great resolve was hovering over us all. I don't know yet what the critics' verdict was, but I care not a jot. I need no enlightenment from them; that performance has among other things, done this for me. *The Kingdom* now ranks higher in my love and esteem than *Gerontius*. This may only be momentary, and I am a little surprised at myself, but at the moment my impression of the work is of a hundred beauties, and such an air of peace and joy pervading it all, in contrast to *Gerontius* nostalgia. My memory is filled with something so profound and magical that I hardly dare to think back too much, to recall that music. I don't want to hear it again - not yet; the music is running through my mind all the time, as a background to my thoughts. Perhaps it was because I was there, taking part, that it took on that unnameable magic. Perhaps it was the spirit of Elgar and I know Mr Kirby loves *The Kingdom* better than anything we have done. The soloists rose nobly to great heights. Isobel Baillie sang 'The sun goeth down' unforgettably, Harold Williams was magnificent in Peter's music, Mary Jarred was Mary Magdalene and Percy Manchester was quite up to standard in his smaller part. At one point in the performance, just before one of the great choruses, our eyes were all fixed upon Mr Kirby and he, very quietly and with a world of meaning, laid his hand on his heart. Near the end, when the solo quartet sing "As this broken bread" one of the simplest and loveliest melodies in the work, the chorus very low and softly sing "wondrously with us" gradually rising to the "To us Thou hast vouchsafed". As it all drew to a close, I felt something slipping away into the past. There was a tremendous ovation, of course; everyone wanted Mr Kirby but he was as modest as ever. I believe he genuinely dislikes that part - the applause! He looked quite spent and obviously moved, not only physically tired, but a sort of relaxation now that it was all over, but he was happy, I thought. As he went off for the last time he pressed his hands to his lips and kissed them to us. It was his tremendous love for the work and his way of thanking us for "singing from our hearts". Afterwards I met Isobel Baillie and clasped her hand, saying "It was wonderful Miss Baillie, your solo, I never heard anything so lovely". She seemed a little taken aback by my warmth, and said "Thank you, thank you very much" and seemed to appreciate my sincerity. I meant to add "just like an Angel", but a lump came into my throat and I had to rush away!

Afterwards there was a Reception at the Town Hall. Our names were announced as we entered the Hall and I found myself shaking hands with the Mayor and Mayoress. This arduous ceremony over, we sought somewhere to sit (myself and two friends) and found ourselves next to Percy Manchester. I said "This is an unexpected honour for us" (a little sarcastically, I'm afraid - one of *those* tenors!) He looked after us nicely and amused us by his Lancastrian accent. Harold Williams was standing by, and when he looked up and saw our little group he said "Ah, brighter Manchester!" He was making caustic remarks about Percy's appetite. "I always travel with him, and you know, the Railway Companies never make any profit". He is very attractive, far more good-looking at close quarters, merry blue eyes and a sarcastic mouth. He was 'Bill' to Percy and they both said how much they enjoyed singing in the Albert Hall *Elijah* and *Hiawatha*, both being regulars there. I very much enjoyed this small talk, but suddenly I thought of time slipping away, this precious evening. Soon Percy and Bill said goodbye, to catch the 11.18 from Croydon, and we were left to recount incidents about meeting singers. Harold Williams is Miss Holyman's favourite singer, and I envied her!

Soon there were speeches. I wish I could remember what everybody said, it was all worthwhile remembering. The Mayor opened, and in the course of the speech he said that after much exhortation he had obtained the information that the whole of the expenses of the concert were being met by Mr Kirby, so that the proceedings could all go to the endowment of an Elgar Bed and Mr K handed over a cheque for £1,000 to a Hospital dignitary. Mr Kirby paid tribute to all concerned, saying he could never express his gratitude to his hard-working Committee and, most of all, the Chorus, saying what a tremendous amount of bad temper we had had to put up with. "Sometimes", he said, "I was tempted to see how much they would stand. But they always turned up all merry and bright the following week". He said that someone had asked him a short while ago if he was satisfied. "I am never satisfied", he answered. "We are always reaching up to higher and better things". I have an enormous respect for Mr Kirby's ideals but I fear they are unobtainable! Of course, I knew

they were and when he seemed so pleased with us about *Gerontius* I was surprised in a way because I knew that however well we had done we could never reach his ideal. Only that choir of angels could do that! He then invited Mrs Blake to speak. She was a lady of about 35<sup>3</sup> and I could not see any resemblance to Elgar in her features. I could hardly believe she was his daughter! She seemed rather overcome, I thought; perhaps she was shy of speaking. She spoke in a beautifully modulated, quiet voice, saying how very glad she was that such performances as had been given would carry on the tradition of the perfect interpretation of her father's works. She said she felt his spirit had been very near all the time. Then Mr Reed was asked to say a few words, he protesting vigorously that ~~he had only been coaxed~~ on to the platform under strict injunction that he would not be asked to speak. He had a delightful manner. I had not heard him speak before. He spoke rather indistinctly and with a lisp, but he had such a little air of gaminerie! He spoke of his esteem of Mr Kirby, both as a chorus master and orchestral conductor, in which latter capacity he had performed for the first time on Tuesday. He said that love of Elgar's music was a very strong link between them. Mr Kirby, he said, always came to him full of enthusiasm over all the wonderful things he was going to do and he knew they would come true. When he was talking to him in his garden about a year ago and told him there was going to be an Elgar Festival, he knew, he said, that there would be. He said Mr Kirby was a "music-maker and a dreamer of dreams", but also he added "a do-er of deeds". It was a bright speech and he ended on a quaintly inimitable note by saying, "I would like to play the concerto again".

How true that all the wonderful things Mr Kirby talks about come to pass. When he gave us that little homily not long ago, about us having a message, the revealing of the greatness in Elgar's music, and although as I felt at the time, *Gerontius* hardly brought those revelations, at the eleventh hour they shone forth in unforgettable splendour where they were most needed, in the work Mr Kirby loves best, and what made that possible but his determination.

Sunday 12 May 1935.

I stayed at home today. I was glad to be alone, to "commune within myself", and it was a happy day for me, as it was for the family, who enjoyed themselves immensely. Criticisms of Saturday proved what I already knew, that the performance achieved its purpose. Mr Bonavia says that a performance of this quality should "prove exceedingly valuable" and *The Times* in the same strain, says that one's opinion of *The Kingdom* is always coloured by the quality of the performance and our performance "left one amazed at its consistency". I realise now what we must all aim for - for the audience to think, after a performance, "what a beautiful work", not "what a beautiful voice".

Sunday 23 June 1935.

There was a Dedication Service at Croydon Hospital this afternoon, of the Elgar Bed. There was quite a crowd of us there, and Mrs Blake was present, and there was Mr Kirby, tiptoeing round, looking very worried and bright-eyed, like a robin. The Bishop of Croydon [Rt Revd E S Woods, later Bishop of Lichfield] took the service, which was quite short and very beautiful. We sang two hymns and I must say they sounded lovely! Afterwards we were invited to look round the nurses' quarters.

26 September 1935.

Tonight was the long-awaited reunion of the Croydon Phil. I had been longing to go again; as I have said before, it had meant so much to me to belong, to meet a man of such incomparable artistry and attainments, such deep love for music and unattainable ideals as Mr Kirby. This evening after an hour's singing he spoke to us on several matters and then in his usual unostentatious manner, he said, "This will be my last evening with you". That was one of the nastiest moments of my life. You could have heard a pin drop in that hall - everyone was shocked and stunned, that is, when we began to realise what he had said, for at first it seemed impossible. It was due to his health. After twenty years as our conductor, he must now give up - he hinted at a possible return one day, but that may have been only to make things seem brighter for us. I cannot imagine

what we shall do without him. He *is* the Croydon Phil., its heart and soul, and it is now up to us all, for his sake, to try and keep up our standard in the future. It is a bitter blow to me, to whom knowing this man has meant so much. For all that Elgar's music means to me now and will mean all my life, I have Mr Kirby to thank. The Elgar Festival will be, even more now, a treasured and wonderful memory. I dare not, at the moment, think of that week, the performances and rehearsals at which all his greatness of spirit revealed itself. There are many things I dare not think of - what I have lost by this! But what he has lost is immeasurably greater. How well I remember at that *Kingdom* performance (thank heavens it was as great as it was) how at the end he seemed not just physically tired, but entirely spent as though the spirit of something within him had fled. It was the attitude of a man who had finished a great task, laboured at for so long, his life was bound up so in the Festival, he had worked and thought of nothing but that for months before. But it was not only the finish of the Festival. It was his last performance. He had laid down his baton - perhaps for the last time, though I pray it will not mean that, but he knew it was goodbye, and what else could that kiss to us have meant? I thought it just love and gratitude, I remember it moved me so, so beautiful a gesture, but it was goodbye - and he knew. I cannot quite realise yet all this will mean to me, it is so sudden and unexpected.

