



CHAN 6652



CHANDOS
COLLECT

Elgar

Overtures

Scottish National Orchestra
Sir Alexander Gibson

Sir Edward Elgar (1857–1934)

1	Froissart, Op. 19 Concert Overture	13:48
2	Cockaigne (In London Town), Op. 40 Concert Overture	14:18
3	In the South (Alassio), Op. 50 Concert Overture	20:32
George Frideric Handel (1685–1759) – Sir Edward Elgar		
4	Overture in D minor (1923) from Chandos Anthem No. 2	5:13
		TT 54:19

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Elgar: Overtures

In his essay on Elgar's *In the South*, Donald Tovey, Reid Professor at Edinburgh University and as canny a practical musician as he was a theorist, writes of conducting the overture with a student orchestra:

I shall not easily forget my impression when, on first attacking [it] with considerable fear and expectation of its being as difficult as it is brilliant, I found that it simply carried the orchestra away with it, and seemed to play itself at the first rehearsal. On inquiry, I found that one single member of the orchestra was not reading it at sight... I and my students had never had a more impressive demonstration of the enormous efficiency of Elgar's scoring.

That this efficiency, self-taught and vividly apparent in all four works on this disc, was quickly and unequivocally acquired from the beginning, is suggested by Elgar's violinist friend W.H. Reed:

I do not think he ever altered or modified any single note of anything he had once set down in the score... Nothing in his own work ever surprised him when he heard it coming from the orchestra, or choir and orchestra, for the first time: he just *knew* how it would sound, and was never disappointed.

It is also suggested by the fact that to the

end of his life, Elgar retained an affection for **Froissart**, his first orchestral work of real significance. 'It is difficult to believe that I wrote it in 1890!' he exclaimed with typical ingenuousness to Fred Gaisberg of His Master's Voice after recording the overture in February 1933, 'it sounds so brilliant and fresh.' Incentive to write it had come in the form of a commission from the Worcester Festival – a faintly ironic stroke of luck, since Elgar, born in Broadheath, had recently settled in London. Things had at last started to look up for this son of a local piano tuner. Schott had published *Salut d'amour* in versions for orchestra, for violin and piano and for solo piano (though, having sold the piece to the publisher outright for five pounds, Elgar was not to reap the rewards of its popularity), and he had married Caroline Alice Roberts, the daughter of a Major-General in the Bombay Native Light Infantry. Inappropriate though many considered the match on grounds of class, religion and age (Caroline Alice was nine years Elgar's senior and she was, at that time, a Protestant, which unsettled both her family and the Catholic Elgars), the marriage signalled the beginning of her lifelong and devoted career as the woman behind a man of

genius. Willingly she surrendered her literary talent, slender as it was, to Elgar's cause.

The idea for the Concert Overture was suggested by a line from Keats which epitomises the tales of Froissart, the chronicler and historian, which Elgar placed at the top of the score: 'When Chivalry/Lifted up her lance on high'. As the valiant opening suggests, the image was of a kind which stirred Elgar's imagination (*cf.* the flashing splendour of the violin line beneath the words 'Bring me my arrows of desire' in his orchestration of Parry's *Jerusalem*), and though, within the decade, he was to produce several works of sounder structure, the grandeur of the writing throughout *Froissart* is entirely characteristic. The dismissal by some of the lyrical middle section as 'salon' in style would have distressed and puzzled a composer who cared little for such distinctions, and it is interesting to reflect that the poetically beautiful central episode of *In the South*, which excites no such reservations, was issued separately under the title *In Moonlight* for small orchestra. There is, in any case, more than a glimpse of the mature, private Elgar in this brief, *poco meno mosso* of *Froissart*, with its quiet, aspiring melody introduced by solo clarinet (already by 1896 the characteristic shape re-appears, its effect deepened by context and harmony, in the 'Meditation' from *The Light of Life*). The

rest, however, is heady, fertile invention, as technically challenging as any orchestral score by Elgar, but music, indeed, to 'carry the orchestra away with it'.

Press comment following the premiere of *Froissart* (under Elgar's baton) was generally favourable, and more than one critic suggested that the overture was better described as the impression of a romantic period than the portrayal of any particular sequence of events. The same might be said of *Cockaigne* and *In the South*. Neither tells any connected story of action and characters; rather, each is an expression of feeling (or soul painting, to use the phrase of another distinguished Professor at Edinburgh, Frederick Niecks) inspired by the character and ambience of a place, and Elgar discouraged anyone who suggested otherwise. 'I do not think I should put that about Strauss at the beginning – not necessary', he advised an early programme-note writer on *In the South*, with its leaping, rather Straussian opening. 'Strauss puts music in a very low position when he suggests it must hang on some commonplace absurdity for its very life.'

