

## PROGRAM NOTES

### Edward Elgar – Cello Concerto in E Minor, Op. 85

#### Edward Elgar

*Born June 2, 1857, Broadheath, England.*

*Died February 23, 1934, Worcester, England.*

#### Cello Concerto in E Minor, Op. 85

As it turned out, this was the last major work Elgar wrote. Alice Elgar was at her husband's side at the first performance, in October 1919. But her health was not good, and when she died the following April, part of Elgar's creative spark died with her. During the remaining fourteen years of his life, he wrote no music of consequence, despite intermittent attempts and sporadic frustration.

Edward also was ill at this time. He had been suffering from serious throat problems, and in March 1918, he had a septic tonsil removed; the day he left the nursing home he asked for pencil and paper and wrote down the opening theme of this cello concerto. Most of the work on the concerto was done during the summer of 1919, in Brinkwells, the little oak-beamed cottage the Elgars rented in Sussex. There was a studio in the garden where he could work uninterrupted, except by his own walks in the woods, and by the unexpected delight of chopping firewood. Alice, meanwhile, grew "mysteriously smaller and more fragile," Elgar remembered. "She seemed to be fading away before one's very eyes." It was their last summer together.

Elgar asked Felix Salmond to give the first performance of the new concerto, and he invited him to Brinkwells that summer so they could work together. Elgar delivered the finished score to his publisher on August 8. The premiere was scheduled at once, with Elgar conducting, but it proved to be somewhat of a disappointment. The concerto was insufficiently rehearsed, not because its demands were excessive, but because the conductor of the balance of the concert, Albert Coates, openly preferred the other work on the program, Scriabin's *Poem of Ecstasy*, and used all the rehearsal time for it. The response to Elgar's concerto was downright chilly; the audience was caught off guard by music so private and poignant, particularly in a virtuoso concerto.

Elgar's cello concerto is a rich and noble work. Designed as two pairs of movements, it opens boldly, with a short and volatile recitative for the solo cello. The violas then introduce an elegiac theme, long and flowing, which the cello cannot

resist. The balance of the movement is broad and lyrical. The second movement is a quicksilver scherzo; the cello introduces a new theme, hesitantly at first, and then takes off, carrying the rest of the movement with it. The passionate, expansive Adagio is the heart of the piece. The orchestra is pared down, so that the solo cello can sing freely above it, and it does so in all but one measure. The finale is large and varied. It begins, like the concerto itself, with a recitative for the cello. Though much of what follows is spirited, there is still an underlying tone of sadness, and, near the end, when Elgar is tying things up, the cello recalls a single heartbreaking phrase from the Adagio that casts a long shadow over the remaining pages. Finally, the cello interjects its very first phrase, and the orchestra sweeps to a conclusion.

On August 5, 1920, only months after Alice's death and little more than a year after the premiere of the Cello Concerto, Elgar wrote: "I am lonely now & do not see music in the old way & cannot believe I shall *complete* any new work—sketches I still make but there is no inducement to finish anything;—ambition I have none . . . ." He did make a few transcriptions, for full orchestra, of music by Bach, Handel, and Chopin, and wrote a handful of occasional pieces over the years—a fanfare, music for a carillon. But the important music that still occupied him off and on he left unfinished: *The Spanish Lady*, an opera taken from Ben Jonson's *The Devil Is an Ass*; a piano concerto; and a third symphony commissioned by the BBC. All were left in sketches. Shortly before his death he asked that his third symphony be left alone—incomplete and unplayable. Elgar had never taken composition pupils, and, despite the magnitude of his success, he had not fostered a new school of composition. When he died in February 1934, he left behind a daughter, Clarice; but in the larger historical sense, there were no immediate survivors.

*Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.*

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