Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Cello Concerto in E minor, Op. 85

Edward Elgar

Edward Elgar is an essential representative of the Edwardian Era, the late Imperialist moment of British history named after Edward VII, who, on July 4, 1904, turned the composer into Sir Edward. The son of an organist in Worcester, Elgar deputized for his father in church lofts, picked up a bit of instruction on violin, served as bandmaster at the Worcester County Lunatic Asylum, and, in 1882, acceded to the position of music director of the Worcester Amateur Instrumental Music Society. By the mid-1890s he was deemed a name to reckon with, and in 1900 his oratorio *The Dream of Gerontius* established him as Britain's leading composer, a perfect embodiment of the comfortably plush, vigorously healthy spirit of the Edwardian moment.

That world effectively ceased to exist by the end of World War I. Elgar spent much of the war years in near depression, mourning not only the devastation that had overtaken Europe but also how far his sympathies lay from the world as it had evolved. Still, he did enjoy an extraordinary surge of creativity as the war reached its conclusion, and in a very brief span of time completed not only the Cello Concerto but also three of his other greatest works, all in the minor mode: his E-minor Violin Sonata, Op. 82 (1918); E-minor String Quartet, Op. 83 (1918); and A-minor Piano Quintet, Op. 84 (1918–19).

Yet, by the time his Cello Concerto was unveiled in late 1919, such new names as Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and Bartók had displaced Elgar as flashpoints of musical excitement; he had become politely tolerated by the British concert world, little more than a relic. He was regarded as so irrelevant that even such a major work as his Cello Concerto was accorded only a modicum of rehearsal time before its premiere by the London Symphony Orchestra. Elgar, who was to conduct the first performance, stood waiting as the orchestra's new music director, 37-year-old Albert Coates, spent almost all the allotted rehearsal period ironing out the kinks of pieces that *he* would lead in the concert. Elgar did his best to ready the orchestra, following through for the sake of the soloist, Felix Salmond, who had worked diligently to prepare his part. The performance went poorly, as could have been predicted, although the audience gave Elgar a warm ovation, if only out of respect for his status as a senior eminence.

IN SHORT

Born: June 2, 1857, at Broadheath, Worcestershire, England

Died: February 23, 1934, in Worcester

Work composed: March 23, 1918–August 3, 1919; dedicated to the composer's friends Sydney and Frances Colvin

World premiere: October 26, 1919, at Queen's Hall, London, with the composer conducting the London Symphony Orchestra, Felix Salmond, soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: November 9, 1940, John Barbirolli, conductor, Gregor Piatigorsky, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: February 16, 2008, at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre, Lorin Maazel, conductor, Alisa Weilerstein, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 29 minutes

At the Premiere

Felix Salmond, soloist for the premiere of Elgar's Cello Concerto, had gained the composer's attention, and trust, after performing in the premieres of his String Quartet in E-minor, Op. 83, and Piano Quintet in A-minor, Op. 84, on May 21, 1919, at London's Wigmore Hall.

One of the most distinguished cellists of his time, Salmond was especially noted as a chamber music interpreter in his native England. After settling in the United States in the 1920s he taught at both The Juilliard School and the Curtis Institute, numbering among his pupils such notables as Bernard Greenhouse (a member of the Beaux Arts Trio for 32 years) and Leonard Rose (who played in the New York Philharmonic's cello section from 1943 to 1951, serving as Principal Cello beginning in 1944).

With the passage of time it became less important to listeners that Elgar's scores from this period stood so far from the cutting edge of the day, and his Cello Concerto grew to be appreciated as one of the finest examples of the genre ever written. Conductor Sir Adrian Boult rightly observed that in this piece the composer had "struck a new kind of music, with a more economical line, terser in every way" from the effusions of his earlier years.

Elgar completed no other major works after the Cello Concerto's premiere. His wife, Alice, who had urged him to simply withdraw from the concert (and take the concerto with him), fell gravely ill within days and following her death five months later he found it impossible to complete additional compositions. He did carry out a good deal of work on a Third

Views and Reviews

The eminent critic Ernest Newman, writing in the London *Observer*, presented a review of the concert in which Elgar unveiled his Cello Concerto. He was miffed by the qualitative difference between the performance of the pieces Albert Coates conducted and the one Elgar led. "Never, in all probability, has so great an orchestra made so lamentable a public exhibition of itself," he proclaimed. Nonetheless, he discerned the many beauties of the Cello Concerto, and particularly noted the care Elgar had taken to balance the solo part against the orchestra, even if that aspect had failed in the performance:

> This scale of colour it has obviously been Elgar's preoccupation to achieve. Some of the colour is meant to be no more than a vague wash against which the solo 'cello defines itself. … the orchestra was often virtually inaudible, and when just audible was merely a muddle. No one seemed to have any idea of what it was the composer wanted.
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> The work itself is lovely stuff, very simple — that pregnant simplicity that has come upon Elgar's music in the past couple of years — but with a profound wisdom and beauty underlying its simplicity … the realization in tone of a fine spirit's lifelong wistful brooding upon the loveliness of earth.

Edward Elgar, ca. 1900

Symphony, enough to allow its sketches to be filled out into performable shape long after his death. One wonders what might have lain ahead if Elgar had continued to compose as industriously as he did in 1918 and 1919.

Instrumentation: two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings, in addition to the solo cello.

The Edwardians

Elgar's life and music are closely associated with the Edwardian Era in Great Britain. That period is defined by the reign of Edward VII, from 1901 to 1910. Edward was 60 years old when he ascended to the throne upon the death of his mother, Queen Victoria. Her long reign (1837–1901) meant that her successor had held the title of Prince of Wales longer than any other royal (prior to the current recordholder, Prince Charles). Edward's leisurely, playboy lifestyle had come to personify a country basking in the fruits of its vast holdings during a time of peace and prosperity. (Think *Downtown Abbey*, *Howard's End*, *A Room with a View.*)

But it was not all garden parties and fox hunting. King Edward's brief reign served as a bridge between the comfortable Victorian Era and the tumult of changing social norms that came to fruition with World War I. Rapid growth of jobs and wages during the Industrial Revolution had brought confidence to an emerging middle class of workers, who demanded labor reforms and organized trade unions. As more women joined the workforce, their voices became heard in issues from education, to welfare, to birth control. The Women's Suffrage Movement gained momentum, and in 1918 a victory came with passage of legislation granting the right to vote to women over 30. (Full voting rights for women at age 21 would be achieved in 1928.)

— The Editors

From top: King Edward VII at his coronation, with Queen Alexandra; an Edwardian tea party; suffragettes on the march