Sir Edward Elgar
Wand of Youth Suites
Nursery Suite
Dream Children

Ulster Orchestra
Bryden Thomson
Bournemouth Sinfonietta
Norman Del Mar
### Sir Edward Elgar (1857–1934)

**Wand of Youth Suite No. 1, Op. 1a** 21:06

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**Wand of Youth Suite No. 2, Op. 1b** 18:06

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A love of children and their intimate world was something Elgar never lost. His œuvre includes a variety of works happily associated with that subject: *The Starlight Express*, the song ‘A Child Asleep’, and the three Suites recorded here. In March 1907 Elgar had visited the United States, where in the course of a six-week tour he conducted various works to considerable critical acclaim. Following his return he plunged into composition with renewed vigour, writing among other pieces the Fourth* Pomp and Circumstance March*, but he spent the later summer months looking through his ‘Shed’ or jotting books. There were six of these, the earliest containing sketches dating back to 1871. They were to prove of much assistance in the production of the orchestral scores of the two* Wand of Youth Suites*. The origins of this music dated back over thirty years to when the teenage Elgar children had written a play in which there was a perfect, untainted world from which ill-tempered adults were barred. The only outsiders in this dream-world were butterflies, fairies, giants and moths; but should an adult recognise the error of his ways, due consideration might be given to his request for admission. The young Edward devised some suitable music, later copying it into his ‘Shed’ books, and it was from this material that the two suites were drawn.

The First Suite opens appropriately with an Overture which had existed in sketches from 1879, when Elgar was bandmaster of a hospital band, although he reworked much of the material. The mood here is exuberant and fast-moving: the composer marks it *Allegro molto* in 4/4 in the key of B flat. ‘Serenade’ is a gentle, lilting piece with a delicate melody first heard from the clarinet but then taken over by the violins, later joined by the woodwind; the melody is tossed between the two. The Minuet (subtitled ‘Old Style’) is a charming seventeenth-century pastiche which had existed since 1881 but only in short score. Marked *Andante* in 3/4, the opening bars carry the following inscription: ‘The two old people enter’ (referring originally to Elgar’s parents!). ‘Sun Dance’, cast in 3/4 and marked *Presto*, is the most strongly developed piece in the First Suite: its origins date from 1879 when it was devised as a waltz (of which there are two glimpses here: first at the change of key from C to A flat, and later when the tune is repeated a third
Lee Williams (1853–1935), organist at Gloucester Cathedral from 1882 until 1898, the first performance of the Suite took place in the Queen's Hall on 4 December 1907, conducted by Sir Henry Wood. Such was Elgar’s enthusiasm that he wrote a second Ward of Youth Suite which he himself conducted in Worcester on 9 September, 1908. The music was dedicated to Hubert Leicester, a friend since boyhood days. This Suite has only six movements, beginning with a March (the opening sketched in 1897) which is in sombre mood in the key of E flat in 4/4 with much use of triplet rhythms. There is an attractive change to G major when the strings have a jaunty semiquaver pattern. The ensuing ‘Little Bells’ (subtitled ‘Scherzino’), also containing sketches dating back to 1879, is an Allegro molto in 2/4. The mood is gossamer-like in the delicacy of the woodwind writing. The wistful middle section, using a falling five-note phrase, is set in the melodic minor; Elgar imparts a warm, autumnal glow when the horn melody enters. However, the opening mood quickly returns, albeit with a brief repeat of the middle section tune now up a third. ‘Moths and Butterflies’, another piece opening with a single, long-held G major chord. The ensuing passage, marked Allegretto, has a rocking 12/8 quaver/crochet rhythm. The change of key to E flat minor with the time signature 4/4 includes part of an F major hymn tune which Elgar had written in 1878 to the words ‘Hear Thy Children’ (entitled Drake’s Broughton, No. 151 in the Westminster Hymnal). The opening mood soon returns until the fortissimo climax where the hymn tune is repeated. ‘The Serious Doll’ (marked Andantino) opens with a gentle and decorative solo flute over rocking, muted strings. The middle section is introduced by oboe and clarinet a drone bass. The fifth movement (an Allegro moderato in 2/2) is called ‘The Tame Bear’. Here Elgar graphically captures the sad picture of a chained and clumsy performing animal being exhibited in the streets. Note the subtle use of the oboe part to suggest the pitiless animal and the tambourine and cymbals to convey his pathetic shuffling. ‘Wild Bears’ (one of the pieces written in 1879) was originally a quadrille and the pace and excitement of the dancing whirl is exuberantly caught. It is a fittingly vivid and exhilarating finale which includes evocative animal-like growls in the bass and percussion parts. The death of his wife, Alice, in April 1920 was a poleaxe blow to Elgar. He was stunned and never really recovered from the loss. Her inspiration, encouragement and assistance were greatly missed, and with the marked change in the musical climate and prevailing tastes in post-war Britain the composer virtually ceased writing music, certainly any completed large-scale score. He sensed his era was over. The brash, vulgar, garish mood of the 1920s was not for a sensitive man approaching his retirement years. Elgar had been the unofficial Master of the King’s Music for two decades before his official appointment in 1924 following the death of Sir Walter Parratt. The duties were scarcely onerous but the sixty-seven-year-old incumbent devoted time and effort to re-organising the King’s Music Library housed in the British Museum. His basic role was more of an adviser to King George V, but there were occasions when suitable ceremonial music was called for, and Elgar’s compositions included Good Morrow (‘a simple carol for His Majesty’s happy recovery’), a four-part setting to words by George Gascoigne dating from 1929, and the Nursery Suite, written to mark the birth of two children to the Duchess of York in 1926 and 1930. Elgar began work on this Suite following the success of the Seven Suite which was written for the National Brass Band Championship in 1930. That, like much of the music written in this last decade of Elgar’s life, had its origins in the ‘Shed’ books. The first movement, ‘Aubade’ (subtitled ‘Awake’), opens with a single, long-held G major chord. The ensuing passage, marked Allegretto, has a rocking 12/8 quaver/crochet rhythm. The change of key to E flat minor with the time signature 4/4 includes part of an F major hymn tune which Elgar had written in 1878 to the words ‘Hear Thy Children’ (entitled Drake’s Broughton, No. 151 in the Westminster Hymnal). The opening mood soon returns until the fortissimo climax where the hymn tune is repeated. ‘The Serious Doll’ (marked Andantino) opens with a gentle and decorative solo flute over rocking, muted strings. The middle section is introduced by oboe and clarinet
passages, only for the opening melody to return in a more rhapsodic manner. There is a delicacy and simplicity in the orchestral writing here which has an enduring warmth. ‘Busy-ness’ is in essence a miniature scherzo in 4/4 marked Allegro molto, in which hustle and bustle are evocatively caught with rising and falling passages for wind and strings. The whole of this brief movement is enhanced by the judicious use of brass. ‘The Sad Doll’ (marked Andantino) is in the form of a slow waltz in which the strings are muted and divided with harp and woodwind. The skill with which Elgar conveys a mood of gentle wistfulness for the children’s toys and the nursery is beautifully captured. ‘The Wagon (Passes)’, an Allegretto in 4/4, depicts a lumbering, heavily laden horse-drawn vehicle, initially heard in the distance ponderously making its journey. Slowly the cart rumbles into the foreground only to disappear again out of sight. Elgar skilfully suggests its size andlugubrious pace by the use of percussion and lower brass in a rhythmic ostinato. The contrasting tune whistled by the driver is introduced by a solo clarinet accompanied by violas. ‘The Merry Doll’ forms an effective contrast to the celebratory music of King Edward VII’s Coronation in 1902. The title is from Charles Lamb, and a long quotation from the poignant words, ‘We are only what might have been’. It finds an echo in the yearning sadness that suffuses No. 1, with its musing oboe and clarinet, and which also intervenes in the lighter No. 2.