Cockaigne and *In the South* appeared respectively in 1901 and 1903, on the other side from *Froissart* of the double watershed in Elgar's career: the *Enigma* Variations (1899) and *The Dream of Gerontius* (1900). A Doctorate of Music had been conferred on

him by the University of Cambridge ('I can't afford to buy the robes', bemoaned England's greatest living composer, on the verge of refusing the honour; it was in such ways throughout his life that the provincial musician's private sense of unworthiness rose to the surface, conflicting with the assured dignity of his public face); Hans Richter had been conducting his music and was championing it in Germany (the vigour with which *Enigma* and *Gerontius* were adopted there helped to make up for the disastrous premiere of the latter at Birmingham in October 1900), and the long reign of Queen Victoria had recently ended, depositing Britain confidently on the threshold of the Edwardian era. *Cockaigne* reflects, then, an inner and an outer optimism, a London that is vigorous but not hectic, serious but never downcast, and, above all, proud and warm-hearted. Elgar, who conducted the premiere at a Royal Philharmonic Society concert at the Queen's Hall on 20 June 1901, described the Concert Overture to Jaeger, his publisher, as 'stout and steaky', while the meditative spirit which lies deeper is suggested by an earlier letter:

Looking at the memorials of the city's great past and knowing well the history of its unending charity, I seemed to hear far away in the dim roof [of the old Guildhall in the City of London] a theme, an echo of some noble melody...

Perhaps that 'noble melody' is the one heard, *pianissimo tranquillo*, on unison horn and clarinet shortly before the recapitulation. Elgar described it as a pause for thought in the peace of a London church, in which the bustle of the street outside can still faintly be heard from the flutes, reminding us cheekily of the solo clarinet theme heard earlier in the work. But even this flute theme has its other moods. It emerges on strings, *nobilmente*, out of the first *tutti* of the overture and appears at the coda, broad and in the 'wrong' key of E flat, before turning about to the tonic C major in the nick of time for a resounding finish. In between, lovers stroll through the park (a second subject on violins, marked *pianissimo dolce*) and a military band passes, its horns and trombones, 'stout and steaky', accompanied by trilling bells and a triangle. A little later we hear a more distant band as if through the mist. Perhaps it is the Salvation Army, for there are softly thrumming, just-audible tambourines. But the music they play does not rejoice, and the musicians, London ghosts perhaps, fade sadly from our sight and hearing.

Cockaigne is not, however, simply a loose procession of themes. A couple of hearings will reveal counterpoints, thematic cross-references and transformations, and a formal cohesion at least as sound as those of most German operatic overtures, and sounder than those of many. And so it is with *In the South*,

longer and, on the face of it, more episodic still. As *Cockaigne* followed *Gerontius*, so *In the South* followed *The Apostles*, which enjoyed far smoother passage at its premiere than *Gerontius* had done. But this time Elgar was depressed for other reasons. His mother had died in September 1902, he was frustrated by the lack of appropriate material for a symphony (sketches for a programmatic one on the life of General Gordon had dissatisfied him) and the Elgars had become unhappy at Birchwood, the little keeper's cottage near Malvern which they had rented as a retreat: the magnificent view across the valleys of the Rivers Teme and Severn was being spoiled. After moving out at the end of October 1903, they left for a holiday in Italy, and after a short stay at Bordighera, they made for Alassio on the Italian Riviera. Progress on the symphony remained at a standstill throughout the two months of the holiday, which is perhaps why, in a fit of despondency, Elgar wrote to Jaeger that 'this visit has been, is, artistically a complete failure and I can do nothing: we have been perished with cold, rain and gales'. There are, however, no gales in the sunny Concert Overture which Alassio, and Byron's comments on Italy in *Childe Harold*, inspired:

Which was the mightiest in its old command
And is the loveliest...

...a land

Wherein were cast... the men of Rome!
Thou art the garden of the world.

It was in Italy, with the richness of Italian popular music all around him, that Elgar probably made his celebrated remark about music being in the air – 'you only have to take as much of it as you need' – and perhaps some of the joy in the overture also derives from Elgar's anticipation of the Elgar Festival which was to take place at Covent Garden in March the following year, and where he was to conduct the first performance of *In the South*.

