

ELGAR AND SOUTH YORKSHIRE¹

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Elgar's connections with Yorkshire are well-documented: his friendships with Dr. Buck of Settle and Thomas Tertius Noble of York Minster and the works composed for the Leeds Festivals. I would like, however, to put the spotlight on the Southern part of the county by outlining Elgar's connections with Sheffield, especially its one-time Triennial Festival, by recalling Elgar's visit to my home town of Doncaster and by presenting an interim report of my researches into performances of his music in Doncaster and district.

Sheffield's Choral Festival was a late entrant into the list as Leeds, Norwich, Birmingham and the Three Choirs had been operational for several decades (1858, 1770, 1768 and 1715 respectively). Its guiding genius was Henry Coward, self-educated, a Methodist, and one of the greatest ever choir-trainers, whose own Sheffield Musical Union had established a reputation before the pilot Festival of 1895, conducted by Coward himself. The triennial series began the year after and Elgar became involved with the Second Festival of 1899. One must remember that these choral festivals represented in their time a substantial proportion of the relatively few chances a composer had to get his music performed and known. In 1899 the main Elgar work performed was *King Olaf*, though the Imperial March was also programmed. The composer had earlier attended a rehearsal and wrote afterwards to A. J. Jaeger:

I say: I went over to Sheffield to conduct a Festival rehearsal. Do you know that their chorus is absolutely the finest in the world? Not so large as Leeds', but for fire, intelligence, dramatic force, they are electrical. *Do go* to the Festival. For the first time in my life I've heard *my* choral effects and very terrifying they are. *Laus Deo* (and Cowardus)!

The performance was on 11 October 1899. Lady Elgar noted with disapproval that there was no-one to meet them at the station, the hotel room was "horrid" and they were at first even refused admission to the concert hall! However, the singing made ample amends. Elgar described it as "superlative" in another letter to Jaeger, despite the handicap of a "d—d bad orchestra". The next Festival, in 1902, heard more of the Worcestershire man's music. At this time, we must remember, *The Dream of Gerontius* was by no means an established work in England. The memory of its indifferent Birmingham premiere two years before still lingered. On 2 October it appeared in a morning concert with John Coates, Frangcon Davies and Muriel Foster as soloists. The choir's first entry was a semitone flat but they sang superbly thereafter. Alfred Hollins, the blind Yorkshire organist, later wrote: "It was as great a success as the performance at Birmingham had been a failure. I shall never forget the realistic effect of the demons' chorus; the snarling was terrifying. ... More than once I could not keep back my tears". Elgar for his part expressed his delight by presenting the Sheffield Free Library with a full score. The same afternoon there was the first public performance of the *Coronation Ode*, which the Sheffield Chorus should have given in London but for the King's illness that summer. Muriel Foster was again among the soloists. The *Sheffield Telegraph*

reported, "Dr. Elgar was delighted with the singing of the chorus. He congratulated every member on the success of the performances. If he had again to choose a chorus to sing the *Coronation Ode* he should not hesitate to come to Sheffield for the voices".

It is pleasing to report that in 1902 Elgar was well looked after, being entertained by Charles Stuart-Wortley, M.P. for the Hallam division. This is not the place to discuss the long and deep relationship between Elgar and Stuart-Wortley's wife, Alice, but obviously it was of vital importance, particularly for the effect it had on the Violin Concerto and other works. Elgar used Coward's superb Sheffield Musical Union for a 1904 performance of *Gerontius* in London, when it shared the concert with Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, and went to America with them in 1911 (part of a world tour by the choir), though he did not enjoy the trip, the U.S. not being greatly to his taste. Elgar paid considerable tribute to Coward in his Birmingham lectures. How appropriate that the present Sheffield Philharmonic Chorus should have participated in one of the best modern recordings available of *The Dream*; I remember many fine performances of this work under Barbirolli in Sheffield City Hall in the 1950s. In 1951 the Sheffield and District Elgar Society was formed, the first in the country dedicated to the composer, which has pursued a programme of lectures and concerts and which supplied the stimulus for a performance of *The Apostles* in the centenary year of 1957.

