2 Elgar and his British contemporaries

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Central to a popular understanding of Elgar's solitary, autodidactic world – one that accentuated his isolation from Britain's musical establishment – has been a narrative that heightened the significance of his roots in 'trade', his Roman Catholicism, his lack of a university education, his struggle for recognition (when others of lesser ability were apparently enjoying greater attention), and his own pejorative and often bitter remarks about the music of his native colleagues. Matters have not been assisted by the prejudicial assumptions of Shaw in 1920 who, through his hostility towards academia, chose to venerate Elgar at the expense of the 'little clique of musicians, who, with the late Hubert Parry as its centre, stood for British music thirty-five years ago'. It was a statement refuted with some vigour by Elgar himself who clearly retained an admiration for Parry.[1] Such polarised and entrenched views had taken root some time earlier. Ernest Walker, a descendant of the 'Oxford School' of criticism (which included Parry and Hadow), devoted an equal amount of space in his *A History of English Music* of 1907 to 'the trio of composers [Parry, Stanford, Elgar] who stand by common consent at the head of modern English music', and quietly denounced Elgar's 'hot-house type of emotionalism', his 'forced pseudo-impressiveness', and a tendency to allow colour to hide content.[2] This was a view endorsed by Edward J. Dent, Professor of Music at Cambridge and a one-time Stanford pupil, whose cursory treatment of Elgar (in favour of Parry and Stanford) in his essay 'Engländer' for Guido Adler's *Handbuch der Musikgeschichte* in 1930 epitomised an academic scorn for Elgar's music. To defend Elgar's position there were Ernest Newman and C. W. Orr (in particular his article in the *Musical Times*, 'Elgar and the Public', of 1931), the angry rejoinder to Dent's chapter in the form of a letter to the national newspapers in Britain and Germany signed by the younger generation of composers including Philip Heseltine, E. J. Moeran, John Ireland, and William Walton (as well as the anti-academic Shaw), and Basil Maine's fulsome *Elgar: His Life and Works*, published in May 1933. The cumulative weight of these and other writings by Tovey, Foss, Vaughan Williams, and Howes,[3] and W. H. Reed's *Elgar as I Knew Him* (1936), established Elgar's public profile and his role as a national icon. Yet there were those who felt that the new wave of Elgar literature still provided a distorted picture, as is evident from the appeal of another Stanford pupil, Thomas Dunhill: 'Several of those who have written

in praise of Elgar have to a large extent defeated their own ends by viewing his works through a telescope, and then reversing the telescope to look at those of his contemporaries through the wrong end.'[4]

As one might expect, such polarised positions only served to obscure a more complex image of Elgar's interaction with his native colleagues. Moreover, Elgar's own experiences of and comments about his contemporaries, notably those of a more negative nature, require a fuller and more thorough contextualisation. We know, for example, that his early disappointment at the Covent Garden Theatre in 1884, when a rehearsal of his music was promised, and his despondent return to Worcester after Sullivan used up all the rehearsal time on a selection from one of his operas, was, as Elgar himself admitted, not the result of malice or aloofness on Sullivan's part. In 1898, at Leeds, when *Caractacus* was to be premiered, the two men met for the first time. Sullivan, according to Elgar, was astonished: '"But, my dear boy, I hadn't the slightest idea of it," he exclaimed, in his enthusiastic manner. "Why on earth didn't you come and tell me? I'd have rehearsed it myself for you." They were no idle words. He would have done it, just as he said.'[5] More importantly Elgar gained some assistance from Frederic Cowen, who had not only established his reputation as a composer of opera, choral works, and symphonies but was also a well-respected conductor of the Philharmonic Society. Cowen perused Elgar's early compositions and it has been suggested that he also provided Elgar with introductions to various London publishers. Such help was acknowledged by Elgar many years later at a banquet in Cowen's honour given by the Music Club on 14 May 1925.

Cowen's growing national reputation as a composer and executant during the early 1880s (not least with his 'Scandinavian' Symphony which attracted attention from all over Europe, including Brussels, Paris, Berlin, and Prague) was almost certainly the principal reason why Elgar had approached him.[6] However, Cowen's music was only part of a much larger tide of new talent that was emerging in London and the provinces. That Elgar recognised this change is implicit in his comments for his inaugural (and somewhat controversial) lecture, 'A Future for English Music', as Peyton Professor at Birmingham University on 16 March 1905.

