

Symphony No. 2 in E flat. Edward Elgar Op. 63

This symphony has to be regarded as one of the miracles of British music. Elgar was himself something of a miracle, appearing at the end of the 19th century as a fully formed, exceptionally gifted European composer in the “land without music.” He went through a considerable struggle before gaining recognition, which first came, ironically, in Germany, partly through the intervention of Richard Strauss but also through the belief and support of his German born friend and publisher A. J. Jaeger at Novello’s. (Jaeger was, of course, immortalised in the ‘Nimrod’ variation). Largely self-taught and born into a lower middle class Catholic family in a period when both class and religious discrimination were still rife, the younger Elgar faced significant barriers and it was not until the turn of the Century that, with the success of the Enigma Variations he managed to overcome both social and religious prejudice through sheer force of his musical excellence. We can detect these early struggles perhaps in the character of his music (he was actually explicit about this in referring to the finale of the Enigma Variations) though it is more likely that his well-documented personal characteristics, a complex mix of nervous energy, confidence and optimism co-existing alongside a more reflective, uneasy, even melancholic moodiness, when channelled through his musical genius (not too strong a term for once) becomes the catalyst for music which frequently veers from confident extraversion to dream-like introspection – a strong feature of the second symphony.

As a 15-year-old I discovered the second symphony quite by chance and it changed the direction of my life. Fiddling one evening with my parents’ radio and experimenting with a newly acquired reel to reel tape recorder I stumbled on a concert conducted by Adrian Boult and was immediately transfixed. The piece then became an obsession: I must have listened to that recording more than a hundred times and went to every live performance I could access. I had the score on loan from my local library for over 3 years and to this day I cannot work out why it was never recalled. Eventually it fell to pieces!

So what makes this work so captivating, unique and special? Is it the exceptional energy and swinging rhythms of the first five minutes? The noble beauty of the funereal second movement? The reckless terror of the third movement with its incredible orchestral virtuosity and nightmare middle section where a haunting theme from the first movement returns as a brutal march like a grim foretaste of the terrible war which broke out only three years after the first performance? Or is it the glorious embrace of the sunset ending where, as T.E. Lawrence remarked in a letter to the composer, “everything seems to end.” Most of all, I could hardly believe, as a teenager, that such a feat of the human imagination was at all possible and that such an immense musical narrative could be told in the course of just over an hour or that a group of 80 or so musicians could collaborate so precisely in performing an orchestral score of such extraordinary complexity, variety and virtuosity, not to mention originality. Although steeped in 19th century traditions the music of Elgar 2 is quite unique, even modernist in its flavours, embracing 20th century challenges even as it glances back to the past in a dream-like cloak of nostalgia. And, like so many dreams, it can also be ambiguous and unsettling.

What makes a symphony a symphony? Why should this particular genre, possibly above all others, have a special place reserved for it in the canon of European musical literature? By the time Elgar came to compose his first symphony (1908) there was already a well-established expectation of any composer that he (less often she) would only be considered as a serious contender for “greatness” once a symphony had been presented to and accepted by a discerning public. After all, orchestras themselves (including the Abergavenny) derive special musical status from the title ‘symphony orchestra’, alongside the equally commonly used

'philharmonic' which signals an orchestra's civic status. By the end of the 19th century the symphony had become both the principal means whereby a composer won his or her spurs and a unique representation of collective cultural excellence through symphony concerts, symphonic ensembles and symphony halls. This level of expectation was particularly the case with the much anticipated first symphony of Elgar with its expansive tonal landscape and great motto theme which, as the composer himself said, "was deserving of a symphony". His first symphony was greeted with immense enthusiasm. Yet the second, which premiered in 1911 was greeted less enthusiastically and with some degree of bafflement. Elgar, who was conducting, remarked to his friend W.H. Reed who was leading the orchestra, how the audience sat there "like stuffed pigs." Perhaps this bafflement was due to its ambiguity: it feels like a work with an intensely personal agenda running through it and yet simultaneously it has noble and powerful characteristics, an avowedly collective, public statement: an uneasy combination perhaps.