[undated, autumn 1935]

Yesterday at rehearsal Mr Elkins gave us some news of Mr Kirby. It was disappointing at first, but it is undoubtedly for the best. He had hoped to return very soon, in a few weeks, but in the last fortnight he has not been progressing so well and now it is definite that he will not be back this season. Early in the New Year he is going abroad. I knew he would not be back and I wish I hadn't heard of the possibility that he might have done! Now, with the cheerful stridency of Mr Regan and the somewhat banal music we are now working upon, there is little if anything of the spirit of last season left. But somehow, after Mr Elkins had spoken, something of that spirit seemed to return; he inspired loyalty in us - to carry on in Mr Kirby's absence and once again, I felt keen. Soon we shall be working on some new part-songs and then *Messiah*. But oh, the memory of the Elgar Festival. I heard a beautiful performance of the *Enigma* the other night and it seemed to hold something of everything that is in Elgar's music, it brought back the memory of that week so vividly; it was the strain of the Festival that undermined Mr Kirby's health. It was a tremendous task to undertake, it didn't only mean the week of performances and rehearsals but months of endless preparation - and this is the result. Surely not many men can have so truly shown their love for another man and his music, as Mr Kirby has for Elgar.

5 December 1935.

Our first concert is on Saturday and tonight our secretary read us a letter from Mr Kirby. I felt I wanted to drink in and remember every word - it was just like him, quiet and simple, yet very sincere. He just wished us success on Saturday and said he could hardly believe that he was going to be absent - it seemed impossible. By the time we were giving our next concert he would be thousands of miles away - what a pang I felt at this - but, he added, "that will not matter". South Africa. How far away that sounds! He said we must consider this season as a breather, and next season we would do big things - even greater than the Elgar Festival. He surprised me by saying this - how could we? But as I have always known his ambitions and ideals are boundless and I suspect he has something wonderful in store for us next year.

*Alan Kirby was true to his word. After his return to health, the 1936-37 season had two highlights. The first was on 27 January 1937, when the choir took part in the first London performance of Vaughan Williams' Five Tudor Portraits with the BBC Chorus and Symphony Orchestra under Boult at the Queen's Hall (the premiPre had been at the Norwich Festival the previous autumn).*

*Then in March the choir sang Elgar's The Apostles at the Queen's Hall.*

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<sup>4</sup> pp 75 - 81, vocal score

10 March 1937.

In speaking about our *Apostles* performance last night I am going to be quite impartial about the chorus, even though I was in it, and I'm certainly not going to withhold praise where it is due for this unimportant reason! It was a grand sight to see Queen's Hall filling up. Mr Kirby had previously made enquiries and told us that the takings were above the average and there were very few empty seats. This is rather a remarkable feat I might say and so the most important question is, ~~did those people say to themselves~~, "I'm glad I came and I'll come again". If we achieved that we achieved everything we've worked for. It is possible, when rehearsing intensively on a work to exaggerate the importance of one's part in it. I have been thinking, and I expect we all have : "We must enter into the spirit of it - nothing must elude us - we must solve all the problems and discover all the secrets", and to this end we worked. But we are, after all, only one factor in the work. Two others are equally important - the orchestra and the soloists. The former body gave a very slovenly account of themselves at the rehearsal, and by comparison they played well on the night, but I had a slight suspicion - not knowing the score at all well - that more could have been made of many passages and this was confirmed by the critics. If only Mr Kirby could have worked with them for a month or two! I really did feel we gave Mr Kirby all he expected of us. At no more than one or two points did I feel we had done better previously. For myself, I got sadly lost in 'Fantasy'. Perhaps we had achieved finer intensity in the 'Turn you to the stronghold' entry, but really I can think of nothing else that was not as it should be. As far as we are concerned, it is our highest achievement ~~since I have belonged~~. It would be boastful to say we realised everything the music holds, but I must say I never hope, or wish, to hear it sung better. With what unanimity did our men change their tone on "Then entered Satan in Judas", and how well they looked after their intonation in one or two notorious passages - and what times we had with them over these! Our entry on "Weeping may endure for a night" in 'By the Wayside' sounded to me a little less than ideal, but apart from this the rest went beautifully with real controlled pianissimos, and the same can be said of the Temple scene. Each section as I call it to mind is a particularly happy memory, with no regrets and wishing we could do it again better next time! I hope I haven't been too lavish with my praise but the critics uphold me. They speak of our "understanding" of the music. I know that will please Mr Kirby. Our semi-chorus, the Florian Lady Singers, must not be forgotten for their exquisitely ethereal "Alleluias" and their simple delivery of the Angels' good tidings. The other important force ~~in the performance is the soloists~~. My admiration for Astra Desmond is beyond words. As Mary Magdalene she is the most perfect interpreter this part can ever have had. Roy Henderson as Jesus is artistically on a level with her. Not the most beautiful baritone I know, but so intense, so sincere, you feel he has [a] grip of everything his part holds, every note and word. Isobel Baillie, Norman Walker (a very beautiful voice) and Eric Greene - good; Frank Phillips as Peter. I don't think the chorus has ever sung better in my experience, and yet - this performance was not, for some reason, the same sort of experience for me as was *The Kingdom*. So many of the members I have spoken to agree that the *Kingdom* performance was something exceptional - there was magic in the air that night, and it isn't just my imagination - everyone noticed it. What summons this spirit then? I think it is very likely the united effort and concentration of every single factor in the performance. That is what Mr Kirby says at rehearsal, that one erring presence can destroy it. It is, anyway, a rare and wonderful thing.

One criticism gave me great joy to read, from the pen of Ernest Newman of *The Sunday Times*. He confesses to writing very foolishly about *The Apostles* in 1903 and came to realise at our performance how insignificant were its so-called weaknesses "as compared to the power and beauty of the oratorio as a whole". So we made an important convert. Mr Kirby, he adds, is obviously an Elgarian of the first water, while the choir "made up in intimacy of understanding what it occasionally lacked in power or lustre of tone".

23 September 1937.

The long-awaited return to the Croydon Phil tonight. It's strange how Mr Kirby, my presiding genius all the winter, fades right out of my life in the summer! I wonder how I get along without him! During the evening Mr

Kirby asked for "any soprano who thinks she knows the 2nd Soprano part in *Gerontius*, please see me afterwards". I don't, of course, (being 1st Soprano) but I instantly made up my mind to remedy that and offered my services. The Southwark Cathedral conductor, Dr Cook,<sup>5</sup> wanted four second sopranos to augment his choir for the performance on 23 October. I was so caught up with the overwhelming prospect of singing *Gerontius* again that I must confess I didn't tell Mr Kirby that I wasn't a 2nd Soprano, but if I learn the part, surely there would be no objection? There is quite a lot to learn, but I am going to do all in my power to take part in that performance. I don't know yet who the 'Gerontius' is going to be.

Later - I hadn't heard a word from Southwark Cathedral and the rehearsal was this evening, so I decided to brave it and rang up Dr Cook at the cathedral. He happened to be there and upon my explaining who I was, etc, he surprised me by saying that he hadn't heard a word from Mr Kirby! Well, I assured him that I and several other members would be very pleased to sing and he seemed pleased and told me to come along to the cathedral for rehearsal this evening at 5.45. There were only three 2nd Sopranos present (including myself!) and I was singing the part for the first time! However, it seemed I really did know it and only got lost once or twice. And great news - Heddle is to be the 'Gerontius'. This is the occasion I really joined the Croydon Phil for! I hope the occasion will be worthy of its importance to me, so that the memory will be a happy one.

23 October 1937

*The Dream of Gerontius*, Southwark Cathedral. Dr Cook, with his choir and orchestra brought together for the performance could not hope to reach the standards attained by Mr Kirby (no rehearsal with orchestra and soloists!) But it was straightforward and I was determined that my part should be the best I could attain to! I didn't want the memory of this performance to be spoilt by anything to regret or to be ashamed of! I had to put aside rhapsodising and being carried away by Heddle's singing and attend very seriously to my job! There was only one thing to give at this performance - my best. All his singing was by no means audible from my position, but it had all its usual qualities. The time has not yet come for me to say that Heddle brings to realization all that is in his part; I feel there are still great depths of feeling to be plumbed, but I feel too that his heart and mind are receptive for any revelation that may come. Even if it never comes, that he has striven for it is all we need to ask of him.

[Late 1937].

1937 has brought me nearer to the understanding of several of Elgar's works. Chief progress has been made with the cello concerto, which I have heard several times and am now fairly familiar with it (Suggia, Beatrice Harrison). The first months of the year, those preceding our *Apostles* performance at Queen's Hall in March, brought the beauties of this great work to life. It was a renewal of the experience of my first season with the C.P.S, when we studied for the Elgar Festival. To learn *The Apostles* had since then become an ambition. Now I want to hear *The Kingdom* again - how badly I just can't say, except that this "want" is nearly four years old. I have heard two performances of *Gerontius*, one of which I took part in. If only the standard of this performance (Southwark Cathedral) had been worthy of the great occasion it was for me. The most beautiful experience was at Gloucester, where the magic spell of ideal surroundings and acoustics, real understanding and love and sympathy on the part of all taking part, resulted in the most satisfying performance I have yet heard. *Gerontius* is an essential part of my life and I only ask to hear a worthy performance once a year. Worthy performances are not so rare as those of the other two oratorios. The Violin Concerto and Symphony no 2 are still practically unknown, but I am hearing the latter at last in February and this will be a great event. When am I to make the acquaintance of the chamber music? I am ready when opportunity affords. Basil Maine's book on 'The Works' is an invaluable guide to me in my pilgrimage through this wonderland of treasures.