> *In looking for* a practical starting point for anything that may be usefully considered in relation to present day music, I think it unnecessary to go back farther than 1880. I do not say definitely that that is the best starting point, but it is sufficient for the purpose. The history of music from the time of Purcell onwards is well known, and it would be merely a tiresome repetition of the *ordinary commercial lecture* to go over the two centuries *preceding 1880. Some of us who in that year* were young and taking an active part in music – a really active part such as playing in orchestras – felt that something at last was going to be done in the way of composition by the

> English school. A large number of compositions during the twenty years following, were brought before us, and the whole atmosphere of English music was changed, owing to the spread of musical education, which was out of proportion to the natural growth of the population; or, to put it plainly, that musical taste has increased. *An interest* hitherto unknown was taken in the work of our native composers.[7]

Elgar's allusion to 1880 may have been simply a convenient 'round number', but he could have been referring to the premiere of Parry's *Prometheus Unbound*, given at Gloucester that same year, and a work which, owing to its unbridled Wagnerian influences, had a disturbing effect on some of the press. Whether Elgar was at Gloucester to hear Parry's new work is not known, but, as the words of his first Birmingham lecture stress, Elgar was experiencing and assimilating all that was going on in British music from the perspective of a *practical* musician. As an orchestral violinist Elgar participated in many of the amateur and semi-professional orchestras in the Midlands at a time when such bodies were enjoying an extraordinary revitalisation of interest and enthusiasm. He played first for the Worcester Three Choirs Festival in 1878 and last in 1893. In 1881 he began playing in Stockley's orchestra for the series of Birmingham Popular Concerts. There were other less prestigious but no less active societies which included the Hereford Philharmonic Society (which he led from April 1891) and the Worcester Festival Choral Society (whose orchestra he also led after 1891), and after he gave up playing, there were institutions such as the Worcestershire Philharmonic which exercised his energies as a conductor. Add to this his friendships with George Robertson Sinclair (who came to Hereford in 1889), Hugh Blair (organist of Worcester from 1895 to 1897), Ivor Atkins (who succeeded Blair in 1897), the two Gloucester organists, Charles Lee Williams and his successor, Herbert Brewer, and Charles Swinnerton Heap (organist, composer, and one of the most prominent choral conductors in the Birmingham conurbation), and Elgar was able to enjoy both a familiarity with the entire choral network of the region and (even as a Catholic 'outsider') the world of Anglican cathedral music.[8]

At Worcester in 1878 Elgar played in Stainer's cantata, *The Daughter of Jairus*, a work of post-Mendelssohnian proportions, though by no means without bold progressions, as can be seen in the striking overture. Other pieces by Armes and Ouseley belonged to an earlier generation whose works Elgar, hungry for the sound of modern European music, already found wearisome: he later recalled that 'they lacked that feeling for orchestral effect and elasticity in instrumentation so obvious in the works of French, Italian, and German composers'.[9] The colour of Parry's *Prometheus* – a streak of modernity the composer would jettison in later works – would have

certainly fired Elgar's orchestral imagination in 1880, but the following year, when Alexander Mackenzie's cantata *The Bride* came to Worcester, Elgar immediately identified both with the composer's flair for instrumentation and the fact that Mackenzie had cut his teeth as an orchestral violinist:[10]

> The coming of Mackenzie then was a real event. Here was a man fully equipped in every department of musical knowledge, who had been a violinist in orchestras in Germany. It gave orchestral players a real lift and widened the outlook of the old-fashioned professor considerably. *The Bride* was a fine example of choral and orchestral writing . . .
>
> I had the honour to meet the composer the following morning and actually shook hands with him at Sansome Lodge.[11]

Dvořák's music, including his Sixth Symphony, held Elgar's attention at the Worcester Festival in 1884, but on 8 October 1885 he would be introduced for the first time, through his employment as a violinist in Stockley's Birmingham orchestra, to one of Stanford's major choral works, *The Three Holy Children*. Performed at the 1885 Birmingham Festival, for which it was commissioned, Stanford's oratorio provided Elgar with a vibrant example of choral and orchestral integration together with an insight into inventive choral forms. Further formative experiences were to follow in Cowen's *Ruth* at Worcester in 1887 and a clutch of Parry's works between 1887 and 1893 – *Blest Pair of Sirens*, the oratorios *Judith* and *Job*, the *Ode to St Cecilia* and the *Overture to an Unwritten Tragedy*, in which Elgar played under Parry's baton.[12]