The date of its composition is significant. The work was originally intended as a "loyal tribute" to King Edward VII. But the king died during its composition so it becomes, in its public dedication, a kind of valediction, though not just for the king, or even the Edwardian era as a whole, but perhaps for the passing of an entire epoch as the world moved into the uncertainty of a new century. The symphony is infused with depths of nostalgia and wistfulness on many levels, yet charged with nervous energy, passionate climaxes and disturbing nightmares. It laments the past yet embraces the challenges of the new era. The whole work, but especially the ending feels like the final episode in a long saga, a sunset, the end of Romanticism and the emergence of Modernism.

We can identify perhaps four linked elements which give symphonies in general this special significance, all of which apply to Elgar's second. Firstly a symphony presents a grand narrative: the opening of a symphony often feels like the beginning of a journey, not always tragic or epic but nonetheless fateful and deeply purposive, serious, even when, as often with Mozart, it is playful. Secondly there is the way in which this epic tale is narrated through three or four (occasionally more) linked movements, tonal and thematic structures which are highly integrated: the home key, dynamically challenged through modulation, takes on special significance whilst the melodic content works and re-works the same motivic material through development, often transformed in ingenious and magical ways. This is especially the case in Elgar 2 where, as we shall discover, the whole symphony derives in some ways from the motivic content of the first few bars. Thirdly, there is the colourful and dramatic use of the orchestra, contrasting strong, fully scored tutti passages, like crowd scenes, often with the string section doing much of the work, with solo woodwinds, which appear, sometimes like vulnerable characters, in more intimate scenes. Both of these contrast with the heavy lifting of the brass which sometimes provide fearsome and threatening volume. These are generalisations of course but there is little doubt that the resources of the symphony orchestra provide the potential for complex and exciting dramatic narratives: colours, conflicts and contrasts in sound unique in the history of world music.

Finally, in all symphonies we encounter a deep sense of tradition, a musical representation of the ascending curve philosophy, the primary myth of European culture. The string quartet does this in a more intimate, discursive way but it is in their symphonies that composers demonstrate an awareness of the weight of musical history, the so-called European canon which they demonstrate an almost sacred duty to uphold and preserve. For this reason, references can often be heard to previous composers' work. In the case of Elgar 2 we hear clear echoes of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, Brahms, Bruckner, Dvorak and even his contemporaries Mahler and Schoenberg. So perhaps it is this conscious sense of the noble

tradition into which a symphony is born that ensures its status as a representation of an entire culture: a symphony is both a personal expressive tool and a collective, universal statement. By 1911, Elgar had already achieved iconic status as a major representative of both European and British sensibilities and the second symphony fits into this mould perfectly with expressive gestures linking the personal and pastoral with the noble and grandiose.

The symphonic form, which expanded considerably through its history, fits neatly into one of the central myths of European culture and philosophy, namely the notion of the odyssey, an often epic journey full of conflict and resolution and with a central heroic figure. (Think, nowadays, 'Star Wars' or 'Lord of the Rings.')

This narrative, in musical form, usually wordless, (though of course there are numerous, celebrated exceptions in the form of choral symphonies) is usually achieved through a series of four linked movements and in this case Elgar chooses what had become probably the most traditionally used format – a sonata form first movement followed by a slow second movement (in this case, a funeral march) then a scherzo and ending with a finale which achieves a sense of climax or at least, closure.

Although imbued with this collective spirit, Elgar's second is yet heavily weighted with references to his own personal journey both in terms of significant places (Tintagel and Venice, cited in the published score) but also to his very close relationship with Alice Stuart Wortley, for whom the composer reserved the affectionate name, "Windflower". The "windflower" influence and the precise nature of this relationship has been the subject of considerable debate over the years but there is little doubt that the inner narrative of Elgar 2 feels very much like a journey of the soul. 'Windflower' had already been referenced by the composer in the Enigma Variations as well as the violin concerto. Was she also the composer's muse for the second symphony? It is unclear, but the score is in fact prefaced with a quote from a late poem of Shelley ('Song') which hints strongly at this soul content:

*Rarely, rarely comest thou,
Spirit of Delight!*

Though typically enigmatic, this provides a clue to the work's contrasting moods, moving between seemingly unstoppable energy and confidence on the one hand and then subsiding or stalling into a much more brooding, dream-like hesitancy on the other. Even the very opening of the first movement seems to hesitate on an uncertain B flat before the numerous 'Spirit of Delight' themes swing into action. Whatever personal meaning that quotation had for Elgar, he would have chosen it with great care and much thought. He was well and deeply read.