5 March 1938.

*The Dream of Gerontius*, Royal Choral Society.

The oratorio was preceded by the Violin Concerto, played by Albert Sammons. In no work of Elgar's is there that unearthly, spiritual quality in greater degree than in this. The work speaks with a voice now so familiar and so greatly loved, yet some of it is difficult, as though the voice's message was beyond my understanding as yet. What a pity the R.C.S. and Dr Sargent have to present their performances in such an environment as the Albert Hall. So many distracting things come between one and the performance - the echo, and extraneous noises such as coughing, and even once a telephone bell ringing!! Heddle's singing held less of that tensely, that reverence of approach and set-apart-ness that made the Gloucester performance so memorable. Perhaps the environment affected him too. It must have been very difficult for him to get into the mood for his opening words whilst the Prelude was punctuated by almost continuous coughing from all over the Hall. As it was, he was definitely "not in tune" (spiritually) at the start. Also he sang from his score this time, which struck me as most strange. There was a new Angel - Gladys Ripley. She didn't approach Astra Desmond but apart from her, she comes nearest to the ideal. A new baritone, Bruce Boyce, was totally inadequate, to put it mildly. He seemed to have not the slightest idea what he was singing about, can never have given the interpretation a moment's thought - at least that is what it sounded like!

[In November 1938 Ruth Newcomb Price attended the first Gramophone Conference, held at High Leigh in Hertfordshire, also attended by among others Walter Legge, Compton Mackenzie, Rex Palmer, Fred Gaisberg, Christopher Stone, and Anna Instone]

Such a lovely day on the Saturday that we had Group Discussions in the grounds. Met two young men - Roy Budden (Chairman of the North West London Gram Soc); Mr Stone, Music Secretary of the Proms Circle, and inventor of a recording apparatus; Scott Goddard; Alec Robertson. Mr Budden and I were arguing about the merits of Elgar as a conductor of his own works: Mr Gaisberg passing by, Mr B hailed him and asked - did he think Elgar was a good conductor of his own works? Mr Gaisberg didn't seem to think so, and to my surprise he said he would rather hear Toscanini conduct the *Enigma Variations* than Elgar! This sparked off a round of anecdotes about Elgar and as time went on there was quite a little crowd gathered round our table! Mr Gaisberg told us of Elgar's visit to Paris, on which he accompanied him and generally looked after him. Once he and Elgar were getting into a taxi on the boulevard when two women of a disreputable type got in at the opposite door and tried to sit on their laps! His description of Elgar's horror and disgust, frantically pushing them aside, "Go away you horrible women, go away!" Elgar went to see Delius and they were like a couple of schoolboys, each trying to outdo the other, Elgar boasting of his journey by air, of the works he had in progress - a symphony, an opera, a piano concerto, chamber works and how poor Delius - the younger man, but an invalid - envied the "young man of 75" that he saw in Elgar. How he had to protect Elgar from the too-eager attentions of the young Menuhins and what delight Elgar took in the friendship of Yehudi. He told the tale of the "matrimonial fever" that overtook the Menuhin children, and how Yalta, the youngest one, wouldn't be outdone but desperately strove to find a husband when her brother and sister got married! To return to Elgar, I asked Mr Gaisberg the question that everybody wants to know, "What about the 3rd Symphony?" He said he had heard it - Elgar played it over to him, the whole work. He described the "wonderful slow movement" and I felt I didn't want to listen any more, for the pity of it - this loss to music.

May 1939

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<sup>5</sup> E T Cook (1880-1953), born in Worcester, was a pupil of Hugh Blair and Ivor Atkins, and

*The Dream of Gerontius* at the Albert Hall, with Sargent, Croydon Philharmonic, Royal Choral Society, Bradford and Huddersfield Choirs (about 1,000 singers altogether) ... As the performance progressed it dawned on me that it was something out of the ordinary; the spirit was there, and my greatest impression was the ease and fluency of the chorus-work. The critics confirm my impression by their praise for our lightness of touch and lack of ponderousness. There wasn't an anxious moment! There were rhapsodical accounts of the unforgettable thrill of the fortissimo passages. It certainly was a lifting up of hearts - and it's got to be. The orchestra was the L.S.O. - Elgar's own orchestra. Heddle has been the "one and only Gerontius" to the world in general (as well as to me) for some time now, so his participation in this important event was a foregone conclusion. There can never have been a performance so beautiful in its simplicity and complete self-effacement. His deep sincerity, well-measured climaxes and the ease and surety of it all added to his unique beauty of voice and style, are what makes his Gerontius memorable. The other soloists were Gladys Ripley and Harold Williams - both very worthy.

[Two years later comes the final Elgar mention, a particularly poignant one in the entry for 10 May 1941]

I was present at the last performance ever held at the Queens' Hall : *The Dream of Gerontius* on the afternoon of Saturday 10th May 1941. That night the Hall, of blessed memory, was destroyed by fire in an air raid.

[And there, in the memoirs, is the ticket stub : "Royal Choral Society : Gerontius. Balcony, 3 shillings and 6 pence. Row I No 92".]

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became Assistant Organist of Worcester Cathedral in 1902. He was appointed to Southwark Cathedral in 1909, and held the post until his death.

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*Ruth Newcomb Moore (nJe Price) aged 20-25*

## EDWARD ELGAR

Nora Clegg

*[Scouring second-hand bookshops for treasure is one of the real joys of life, and I came across something of great interest just a few weeks ago - a book entitled a Record of Musical Evenings, published in Manchester in 1909. However, no author adorns the title page, and there is no introduction. It would appear to chronicle the activities of a group of musical friends who must have formed a "club" at which they performed music, apparently in private houses, and presumably for themselves and their friends and families. The book begins with a list of members for 1905-6, comprising ten ladies and five men. The "season" began in the autumn and ended early in the new year with an "annual concert". Each evening was given over to a particular composer or theme, beginning with Handel on 31 October 1905 at 'Holm-Acre'. The programmes consisted of vocal solos, pieces for piano, violin or flute, and for various combinations of instruments. Larger works were often given as piano duets (in this case the fifth Organ Concerto). There follows in the book a "Synopsis of the Composer's Life and Works" by one of the group. The ensuing evenings consisted of a Mendelssohn evening at 'Parkdale' on 14 November; Tchaikovski (sic) at 'Dunham Knoll' on 29 November; and Schumann at 'Woodleigh' on 12 December. The 'Annual Concert' (comprising works by all the aforementioned composers, plus Beethoven's 'Moonlight' Sonata) was held at 'Holm-Acre' on 12 January 1906.*

*The 1906 'List of Members' was two less than the previous year. On 27 November at 'Oldfield Brow' the subject was Brahms; Grieg followed on 12 December at 'Dunham Knoll'; Mozart on 20 January 1907 at 'Upton Lovell'; music by 'Italian composers' was given at 'Breeze Hill' on 15 February; and the season closed with the Annual Concert at 'Parkdale' on 1 March.*

*The 1907-8 season showed that two new members had joined, restoring numbers to fifteen. The first evening was on 23 October at 'Oldfield Brow' and featured Elgar's music. The concert began with My Love dwelt in a Northern Land, and then Mrs Ernest Hall sang a "vocal solo from The Kingdom" - presumably 'The sun goeth down'. (This is some indication that the group was quite progressive, as The Kingdom had only been premièred just over a year before.) Then the two Chansons were given in their original violin and piano version; followed by The Pipes of Pan. Cockaigne was given as a piano duet; and the evening concluded with two more part-songs, Evening Scene and O Happy Eyes.*

*The synopsis, which is printed below, was written by Miss Nora Clegg. She was born in Altrincham in 1879; and in 1886 her eldest sister Isabella ('Ella') had married the Rev Charles Gorton, who had been a curate of St Margaret's Dunham Massey near Altrincham. Three years later Gorton became Rector of Morecambe, and in 1891 founded the Morecambe Musical Festival. When Elgar visited the Festival in 1903 the two men became great friends and Gorton advised Elgar on the libretto of the Apostles trilogy. Miss Clegg's "synopsis" seems to have borrowed from published works such as Buckley's 1905 biography and possibly the Strand Magazine interview from 1904; but there are also some interesting personal observations from her brother-in-law, Gorton.*

*The rest of the 1907-8 season comprised Schubert, French composers, Bach, Beethoven, and 'Early English Composers'. At the annual concert on 28 February 1908, My Love dwelt... was repeated, and The Snow was given (with Miss Clegg as one of the two sopranos).*

