

THE MUSIC MAKERS BY EDWARD ELGAR (Opus 69)

First of all, although somewhat belatedly by the time this communication is read, a very Happy New Year to all members of the Colinton and Merchiston Choir. Following on from our communication prior to Christmas to choir members, and the Zoom social which followed, this is another of our periodic communications aimed to maintain a sense of belonging for us all, until we are able to meet and rehearse together once again.

This talk is going to fall into the following three main sections:

- 1. Background reasons for my choice of this piece of music;**
- 2. Brief biographical information about Elgar;**
- 3. The work itself.**

On the choir website, on the page dedicated to *The Music Makers*, you'll find a link to the words of Arthur O'Shaughnessy's *Ode*, which formed the libretto of Elgar's choral work *The Music Makers*, and is worth reading prior to reading the notes I have prepared. There is also a link provided to a recording of the music: there are numerous recordings available, but I have suggested the one recorded in 1967, conducted by Adrian Boult and featuring Janet Baker as the mezzo-soprano soloist, in magnificent form. Hopefully, this will provide the basis for some good discussion amongst those who wish to attend the Zoom gathering on Monday 22 February.

My keen interest in choral music developed in my pre-university days, living initially in Gloucestershire and subsequently in Worcestershire. In that part of England, the musical influence of a number of significant composers who had lived and worked there could be strongly felt:

Edward Elgar (1857 – 1934)
Gustav Holst (1874 – 1934)
Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872 – 1958)
Gerald Finzi (1901 – 1956)
Herbert Howells (1892 – 1983)

In the course of its history, the Colinton and Merchiston Choir has performed a number of works by these composers.

Many of the works of these composers were written for performance locally, where the Three Choirs Festival, first held in 1715 and which rotates between the cathedral cities of Gloucester, Hereford and Worcester, still dominates musical life to this day. As a teenager, I was a regular attender at this festival, which fostered my love of English music in general and of the English choral tradition. By chance, I studied Elgar's *Enigma Variations* as a set work for O Level Music, and his wonderful *Cello Concerto* at A Level, both of which confirmed my love of his music.

THE MUSIC MAKERS BY EDWARD ELGAR (Opus 69)

Although Edward Elgar became the leading British composer of his day, he had a background which did not suggest such a destiny. Born near Worcester, his father owned the music shop in the city, and was therefore seen by the “establishment” to be “in trade”; and he was a Catholic at a time when Catholics were still very much a minority in Britain, especially in an Anglican dominated English cathedral city. Rather more significantly, he received almost no formal musical training, and lacked the connections that a good university education could offer him. As a self-taught musician, unable to pursue his ambition to study at the Leipzig Conservatoire, he learnt his trade and earned his living playing in and conducting various ensembles, assisting and following his father as organist of St George’s Catholic Church in Worcester, teaching the violin, composing works for local groups and writing popular-style pieces for publication, such as his famous *Salut d’amour* for violin and piano. Also belonging to this early compositional period are the *Songs from the Bavarian Highlands*, which some of our choir members may remember performing in 2000.

Elgar became prominent nationally with the composition of the *Enigma Variations* in 1899, followed in the same year by the song cycle *Sea Pictures*. The following year, he composed one of my favourite choral works, *The Dream of Gerontius*: its premiere in Birmingham was unsuccessful because of lack of preparation, and, in Elgar’s mind, because of its overt Catholicism, but was successfully performed shortly afterwards in Germany and at the Three Choirs Festival. For some time, its performance was still banned in some English cathedrals, until some of the words in Cardinal Newman’s libretto were adopted for use in Anglican hymn books. In its use of leitmotifs, as in his later choral works *The Apostles* and *The Kingdom*, there are Wagnerian overtones, and at the end of the score he wrote a quotation from Ruskin - “This is the best of me”.

