

The enigma of Elgar

He's thought of as the most English of composers. But, as a new festival demonstrates, Elgar drew his greatest inspiration from the Continent. Jessica Duchen reports

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Blazing, triumphant horns, pulsating strings, soaring melodies: it has to be Richard Strauss. But no - this is Elgar, his tone poem *In the South*. Symphonic variations full of character, variety and humour; poignant concertos wearing their vulnerable hearts with pride - Dvorak, perhaps? No, Elgar again. What about intense mysticism, a long-spun, inward spirituality, the journey of a soul into the beyond: the next thing that Wagner could have composed after *Parsifal*? Elgar, in what he himself regarded as his finest creation, the oratorio *The Dream of Gerontius*.

Sir Edward Elgar, First Baronet of Broadheath, Master of the King's Music, player of golf, attender of horse races and composer of "Land of Hope and Glory", has become so associated in the public mind with the twilight years of the British empire that to suggest he is the most unEnglish of English composers might cause apoplexy in some quarters. Elgar himself might have been the first to fall prone to it, especially as the landscape around his native Malvern proved a crucial source of inspiration throughout his life. But now the brand-new Birmingham International Airport Elgar Festival in Malvern, beginning on Wednesday on Elgar's birthday, 2 June, offers total immersion in the composer's world and a chance to appreciate how remarkably unEnglish he can be.

The festival is led by the conductor William Boughton, who traces this unEnglishness to Elgar's educational background, or lack of it. Indeed, Elgar's formative years, with no formal musical training, were probably the least typical of any composer in Britain in the late 19th century. This accident of fate nevertheless enabled Elgar to develop a musical personality of a strength far transcending that of his more "educated" contemporaries. "If Elgar had attended a London music college or Oxbridge, he would not have turned out as the same composer," Boughton remarks. Away from academic strictures and stuffy traditions, the young composer was free to find his own path.

Elgar was born in 1857 in a small cottage in the Worcestershire countryside at Broadheath, a building that is now transformed into an enchanting museum. His father had a music shop in Worcester; his mother converted to Catholicism and raised her children in the faith. Neither the shop nor the church did the young composer many favours. Later he would recall bitterly that "I was kept out of everything decent 'cos 'his father keeps a shop'." And when he married one of his pupils, Alice Roberts, her family promptly disinherited her. Indeed, Elgar had

to struggle against the anti-Catholic prejudices of the English Establishment throughout his life.

The youthful Edward learned music mainly from his father; beyond that, he taught himself. An admirer later asked one of the composer's friends, "But who was his master?" and received the response: "The good Lord." Elgar absorbed the craft of music from the inside, playing the violin in local orchestras and small bands, conducting the orchestras of a girls' school and a lunatic asylum; he wrote his first compositions to give domestic pleasure in Worcester drawing-rooms. He by-passed the Anglican choral tradition that dominated public schools and universities, and he was born too early to experience the "folksong revolution" that would be so important to Vaughan Williams. In time, Elgar also developed a vigorous dislike for Charles Villiers Stanford, a composer five years his junior who, at the Royal College of Music, taught virtually every British composer of the next generation, including Holst, Bliss and Coleridge-Taylor. Elgar even composed into the Demons' Chorus in *The Dream of Gerontius* a musical "cipher" that transformed "Stanford" into "Satanford". "The stuff I hate and which I know is ruining any chance for good music in England," wrote Elgar, "is stuff like Stanford's which is neither fish, flesh, fowl nor good red-herring!"

The Anglican tradition, folksong research and the teaching of Stanford helped to define Englishness in music of this era. But Elgar's influences, ironically for a "country boy", were almost exclusively European. Schumann - in Elgar's youth still widely regarded as radical - meant much to him, as did Brahms; and Dvorak's Symphonic Variations planted in Elgar's mind a seed that would bear fruit in his "Enigma" Variations. Later, Richard Strauss became a personal friend and a further influence. Elgar was an intensely emotional character, prone to severe depressions and occasional contemplation of suicide; the examples of such composers helped to keep in his music a heart-on-sleeve emotionality that traditional British establishments squashed out of most others.