The momentum created during the opening pages is strong enough to survive a *nobilmente* second subject (broad, descending scales on strings), and only with the arrival of a gentle minor-key theme in sixths on clarinet and cor anglais does the music pause to admire the landscape. After a still more expansive major-key episode of Straussian opulence and harmony, the clarinet and cor anglais theme once again takes up the reins. The music forges ahead to be brought up short before a beat's pause, and we are plunged into a mighty episode, measured and forceful, with intervals of a fifth piling up against one another. Elgar, who by this passage 'endeavoured to paint the relentless and domineering force of the ancient day, and to give a sound picture of the strife and wars, the "drums and trappings" of a later time', wrote nothing more graphic. Tovey said that

he would be highly pleased with himself if he discovered a Roman bridge or viaduct, at Alassio or elsewhere, that excelled the suggestive power of this passage. The episode advances and retreats, and the music once again scurries into life before settling down into the central section for solo viola beside soft strings, harps and, presently, solo horn. As part of the overture, this episode – described by Elgar as 'Canto popolare', though the tune is his own – is gravely beautiful and a perfect fit; as a piece for small orchestra out of context (the aforementioned *In Moonlight*), how is the listener to explain the gentle references on upper strings to the overture's opening bars? And how lame the necessary full close sounds when compared with what happens in the overture: the 'Canto popolare' hesitates, a G halfway through its D major theme is taken by the rest of the orchestra as the mediant of the home key, and the recapitulation steals in, quietly but fully certain of itself. It is given to the *nobilmente* second subject to provide the resplendent coda.

In his book *Elgar on Record*, Jerrold Northrop Moore reminds us that Elgar made two recordings of *In the South*: one, the familiar electrical set made in 1930, the other, substantially cut to fit onto four 78 rpm sides, in December 1921. The latter was initially not approved, and attempts to re-record it at

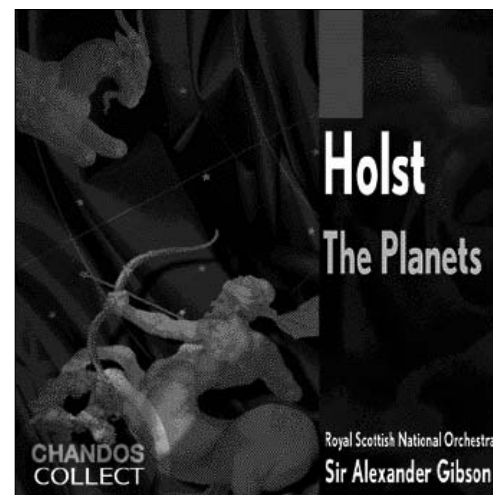
sessions two years later were only partially successful: no more than the first side was remade. Investigating, we find that, commercially, there were more pressing matters. The Gramophone Company was only too eager to accept Elgar's suggestion that most of the session be spent instead recording his new transcription of the **Overture in D minor** to Handel's Second Chandos Anthem, which had been played earlier in the year at the Three Choirs Festival in Worcester, and which was therefore assured of some sale (records in those days could generally be issued sooner after the sessions than is the case today, as all that was involved was the selection and processing of one four-minute 'take' instead of another; the medium rendered detailed editing impossible). Work on the transcription came fairly easily to a composer who was becoming increasingly tongue-tied: his wife had died three years earlier, and his energies were directed more towards committing his music to the gramophone, which fascinated him, than towards original composition. The transcription of Handel's overture (and one of Bach's Fantasy and Fugue in C minor, reluctantly undertaken after discussing the problems of Bach transcription with Richard Strauss; Elgar had hoped that the German composer would do it) is a grand piece of work, with a notably exuberant treatment of

the central fugato. The orchestra is at least as large as anything else on this disc, with piccolo, cor anglais, bass clarinet and contrabassoon added to the usual woodwind

complement. There is also an *ad libitum* organ part which is included here.

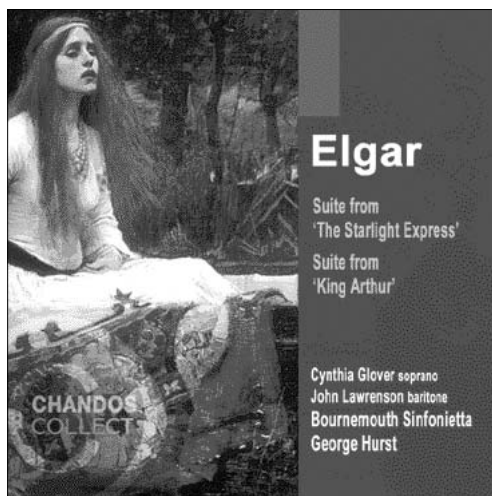
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