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Formed in 1966 and based in Belfast, Northern Ireland, the Ulster Orchestra is now one of the major orchestras in the United Kingdom and Ireland, with a main concert season in the Ulster and Waterfront Halls, and additional performances across Northern Ireland. Orchestra in Residence for the Belfast Festival at Queen’s University, it also accompanies opera and ballet productions at Belfast’s Grand Opera House, while its outstanding education and outreach work has been recognised by an award from the Royal Philharmonic Society. As Principal Conductor and Artistic Adviser, Thierry Fischer numbers Bryden Thomson, Vernon Handley, Dmitry Sitkovetsky and Yan Pascal Tortelier among his distinguished predecessors, with Kenneth Montgomery being the Orchestra’s new Principal Guest Conductor. The Ulster Orchestra has made more than sixty recordings and is an exclusive broadcast partner of the BBC, with many relays on BBC Radio 3, Radio Ulster and BBC TV. Tours of Europe, Asia and the United States have added to the Orchestra’s reputation.

Born in Scotland, Bryden Thomson studied at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama and in Europe with Hans Schmidt-Isserstedt and Igor Markevitch. He worked with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra as assistant to Ian Whyte after whose death he undertook some 250 engagements in two years. He was Principal Conductor of the BBC Northern Symphony Orchestra from 1968 to 1973, Principal Conductor and Music Director of the Ulster Orchestra from 1977 to 1985, and undertook guest conducting engagements with orchestras such as the Philharmonia Orchestra, Royal Philharmonic, London Philharmonic, Scottish National and Scottish Chamber orchestras. His work in the operatic field included posts with Norwegian Opera and Scottish Opera. Bryden Thomson died in 1991.

In 1998/99 the Bournemouth Sinfonietta celebrated thirty years of providing music of an international standard to the South and West of England. Performing in venues ranging from concert halls to community centres, the Bournemouth Sinfonietta maintained a
commitment to the people of the region with a touring programme from Lands End to High Wycombe. The Sinfonietta was Resident Orchestra at the Hall for Cornwall in Truro following a successful concert series, and also gave concerts in Brazil. Under the baton of Principal Conductor Alexander Polianichko, who was appointed in 1997, the Sinfonietta toured both Normandy and Polianichko’s home town of St Petersburg.

Born in 1919, Norman Del Mar was educated at Marlborough and the Royal College of Music. From his early successes as Sir Thomas Beecham’s assistant, he became a notable conductor of Mozart, Janáček, Strauss and Schoenberg, amongst others. He worked with a range of British orchestras including the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, as well as with orchestras in Europe, Russia, the Middle and Far East, and South America. He was also a keen opera-lover and was invited, as guest conductor, to perform at The Royal Opera, Covent Garden, Sadler’s Wells, the Royal Stockholm Opera and Scottish Opera. He died in February 1994.
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Mastering Jonathan Cooper
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ELGAR: WAND OF YOUTH SUITES ETC. - Ulster Orchestra/Thomson

Sir Edward ELGAR

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Bryden Thomson

Bournemouth Sinfonietta*
Norman Del Mar*

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