To a large extent the more negative perspective of Elgar's relationship with his Victorian contemporaries stems from the important yet dispiriting years of 1889 and 1891 when Elgar, newly married, removed with his wife to London. Though this period constituted Elgar's 'university' experience, in that he learned much from concert-going, visiting the opera, and making himself known to London publishers, he was nevertheless personally disappointed with the lack of progress he was able to make with his career outside the Midlands. Added to which, his first major orchestral work, *Froissart*, written in Kensington between April and July 1890 and on which the composer undoubtedly rested his hopes, made no headway initially after its Worcester premiere later that year, as Manns, to whom Elgar showed the score, was in no hurry to programme it at the Crystal Palace. Back in Malvern, Elgar was forced to resume his teaching practice and to return, reluctantly, to playing his violin in regional orchestras. 'I played 1st violin for the sake of the fee as I cd. obtain no recognition as a composer' were the words he wrote somewhat despairingly on his festival programme at Worcester in 1893.[13] Kennedy has proffered an interpretation of these comments, suggesting that the premiere of Parry's *Job* prompted Elgar to compare his poor fortune

(if poor fortune it was) with the burgeoning success of his contemporaries. This may be true, but if Elgar felt resentment, he had little reason to feel bitterness towards his colleagues, for in the early 1890s, as Kennedy has also submitted, he had little to offer the public.[14] Brief exposure occurred with the publication of *Froissart* by Novello and by circulation of the part-song 'My Love Dwelt in a Northern Land' in the *Musical Times* after its publication by Novello in 1890; but there was nothing substantial to raise Elgar's national profile nor was there anything to bring his name before his more nationally renowned peers. It was only in 1896, with the advent of *The Light of Life* at Worcester and *Scenes from the Saga of King Olaf* at the North Staffordshire Music Festival, that Elgar's name truly came before the public for the first time. This rise to fame was aided by Jaeger's assertive policy with Novello, the avid promotion of *King Olaf* in *The Musical Times*, and the first London performances of extracts from *Scenes from the Bavarian Highlands* and *King Olaf* at the Crystal Palace under Manns the following year. It was at exactly this time that Jaeger brought Elgar to the attention of Parry:

> Look out for Elgar's 'King Olaf'. Though unequal & in places open to criticism I think there is some *fine* stuff in this. The young man has imagination, beauty, strength, 'go'. He is exceptionally gifted & will 'take the shine out of' some of the gentlemen at the top of the profession (Excuse the slang!) I believe in him: and oh! he has **MELODY**!! Melody that touches one. He is not yet very *deep*, but he will grow, I feel sure. 'The Light of Life' I do *not* care for, *nor does he*! He spoke of it as a 'written to order' effort. 'Olaf' is very different stuff. Whether he will do anything *great*, the future will prove.[15]

After hearing Elgar's *Caractacus* rehearsed at St James's Hall for the Leeds Festival in 1898, Parry first met Elgar at the premiere on 5 October. Shortly after hearing *Caractacus* in London, Parry witnessed the premiere under Richter of the 'Enigma' Variations at St James's Hall on 19 June 1899 and enthusiastically recorded in his diary 'Elgar's Variations first rate. Quite brilliantly clever; and genuine orchestral music.' Of Elgar's subsequent works, Parry greatly admired *Cockaigne*, parts of *The Apostles*, the *Introduction and Allegro*, the Violin Concerto ('after my own heart') and *Falstaff*, but he was unconvinced by the over-tessellated leitmotivic scheme of *The Kingdom* in which, he noted, 'the mosaic-like juxtaposition of thematic bits jars and bewilders',[16] and he thoroughly disliked the sentiment of *The Music Makers* and *The Spirit of England*. As for the symphonies, he began by being deeply impressed by the First, the London premiere of which he attended (along with most of the capital's distinguished musical society) on 7 December 1908 at Queen's Hall. 'Place packed. Work received with enthusiasm. Very interesting, personal, new, magnetic. A lofty standard', was his first response.[17]

But repeated performances emphasised an emotional abandon (and one suspects a thematic over-concentration) uncongenial to Parry's classical inclinations, and, though he admired the orchestral technique of the Second Symphony, he was to find this work 'blatant and vulgar'.[18]