In addition to the progression of movements, the narrative of a symphony is defined also by its tonal structure in tandem with thematic development. Typically, the opening defines the key like a call to arms and this is as true of Elgar 2 with its opening, syncopated fanfare, as it is in the 4th symphonies of Tchaikovsky or Bruckner or indeed the 104th symphony of Haydn. Using the convention of sonata form, by the time the so-called 'second subject' is introduced the music will have modulated and a new 'character' appears. (Elgar's first movement has two of these, the first in a restless G major and the second in an equally restless G minor). In the development section, the modulations will proliferate, creating significant tensions which clamour for resolution resulting in more drama, more conflict.

Elgar's second, being in E flat, belongs to a special category of E flat symphonies, all of which seem to be referenced to a greater or lesser extent. Choice of key is fundamental in determining what kind of story a symphony is going to tell. D minor spells tragedy (Franck), C

minor, fate (Beethoven 5), D major, optimism and strength (Brahms 2), C major, sunny optimism (Schubert 9) F minor, mourning (Haydn 49) and F major a pastoral idyll (Beethoven 5, Brahms 3). This is all shockingly oversimplifying things, of course, but I would not be the first to point out that the E flat Symphony has a unique place in musical history which can be traced back as far as the wonderful “drumroll” Symphony of Haydn (his number 103) which also has a march-like C minor second movement. This tradition continues through Mozart’s 39th, Beethoven’s ‘Eroica’ (again with a funeral march for the second movement), Schumann’s 3rd (Rhenish) the opening of which provides a striking parallel to Elgar 2; Bruckner 4 which also opens with a horn call (though as from a distant mountain top). The opening ‘horn’ call was always doubly relevant as it represents figuratively the optimism and courage of the hero, but structurally, it states unequivocally the home key. (In earlier times, horns were basically limited to playing tunes in the home key so when we hear the horn sounding that particular arpeggio we know that the music has returned to the tonic). Perhaps Wagner’s Ring Cycle with its opening massive build up of E flat horn chords in the Rheingold Prelude also links to this tradition and intriguingly, even Mahler’s 8th which premiered only one year before Elgar’s 2nd is also in E flat. The case of Schoenberg is equally fascinating. Twenty years younger than Elgar his music was already gaining notoriety for its ambiguous and adventurous use of tonality which would eventually lead, in 1911 to a dissolution of key centring altogether, a “full-scale plunge into the sub-conscious.” In Elgar 2, especially in the development of the first movement and the whole of the scherzo, Elgar’s use of tonality, especially through tritones and augmented chords is equally ambiguous and unsettling, equally dreamlike, even perhaps, traumatic.

Frank Zappa once remarked that “writing about music is like dancing about architecture” so a detailed analysis here would be tedious in the extreme. The truth of the work will come from rehearsing and performing it. Yet, some outline of its ‘architecture’ will draw attention to and provide some clues to its remarkable integrity of structure, complexity of expression and ingenuity. Overall, the four movements seem to create a fundamental balance or symmetry – movements 1 and 3 are built out of the same material and in many ways reflect the inner journey, the soul or ‘windflower’ elements. Movements 2 and 4 broadly speaking are more expansive, universal statements in the sense that they somehow reach out to the external world, or at least connect the inner expression to universal grief (in the funeral march), collective hope and ultimately resignation (in the finale.)

The overall key plan of the movements is also significant – E flat – C minor – C major and E flat. Within these keys Elgar creates particular and recurring tonal flavourings – harmonic ideas, modulations and chord sequences which colour the whole work and remain in the memory as a kind of aftertaste. One of these involves a tendency (heard at the very beginning and the very end) to combine melodic ideas which rise upwards with tonal progressions which flow downwards (subdominant-wards, i.e. adding flats). Interestingly, Beethoven does exactly this, though far less flamboyantly, in the first few bars of his third (E flat) symphony, descending to a D flat in bar 7 where Elgar powerfully *ascends* to a D flat chord in bar 6. Another harmonic flavour which recurs frequently is the use of tritone harmony, or harmony which progresses through augmented fourths. This is particularly strong in the development section of the first movement and through the whole of the scherzo where it results in ambiguous and whole tone harmonies. Most significantly, many key moments, harmonic gestures and tonal shifts are coloured by the rising semitones in thirds, heard right at the outset of the first movement, just at the end of bar 2.

