PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Edward Elgar

Symphony No. 2 in E-flat Major, Op. 63

Elgar composed his second symphony in 1910 and 1911, completing the four movements at the end of January, February 6, February 21, and February 28, 1911, respectively. He conducted the first performance on May 24 of that year in London. The score calls for three flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, bass drum, snare drum, cymbals, two harps, and strings. Performance time is approximately fifty-four minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first subscription concert performances of Elgar’s Second Symphony were given at Orchestra Hall on January 12 and 13, 1912, with Frederick Stock conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on November 8, 9, and 10, 1984, with Leonard Slatkin conducting. The Orchestra has performed this symphony at the Ravinia Festival only once, on June 30, 1951, with William Steinberg conducting.

When Elgar’s Symphony no. 1 was introduced in Manchester in December 1908, it was immediately hailed as a long-awaited landmark—as England’s First Symphony in effect, the first true masterpiece England had produced to set beside the great works in that form by Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Schumann, and, more recently Brahms, Dvořák, and Tchaikovsky. The accomplishment was extraordinary—fulfilling the promise Bernard Shaw expressed when he first heard Elgar’s Enigma Variations nearly a decade earlier: “I sat up and said ‘Whew!’ I knew we had got it at last.” But the burden was great. Eighty-two performances of the new symphony were given in six countries the next year. Elgar’s Violin Concerto, which premiered in November 1910, extended the composer’s triumphal run and predicted more great things to come. Then, six months later, Elgar’s Second Symphony fell flat. The hall wasn’t full; the response was tepid. “They sit there like a lot of stuffed pigs,” Elgar said to the concertmaster as they left the stage.

By 1911, Elgar held a position in musical life in England that had long gone unoccupied. His first Pomp and Circumstance march, composed in 1901, had already become a huge hit with the public, and, once he was knighted in 1904, he was recognized everywhere as England’s greatest composer. But Elgar was too insecure and too unstable—he suffered all his life from manic-depressive swings—to take failure in stride. Success had not come easily or early in his career. He was already forty-two when the Enigma Variations were first played in London—the event that sent ripples of excitement throughout the music world. Even after he was a national figure, with Sir appended to his name, he continued to refer to himself simply as “a piano-tuner’s son.”

Although Elgar was devastated by the public response to his new symphony—particularly after the enthusiasm that greeted his two previous big works, the First Symphony and the Violin Concerto—there also is reason to believe that he overreacted. The critics spoke of an enthusiastic reception and wrote glowingly of the symphony itself (The Telegraph said it was decidedly better than the First). Attendance was low, it has been suggested, because ticket prices were unusually high and the music was all new (the other premieres were by Walford Davies and Bantock)—always a fatal combination, even with a name like Elgar’s on the bill. Nonetheless, when repeat performances in the days following the premiere were even more poorly attended, Elgar even refused to accept his fee from the orchestra.
Elgar’s wife Alice was the first to rank the Second Symphony high in her husband’s output: “It seems one of his very greatest works, vast in design and supremely beautiful.” It is one of Elgar’s encyclopedic works that knits together many of his personal themes, from his earliest schoolboy years, when he wrote that he was, above all, “longing for something very great,” to his current life, a time of true attainment, and it suggests a man of great contradictions and complexities. It recalls the lines written by Cecil Day-Lewis (perhaps better known today as the father of the actor Daniel Day-Lewis) in The Gate to describe Elgar:

> The stiff, shy, blinking man in a norfolk suit:
> The martinet: the gentle-minded squire:
> The piano-tuner’s son from Worcestershire:
> The Edwardian grandee: how did they consort

> In such luxuriant themes?

When Elgar set out to write his first symphony, he said, in a lecture at Birmingham University, that the symphony without a program was “the highest development of art,” words pointedly meant to justify his choice at a time when many composers had given up on the form—this was after all the era of Strauss’s pictorial tone poems and Debussy’s bold new canvases. (The first decade of the twentieth century also was the age of Mahler’s symphonies—his Seventh premiered in Prague just three months before Elgar’s first, and the Eighth was first performed two years later in Munich, the year before Elgar began his Second Symphony. But England was largely unaware of Mahler at the time.) And 1910, the year Elgar began work on his Second Symphony, also was the year Stravinsky began sketching The Rite of Spring. Times were changing even more rapidly than Elgar suspected.