In the years that followed, leading to the outbreak of the First World War, other major compositions followed, including the two *Symphonies*, the *Violin Concerto*, the *Pomp and Circumstance Marches*, and *The Music Makers*. During the War years, he composed a number of patriotic works, including *For the Fallen* - again, performed by the Colinton and Merchiston Choir in 2014. Shortly before and immediately after the conclusion of the War, he composed his last major works, which included the famous *Cello Concerto* and various chamber works. After the death of his wife in 1920, he completed no more significant works, but remained a prominent national figure through his recordings as a conductor, and having achieved the fame and social standing for which he had long craved.

***The Music Makers* (please read the libretto before going any further)**

THE MUSIC MAKERS BY EDWARD ELGAR (Opus 69)

After his three major oratorios, this is Elgar's best known choral work. The words of O'Shaughnessy's poem clearly appealed to Elgar's view that he was still an outcast of musical society, as evident in the first two stanzas, repeated at key points in the work, despite the national recognition he had gained. It is scored for alto / mezzo soprano, SATB chorus, and orchestra, lasts for approximately 40 minutes, was premiered at the Birmingham Festival in October 1912, and was his last major choral work. It is not a work which contains separate choral and solo numbers: each section merges into the next, and from the first solo entry, which comes nearly half way through, for much of the time chorus and soloist work together on equal terms.

Overall, the work is extremely introspective, yet with real moments of enthusiasm and joyful outburst. One of the most striking things about the work is Elgar's use of self quotation, and quotations from other works, which was also a characteristic of his great hero, Richard Strauss. Initially, this was a cause of considerable criticism, along with criticism of O'Shaughnessy's poem, which is very much a reflection of the era in which it was written. However, in (relatively) more recent times, critics have been kinder in their views of the work, as a result of which, performances have increased in frequency.

To my mind, one of the chief interests in *The Music Makers* is Elgar's quotations from his other major works, how he knits them into the fabric of the music, and how well they suit the text he was setting. Along with Elgar's supreme mastery of orchestration, for aficionados of his music, and for those who wish to do some research, the key points are as follows:

- “We are the dreamers of dreams” *The Dream of Gerontius*
- “Wand'ring by loan sea breakers” *Sea Pictures*
- “And sitting by desolate streams” theme of *Enigma Variations* played by the orchestra
- “We fashion an empire's glory” *The Marseillaise* and *Rule Britannia*
- “And o'erthrew them with prophesying” Demons' Chorus from *Gerontius*
- “But on one man's soul it hath broken” Nimrod, from *Enigma Variations*
- “And out of the infinite morning” opening of Symphony no.1
- “And his look, or a word he hath spoken....” Symphony no.2 and Violin Concerto
- “And a singer who sings no more” the beautiful solo phrase “Novissima hora est” from *Gerontius*

Adjectives which have been used to describe Elgar include disillusioned, despondent, insecure, depressed and aggrieved – the melancholic tone of much of *The Music Makers* reflects Elgar's own melancholy on the fate of the artist.

THE MUSIC MAKERS BY EDWARD ELGAR (Opus 69)

The work is frequently criticised on two counts. Firstly, for Elgar's choice of a text which now very much belongs to a bygone age, and secondly, for the use of self-quotation. However, he clearly identified himself with the "dreamer of dreams", making it appropriate that he should recall his earlier career through a series of quotations from his most important works. Despite its critics, at the time of composition and since, *The Music Makers* has been popular, and continues to be popular with singers and audiences alike. His supreme mastery of orchestration is undisputed, and here it is as obvious as it is in many of his other more well-known works.

I hope that choir members enjoy reading about and listening to this work, which is one of my favourites. When I first came to Edinburgh in 1985, long before I moved away from music and into housemastering at Merchiston, there were two choral works which it was my ambition to conduct: Bach's *B Minor Mass* and Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius*. The former ambition was realised when I was conductor of the Edinburgh Bach Choir in the Queen's Hall in 1989. The latter was never realised, but if anything, my love of Elgar's choral music has grown over the years. *The Music Makers*, to my mind, is a work which it is well worth getting to know, and one which I will always enjoy.

Philip Rossiter
January 2021