There are also other recurring flavours which might be described as Elgar’s so-called ‘nobilmente’ style, or ‘pomp and circumstance’ character. Rolling sequences; striding, onward

moving, confident and bold melodies: the finale has a particular dynamic, purposeful quality which only dissolves at the very end; grand counterpoints with Bach-like mobile bass lines, also a strong element of the finale. Then there are the numerous proud 'tosses of the head' to be heard, nobly and tragically in the second section of the funereal slow movement as well as in the finale where he captures perfectly that sense of coming together with collective purpose. Stirring stuff, which drew a wider public and establishment recognition – a knighthood and an O.M.

(Incidentally, in 1965, on the evening of Winston Churchill's funeral, the BBC changed their published schedule to broadcast a performance of Elgar's second. I heard it of course!)

The first movement follows a surprisingly conventional sonata structure though the detail is anything but. The long parade of rolling 12/8 melodies with which the movement opens eventually subsides into what are in effect two 'second subjects' (the second of which gives the cello section a moment of expressive glory) though closer examination reveals that the motivic basis of all of this seemingly diverse material is the same. 'Diversifying a unity' is the hallmark of all great music (as Hans Keller once wrote.) There are also three great climaxes in this movement, rounding off each of the sections – exposition, development and recapitulation. It is particularly in these climactic moments that the orchestra is required to deliver, with virtuosic string arpeggios, woodwind flourishes and glorious resonating delivery in the brass.

But it is in the development section that we encounter the uniqueness of Elgar's vision. Where composers so often leap into their developments with aplomb and dynamic energy (think Mozart's 40th or Elgar's own first) here the material is fragmented beneath a veiled canopy of augmented triads (a slow motion inversion of the opening bars) and a muted orchestral sound punctuated by chromatic woodwind runs and overlapping strings. We find ourselves transported into an impressionistic landscape into which Elgar inserts the most poignant of melodies. We hear this mysterious cello tune twice, the second time accompanied by sinister, ghostlike trombones. This has to be one of the most chilling and introspective development sections of any symphony and a melody of unique outline and harmonic (tritone) flavour taking us into a chilling but beautiful inner space.

The music recovers, picks up energy, climaxes, recapitulates and subsides again before gathering energy for the brief but spectacular coda, a final reference to the 'Spirit of Delight' motto, a cascade of strings and a chromatic rushing upwards through the octaves which might easily reflect another line from the same Shelley poem:

*I love love,
Though she has wings
and like light can flee.*

The slow movement continues this process of creating a bridge between personal sentiment and public statement which I have suggested is a characteristic to a greater or lesser extent of the narratives of all symphonies. In composing this funeral march, Elgar must have been acutely aware of the direct parallel with Beethoven in his third symphony and the equally complex notion of the hero. At an earlier stage of the symphony's life, Beethoven had projected Napoleon as a universal hero, an ideal which in reality poor Napoleon Bonaparte could never have sustained, Beethoven famously tearing the dedication page from the score in anger after Napoleon had himself crowned Emperor. For Elgar, whilst Edward VII is clearly

referenced, the music, as with Beethoven, in amplifying the ritual of mourning takes it into another sphere of meaning altogether, moving from personal reflection to universal grief. In fact this happens a few times through the course of an elegant musical structure which broadly follows this pattern:

(Intro) A B C (link) A B C (Coda)

The A section is the funeral march itself, a slow, respectful C minor tread. The C section is a noble and deeply stirring paean, a hymn of praise. But it is in the transition, the B section that Elgar demonstrates his unerring capacity to link inner and outer expression in musical form. Coming out of the march (A) the music becomes almost motionless, an intense, hovering stillness, the strings creating a hesitant pianissimo with some extraordinarily poised harmonic tensions. The music gradually expands and flows out of this stasis, opening outwards towards the hymn and as the music builds, Elgar divides the strings to create one of the most remarkable passages in the whole symphony. The primary theme is itself held steady but the surrounding textures create a tracery of rushing scales like wild water rushing from all directions. Tom Service, writing in *The Guardian* in 2013, confesses that this passage instantly dispelled his previously mistaken dismissal of Elgar as a stiff Edwardian “purveyor of fusty Romanticism.” He writes, “even in the score it's difficult to see precisely how and where the tune is being played, such is the richness of Elgar's orchestral writing - but surrounding it is a gossamer tracery of harp lines and of divided violin, viola, and cello parts that glitter and shimmer. The noble outline of the melody is transformed into a much more ambiguous dream-state by an astonishing feat of orchestral imagination, in which colour and timbre become a way of feeling.”