The surviving documentary evidence confirms that Elgar returned Parry's admiration. With the publication of *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* between 1879 and 1889 Elgar learned much from Parry's articles.[19] We know too that, besides his practical experience of Parry's music as a violinist, he also keenly followed Parry's progress as a composer, making a special note of hearing the premiere of Parry's Fourth Symphony under Richter on 1 July 1889, only weeks after settling in Kensington with his new wife. After Elgar's rise to fame at the end of the 1890s, he continued to be a student of Parry's music. 'CHHP *Job*' appears below a discarded sketch in Part One of *Gerontius* (the Litany),[20] and a letter to Parry of 27 May 1903, while Elgar was working on *The Apostles*, exhibits Elgar's dependence on Parry's knowledge of word-setting. Further gestures of approbation were shown in Elgar's performances of Parry's *The Lotus-Eaters* and the *Ode to Music* with the Worcestershire Philharmonic and, in 1904, in gratitude 'for an act of friendly intervention on Parry's part', Elgar offered to take on any tasks of drudgery for his friend, 'anything in fact that an ordinary copyist could or could not quite do, I would take the greatest pride and pleasure in doing it for you'.[21] After Parry had successfully agitated for Elgar's honorary D. Mus. at Oxford, Elgar was particularly delighted by the university's invitation, because, as he expounded in a letter to Parry in January 1905, 'it permits me, in some slight way, to become associated with your name for one glorified moment . . . I only wrote this to thank you and to say that the degree would come as a doubly pleasant thing now, in view of my taking up the Peyton Professorship at Birmingham.'[22] When Elgar appeared for the first time in his official capacity at Birmingham, he used the opportunity of his inaugural lecture to heap praise upon his older contemporary with the accolade 'the head of our art in this country.'[23]

Elgar's lecture may have been flattering to Parry, but its criticisms of British music and the British composer angered both Stanford and Mackenzie. Indeed, in Stanford's case, the Birmingham lectures were to prove a decisive watershed in his professional association with Elgar. It was with the publication of *King Olaf* that Stanford became aware of Elgar's gifts, and his enthusiasm for the younger man's music was quickly passed on to Mackenzie.[24] As a regular visitor to Malvern, Stanford took the opportunity to be better acquainted with Elgar during the RCM vacations. Stanford played Elgar the whole of his new Requiem for the 1897 Birmingham Festival; and Elgar heard Stanford's *Shamus O'Brien* when it was touring in Worcester. Stanford directed performances of *King Olaf*, the 'Enigma' Variations, the

Sea Pictures, and *Cockaigne* at the RCM and Leeds,[25] and besides other generous personal gestures, such as his role (and Parry's) in Elgar's successful election to the Athenaeum Club on 12 April 1904, he agitated vigorously for Elgar's honorary doctorate at Cambridge University in 1900 as 'the most prominent and the most brilliant of the younger generation',[26] and lobbied Elgar on more than one occasion for new works.[27] Yet, the letters between Elgar and Jaeger overwhelmingly reveal that Elgar liked neither Stanford nor his music. He mistrusted the Irishman's overt ambition and political conniving (especially on behalf of his own pupils), and there was always the lingering sense of inferiority, he the non-intellectual and Stanford the university professor. Elgar's ill-judged comments in his first two Birmingham lectures (rightly described by Kennedy as an 'insensitive blunder'),[28] which Stanford clearly believed were aimed at him, were an unpardonable insult. An estrangement ensued until 1922 when Granville Bantock effected a reconciliation between the two men; Elgar, however, always claimed ignorance of the reason for their estrangement.

With *Caractacus*, the Variations, and *Gerontius* Elgar eclipsed the achievements of his senior contemporaries. Moreover, Parry, Stanford and Mackenzie were only too well aware of the neglect of their own music by Britain's chief conductors (especially Richter, Henry Wood, and Cowen) as Elgar came to the fore. Richard Strauss's eulogy of Elgar, as the 'first English progressivist', also placed him in the vanguard of modern British music and gave him an almost iconic status in the eyes of the younger generation, notably Holst and Vaughan Williams.[29] Of these Elgar took a particular interest in the music of William Hurlstone (whose *Variations on a Swedish Air* he greatly admired), and Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, who had received Jaeger's ringing endorsement.[30] Elgar's encouragement of Coleridge-Taylor took the form of a recommendation to the 1898 Gloucester Festival for a new orchestral work – the Ballade in A minor. This, along with *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*, premiered at the RCM under Stanford on 11 November the same year, and which Elgar attended, were instrumental in forging Coleridge-Taylor's meteoric rise to fame. With the success of *Hiawatha* and the Ballade, Taylor rapidly began to attract commissions, at which point Elgar appears to have abandoned his initial enthusiasm for bitter criticism. By 1901, Taylor's cantata *The Blind Girl of Castèl-Cuillé*, written for Leeds, was dismissed as 'cheap' and 'flung off to degrade the choral singing of the country',[31] while *The Atonement*, composed for Hereford in 1903, was condemned as 'a disgrace to any civilised country' which rudely exposed Taylor's 'utter want of education'.[32] Some have attributed this volte-face as a sign of Elgar's insecurity and aversion to competition.

