

Elgar - *Falstaff*, a Symphonic Study

I suspect that Elgar's *Falstaff* will be new to many, which makes me doubly proud to be conducting it for you in this concert. The music of Elgar is incredibly close to my heart and this piece more than most. I've often been asked which musician I would like to have met from the past: the answer is always Beethoven first but then it's a tie between the genius Mozart and Edward Elgar. Whilst he was probably something of a curmudgeon as a person - but not the bombastic 'Colonel Blimp' type character history has tried to portray - I adore his incredible sensitivity to the world around him. He once said; "My idea is that there is music in the air, music all around us; the world is full of it, and you simply take as much as you require". And also, the fact that he was almost entirely self-taught has always left me in awe.

This 'Symphonic study', as he described it, has lagged behind Elgar's well-known masterpieces such as the Enigma Variations and the Cello Concerto in the public's consciousness. But he himself thought it his finest work and the pure musical craftsmanship is quite stunning!

This is Shakespeare's *Falstaff* of the Henry plays - aging side-kick to the young Prince Hal he's obviously valued for his great company, wit and love of life. But his comic mendacity and penchant for exaggeration will catch up with him eventually.

Elgar's work is in four connected scenes broadly outlining the action from Shakespeare's Henry IV Parts 1 and 2;

- Falstaff and Prince Henry
- Eastcheap - the robbery at Gadshill - The Boar's Head - revelry and sleep, followed by the Dream Interlude: Jack Falstaff, now Sir John, a boy and page to Sir Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk
- Falstaff's March - The return through Gloucestershire, followed by the second Dream Interlude: Gloucestershire, Shallow's orchard - The new king - The hurried ride to London
- King Henry V's progress - The repudiation of Falstaff and his death

Falstaff is at its greatest at the end. The excitement of the coronation procession and the crowd is vivid until 'The man of stern reality' stops and King Henry stands before his old friend - he is banished. Falstaff's heart is broken, and his world destroyed: 'The king is dead; long live the king'! A side drum turns the atmosphere to ice, a bar of silence stops our breath, and one beat tells us it is all over.

When I've performed and indeed recorded Elgar's *Falstaff* over recent years, I've made the contentious decision to include actors and dialogue at the key dramatic moments. Whilst Elgar never called for it he did write explicitly about the correlation between the drama and the music. My hope is that this moment of personal mischief on my part will enhance your understanding and enjoyment of Elgar's masterpiece.

Beethoven - Violin Concerto

By the time Beethoven wrote his one and only violin concerto in late 1806, he was coming up for 36 years of age and was already a seasoned composer of orchestral works. Four symphonies, four piano concertos and the Triple Concerto had been completed, mostly with Beethoven's usual approach of lengthy contemplation and revision. Not so with the Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D major. In fact, stories abound over the premiere of this work and its preparation, or rather lack of it.

This was the era of 'benefit concerts' for both performers and soloists, a way of garnering attention and hopefully earning some money! The celebrated violinist and friend of Beethoven, Franz Clement, was to be the beneficiary on this occasion. However, Beethoven was incredibly late delivering the solo part and rumour has it that Clement actually sight-read in the performance this new and challenging work. I suspect that's only half true as we know already that Clement had been an advisor to Beethoven on previous major works so, it stands to reason that he would have been consulted on, and probably influential in shaping, the material and challenges of the solo part. Nevertheless, an inauspicious start! The next part of the story is that Clement, either at the end of the performance or even after the first movement, began improvising on one string - whilst holding the violin upside down...

Safe to say the first performance of one of music's greatest works was not a success. Indeed subsequent performances were few and far between until the 12-year-old Joseph Joachim (a figure who was to exert enormous influence over music in the 19th century) revived the work in 1844 in London with Mendelssohn conducting the orchestra of the London Philharmonic Society.

The concerto begins with four unaccompanied timpani strokes, a motif that continues to appear in different guises throughout the first movement, gaining greater meaning and harmonic potency each time. The woodwind introduce us to the sublime beauty of the second theme before the soloist enters with an ascending line of octaves - a unique touch of fantasy which give the impression of the soloist simply rising up from their seat to join us. The slow movement creates a remarkable feeling of stillness and contemplation before leading us into a rousing, romping rondo of a finale! We're years away from the 9th Symphony, its Ode to Joy and the 'brotherhood of mankind', but I always get the feeling that Beethoven is here imploring his fellows to celebrate, live life to the fullest and never look back!

-Andrew Constantine