Sheffield, which obviously has a proud Elgarian record, was on the itinerary of Elgar's concert tours with the London Symphony Orchestra. So in 1909 was Doncaster, a provincial town of no great musical importance. During the previous century it had had its share of the ballad concerts which were then so common, and had gradually built up a worthy choral tradition. Louis Jullien had brought his orchestra three times to the town in the 1840s and 1850s to give promenade concerts and those charismatic figures, Niccolò Paganini and Franz Liszt, came in 1833 and 1840 respectively, but when the *Doncaster Gazette* described Elgar's concert with the L.S.O. on 28 October 1909 as "one of the most notable ever held in the town", it was thoroughly justified.

Sir Edward's association with the orchestra (founded in 1904) was close and lasted nearly thirty years. Travelling tired him and gave him headaches but he needed the money that conducting fees brought from 1905 onwards (later he conducted them several times without fee). The L.S.O. gave the premieres of several Elgar compositions – the *Introduction and Allegro*, the Second Symphony and the first London performance of the First Symphony – and later recorded several of his works under his baton. Elgar was even invited to become its permanent conductor when Richter retired in 1911.

Its Doncaster concert was part of the 1909 autumn tour, being also the first of the 1909–10 series of Subscription Concerts arranged at Doncaster Corn Exchange by two locally born musicians, George and Bromley Booth. Attendance was happily very good even though this concert was rather more highbrow than the celebrity "ballad" concert usually offered in these series and even though reserved seats at 7/- and 5/- were on the expensive side for those days (unreserved seats were 2/- and 1/-). Unsurprisingly the programme was mainly Elgar, though it began with a "spirited" account of Weber's *Euryanthe* overture in which, said the *Doncaster Gazette*, "the dramatic passages and charming melodies ... received full justice from the orchestra." The principal work in the first half was the First Symphony, accorded an enormous programme note several pages long, complete with musical

examples. Doncaster thus heard one of the hundred-odd performances this symphony enjoyed during the first year after the Manchester premiere – surely a record for any symphony – and apparently, according to the *Doncaster Chronicle*, was the ninth provincial town to hear it. The *Gazette* said the performance was “a magnificent volume of sound – which even the bad acoustics of the Corn Exchange (they were reckoned to be good in later years) could not seriously impair – and a rendering in which every tone, every shade of meaning ... was brought out to the full.” It was heard with “rapt attention”, though, the *Gazette* continued, “it is making a large demand upon the artistic appreciation of an ordinary concert audience to play the whole of a symphony before them at a sitting” (!), and was greeted at the end with “an enthusiastic burst of applause.” The *Chronicle* reporter spoke of its “majestic beauty” and the “intense feeling” of the reading, but he must have been paying less than complete attention as he said the work was in three movements!

After the interval Elgar introduced three movements from the *Second Wand of Youth* Suite: *Little Bells*, *The Tame Bear* and *Wild Bears*. The last had to be encored. The *Elegy* from Tchaikovsky’s *Serenade for Strings* apparently featured “very delicate work ... its pathos and restrained sentiment were beautifully handled.” The soloist was Phyllis Lett, a popular contralto of the day and no stranger to the town. She had warmed up in the first half with Handel’s “*Largo*” with “splendid feeling and a rich, ripe tone”, compared by the *Chronicle* to Clara Butt’s, though the *Gazette* stressed that Elgar “happily does not believe in the over-sentimentalising of this familiar work.” Her main offering was three of the *Sea Pictures* (originally written for Clara Butt), *Sea Slumber Song*, *Where Corals Lie* and *The Swimmer*, a sympathetic reading apparently. A long programme by our standards ended rousingly with a relatively new piece, the *Fourth Pomp and Circumstance* March. Elgar’s conducting technique was described by the *Gazette* as a “a study in itself ... nervous and forceful, almost jerky, but entirely free from fuss or violence”, an impression confirmed by more sophisticated contemporary accounts.

