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Sunday Afternoon Classics

Elgar's Serenade

Sunday 21 January 2018 2.30pm

CARL MARIA VON WEBER (1786-1826)

Euryanthe, Overture

"I'm waiting in agony for a good libretto ... I don't feel right when I haven't got an opera in hand." The sad fact is that Weber, the most gifted opera composer working in Germany before Wagner, only once found a libretto anywhere near worthy of him and, as a direct consequence, wrote only one opera which survives in the regular repertoire of opera houses today. *Der Freischütz* has its problems, it is true, but it is a masterpiece of the librettist's art in comparison with works like *Euryanthe* and *Oberon*. The ultimate examples of the Weber dilemma, both of those operas are abundant in music of the highest quality and have suffered from being too often dismissed as virtually unstageable.

The consolation is that Weber's genius is most succinctly and most engagingly represented in his overtures. He was a brilliant orchestrator and he was a consummate designer of single-movement structures which, while they are intended to set the scene for the opera or play they precede, are entirely convincing in themselves. Above all, he was an inspired melodist whose vocal material sounds just as effective in a purely instrumental context.

The Overture to *Euryanthe* – the opera was commissioned by the Kärntnertortheater in Vienna as a direct result of the success of *Der Freischütz* in 1821 and first performed there two years later – features two great themes associated with the knightly troubadour hero Adolar. The first, following a full-orchestral flourish setting the scene amid the chivalry of 12th-century France, is a march-like tune first heard on woodwind and brass. The other, approached by a dramatic intervention on timpani and expressive sighs on cellos, is a lyrically eloquent melody introduced by violins. Apart from a ghostly episode eerily scored for just eight muted violins and *tremolando* violas, the rest of the overture is based on the introductory flourish and the two main themes, which are most ingeniously combined in a fugal development. In the recapitulation, however, the march tune is omitted to make way for an expansive treatment of the lyrical melody, now triumphantly celebrating the reunion of Adolar with his beloved Euryanthe.

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JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Violin Concerto in D, Op.77

Allegro non troppo / Fast, but not too fast

Adagio / Slow

Allegro giocoso, ma non troppo vivace / Fast, playful, but not too lively

Brahms's Violin Concerto is a testimony both to his friendship with the violinist Joseph Joachim, and to his readiness to take on the legacy of Beethoven's Violin Concerto, almost a compulsion given Brahms's highly developed sense of his place in the Austro-German tradition. The two are actually linked, as it was Joachim (then aged 17) who was the soloist when Brahms first heard the Beethoven concerto in 1848, five years before they actually met. While he was working on his own concerto, Brahms frequently asked Joachim for advice on the layout of the solo part (though he didn't always follow it). The two men devoted considerable time and energy to revising it, right up to, and even beyond, the last minute, and it was Joachim who wrote the first movement cadenza which is most frequently played. He gave the premiere in Leipzig, with Brahms conducting, on New Year's Day, 1879.

Josef Hellmesberger, who conducted the first Vienna performance, remarked that it was a concerto not so much for, as *against* the violin; the violinist Bronisław Huberman, countered this by saying that it was, rather, "*for* the violin, *against* the orchestra – and the violin wins!". Both comments seem wide of the mark. The solo part is certainly a virtuoso one, but Brahms was never one to exploit virtuosity for its own sake. His close friend the pianist and composer Clara Schumann thought the soloist and orchestra were "thoroughly blended". The relationship is much more that of equals than in the display vehicles provided by the concertos of, say, Paganini or Wieniawski. Symphonic principles of development and firm structure are more important than dazzling solo pyrotechnics.

First movement

The concerto is in the same key as Brahms's Second Symphony, written a year earlier. The warmly lyrical beginning suggests that it is also going to share the symphony's mainly genial atmosphere. And so, for the most part, it does. But the expansive first movement centres on the balance between the calm and spacious mood of the opening theme, and the sturdy, rugged music which leads to the soloist's passionate first entry. It is a while before the music settles down again and the soloist plays the opening theme for the first time, before moving on to a graceful, smoothly flowing melody with a hint of the Viennese waltz to it.