Others that Elgar chose to support, particularly those with a predilection for Richard Strauss, were Granville Bantock (who was considered by many

critics to be more progressive than Elgar), Percy Pitt, W. H. Bell, Cyril Scott, and Josef Holbrooke. As a self-styled rebel and radical, Bantock professed himself the foe of academia (a stance which chimed with Elgar's own). He pursued his radicalism (with the help of William Wallace) as conductor of the municipal orchestra at New Brighton, using the venue to promote concerts of new British music. A programme of Elgar took place there on 16 July 1899 and sparked a lifelong friendship between the two men. Elgar promoted Bantock's own music (including such works as the *Russian Scenes* and *Dante and Beatrice*) and used his influence to secure Bantock's appointment as Principal of the Birmingham and Midland Institute in 1901 (in spite of Bantock's antipathy to academia). In turn Bantock appointed Elgar as official Visitor to the Institute and succeeded him as Peyton Professor at Birmingham University in 1908.

The perception of Elgar as the leader of a new musical 'modernism' in Britain was forged by his appointment as president of the Musical League, an organisation spearheaded by Delius and Bantock (with the support of Henry Wood, Percy Grainger, Norman O'Neill, Arnold Bax, Havergal Brian, and Pitt) to promote the music of less well-known British composers.[33] Delius's contact with Elgar was no more than intermittent. They had briefly worked together as adjudicators for the Norwich Festival in 1907 and had met in London the same year while ideas for the Musical League were being discussed. Elgar's music, however, was never congenial to Delius, who, as an iconoclast, atheist, republican, and socialist, was diametrically and temperamentally opposite to Elgar's politically conservative disposition. Delius reserved some appreciation for the *Introduction and Allegro* and *Falstaff*, but he was intrinsically antipathetic to Elgar's oratorios and symphonies, and disliked his 'thick' orchestration.

As has often been noted, the end of the First World War, which coincided with the death of Parry, signalled a sea-change in British musical reception. A rejection of the country's Victorian and Edwardian musical legacy did not immediately lead to the neglect of Elgar's music (as it did of Parry's, Stanford's and Mackenzie's), but Elgar himself was undoubtedly aware that public attention had shifted elsewhere. In January 1922, Elgar entertained Richard Strauss to lunch in order to meet a group of younger English composers, among them, Ireland, Bax, Bliss, Goossens, and Rutland Boughton, and, through the offices of Ethel Smyth, he lent support to the knighthood of Dan Godfrey, conductor of the Bournemouth Municipal Orchestra. Yet, Elgar was wary of Britain's post-war musical development. He disliked the music of Vaughan Williams and Holst, and was openly hostile towards the works of Bliss and Goossens at the Three Choirs Festival in 1922,[34] though he did express some enthusiasm for Constant Lambert's *Rio Grande* and the work of Bax.[35] In 1924 there was a debate in court circles as to who would

succeed Sir Walter Parratt as Master of the King's Music. In a nationalist environment where Vaughan Williams's assimilation of folk song was considered more representative, Elgar's 'German methods' were clearly thought to be a negative factor; but in the end Elgar's fame and achievement (and, ironically, Hugh Allen's recommendation from the Royal College of Music), were crucial to his eventual appointment.[36]

In the last years of Elgar's life, which witnessed a degree of rejuvenation in his composing activities, not least with the commissions of the *Nursery Suite*, the *Pomp and Circumstance* March No. 5 and the Third Symphony, as well as the public interest in his music generated by the newly emerging recording industry, Elgar's association with the younger generation appears to have been replaced by a retreat into nostalgia and a solidarity with his older contemporaries. He is known to have admonished Vaughan Williams for his criticism of Parry's orchestration of the Symphonic Variations;[37] he paid tribute to Mackenzie in an article for a Worcester publication, the *Three Pears Magazine*; and was instrumental in recommending Bantock's knighthood in 1930. He also appears to have drawn much comfort from his correspondence with Cowen, on whose advice he had relied early on in his career. Elgar lamented that the present generation undervalued Cowen's contribution as a conductor,[38] and, at an after-dinner speech on Cowen's eightieth birthday in 1932, he described Cowen as 'a dominating factor in the musical life of this country since 1875'.[39] More fully documented, however, was Elgar's visit to Delius on 30 May 1933, which arose as an interlude between the rehearsals and the French premiere of Elgar's Violin Concerto with the young Yehudi Menuhin. It was a curiously providential meeting (which Elgar reported in the *Daily Telegraph* and Fenby summarised in *Delius as I Knew Him*), for the following year the deaths of both men (which flanked the premature deaths of Holst and O'Neill) would signal the end of an era, though it would be with the deaths of Mackenzie and Cowen in 1935 that links with a past age would finally dissolve.