This concert included four Elgar compositions. They were not, of course, the first Elgar works to be heard in Doncaster. The first I have traced is, perhaps inevitably, *Salut d’Amour* — described as a “*Morceau Mignon*” — by the Band of the Second Life Guards in the Corn Exchange on 25 November 1900 (three years later the same work was performed at a pupils’ concert in the Guildhall in a version arranged for four pianos, 8 hands). The Doncaster Orchestral Society, a mainly amateur body which eventually built up to a strength of about 35, had something of a heyday in the Edwardian era and they tackled the *Imperial March*, *Pomp and Circumstance* 1, 2 and 4 and *Sevillana* in the pre-1914 period. It was, however, the choral Doncaster Musical Society that espoused the Elgar cause most in those pre-Great War days. They first did *King Olaf* in 1903. It has had five performances since, either by the D.M.S. or by its still-existing successor, the Doncaster and District Choral Society, in 1913, 1922, 1927, 1934 and 1952 — more than one might expect. Curiously *The Apostles* was performed in the town in 1908 before *The Dream of Gerontius*, which had to wait until 1911. *The Apostles* was a special effort, bringing together the Doncaster and Rotherham Musical Societies, both conducted by Thomas Brameld of Rawmarsh, a remarkable man, self-taught like Coward and an energetic and instinctive choral trainer who once rated an entry in *Grove*. However, *The Apostles* has never been heard again, while *The Dream* has

notched up seven performances, three during the sixties. The first two (1911 and 1915) had Gervase in the title role, one of its greatest exponents. From 1912 the D.M.S. was conducted by Wilfrid Sanderson, organist of Doncaster Parish Church and composer of tuneful songs still sung nowadays (*Grove* has never given him an entry incidentally). He conducted *Gerontius* twice and *King Olaf* once in his eight seasons with the D.M.S.; he conducted his ladies' choir in *The Snow* and played arrangements of Elgar orchestral works on the organ. Another noted light music figure to perform Elgar in Doncaster was John Philip Sousa, whose band played *Sevillana* at the Corn Exchange in 1905.

Altogether I have listed 314 performances of 85 different works between 1900 and February 1982. I have missed several recent brass band performances of *Pomp and Circumstance* No. 1 and doubtless many renderings of *Land of Hope and Glory*, though the latter's assumed Doncaster premiere (by Clara Butt in 1904) is noted, also a 1906 performance in a Doncaster Grammar School concert, interpolated — how appropriately I leave you to judge — in an abridged production of Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Two performances of it in patriotic concerts in autumn 1914 are worth mentioning as underlining the connection of Sir Edward's music with great events in our history, which is reflected in Doncaster as elsewhere. Other examples of this are two performances of *Carillon* in 1917–18, one with piano accompaniment, the appearance of *For the Fallen* in inter-war Armistice Day services at Doncaster Parish Church and in the Choral Society's Victory Concert in 1946, the presence of *Enigma* in a Festival of Britain concert in 1951 and *Cockaigne* in Coronation year, 1953. Looking down the list one sees a number of short items which are scarcely known, even in these days of Elgar plenty: *A War Song*, heard in a pupils' concert in 1909, *The Kingsway*, sung by Clara Butt in 1910, and *Weary Wind of the West*, *Death on the Hills* and *Evening Scene*, short choral songs done in 1912, 1928 and 1935 respectively.