*The group would seem to have been based in the Altrincham area, as 'Dunham Knoll' is one of the venues mentioned, and a "Miss M Richter" is one the members. (The well-known conductor lived nearby at Bowden, and this lady was almost certainly one of his family). I have not had the time to follow-up any of this information, but possibly other members, particularly from the North-West Branch, might be able to help. One question is : for how long did the group exist? On the spine of a Record of Musical Evenings is printed intriguingly, 'Vol 1' - Ed.]*

One of the most distinguished German critics - Otto Lessmann - has declared Elgar to be the most brilliant champion of the national school of composition which is beginning to flourish in England. It is

Edward Elgar who has made Germany and the continent generally realise that serious English music is a thing to be reckoned with. The translation and presentation of such a lengthy work as the *Dream of Gerontius* at a Lower Rhine Festival has a kind of significance that the English musical public would do well to consider. The programme is much more carefully chosen than at our own festivals, the idea being not at all that it should contain something for all tastes, but that it should be characteristic of musical art as it now stands, giving only the most typically excellent of newer compositions, and of older compositions only those upon which it is felt that contemporary genius had been more particularly nourished. It was not accidental that on that occasion Bach was abundantly represented, that Beethoven appeared only in the most modern in feeling of all his works - the C minor Symphony - and that Liszt's revolutionary *Faust* Symphony was given. Neither was it accidental that the preference was given to Strauss among German, and to Elgar among English composers. For those are the men who really carry the torch, and the Germans are not to be deceived in such matters. This recognition, however, did not come to him quickly, and has perhaps not yet come as fully in England as it has in Germany.

Elgar was born in 1857 near Worcester. His father was organist at St George's Roman Catholic Church in Worcester. His mother shortly afterwards joined the Roman Catholic Church, and though his father never joined she brought up all her children in that faith. Besides his post as organist, Mr Elgar had a large music warehouse, and took great interest and had considerable influence in all the musical doings of the city. There was a large family, and not much money to spare, so that young Edward had to take his chance with the others, and got no special educational advantages. He was left to grow - musically - as he chose, and to take in any and every artistic impression that might be floating in the air. He studied by himself endless books on harmony, counterpoint, and musical form generally. He says now, "Mozart is the musician from whom everyone should learn form. I once ruled a score for the same instruments and for the same number of bars as Mozart's G minor Symphony, and in that framework I wrote a symphony following as far as possible the same outlines in the themes and the same modulations. I did this on my own initiative, groping in the dark, but looking back after 30 years, I don't know any discipline from which I learnt so much."

My brother-in-law, Canon Gorton, once asked him his views on his education; had he gone to a Royal College, Germany, etc, would he have done his work, might he not have fallen into a mould, and become someone else, not himself? "I had," replied Dr Elgar, and then he paused for fully a minute to relight his pipe, and continued with emotion, "I had the best mother a man ever had. She was a yeoman's daughter; she read French and German, she did not know Latin or Greek, but she had translations, and with these she sought to widen the reach of my horizon. What I had to start upon, she gave me. Had I gone to a college, I might have been a prig, having a certain cleverness. Still, it was a hard fight."

He found one day in a stable loft, he tells us, an unsorted collection of old books. There were all kinds of books there, theology, Elizabethan dramatists, old chronicles, besides a tolerable collection of old poets and translations of Voltaire. He devoured them all, and regarded them as treasures of unspeakable worth. His turn of thought inclined to the serious, the heroic. An inborn inextinguishable thirst for knowledge spurred him on. Instinctively he felt that the highest order of pleasure was the discovery of truth, listening to the teaching of truth, and the adoption of its teaching. He was at once an idealist, dreaming, and a toiler, working. He was often in the organ loft beside his father (later he took his father's place as organist), and there he became familiar with the great composers who have written for the Church of Rome. He knew every inch of old Worcester Cathedral; certain mediæval carvings there moved him strangely. He listened to the anthems and services, noting everything and making endless inquiries. Did a chord strike him as more than usually effective or expressive, he would not rest until he had studied its environments, the disposition of the voices, or whatsoever else gave it beauty above its sister chords.

At 15, Elgar left school, and after a year's work in a solicitor's office, he decided to devote himself entirely to music. He studied continuously, showing always tremendous energy and an amazing capacity for taking pains. He taught himself to play one instrument after another; he joined amateur orchestras, became a solo violinist of local repute, and did some hard work conducting a lunatic asylum band. In 1889 he married a daughter of Major-General Sir Henry Roberts. He was then an unknown teacher of music. They went at once to live in London, taking a house in Norwood. Their means were very small, and difficulties came apace. "It was then," said Elgar to my brother-in-law, "that I set *My Love dwells in a Northern Land*. I had read the words in a magazine, and wrote to Andrew Lang for the use of his words. He sent me them at a fee of a guinea. After I had set the part song he wrote to say I must use another version, as it appeared in his volume of poems. This meant re-casting the song. Then Novello objected to it; it was unusual! I should not have bought it if it had not been. However, they would publish it and give me - some copies!" This part song was much taken up by the Northern Festivals, and at least 2,000 copies were sold in two years, out of which Elgar got no profit.

The next few years were full of hard work and many disappointments. Some of his work was shown to Manns, of the Crystal Palace, who promised to produce it at one of his concerts. Four times he was promised rehearsals in London, and four times he was disappointed.

Finally *Black Knight* was accepted for Birmingham in 1893, and *King Olaf* was brought out in 1897. Then, fortunately, among a lot of music sent out to him at Vienna, Dr Richter found the *Enigma Variations*. He immediately picked them out as something quite remarkable, arranged to meet Elgar, and produced them in 1899.<sup>1</sup> In 1900 the *Dream of Gerontius* was produced at Birmingham. It was a perfect fiasco, so badly was it given. Nearly all the English critics, with a few exceptions, notably Mr Arthur Johnstone and Mr Ernest Newman, went against it. It was too revolutionary, too new! If the German critics had not been present and recognised its worth, it would have been a bad day for Elgar. To the London critics Elgar owes nothing. To Dr Richter and to Dr Manns he owes enormously, and, if we may judge from the thrilled and enthusiastic audience, such a one, for instance, as crowded to the first production of the *Dream* in Manchester, we may say too, surely, that he owes much to the English people themselves, who, despite the critics, will have his music.

The subject of *Gerontius* appealed peculiarly to Elgar's temperament. The work has, throughout, a mystic atmosphere. It is deeply and intensely religious. The prevalent poetic note is the mystical exaltation, now of the contrite sinner, now of the aspiring saint. Arthur Johnstone wrote: "On looking back at the extraordinary eloquence and beauty of the musical symbolism in the prelude and death agony of *Gerontius*, one perceives that the quietus which comes to the spirit in the scene following *Gerontius'* death, is merely a climax in a process that really begins with the first notes. The heavenly calm at the opening of the second part one realises more and more. Splendid as the treatment of the hymn 'Praise to the Holiest in the Height' is, the final section is not so completely adequate as the rest. The truth is, that the composer found himself in the presence of a task hopelessly beyond the powers of any mortal, except Bach. In the 'Sanctus' the shining circles of the heavenly choir are, as it were, made audible to the ears of mortals. Bach could only do it once, and no other composer could do it at all. Elgar gives a beautiful and grandly conceived hymn of the Church Triumphant, and with that we may well rest satisfied. He is, in the main, a dramatic composer, and in those cases where he enters the domain of purely religious music, he gravitates back rather to Palestrina, with his 'Souls like thin flames mounting up to

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<sup>1</sup> There are some errors here. *The Black Knight* was not given at Birmingham, but in Worcester. *King Olaf* appeared in 1896. The story about Richter and Vienna is legend.

God,' than to the greater and serener spirit of Bach".

In judging Elgar's oratorios, we must beware of judging by false standards. From the beginning to the end, there is not a particle of Handel or Mendelssohn. Without the slightest intention of doing anything revolutionary, but simply following the bent of his own genius, Elgar brushes aside the conventions of oratorios, very much as Wagner brushed aside the conventions of opera, and justifies himself just as thoroughly in so doing. He has musical symbols corresponding to ideas, feelings, aspects of nature, or personalities, exhortations of angels, suggestions of the devil, mystical rapture, rebellious despair, and he uses them as symbols in the manner of a language. Everything in the score is vivified by the idea. For the old oratorio writers, the most important part in the drawing up of the libretto was the engineering of musical opportunities; here, an effective entry for the principal soloist, there a chorus with scope for contrapuntal writing, etc. In Elgar's oratorios, he makes the text the centre of gravity, the music must, in some clear manner, contribute to the exposition of the subject.

Many, indeed, find in Elgar a preponderance of the emotional over the intellectual. Probably he was influenced in *Gerontius* by the high colour affected in the Roman Church. No doubt the emotional side of *Gerontius* is unwontedly rich, but at the same time there is also no doubt of the intense intellectuality of the *Apostles* and the *Kingdom*, or *The Kingdom of God*, as Elgar would have preferred to call it. Some critics complain of the exaggerated use of the *leitmotif*. Whether it is exaggerated or not depends on the use he makes of it. Perhaps a few instances will explain better what I mean. My brother-in-law once asked Sir Edward how he distinguished between music and thought. He replied that he could not distinguish. Fear to him was represented in his mind as a musical sound. When he called his wife he had a distinct musical theme in his mind, always the same one, of course. He thought in sound. He said one day, "What I see takes its form not in remembrance of shape, but in sound. Once, walking in Malvern, I saw the mist and clouds sweeping down the valley, pierced by the sun, and, how connected I cannot tell, the music of it came to me."