That wasn't all. A friend recalled going to the opera with Elgar at Covent Garden in the early 1890s: "Wagner only: no other was worth listening to - according to him!" *Die Meistersinger* was a Wagnerian favourite for him, also *Tristan und Isolde*; he made pilgrimages to the Wagner festival at Bayreuth, where he heard *Parsifal* and dissected it motif by motif; and he kept a portrait of the composer in his study. And the impact of Wagner can be heard in Elgar's writing like gold threads woven into a dark fabric: the wide contours of the melodies, the brilliant and sensitive orchestration and the triumphal marches - surely springing from the examples of *Meistersinger* and *Lohengrin*.

From the start, too, it was foreign musicians who most rapidly responded to Elgar's genius. Hans Richter, disciple of Brahms and Wagner, was prime among these, premiering the "Enigma" Variations, the work that fully established Elgar's public reputation. Also, as Boughton points out, "It was a foreign violinist, Fritz Kreisler, who inspired the Violin Concerto and gave its premiere. Even today, it seems to be foreign violinists who are most drawn to it." In the current Elgar Festival, the work is performed by the young Russian-American violinist Ilya Gringolts.

Most vital, however, was the influence of August Johannes Jaeger, Elgar's editor at the music publisher Novello's. The German-born Jaeger was the one

person, aside from Alice, who could substantially affect the nature of Elgar's music and it was his advice that helped Elgar to turn the "Enigma" Variations and *The Dream of Gerontius* into towering international masterpieces. Elgar often responded to his friend's pertinent criticisms by digging his heels in, refusing to budge - then capitulating. On Jaeger's advice he extended the last of the "Enigma" variations to crown the work with the powerful, substantial finale that it would otherwise have lacked. And in *Gerontius*, the climax, when the Soul goes before the Almighty, would never have come into being without Jaeger.

"Since *Parsifal*," Jaeger wrote to Elgar after seeing the first part of the manuscript, "nothing of this mystic, religious kind of music has appeared... that displays the same power and beauty as yours. Like Wagner you seem to grow with your greater, more difficult subject and I am now most curious and anxious to know how you will deal with that part of the poem where the Soul goes within the presence of the Almighty. There is a subject for you!"

Elgar demurred. "The Soul says 'I go before my God' - but we don't - we stand outside", he wrote back. Jaeger convinced him to rethink. "You may take it for Gospel that Wagner would have made this the climax of expression in the work... Wagner always revelled in seemingly 'impossible' situations and this one would have brought forth his most splendid powers... Why should you be dull and sentimental at such a supremest moment?... Here is your greatest chance of proving yourself poet, seer, doer of 'impossible' things - and you shirk it! Were the rest of the work less superb, I should hold my peace and be content with a 'mere English cantata'." At last Elgar listened. The completed *Dream of Gerontius*, as he wrote afterwards, was "the best of me".

"I think *Gerontius* is one of the greatest oratorios ever written," says Boughton. "It's so powerful that it moves me to tears every time. If that's how one goes to meet one's maker, then that's fine with me." And the work's most striking moment owes its life to Jaeger, who is immortalised among the musical portraits of Elgar's friends in the "Enigma" Variations as "Nimrod" the hunter (*Jäger* is German for "hunter"). Ironic, perhaps, that this variation, probably the most recognised English piece after "Land of Hope and Glory", is dedicated to a German-born editor who persuaded Elgar not to be bound by the limitations of music in his own land.

By the end of his life, Elgar had achieved all the success, worldly, social and musical, to which he had aspired. Yet he never quite shook off his background. "Much in Elgar's psyche is bound up with the fact that he still felt he was a country boy," says Boughton. "If you look at photos of him in Worcestershire, he is at ease; but when photographed with the aristocracy, he stoops and seems not to know what to do with his hands." It is a poignant image of a man who even today remains the greatest British composer of the past 300 years.

Birmingham International Airport Elgar Festival 2004, Malvern, Wednesday to Saturday (www.elgar-festival.com)