Elgar wrote a motto from Shelley—“Rarely, rarely comest thou, / Spirit of Delight”—at the top of his keyboard draft and at the end of the full score of the symphony. He later said that “The spirit of the whole work is intended to be high and pure joy: there are retrospective passages of sadness, but the whole of the sorrow is smoothed out and ennobled in the last movement.” He also spoke of the symphony as representing the “passionate pilgrimage” of the soul.

“I have worked at fever heat, and the thing is tremendous in energy,” Elgar said, and the Second Symphony begins with a veritable explosion of sounds and ideas. The entire first movement is a very large paragraph, rich in detail and assured in its large-scale architecture. “The germ of the work,” Elgar wrote, “is in the opening bars—these in a modified form are heard for the last time in the closing bars of the movement.” Those few wild, swashbuckling measures of music—the “Spirit of Delight” motto—do indeed set the entire symphony off on its great adventure. Through the first movement, with its complexity of conflicting emotions and unexpected musical detours, its restless energy, and mastery of long-range planning, this music suggests a parallel with that of Mahler, who died just six days before the premiere of Elgar’s Second Symphony.

“I have written the most extraordinary passage,” Elgar wrote to his dear friend Alice Stuart-Wortley, who is the secret muse of the Second Symphony, regarding the spooky, haunted development section. (It came as second nature to the composer of the Enigma Variations to encode his music with personal references, and this symphony is filled with music Elgar identified with Alice Stuart-Wortley—the “other” Alice in his life, as opposed to his own “Lady Alice”—including a theme labeled “Windflower,” his nickname for her. As Elgar wrote to a friend, once again quoting Shelley: “I do but hide / Under these notes, like embers, every spark / Of that which has consumed me.”). With its muted violins and muffled horn calls, the unexpected mood shift of the development section suggests what Elgar called “a sort of malign influence wandering thro’ the summer night in the garden.” The recapitulation regains the reckless energy and the spirit of delight.

The magnificent, deeply moving orchestral dirge Elgar places next is clearly a homage to Beethoven’s Eroica Symphony, also in E-flat and with its own grand marcia funebre. At the time of the premiere, the public thought it was meant as funeral music for Edward VII, who had died a year earlier. Elgar even dedicated the symphony “to the memory of His Late Majesty King Edward VII.” But, in fact, the music came first, sketched in part as early as 1904, when Elgar learned of the death of his good friend Alfred E. Rodewald. The movement is broad, eloquent, and surprisingly complex in imaginative detail for such slow
and somber music—midway through, for example, the oboe plays rippling arabesques against the off-beat “drum beat,” itself a singular combination of low winds, brass, drums, harps, and ricocheting strings. “I have written out my soul,” Elgar said to a friend.

The high-speed scherzo, sketched in the Piazza San Marco in Venice, amidst the bustle of pigeons and tourists, brings the relief of spirited, genial music. But eventually it is haunted by the ghosts of the first movement, and the mood turns sour. The orchestral writing is brilliant throughout.

The finale begins innocently as it works its way toward a grand, striding theme Elgar labeled “Hans himself,” after the celebrated conductor Hans Richter, who had led the premiere of Elgar’s First Symphony. The music moves forward briskly, building in energy and excitement, promising a triumphant, all-stops-out conclusion—the kind of thing Elgar did so brilliantly in his First Symphony. Instead, however, Elgar writes a soft, beautiful, and unexpected coda. The opening of the symphony reappears fleetingly, its theme sounding lovelier than ever. Gradually the music settles into a mood of deep, if nostalgic, serenity and fades. At the very end, Elgar suggests the final cadences of Wagner’s Tristan and Isolde, which so moved him when he heard it for the first time at a memorial concert in 1883, the year Wagner died, that he wrote in his program book: “I shall never forget this.”

Although his second symphony had followed quickly on the heels of the first, Elgar was in no frame of mind to consider writing a third. For years, his friend George Bernard Shaw continued to badger him to begin a new symphony and finally persuaded the BBC to commission it to honor Elgar’s seventy-fifth birthday celebrations in 1932. During the last year of his life, Elgar jotted ideas down, as if compiling the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. When he died in February 1934, he left more than 130 pages of sketches—a puzzle that could not be finished. At the time, it appeared that Elgar’s Third Symphony had in fact “died with the composer,” as Shaw suggested, and the material lay untouched for more than half a century. But, in recent years, interest in the sketches picked up, fanning speculation that something might be made of them and culminating finally in the work of London-born composer Anthony Payne. His “elaboration” of the material into a fully performable score was premiered, to great enthusiasm, in London in 1998, sixty-four years after the composer’s death, and presented by the Chicago Symphony the following year.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.