The awful solemn 'judgment' theme in *Gerontius* came to him, he told him, on looking into deep, black, gloomy water. Just as a painter dips his brush into his paints, and uses different colours, so Elgar uses his *leitmotifs*. His use of the *leitmotif* is no mechanical device, it is a part of his nature. He likes to call himself an open air musician; he never composes at a desk, but always out of doors, with just a musical sketch book with him. He will never touch a dead subject; Christ and the Church represent his faith; they are a living force to him, and for that reason he is impelled to write about them. Subjects like Elijah, Moses and the Israelites, the themes that the old oratorio writers loved would not appeal to him. With regard to the *Apostles*, I believe there should still be another part. The chief contest is yet to come. The *Kingdom* I understand should not have stopped where it did, but should have gone as far as the preaching at Ephesus. Some day Sir Edward hopes to write further of the fight between light and darkness.

Those who know Sir Edward best say that his character is extraordinarily many sided. He is a devout Roman Catholic, and his whole life bears the mark of deep religious feeling. He is besides essentially a man of affairs. He has even said more or less seriously that he would rather like to enter the House of Commons. At any rate he very nearly accepted the Mayoralty of Hereford, when it was offered to him a year or two ago!

He has a small laboratory of his own, and is keenly interested in science, and in all branches of art, painting, and literature, as well as music. Indeed, he has a quite unusual knowledge of English literature, due largely to his mother's early influence. He is a man of moods, sometimes morose and silent, and then difficult to deal with. If any stranger should talk to him about his music, he shuts up like an oyster in his shell. More often he is a most interesting companion to his friends, a born raconteur, with a great sense of humour.

Lady Elgar is his constant companion. She is a very charming and cultured woman, and writes many of the words of his songs. She would probably have gained distinction in the literary world if she had not married a genius. As it is she devotes herself wholly to her husband. She has a serene temper, and great tact and sympathy, gifts which must be of the utmost use and comfort to a man of Sir Edward's temperament. She has, for instance, an unflinching skill in keeping bores at a distance! But beyond this, she is a great stimulus to him in all his work, and an influence in his life, the extent of which it would be difficult to overestimate.

## BOOK REVIEWS

August Jaeger : Portrait of Nimrod: a life in letters and other writings, by Kevin Allen.  
*Ashgate, Aldershot, 2000; pp. xviii + 318. £50*

It seems unlikely that Jaeger would have commanded the interest which this biography presupposes had he not been ennobled as Nimrod in Elgar's Variations. While the composer recognized that his musical portrait excluded the "ardent and mercurial" aspects of Jaeger's character, the letters published by Percy Young and Jerrold Northrop Moore, together with Dorabella's *Memories of a Variation*, have helped to round it out. Inevitably, then, a good deal of the material in Kevin Allen's study will be familiar to Elgarians, yet many of the letters acquire fresh nuances when read within an unfolding narrative of Jaeger's professional and family life. And the account of his dealings with composers other than Elgar deepens our understanding of that British musical scene which was notably enriched during, and to a significant extent by, the two decades of Jaeger's activity.

Yet his prescribed duties were merely those of a publisher's drudge : however meticulous his supervision of Novello's printed and copied performing materials, however resourcefully he foresaw and overcame problems, his services were never valued at more than £5 a week. Nor does Jaeger's insistence on his amateur status as a musician (an *idée fixe* compounded of vexation and pride) make any more likely the many roles he went on to perform, as analyst and critic for the musical public and as goad, inspirer and confidant to a clutch of composers.

Allen affectively varies the rhythm of a biography that must rely at times on conjecture by sketching backgrounds to various stages of Jaeger's career - Paganini's restaurant where business was often done, Davos and its Hotel Buol where he struggled against tuberculosis, changing medical opinion and treatment of the disease itself, and so on. The first such sketch depicts Jaeger's formative environment, political and musical, in Düsseldorf. Whatever the rigours of Bismarck's Prussia that prompted the family's emigration to London, he treasured memories of his native city's musical life and its association with Mendelssohn, Schumann and Brahms. Though his own musical training, as violinist and pianist, seems to have been modest, he subscribed unswervingly to the view that German musical culture was the touchstone, and, in an England where many discerning patrons were of German extraction, could lay claim to standards of taste and discrimination he found underdeveloped here; even his need to seek out and applaud emerging creative talent directly reflects Schumann's example. The Düsseldorf performance of *Gerontius* he did much to make possible must have been a climactic experience, its honours evenly divided between a revelatory English creative achievement and a magnificently accomplished German performance; eight years later his memorial concert aptly juxtaposed Elgar, Parry, Walford Davies and Coleridge-Taylor, predominant figures in Jaeger's English crusade, with Wagner and Brahms.

That he lacked a comprehensive technical grasp of compositional processes was scarcely a handicap in the field of musical criticism, which Jaeger entered through Novello's house journal, the *Musical Times* : to respond to a first performance with an elegant choice of epithets, distributing approval or censure on an apparently arbitrary basis, was common enough practice. Some of Jaeger's critical notices can appear just as confident in unfiltered emotion as the basis for a verdict, but when his attention was caught by a new work or a new composer, he was prepared to explore more deeply, repeatedly reading a score and playing it at the piano to clarify the nature of his response. Inevitably, repeated exposure could at times breed disenchantment, and the fluctuations in his evaluation of Coleridge-Taylor, initially assigned a place in the Jaeger pantheon beside Elgar's, weave a piquant thread through Allen's story.

Like many critics, Jaeger had his fixations, seeking out the same qualities for praise or blame in all that he heard. Allen's third chapter, 'The Russian Campaign', describes Jaeger's opposition to the predominance in Henry Wood's concerts at the Queen's Hall of Russian works, and the consequent neglect of British music. Even his admiration for Tchaikovsky's 'Pathétique' wilts under its oft-repeated impact, but it is the emphasis on exotic colour and rhythm of the Russian Nationalists which he finds detrimental to more essential qualities, above all of melody. A decade later the "strong, original melodist" he hears in Elgar ranks him above Delius, "of the crazy 'colour' school", but the originality is not exemplified. He has less to say about harmony, whether as local expressive gesture or as structural determinant. When he questions the close of the first movement in Elgar's first symphony for its "awfully sudden change to A", the evocative A minor parenthesis is not related to the role its key and its phrase have played in the whole movement. Indeed, Jaeger's general uneasiness with Elgar's codas (spoilt "by trying to be 'unconventional'") is reiterated without much reference to the designs they close.

The analyses of the Elgar oratorios on which Jaeger laboured so heroically tend to imply that musical coherence is chiefly dependent on a textually appropriate succession of leading motives. And in purely instrumental contexts his concern is more with itemized beauties than with their integration into wider spans. So one may question why superbly equipped composers like Elgar and Parry should have been ready to brook, even to heed, criticisms of their structural balance by this 'amateur'. Certainly they must have been impressed by his intense seriousness of purpose, and his close familiarity in sound with their music. But above all, they must have recognized that, whatever Jaeger's exegetical limitations, he had an intuitive feeling for the effective balance and pacing of a musical design.

Elgar's acknowledgement of this was not entirely graciously expressed, but is documented in his recasting of climactic contexts in the Variations and *Gerontius*; and it is to Jaeger's nose for a composer's strengths that we owe the Introduction and Allegro with its central fugue. Younger protégés' debts to Jaeger were of many kinds: thoughtful reviews of new works, recommendations to concert promoters and (always problematic) words in season at Novello signified confidence in their potentialities. But still more valuable must have been personal letters such as those which this chronically overworked man wrote to Walford Davies, mixing sympathetic recognition of composing ideals with judicious criticism of their imperfect realization; and whether he counselled Davies to "fall desperately and *successfully* in love" or "NEVER again use a *Euphonium*", he was making points that sprang from the music. Though Davies was not to fulfill Jaeger's highest expectations, the correspondence between them helps to explain the affection which Jaeger inspired.

It also confirms that, despite his remarkable facility in manipulating the English language to match Elgar's taste for the facetious, Jaeger's most characteristic tone is that of "the good, lovable honest Soul" saluted in 'Nimrod'. The picture Allen draws of his warm family life makes doubly affecting Part Two of the book, which charts the irreversible decline in Jaeger's health through his last four-and-a-half years. Already starved of her husband's company by his long hours at Novello, his concert-going and review-writing, and his need to squeeze in at unreasonably early hours such extra tasks as the Elgar analyses, Isabella now had to face his absences at sanatoria abroad or, when the firm could no longer hold his job open, his enforced, but racked, presence at home.