Second movement

The *adagio* was a last-minute replacement for the slow movement and scherzo which Brahms originally planned as part of a four-movement design. The soloist muses on the oboe's opening tender, heart-easing melody, often using just the first three notes as a starting-point for rhapsodic, almost improvisatory flights of his/her own. It was this movement, in particular, that prompted a sour reaction to the concerto on the part of the Spanish virtuoso Pablo de Sarasate: "I don't deny that it's fairly good music, but does anyone imagine ... that I'm going to stand on the rostrum, violin in hand, and listen to the oboe playing the only tune in the *adagio*?"

Third movement

The finale is one of Brahms's tributes to the Hungarian Gypsy style he so enjoyed. The music is full of fiery energy, with characteristically cunning Brahmsian syncopations. A quieter episode introduces a more relaxed tone, with Brahms stretching the music's two-in-a-bar metre to three in a bar. Towards the end a brief cadenza-like flourish for the soloist signals an increase in speed for the even more high-spirited final section.

Mike Wheeler © 2018

EDWARD ELGAR (1857-1934)

Serenade for Strings, Op.20

Allegro piacevole / Fast, pleasingly

Larghetto / Fairly slow
Allegretto – come prima / Quite fast – as before

Serenade (n): 1). a piece of music appropriate to the evening, characteristically played outdoors. 2). A performance given to honour or express love for someone. 3). An instrumental composition in several movements, similar to a suite.

Edward Elgar loved words; and he chose them with care – even when writing purely instrumental music. On 7 May 1888, in Worcester, he conducted an amateur string orchestra in *Three Pieces* of his own composition: *Spring Song, Elegy* and *Finale*. The manuscript has vanished, but in the summer of 1893 he published a work for strings in three movements with a first movement that breathes the freshness of spring, and a *Larghetto* that has all the qualities of an elegy.

This time, he called it a *Serenade for Strings*, and it fits that title to perfection. It's a suite-like instrumental composition; and if it's too exquisitely written to be *played* outdoors, the open-air spirit of Severn-side blows through every bar. And as for expressing love; well, twelve months and one day after the *Three Pieces* had received their first hearing, Elgar had married Caroline Alice Roberts at Brompton Oratory. Throughout their married life, Elgar's '*Braut*' (bride) guided and advised him in his creative work, and if the *Serenade* is indeed the *Three Pieces*, honed and re-written, there seems little doubt that she had a hand in the process. "Braut helped a great deal to make these little tunes", scribbled Elgar on the manuscript.

The result sounds as fresh, as natural and as sweetly sonorous as if it had flowed straight from his pen; from the brisk viola rhythm that launches the work and the lilting melody that follows (marked *piacevole*: "pleasingly"), through the passionate melancholy and twilight quiet of the wonderful *Larghetto*, to the deceptively simple *finale*, with its glints of sunlight, its gentle reminiscences of the first movement, and the tender glow of its E major finish. And Elgar knew it. To the end of his life, he'd cite the *Serenade* as his favourite of all his works.

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EDWARD ELGAR (1857-1934)

Variations on an Original Theme 'Enigma', Op.36

Theme - Enigma
I (C.A.E.)
II (H.D.S.-P.)
III (R.B.T.)
IV (W.M.B.)
V (R.P.A.)
VI (Ysobel)
VII (Troyte)
VIII (W.N.)
IX (Nimrod)
X Intermezzo (Dorabella)
XI (G.R.S)
XII (B.G.N.)
XIII Romanza (* *)*
XIV Finale (E.D.U.)

Happiness is a cigar called Enigma

After a long day of peripatetic violin lessons in October 1898, Edward Elgar lit a cigar and sat down at his piano. "I began to play, and suddenly my wife interrupted by saying 'Edward, that's a good tune ... play it again, I like that tune'. I played, and strummed ... and that tune is the theme of the Variations." He tried the tune differently, asking, "Whom does that remind you of?" "That's Billy Baker going out of the room", she replied. From this parlour-game grew the greatest orchestral work yet written by a British composer. First performed in London on 19 June 1899, and repeated a month later at New Brighton Tower, the *Enigma Variations* marked a turning point not just in Elgar's career, but in the history of British music.