The only major absentees from my catalogue are *The Kingdom*, the Second Symphony and *Falstaff*, though the Cello Concerto, *In the South* and the String Quartet figure only in excerpts. The Piano Quintet appeared for the first time as recently as April 1981. Although professional orchestral concerts have never been plentiful, Doncaster can boast quite a number of great Elgar performers who came to the town to perform his music. We have mentioned Elgar himself, Gervase Elwes and Clara Butt. There were also Hans Richter (*Pomp and Circumstance* 1 with the Hallé in 1907), Barbirolli (*Enigma* with the Northern Philharmonic in 1935, a Robert Mayer Children's concert) and Basil Cameron (*Serenade for Strings* in 1944, *Introduction and Allegro* in 1942 and *Enigma* in 1951, with various orchestras).

It is no accident that over half (165) of the listed performances have been in the thirteen or so years since 1968. These have been years of an Elgar revival which has affected Doncaster as much as other places; also, since that year, I have been music correspondent for various local newspapers and so the list is probably fuller than for the earlier period, when one is dependent on what the local papers happen to report and a record of many shorter pieces is inevitably lost. But during the 1970s there have been several all-Elgar, or nearly all-Elgar, concerts which have boosted the total. In May 1979, for example, a Museum concert of works by Sir Edward and his Midland contemporaries (and friends), Bantock, Walford Davies and Havergal Brian, explored choral and instrumental music and solo songs. In November the same year we enjoyed, in an all-Elgar concert, also at the Museum, *Sea Pictures* (its

first complete Doncaster performance) and the Violin Sonata, among others. Most notably, the town had its own Elgar Festival in 1974 – four events, including an illustrated talk on “Elgar the European” by Dr. Percy Young, an organ recital at the Parish Church by resident organist Magnus Black featuring the G minor Organ Sonata and the *Vesper Voluntaries*, and a final concert bringing together two local choirs, one male voice, the other mixed voice – in fact the Doncaster and District Choral Society whose work for Elgar we have mentioned – a soprano soloist and a local string orchestra, all making their own Elgar offerings, rarely heard songs, *From the Bavarian Highlands* (more or less complete), *The Spanish Lady*, instrumental music and the first performance of a specially made arrangement, by the choir’s conductor, for male voices, of Elgar’s Christmas card tune of 1897, *Grete Malverne on a Rock*. Most interesting of the concerts was the mid-week instrumental concert by violinist Paul Collins and pianist John Parry. This presented the Violin Sonata and several of the violin and piano pieces Parry later recorded (with John Georgiadis for Pearl Records), and some of the few solo piano miniatures like the *Sonatina*, *Concert Allegro*, *In Smyrna*, *Skizze*, *Salut d’Amour* (sounding very unsyrupy in its original guise) and *Chantant*, written when Elgar was fifteen and never published – this was probably its first public performance. That concert also featured two presumably first performances of fragments completed for the occasion by Mr. Parry, who had been researching in the British Museum. The *Two Polonaises*, dated 7 March 1879, in D minor and F major, were offshoots of Elgar’s violin studies at that time (he was twenty-one) and are heavily influenced by Wieniawski. In preparing the performances Mr. Parry added, in the case of the D minor, a single chord to complete a final cadence and indicated, in the F major, a straight repeat of the opening section to end up, as he said, “in the right key”. This was a satisfactory solution for the latter – the D minor *Polonaise* had to be omitted as the violinist played under the handicap of a broken middle finger on his bowing hand.

The other premiere was the *Movement for Piano Trio*, which dates from February 1886 and was re-copied by the composer in 1920, though he added no fresh material. Elgar left 75 complete bars: a slow introduction in B flat and a sonata exposition in D minor contrasting the opening idea with a thoroughly characteristic second subject in F major. Additionally there was just the violin line of a development (30 bars); this needed harmonising – “not my strong point”, said Mr. Parry modestly to me in a letter – but at least these bars seemed to lead to a recapitulation of the second subject in the sub-dominant, and then to the first subject in the tonic. Five bars of coda (invented by Mr. Parry) rounded off a six-minute movement, a pleasant, distinctive one with much fluent, flexible string writing, so characteristic of the mature Elgar. A local cellist played a worthy part in the performance and he pointed out to me the similarity of certain passages to the corresponding sections of Smetana’s Piano Trio. Elgar may have known this. One work Mr. Parry could not perform his plastic surgery on was the Piano Sonata No. 2, 6½ bars long – he did play me those bars privately.