While she did all she could to sustain morale, to care for their two children and to bring in some income by teaching the violin, Jaeger desperately needed financial support, and also, if he was not to surrender to utter despair, continuing contacts with the world of music he had made his life. As any reader of the published letters will have sensed, Elgar's relations with Jaeger underwent a marked change in these years, when his stature was established, not only in the eyes (at last) of Novello but of the whole musical community. Jaeger perhaps exaggerated the danger he saw in Elgar's social advancement, but the

process clearly created an uneasiness on both sides. So it is not Elgar to whom Jaeger writes enormously long letters at this time, courageously addressing a wide range of topical musical questions, with no more than occasional relapses into bleak contemplation of his own plight, but Hubert Parry. And, if not so long, his letters to Sydney Loeb are valuable too, for they record his maturing view of Elgar's first symphony.

Parry and Loeb visited the stricken Jaeger, and contributed generously to his welfare. Elgar was less in evidence, but there is no doubting how constantly he and his music were in Jaeger's thoughts. Indeed, the man who had been robbed of attendance at all three of the oratorio premiPres was enabled, against all the odds, to attend that notable symphonic début. How strongly one feels for him is a measure of the sensitivity and breadth of view that Kevin Allen has brought to this study.

Ashgate have produced it handsomely, though the small type of the indented letters makes for some rather cluttered pages. The photographs include all the chief characters in Allen's story, and reinforce its vivid avocation of an already remote yet crucial period in our musical rehabilitation.

Peter Evans

Tunes of Glory : the life of Malcolm Sargent, by Richard Aldous.

*Hutchinson, 2001. 245pp. £18-99*

"Sargent was bargain-basement. He has perhaps been over-vilified, but one cannot make out a convincing case for drastic rehabilitation. He was a star musical propagandist, not a great conductor". This quote, taken from the prologue to a new biography, is not by its author Richard Aldous, but by Michael Kennedy, and seems to be a view held by many. The reputations of the other three great English conductors who dominated the musical scene during the middle of last century - Barbiroli, Beecham, and Boult - seem to have survived relatively intact : but not so Sargent. The *New Grove* entry may be taken as an example : while acknowledging Sargent as "the outstanding British choral conductor of his time", he is then damned by the following : "...it is possibly as a supremely efficient and energetic popularizer of music for listeners on many levels... that he will be chiefly remembered".

Sargent was a great showman : the carnation in the buttonhole was his world-famous trademark. He courted fame and those who could give it him. He was autocratic and snobbish (possibly as a cover for his own insecurity : he came from a lower middle-class background and there was some doubt as to the legitimacy of his birth). He spoke his mind and often offended people, most notably orchestral players, after some ill-chosen remarks in 1935. (Some players never forgave Sargent for this and he was far from popular with them for the rest of his life.) Yet musically he was his own man : he never sought the glamour of the opera house (though he conducted four eminent British premiPres - Vaughan Williams' *Hugh the Drover*, *Sir John in Love* and *Riders to the Sea*, and Holst's *At the Boar's Head*), much preferring works like *Hiawatha* and the Gilbert and Sullivan operas. Maybe this contributed to his reputation as a musical lightweight. Yet as well as his acknowledged ability with choral music, he was also recognised as a major interpreter of Sibelius and, later, Shostakovich; and took a great interest in modern British composers such as Rawsthorne and Tippett. During the eleven years of the Courtald-Sargent concerts he introduced and conducted many new works. In 1927 he was called in at short notice to conduct the Diaghilev ballet in place of the indisposed Eugene Goossens. Diaghilev was immensely grateful and so impressed that he asked Sargent to conduct again the following season. Sargent was not fond of atonal music, but then neither were his three chief contemporaries, and he probably had a wider repertoire than they did.

Sargent's Elgar has often been overlooked, although his conducting of the first recording of *Gerontius* is universally admired : John Knowles in *Elgar's Interpreters on Record* wrote : "Sargent's direction is

incisive and yet fully sympathetic to the spirituality of a work that meant so much to him personally". Sargent was also very fond of *The Apostles* and *The Kingdom* and would have liked to record them. Elsewhere on record, he was a fine accompanist in the concerti, for Heifetz and Tortelier; and made three recordings of the *Variations*, all rather underrated these days, although Ronald Taylor described his first recording, in 1945 with the National Symphony Orchestra, as "sparkling and vigorous" on its transfer to CD (Dutton CDK 1203, review March 1999); and I grew up with the fine HMV Concert Classics version, still one of my favourites.

In 1965 Sargent finally agreed to write an autobiography, after having rejected the idea for years. He was assisted by a critic, Charles Reid, who was to ghost-write the book. Although a good deal of it was completed it was left unfinished at the conductor's death. In wishing to complete the task, Reid offended Sargent's executors, who refused him access to much private material; so Reid went ahead anyway and his biography appeared the following year. It contains very little about the Sargent family, or Sylvia Darley, Sargent's secretary, who had refused to co-operate with Reid.

Now, over thirty years after Sargent's death, comes this new book whose author teaches history at University College, Dublin. Richard Aldous admits to being a music-lover, but appears to be lacking in knowledge in some areas of music. For instance, *The Dream of Gerontius* apparently lasts "two and a half hours" (p110). The aim of the book is to establish Sargent as "an accomplished professional who established new standards of excellence". It also looks at the social and cultural background to Sargent's life, with opportunities for "boys of humble origins" to rise in society; and at Sargent's ability to take advantage of the growth in "mass culture" to promote himself. Yet really it is a virtually "straight" biography, based on Reid, with extra details drawn from Sargent's own papers and the memories of those who knew him, including his secretary Sylvia Darley, and his son Peter. These new revelations actually tell us little except that his private persona was not as nice as his public face (but then, how often that is true of the rich and famous). Much is made of his sexual shenanigans, which apparently involved nobility and even royalty. "His sexual conquests were legion" (p26); he was a "notorious womaniser" (p63), and "a serial philanderer" (p120). However, I am not sure what the author gains by constantly turning over stones like this. What is needed is a serious and scholarly look at Sargent's musical reputation, which could be done quite objectively through his many recordings. Aldous' book is very readable, but as the blurb states it "is as much an exploration of celebrity and the English psyche as the story of one extraordinary man". Anyone interested in Sargent the musician, and especially the importance of Elgar's music to Sargent's career, is best advised to go to Reid, which at 462 pages is nearly twice the length of this new book.

The Editor

## **RECORD REVIEWS**

Sospiri, Op 70. With works by Bridge, Haydn Wood, Ireland, Delius, Warlock, Geoffrey Bush, and Vaughan Williams.

*English Northern Philharmonia conducted by David Lloyd-Jones*  
Naxos 8.555068

This disc is entitled 'English String Miniatures Vol 2'; Lloyd-Jones' first venture (with the Royal Ballet Sinfonia) consisted mainly of music by minor or largely forgotten composers. The names here are generally in a higher league and some of the music more familiar: as well as the Elgar we have Delius' *Air and Dance*,

Warlock's *Serenade*, Ireland's *The Holy Boy*, and Bridge's three miniatures, *Sally in our Alley*, *Cherry Ripe*, and *Sir Roger de Coverley*. There is also Vaughan Williams' *Charterhouse Suite*, which began life in 1920 as a series of piano pieces, which were then scored for string orchestra by the Editor of the Polychordia String Library, James Brown, with the composer's collaboration and approval. The Suite has been recorded before but not often, and it is good to have them here.

The other two pieces are real rarities. First, the *Fantasy-Concerto* by Haydn Wood (1882-1959), best remembered for *Roses of Picardy*, and also by Elgarians for his orchestral arrangements and recordings and Elgar's songs in the 1930s (and available on the Society's first *Interpreters* CD (CDAX 8019)). The *Fantasy-Concerto* (its first recording, surely?) actually began life as a string quartet of 1905, which won a prize in the Cobbett chamber music competition. Years later it was revised and adapted by the composer for string orchestra. The final section sounds in places remarkably like Elgar's Introduction & Allegro, which of course was written in the same year.

Then there is Geoffrey Bush's *Consort Music* which was originally a set of songs in styles popular at the time of Prince Albert, and again orchestrated later. They are great fun, and knowledgeable listeners will be able to recognise many of the actual works which inspired the pieces : for instance, the 'Valse' is clearly derived from Weber's *Invitation to the Dance*.

The English Northern Philharmonia strings play with great enthusiasm, although occasionally there is not quite the ensemble one would expect at the very highest level. But that is to carp. David Lloyd-Jones has already established his Elgarian credentials on Naxos with his award-winning recording of *Falstaff* (8.553879), and interprets the pieces on this new disc, light though they are, with loving expression. This record is such an outstanding bargain, that I have included it, even though it only contains four-and-a-half minutes of Elgar. A real joy : buy it, now.

The Editor

Romance for Bassoon, Op 62. With works by Vaughan Williams, Hurlstone, Dunhill, Jacob, Arnold, Vinter and Cooke.