The three sections of the march are now re-stated but with significant additions and enhancements. The most notable of these is the extended oboe obligato which weaves a counterpoint of remarkable subtlety and beauty over the C minor march theme. The effect of this is to provide a kind of intimate, personal commentary to the collective experience as well as giving the lead oboe player a moment of shining glory! And as the grand spectacle dies away, with a kind of resigned inevitability, the ‘Spirit of Delight’ theme makes an appearance, firstly in the clarinets and violas, then a brief reference in the violins before the elegy finally closes.

The third movement – a Rondo/Scherzo - is possibly the composer's most modernistic creation despite its conventional form. The very opening, with unconventional parallel fifths in the bass line and whole tone harmony is nonetheless directly based on the motivic material heard in the first movement though now significantly up tempo. The pace is breathtaking and the rhythmic vitality astonishing, borrowing to some extent from the example of Dvorak in his ‘furious’ mood but now on steroids! Technically, the movement is demanding for all sections of the orchestra but especially for the woodwind who are called upon to interact with exceptional agility. The darting phrases over the parallel fifths harmony which provides the returning motif of the ‘rondo’ form is in fact an up-tempo inversion of the thirds in semitones motif and it is this specific harmonic flavour which prepares the ear for the return of the mysterious cello theme from the first movement. But what had formerly appeared as a veiled dream now turns into a nightmare! The theme is presented firstly on the violins but then re-stated with the full force of the brass and percussion, the tambourine cutting through the dense orchestral texture like the grim reaper's scythe and the strings overlaying the rondo melody with a kind of madness.

Some critics have regarded the finale as something of a let-down after the brilliance of the third movement and it is true that much of the music in this ‘moderato e maestoso’ seems to belong to a previous era. Yet, for me, as for many, this finale feels like the only possible way of drawing together the experience of the previous narrative and finding some resolution. The rolling triple time melody with its insistent rhythm is somehow comforting; the rising nobility of the second

theme (in the subdominant key of A flat) is charged with optimism whilst the third great theme (now in the dominant key of B flat) glows with a kind of civic grandeur. In keeping with this mood, the development section launches into an energetic fugato based on the second theme but now with an added flourish which gives the horn section in particular an eye-popping challenge. But Elgar knew and loved his musicians and delighted in giving them these opportunities to show off!

The repetitions and rich re-statements of these themes reinforce the glowing optimism and yet the story ends with something far more reflective – often referred to as a sunset, a valediction perhaps, a sense of profound nostalgia, though without regret as the ‘Spirit of Delight’ theme, overlaid with harps and strings, creates a fertile landscape of closure. This is the music, richly cloaked in Autumnal colours, where, as T.E. Lawrence remarked, “everything seems to end.”

Elgar has indeed taken us on a profound and often unsettling journey, yet finally arriving at a place of reconciliation, a return to faith, hope and calm resignation and, of course, E flat major and the ‘Spirit of Delight’. Perhaps the greatness of this symphony ultimately rests in its capacity to create a bridge between the personal and the universal. When this happens we feel a deep sense of connection to time and to the passing of time. In the second symphony the intimate and the personal are connected almost magically to the historical and cultural, even, dare I say, the political (in the widest sense of that word.)

In the Greek myth of Psyche and Cupid, Psyche (the Greek for ‘soul’), having fallen in love with a god, is required to go through endless struggles, perform impossible tasks, overcome extraordinary adversity, complete an epic journey of the soul before she is finally given her heart’s desire. The story is a lesson in love, and the key to her ultimate success, the glowing ending where she is borne aloft to sit with the gods herself, is that she never relinquishes her vulnerability, her capacity to feel.

Perhaps this provides a clue as to the true enigma which lies at the heart of Elgar’s 2nd Symphony. ‘Windflower’, though in the composer’s personal life connected to a real person, is essentially the vulnerable soul required not merely to experience the harsh reality of the external, unforgiving world but through this to maintain the capacity to feel, the ability to reach out to others and through this connection to make sense of things. Perhaps the primary function of all music is to teach us how to feel and therefore how to connect: ultimately, how to love. This is maybe why Eric Fenby could write on the first page of his memoir about Delius, “I have learned more from the closing bars of Elgar’s second symphony than from the combined writings of all the great thinkers and philosophers.”

Rod Paton
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