Altogether 33 Elgar pieces were aired in the Festival. I wrote at the time that several of them would merit recording by an enterprising gramophone company. At least 21 have received their first recording since.

To return to the survey, one is surprised to see how many Elgar works have been played in arrangements other than the composer’s own, over 50 of the 314 performances. These arrangements generally, and there have been dozens, if not

hundreds, are a study in themselves. They fall into three main categories: first, those for students – I have mentioned that incredible eight-hand arrangement of *Salut d'Amour*, and recently I liked hearing *Chanson de Matin* on a quintet of recorders; then there are the very enjoyable arrangements of the *Six Short Pieces* Opus 22 (originally violin solo) for amateur string orchestra or viola/piano – these figure in the list, as does Henry Geehl's expansive setting for amateur orchestra of the *Idylle* for violin and piano from Opus 4; secondly, there are the vocal arrangements: of solo songs for choir, notably Leslie Woodgate's for male voices of *Like to the Damask Rose* (Woodgate, by the way, often conducted the Doncaster LNER Choir between the wars and composed music for them) or arrangements of music for one type of choir for another type, like H. A. Chambers' setting of *As Torrents in Summer* for four-part male choir, or Woodgate's arrangements for male voices of *From the Bavarian Highlands*. These all figure in my list, though not Woodgate's mixed voice settings of *Shepherd's Song*, *A Poet's Life* and others of the *Seven Lieder*, or Montague Phillips' SSA arrangements of various solo songs. *Pansies* was heard in 1921 – this was a solo vocal version of *Salut d'Amour*. Finally there are the instrumental transcriptions. Those for brass band are not by any means new, as Denis Wright and James Ord Hume, who made several of them, have been dead for many years. Arrangements of Elgar for band, military or brass go back a long way. We have seen that the very first Elgar performance in Doncaster of *Salut d'Amour* was by a military band and, presumably, Sousa had someone transcribe *Sevillana* for his band in 1905. Then there are the organ transcriptions, which played a considerable part in disseminating Elgar's orchestral music when there were few gramophones, few live orchestral concerts and no radios. Doncaster Parish Church has a fine organ, built by Schulze in 1862, and it was here that Doncaster heard transcriptions of the *Prelude to Gerontius* (arranged Brewer: especially popular), *Dream Children* No. 2 (arranged Atkins) and the slow movement of the Violin Concerto (arranged Charles Macpherson). Ivor Atkins' Second Organ Sonata (from the *Severn Suite*) is another arrangement of this type. These arrangements can still be noted from recent years (Atkins' Organ Sonata No. 2, *Chanson de Matin* arr. Brewer, *Pomp and Circumstance* No. 4 arr. Sinclair, and the slow movement of the Cello Concerto arr. Gregory Murray) so there is, perhaps, still a place for them. Incidentally, several Elgar organ transcriptions (*Idylle*, *Gavotte*, *Pomp and Circumstance* No. 1 and *Sursum Corda*) were made by E. H. Lemare, once organist of Sheffield Parish Church (now Cathedral), though mostly these were after he left Sheffield.

During the past eighty-odd years Doncaster has been fortunate to have many Elgar lovers among its leading musicians: Brameld, Sanderson, H. A. Bennett (later organist at Rochester Cathedral), Percy Saunders (later organist of Wakefield Cathedral) and others who are still alive (if one has to nominate the greatest Elgarian associated with South Yorkshire, it would have to be Coward). I hope the pattern of performances they created is of some interest. One's researches in this direction are obviously incomplete. But if others would to the same in other towns, we might be surprised at some of the performance patterns thereby revealed.

(This article was adapted from a lecture given to the Yorkshire branch of the Elgar Society in November 1981; some of the material has appeared at various times in that Society's *Journal*)