*Roger Birnstingl (bassoon), Sam Haywood (piano)*  
*Sanctus SCS 022*

I remember Roger Birnstingl when he was Principal Bassoon in the LSO in my early years of London concert-going (not a surname that is easily forgotten). For the last twenty years he has been solo bassoon in the Suisse Romande Orchestra, and so has had "a very limited repertoire of English music", which is one of the reasons he decided to make this disc, entitled 'An English Serenade'. The music spans most of last century, from Hurlstone's posthumous Sonata of 1907 (a marvellous piece this, from a talented composer who sadly died at only 30 years of age) to Arnold Cooke's 1988 Sonata, dedicated to Birnstingl.

There is some wonderful music here. Members will probably know the Vaughan Williams Six Studies in English Folksong from one of its other incarnations. The Dunhill and Hurlstone are excellent, as might be expected from two composers who were very committed to chamber music. The Vinter is unashamedly populist, pure Radio 2/ Classic FM, and none the worse for that. The Cooke is perhaps the hardest work for the listener, but that could be because it comes towards the end of the disc! The Elgar is sensitively and expressively played, bringing out the essential Elgarian wistfulness : of course one misses the orchestral accompaniment, but a disc worth buying for the imaginative and well-executed repertoire.

The Editor

String Quartet, Op 83. Piano Quintet, Op 84.

*Sorrel Quartet with Ian Brown (piano)*  
Chandos CHAN 9894

Gone are the days when these works, either singly or as a coupling, were absent from the catalogues. The best of course, as far as the Piano Quintet is concerned, is the Cohen/Stratton version transferred to CD back in 1993 but since then there have been new versions on EMI (LSO soloists), and on several budget labels such as Edition Abseits, Discover International, and Naxos. Chandos have now released the pair with the exciting young Sorrel Quartet and the versatile, experienced pianist Ian Brown. The result is superb.

The First World War was a dreadful time for Elgar and a watershed for his career, especially his international reputation, whilst his health was also not good. Lady Elgar found Brinkwells, an isolated cottage near Petworth in Sussex, where her husband could escape from the rigours of wartime London. He began to compose chamber music, something he had neglected for thirty years, though in 1907 he had begun to write a string quartet for Adolph Brodsky's quartet. Nothing came of it (or more accurately some of its material went into *The Music Makers* or the First Symphony) until 1918 when Elgar completed this work, dedicated to Brodsky but first performed in public by W H Reed, Albert Sammons, Raymond Jeremy, and Felix Salmond at the Wigmore Hall on 21 May 1919. Chamber music is sometimes produced or rediscovered by composers at the end of their lives. Bruch did it too, and often a poignant restless mood or one of solemn repose pervades the music which they produce. Each of the three movements in this quartet fit such a bill, though the impassioned finale has much of the orchestral Elgar in it. The Sorrel Quartet give an excellent account of the work, wistful in the slow movement (most favoured by Lady Elgar and played at her funeral just one year later), vibrantly energetic in the virtuosic finale with impressive unity of ensemble. The Quartet's leader Gina McCormack has no restraint (quite rightly too) in exploiting violinistic effects such as portamento, harmonics etc and gives a dazzling display of her considerable technique, inspiring her colleagues right to the last chord in a tightly knit yet expansively sensitive, well-paced account of a work which is frankly hard to bring off convincingly.

The Piano Quintet also has the same air of melancholy as the quartet, stemming no doubt from Elgar's concurrent work on the Cello Concerto which was next to come, though it tends to more eerie moments - apparently a group of dead trees near the cottage affected Elgar when writing the piece in 1919, "a ghastly sight in the evening". The work is notable (and notably performed too) for its ebb and flow of rubato as well as its varied moods. The sublime Adagio drew the best music from Elgar and therefore the best from these players (with some particularly luscious phrases from violist Sarah-Jane Bradley and cellist Helen Thatcher) in an exquisitely balanced and above all stylish performance; though no less memorable are the brilliantly coloured guitar-like effects towards the end of the first movement, the Spanish element which Reed likened to a local legend of monks in the area but which is now pretty convincingly debunked and attributed to Elgar's friend Algernon Blackwood, a writer of ghost stories. The finale, with its cyclical references to the first movement, is given both passion and subdued sensitivity true to the Elgarian idiom. This is exciting playing of the highest order, always touchingly involved and, above all, deeply committed. I thoroughly recommended the disc.

Christopher Fifield

Five Songs from the Greek Anthology, Op 45. With male voice songs by Gade, Mendelssohn, Schubert, and Peterson-Berger.

*Copenhagen University Choir conducted by Jørgen Fuglebak*

It's always most encouraging to hear of musicians from overseas taking up Elgar, and especially when they record his music, as it means that the music stands a chance of reaching a wider public in that country. Elgar's part-songs are gradually becoming better known, and there have been some fine recordings of them in recent years. Now the Copenhagen University Choir (men's voices; the oldest choir in Denmark, founded in 1839) have included the *Greek Anthology* songs, on a disc containing works by German and Scandinavian composers.

As most members will know, I have an extremely soft spot for part-songs, and there are some wonderful examples here. (By the by, I wish some of the talented male choirs which one hears from time to time would take up some of this repertoire : it is so much more fulfilling than the schmaltzy, overblown arrangements of "songs from the shows" - or worse - that one normally hears.) The songs of the two Scandinavian composers are well-written and attractively performed; but really it is the Schubert and the Mendelssohn which stand out. The choir sings with admirable attack and ensemble, and the diction is good. The bass lines are very secure, and the only real criticism is that the top tenor sounds strained on quietly-sung high notes (but what top tenor does not?). Having said that, there are some wonderfully controlled *pianissimos*, as in Schubert's *Die Nacht*; and they are equally effective in the louder songs (why do so many of this kind of song feature hunting?).

It has to be said that the Elgar songs are the weakest set on the disc. For a start, they are taken quite slowly - total time 8'36", as against 7'31" (Baccholian Singers CMS 565123-2) and 7'08" (London Symphony Chorus CDA 67019). The two outer songs in particular need to go at a much faster lick. The choir's English is good, but expression is at a premium, not surprisingly as the English translations are rather flowery and obscure in places. But full marks to the Danes for effort. It is hoped that the disc will be available for sale in this country eventually : details as and when we have them.

The Editor

Violin Concerto, Op 61. With Walton : Violin Concerto

*Jascha Heifetz (violin), London Symphony and Cincinnati Symphony  
Orchestras conducted by Sir Malcolm Sargent and Eugene Goossens  
Naxos Historical 8.110939*

No Elgar lover can possibly be without Heifetz's recording of the violin concerto. If anyone internationalises the work, his performance does, cutting through any English restraint and getting, from the opening flourish, to the impassioned heart of this red-blooded music. Elgar, of course, wrote it (in 1910) with a foreigner in mind, Kreisler, and it was soon taken up by the likes of Ysaÿe, Oistrakh, and Busch, not to mention Menuhin and later generations such as present day international players from Kyung-Wha Chung to Zukerman. Heifetz was incredibly assured in matters of technique, and with intonation of amazing clarity, sweet-toned in the slow middle movement. This recording was made at Abbey Road in 1949 and follows in the tradition of the great Sammons/Wood and Menuhin/Elgar recordings of 1929 and 1932 respectively. As a supportive yet flexible accompanist to Heifetz, Sargent keeps a tight control on the LSO, their sound on this remastering occasionally prone to a dull flatness of tone. Heifetz's sound is immediate, *portamento* stylishly restrained at the emotional high points. The finale (especially in that uniquely accompanied cadenza) is an absolute *tour de force*, and though some roughness and loss of tonal focus when double or triple-stopping may not delight all, you can smell the rosin flying off the bow in his *spiccato*. This is the benchmark recording of a wonderful work.

Heifetz could not do more to show his belief in British music than to commission a concerto, which he did

from Walton in the late 1930s. The first recording the Lithuanian violinist made of it was in America during the war years (February 1941) with Eugene Goossens conducting his Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. Walton was an ambulance driver for his war effort and so could not be present at the recording sessions; had he been he probably would have made changes to the orchestration, which he subsequently did, mainly regarding the percussion element (and to this reviewer as a conductor that is a matter of regret). As it is, this recording of the original version is not only of historical interest, but proves once again to be an ideal vehicle for the evidently sympathetic and grateful Heifetz.

Mark Obert-Thorn's remastering of both works is highly impressive, both concertos notable for their clarity of sound, unfogged lower frequencies and absence of hiss or reverberation.

Christopher Fifield

Violin Sonata, Op 82, plus other works for violin and piano.

*Marat Bisengaliev (violin), Benjamin Frith (piano)*  
*Black Box BBM 1047*

Marat Bisengaliev is an outstanding violinist in the long tradition of Russian virtuosi (he is actually from Kazakhstan, now an independent state). His love of Elgar's music is well-known and he brings a freshness to his interpretations which focus especially on the passion in the music (see review of his performance of the Violin Concerto in the last issue of the NEWS). This disc is a follow-up to BBM 1016, which was entitled 'Elgar: Re-discovered works for Violin'. As I mentioned in my review then, the title is not really accurate, for although some of the pieces were unusual, and certainly rarely recorded, most of them were well-known to Elgar aficionados. The title is even less accurate for this 'Volume 2', as the major work here is the Violin Sonata, which hardly needed "re-discovering", and seems to be riding on the crest of a wave at the moment.

