



## HOMAGE TO ELGAR

LAST year we celebrated the bi-centenary of the birth of Mozart and in the same year the centenary of the death of Schumann. This year we commemorate the centenary of the birth of a composer who died just over twenty years ago—Edward Elgar. Elgar is associated in one's mind with many different things—with Malvern and the Three Choirs Festival; with massed brass bands playing "Land of Hope and Glory"; with Edwardian salon music, showy and exuberant; and, if one knows him better, with a range of orchestral and choral music that puts him beside the great masters of the world. Like the Victorians amongst whom he spent a great deal of his life, he tends to be regarded by younger generations as a gruff, remote, patriotic figure whose music is difficult to appreciate.

Described as "a very distinguished looking English country gentleman, tall, with a large and somewhat aggressive moustache, a prominent but shapely nose, and rather deep-set but piercing eyes" Elgar the man still remains in many ways elusive. His biographers have tried to give all aspects of his character life and unity but even today have not wholly succeeded.

"Elgar's personality was more subtle than most and defied easy definition," writes Percy Young. "He was infuriating, lovable, proud, modest, gregarious, solitary, gay, morose; a dreamer, a man of affairs; it depended when and where he was encountered." He would not write his autobiography and implied that there was sufficient of this in his music.

Some may remain completely averse to him and remain outside his world

all their lives but even in this unsympathetic age, when patriotism is unfashionable, behind all his superficialities and irritating mannerisms there lies music of enduring worth.

Interest in Elgar may spring from as little as a single phrase which leads into his imaginative world. In the Violin Concerto there is a poignant, falling phrase which the solo violin introduces in the first movement. During the work it is transformed, it disappears in a profusion of iridescent cascades but it is true Elgar, and is at the heart of the work—a work full of Elgar's elusive quality and nobility of mind. This nobility at times has an elegiac element for Elgar suffered all his life from the neglect he encountered in his youth—a wound no subsequent awards could heal.

Or again interest in Elgar may be stimulated by the more easily followed Cello Concerto, or by one of his smaller works such as *The Wand of Youth* Suite which with its indefinable yearning is characteristic of the composer. Basil Maine, a friend of Elgar's writes that this yearning "sometimes in the melody, sometimes in the tone colour, sometimes in the harmonic progression, is an evasive yet real quality, which can only be described as Elgarian. It is Elgar's own sound. Whenever Elgar turns his thoughts to days gone by, this quality steals over the music like a mist. It is not merely that he is reaching out after the intangible happiness of his own childhood, as so many of us do, but also as if he instinctively knew that he was

LEFT: Sir Edward Elgar, with Yehudi Menuhin and Sir Thomas Beecham in London in 1933. All three took part in one concert that season, Elgar conducting and Menuhin playing the Violin Concerto

leaving behind an era of confidence and trustful human fellowship which would never return. This quality, this unique sound, works with an unmistakable potency in the music which he calls 'the First Dream Interlude' in *Falstaff*, and the same feeling is engendered whenever Elgar turns a backward look over the years of his own life."

The NZBS commemoration programmes start with a BBC Concert in the Main National Programme on Sunday afternoon, June 2. Here Sir Adrian Boult, who first met Elgar when he was 16, introduces a programme which includes the Cello Concerto and some shorter orchestral pieces. Sir Adrian Boult was present at the first rehearsal of the cello concerto. In the evening, from all YCs at 7.40, Dr Vernon Griffiths will give a talk, "Elgar, the Man and his Music" and this will be followed by a new recording of *The Dream of Gerontius*, conducted by Sir Malcolm Sargent.

*The Dream of Gerontius* is Elgar's choral masterpiece and although infused with the beliefs of the Catholic Church, like all true revelations it has universality. Elgar wrote of it "... This is the best of me. For the rest, I ate, I drank, I slept, I loved, I hated as another. My life was as a vapour, and is not. But this is what I saw and knew. This, if anything of mine, is worth your memory." His text is the poem by Cardinal Newman which tells of the death of Gerontius and the experience of his soul as it approaches his God. After death an angel escorts Gerontius's soul to the veiled presence and on the way he hears the singing of demons and angelicals. Before the judgment the angel of the agony intercedes for him. After his judgment he joins the souls in purgatory, who with the angel and the choir sing as he is delivered to his night of trial. Gerontius himself is human. Elgar wrote, "Look here: I imagined Gerontius to be a man like us, not a priest or a saint, but a sinner, a repentant one of course, but still no end of a worldly man

in his life, and now brought to book. Therefore I've not filled his part with church tunes and rubbish but a good healthy, full-blooded, romantic, remembered worldiness so to speak." The directions on the score at the opening of the work are typical Elgar—*Lento mistico*.

The programmes continue during the week June 3-9 with performances of the Violin Concerto by Malcolm Latchem and the National Orchestra. In the same programme is the "Froissart Overture" with its motto, "When chivalry lifted up her lance on high." Some of the chamber music will be heard, the Quintet for piano and strings played by Maurice Till with the Rosner Quartet and the Violin Sonata played by Ritchie Hanna and Ormi Reid. Stanley Oliver will speak of Elgar as a composer for voices, and John Gray will speak on vintage Elgar recordings.

Elgar was one of the few composers of his time to record many of his own works and it is interesting to see that a very different man was also recording

### MYSTERY NOTE

IN the middle of the slow movement of the Schubert 4th Symphony (*The Tragic*) which was being broadcast by the National Orchestra in a studio concert on May 9, the small studio audience was startled to hear a loud sustained note gradually dominate the orchestra. At first it sounded as if the key on a wind instrument had jammed and was producing only one note, then technicians hurried out to check the feed-back on the speaker system. After several minutes the mysterious note disappeared, but it was not until after the concert that the reason for it was discovered. Outside in the street two drunks had been having an argument over a car horn. To settle it one of them leant on the horn which sounded a prolonged A Flat and fitted neatly into the key of the movement.

at the time—Stravinsky. John Gray's programme will include the symphonic poem *Falstaff* in a recording which so pleased Elgar he used to play it to all his friends. There will be extracts from the Violin Concerto played by the very young Menuhin and conducted by Elgar (see photograph at top of page), and the Triumphal March from *Caractacus*, the last recording Elgar was connected with. At the time he was in a nursing home in London and the gramophone company thought it would cheer him up if they installed a line to his bedside so that he could supervise the recording. Lawrence Collingwood conducted and Elgar was able to tell him how the work should go.

SOME of those who will be contributing to the Elgar centennial programmes broadcast by NZBS stations are shown below: From left, Sir Adrian Boult, Sir Malcolm Sargent, Stanley Oliver, Dr Vernon Griffiths, Ritchie Hanna, Malcolm Latchem, Francis Rosner, Maurice Till



Spencer Digby photo

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