Nuts and Bolts

Why? Well, there was the technical mastery. Elgar had never been to music college, but while his academically-trained peers had been learning their orchestration from textbooks, he'd been playing his violin in amateur operatic pit bands, local orchestral societies and music festivals. He knew, from within, exactly how an orchestra worked. This was the first piece of British orchestral music that sounded as if its composer actually liked the sound of an orchestra.

Form and Feeling

And this practical know-how was allied to a brilliant musical vision. The work is a set of variations – one of the easiest musical forms to follow. But the way Elgar structured them, the *Enigma Variations* are virtually a miniature symphony. Yet, just as much, they're a set of 15 short, tuneful pieces, each capturing to perfection a particular mood or scene. You don't have to be a musicologist to enjoy the pictures of distant liners and bulldogs splashing in rivers, or to respond to the profound emotion of *Nimrod*.

“My friends pictured within”

Music like this can't be faked, and, of course, in writing about his friends and family, Elgar didn't have to fake anything. The people – and places – he chose to include in the Variations were those that encouraged him through his troubled formative years. The whole piece, from beginning to end, glows with a sense of genuine love – for friends, for family, for home.

And the “Enigma”? Elgar loved “japes”, and it might be the counterpoint to another famous tune – perhaps *Auld Lang Syne*, or the National Anthem – or an abstract concept, like Friendship. Elgar's only response to every suggestion was “No – nothing like it.” All we can go on are Elgar's handful of clues, and his dedication: “To my friends pictured within”:

Theme: Enigma

The composer himself, hesitant and melancholy, then quietly hopeful.

I (C.A.E.)

Caroline Alice, the composer's wife. Where the theme is hesitant, the variation is measured, tender and serene.

II (H.D.S.-P.)

Hew Stuart-Powell, an amateur pianist – and the way he'd run his fingers over the keys while warming up to play.

III (R.B.T.)

Richard Townsend, a family friend, had an unusually high voice – but would make it exaggeratedly low for comic effect. Listen for the bassoons.

IV (W.M.B.)

Local squire William Baker barking the day's plans at his bemused house-guests before accidentally slamming the door on the way out.

V (R.P.A.)

Richard Arnold was loved by Elgar for his serious and thoughtful conversation (strings) – which he'd break up with unexpected witticisms (woodwinds).

VI (Ysobel)

Isabel Fitton, a viola pupil of Elgar's. This variation is both a delicate portrait of a young Worcestershire lady, and a string-crossing exercise for the viola section. Conducting her in an amateur performance years later, Elgar noticed that Isabel still couldn't play it ...

VII (Troyte)

The Malvern architect Arthur Troyte Griffith – Elgar tried to teach him the piano, and we hear him ham-fistedly pounding the keys.

VIII (W.N.)

Winifred Norbury's elegant Georgian house, Sherridge Court near Worcester. The oboes imitate her distinctive, genteel laugh.

IX (Nimrod)

“Nimrod”, was the “mighty hunter” of the Bible; Augustus Jaeger (German for “hunter”), was Elgar’s German-born editor, and his most devoted and understanding musical supporter. This great slow movement was inspired by a summer evening’s conversation about Beethoven.

X Intermezzo (Dorabella)

A complete contrast - a deliciously-scored interlude portraying Dora Penny, a 24-year old Elgar enthusiast from Wolverhampton. The woodwinds imitate her slight stammer.

XI (G.R.S.)

Not so much George Sinclair, organist at Hereford Cathedral, as his bulldog Dan – tumbling down the banks of the River Wye and paddling furiously upstream.

XII (B.G.N.)

Basil Nevinson was a cellist, so this variation is an expressive and poignant elegy for the cellos, leading directly into -

XIII Romanza (* * *)

Officially, the asterisks represented Lady Mary Lygon, then on a sea voyage, but the desolate clarinet solo over a quiet drum roll (representing the liner’s engines) hints at a more tragic story. Yes – that’s the theme from Schumann’s piano concerto, but why? – Elgar never told.

XIV Finale (E.D.U.)

Elgar himself reappears, completely transformed – “Edu” was Alice Elgar’s pet name for her husband. A stirring build-up leads to a sweeping and optimistic finale, which pauses only to recall C.A.E. and Nimrod before ending, transformed, in the confident splendour of the full orchestra.

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