Bisengaliev takes a no-nonsense approach to the music. As I listened, I found myself thinking of Sammons' 1935 interpretation, although there is little of the "English" restraint found in that version. It was interesting to find that these are the two fastest recordings, with Bisengaliev at 23'45" just a few seconds quicker. The opening is really exciting and the soloist is superb in the arpeggios after fig 5, always a difficult section to bring off successfully. There is an intensity, a restless pushing onwards about the music, especially in the first movement, which is very compelling and also reminiscent of the way in which Elgar conducted his own works. Unlike the other two chamber works there are no metronome marks in the Sonata, so there is some scope for personal interpretation in, say, the 'Andante' of the Romance. (It has often been pointed out that the word 'Andante' means not "slow" but "at a walking pace", and was originally used to denote the style rather than the speed of a piece). Bisengaliev's Romance is true to the score and sensitively played, but he does not linger; and those who prefer more intimacy and introspection in their Elgar slow movements should look elsewhere. The third movement, 'Allegro, ma non troppo' I felt was a shade too "troppo", but once again it is a violinistic tour de force and very exciting. This may not be my preferred choice, but it is a very persuasive and convincing account of the Sonata.

Bisengaliev adopts the same approach with the smaller pieces. The Elevation (which is of course Sursum Corda by another name) lasts barely four and a half minutes : orchestral versions often take twice as long. The tempo is picked up immediately the climax is reached, almost out of embarrassment, it would appear. The lighter pieces are much more successful : Bisengaliev's delightful touch and mastery of technique brings the best out of them. He is also very much at home in the first and third of the Bavarian Dances (the second appeared on the earlier disc) and a real curiosity, an arrangement of a piano piece, Petite Reine by one Victor Beraud (who was actually a Worcester composer named Frank Blackbourne). Despite my minor reservations, this is a thoroughly enjoyable disc and I urge you to buy it.

The Editor





## LETTERS

From : Nigel Evans, RNCM, Manchester

*It is no secret that the theme of Elgar's Variations Op 36 represents the composer himself, as his own elucidation to The Music Makers makes clear. Here he admits that the Enigma theme marked at one point *mesto* (sad) "expressed... my sense of the loneliness of the artist". I note however with interest that all the literature devoted to Elgar I have read (and I have read most of it) falls short in explaining which Elgar is 'Enigma' - why he adopted Enigma as his disguise.*

*It seems to me that our composer, who loved puns, puzzles and ciphers of all kinds, chose it simply because he could not resist the chance to indulge his passion for word play. Edward, or "E.E." as he was known to his closest friends (August Jaeger, right-hand man at Novello even addressed him as "the octave...you SPHYNX!!") therefore assumed the identity of Enigma because he was Mister E (Mystery) and wanted to be "left unguessed" by the public. As for the variation friends "pictured within", they were unlikely to be known to the general public and so would keep their anonymity despite the use of initials or nicknames.*

*Although the veil was a thin one, this cover-up worked well. Elgar teased Dora Penny (Dorabella) that she "of all people" should have guessed the secret, and how right he was - as a diary entry for Friday 30 October 1896, reproduced in her Memories of a Variation, shows : "Mr Elgar came and saw us in the interval. Went to Choral Symphony in the evening. Mr.E. sat with me most of the time".*

*If this all seems rather unsophisticated and too simple to be believable, it is worth remembering that Jaeger himself (and he was in a position to know) considered the whole enigma business simply "a bit of Elgar's humour".*

*[There is also the letter from Elgar of early September 1898 in which he for the first time dispenses with formality in addressing Jaeger. The letter begins "My dear Jaeger (The Mister-y is soluted)" - Ed.]*

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From : Neil Mantle

*With reference to the interesting article of Barbirolli's Elgar recordings by K D Mitchell (JOURNAL March 2001), I think the following extract from an article by John Snashall, which appeared in the ICRC magazine for November 1995, throws some light on the non-issue for several years of the December 1956 recording of the Introduction & Allegro.*

*"Another death which shook the musical world occurred in July 1970, that of Sir John Barbirolli. It was agreed by Bob [Auger] and myself that we should put together a memorial disc, and I started to plan the contents. I felt that I had to include some Elgar, and I remembered that in December 1956, the first year of his Pye contract, he had recorded the Introduction and Allegro, which had never been released because the tapes had a lacerating top frequency fault and were therefore considered unusable.*

*"I went into our tape library and found the boxes, clearly marked 'Not to be used'. I was familiar with a Barbirolli 78 rpm recording of the work, which had become my favourite performance (HMV C3669/70, 12/47). Putting the first reel of tape into the machine I settled back to listen. As usual, there was the sound of the orchestra chatting amongst themselves, and then the sound of Sir John arriving and mounting the rostrum. After the usual 'Good mornings' he made a few comments, reminding the players to watch certain points and said he was ready to record. Then he growled, 'And it had better be good, because I've got a raging toothache!' What followed was one of the most intense and superb performances of the piece that I have ever heard, superior even to the 78s. After Bob Auger had done a splendid piece of sonic restoration on the tape, very little editing was required, and that first take was issued almost untouched".*

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*These were found among music sent to Society member Arthur Walker who wonders if anyone could assist in identification. The writing on the back of each suggests Worcester in 1928, whereas the Three Choirs was held there the following year. Kevin Allen, who includes these photos in his book, *Elgar in Love*, dates them 1932.*

## 100 YEARS AGO...

The prestigious London Musical Festival, conducted by Henry Wood, was including the *Enigma Variations* on 4 May at the Queen's Hall. It was, wrote Alice, "a splendid success" and there was an ovation for Edward. Elgar was "very busy with proofs of *Cockaigne*" around this time, but before the premiere of that came the Worcestershire Philharmonic performance of (most of) *Gerontius* on 9 May. Alice once again called it a "splendid" concert, and the following day wrote to Jaeger: "...The room was crowded, & the audience deeply impressed". Edward wrote to the Editor of *The Musical Times*, picking up the point of the work's alleged difficulty: "Our performance... shews that the work *IS* within the means of an intelligent chorus with a (fairly) intelligent Conductor".

Jaeger was not well, and Elgar went up to London to go with him to see a specialist. He needed an operation, and spent a few days in Malvern with the Elgars prior to going into hospital. About this time Elgar received a letter from Alfred Rodewald, a wealthy Liverpool businessman who was also a gifted amateur musician, and whom the Elgars had met at Bantock's concerts at New Brighton. He invited them to spend some time with him at his country cottage at Bettws-y-coed in north Wales. Elgar had a conducting engagement at Cambridge on 7 June (*Sea Pictures*) and went to Wales directly from there, meeting Alice at the cottage. They enjoyed their stay, Elgar going on an outing to Beddgelert, Aberglaslyn and Tremadoc on the 15th with Rodewald and Adrian Mignot, the President of Rodewald's Liverpool orchestra. On 17 June the Elgars travelled to London for the premiere of *Cockaigne* on the 20th, "a great glorious success" according to Alice.

Despite these successes and diversions, Edward was depressed by not having a major work in hand during the summer months, for the first time in four years. However, he heard that the Gloucester organist, Herbert Brewer, had considered withdrawing his Three Choirs commission - a short choral work called *Emmaus* - as he lacked the time to orchestrate it. Elgar immediately volunteered to do the job, and began work on 27 June, completing it ten days later, to the immense joy and gratitude of the composer. He decided to solve the problem of his own lack of a work by completing and issuing the two marches. On 30 June the diary noted "E porsley badsley but orchestrating for H. Brewer & thinking of his Marches". They were eventually completed in mid-August and sent off to Boosey's in preparation for an autumn premiere.

On 9 July they had gone to Birchwood for the summer. Elgar did a lot of cycling with various friends, but became depressed once more when a bad foot curtailed his riding. He wrote to the Malvern schoolmistress Rosa Burley, who had taken a party on holiday to the small Welsh resort of Llangranog, and she invited him to spend a few days there with them. He left on 15 August and returned on the 20th, during which time the beautiful landscape had stimulated his creativity again, and he noted down themes which would eventually find their way into *The Apostles* and the Introduction and Allegro.

Early September saw the London rehearsals for Gloucester, which Edward attended, and then he and Alice went straight to Hasfield Court, home of the Baker family, where they joined the house party for the duration of the Festival. Edward had great fun playing with the Baker boys, he in the guise of Nanty Ewart, the pirate captain from Scott's *Redgauntlet*. As well as *Emmaus*, there were performances of the *Gerontius* Prelude and Angel's Farewell, and *Cockaigne*.

# The Elgar Society Journal

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**July 2001**

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Front Cover : Elgar, aged about 44. The photograph is often described as taken on the Malvern Hills - strictly true, but believed (at least by the Editor) to have been taken behind Craeg Lea.

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