

So much has changed  
since the centenary



Terry Grimley listens to the voices of Elgar's friends and colleagues, captured in a radio documentary made in Birmingham half a century ago

# ELGAR 150 YEARS



unfinished opera, *The Spanish Lady*.

Listening to the programme today – made possible for me by courtesy of Barry Lankester, former BBC presenter and studio manager on the original broadcast, who lent me a copy – is to get a powerful sense of a contemporary phenomenon becoming history.

These are voices from another era in more than one sense. Nothing dates more in half a century than the mannerisms of colloquial speech, and there are many cut-glass middle-class vowel sounds here you would be hard pressed to find nowadays outside the Royal Family.

The technical methods by which the programme was produced also belong to another age.

"This was before tape," Barry Lankester explains. "There were Hunter Hillman estate cars with recording machines in the back. They were mobile recording studios, in a sense. The driver had an engineer with him, or the driver was perhaps an engineer, and the interview was cut directly on to a disc. The most you could get on to a disc like that was five minutes.

"The broadcast consisted of Alec Robertson in the studio with Charles Parker and myself in the control room, and Marigold, my wife to be, playing all the discs containing the interviews and music."

Listening to a recording of the broadcast, there is no sense of this hair-raising live radio regime: What comes across from the contributors is a horse's-mouth picture of Elgar as a charismatic but rum cove who could be warm and generous or tetchy and self-pitying, who sometimes preferred playing with his chemistry set or watching horse-racing to writing music.

On the subject of chemistry, Carice recalls how Elgar once almost asphyxiated her mother because he had no idea the chlorine gas he was making in his basement laboratory was finding its way via a fireplace to her bedroom.

As to horse-racing, Menuhin tells the famous story of when he first met Elgar as a 16 year-old to rehearse their famous recording of the Violin Concerto: "He stopped me after perhaps a minute with the words 'I'm sure that will be fine, and there's no need to proceed any further. It's such a lovely day I must go off to the races'. And I did not see him after that until the actual recording session."

Yet when it comes to discussing technical

Fifty years ago, the centenary of Elgar's birth was celebrated by the BBC in Birmingham with a documentary featuring the voices of many people who knew him at first hand.

Produced at the then BBC studios at 282 Broad Street by legendary producer Charles Parker – later famous for his innovative "radio ballads" – *The Fifteenth Variation – A Portrait of Elgar* was presented by Alec Robertson, a well-respected musicologist who also happened to be a Roman Catholic priest.

A long and distinguished list of contributors – none of them, sadly, still available for comment today – included Elgar's daughter Carice, the composers Ralph Vaughan Williams and Sir Arthur Bliss, the conductor Adrian Boult, violinist Yehudi Menuhin, pianist Harriet Cohen, and Agnes Nicholls, wife of the composer and conductor Sir Hamilton Harty and soloist in the first performance of *The Kingdom* at Birmingham Town Hall in 1906.

Sir Barry Jackson, founder of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre and the Malvern Festival, and an important contributor to the evolution of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre into the Royal Shakespeare Company, talked about his collaboration with Elgar on the



matters, there is unanimous agreement about his professionalism – for example, being a self-taught composer did not prevent him being one of the greatest masters of orchestration in all music.

Boult, for instance, has this to say: “Brahms, it’s said, used never to allow a score of his to be printed until he had heard the work at least once. On the other hand, a good deal of Elgar’s work was actually engraved before the first performance, and he told somebody I know that he never had altered a thing after he’d heard it.”

Vaughan Williams hones in on a particular example of Elgar’s unorthodox but unerring orchestration: “In the introduction to Elgar’s First Symphony, the melody is given to fairly heavy woodwind and violas, the cellos and double basses play the bass *detaché* while the inner harmony is left to two soft, muted horns.”

“Well, I think if a student had brought that scoring to any composition teacher he’d have

typically original and at the same time typically English.

“Well, having heard the *Variations* I was pining to find out more and I journeyed to Birmingham to hear the first performance of *Gerontius*, and I have to confess, perhaps to my shame, that at first I was bitterly disappointed.

“I now know that I was wrong – not that I am yet reconciled to the opening or to the demons in spite of their virtuosity, but that the beauty of the rest more than outweighs those places...”

“The first time I ever addressed Elgar personally was not by word of mouth but by a ‘Dear Sir’ letter early in the 1900s when I wrote and asked him to give me some lessons in composition. I received a polite letter from Lady Elgar saying that her husband was too busy at the moment and advising me to apply to Bantock.

“The first time I think that I actually had a conversation with Elgar was at a performance

## WHAT ELGAR MEANS TO ME

“You’re not enjoying this, are you?” This across the CBSO from Simon Rattle to my miserable face in the percussion department, during a rehearsal of an Elgar symphony many moons ago.

“No, I’m hating every minute of it.” What a confession... but as professional musicians we all have to play everything scheduled. I made the point later however that yes, I was paid to play, but not paid to like it.

One cannot possibly like all music from all composers,



although I always felt guilty when I confessed, and therefore made an extra effort at the actual concert.

The CBSO must play more Elgar than any other outfit, after all he is our local celebrity. So now I am truly grateful that I no longer have to listen to, or play his (to me) sentimental, jingoistic, uncomfortable and often ugly offerings.

Enjoy the Elgar indulgences, have a good bash, but keep me out of it.

Post reviewer Maggie Cotton

put his blue pencil through it and said ‘this will not be heard’. And to my mind, when I look at it still, it looks all wrong but it sounds all right. Here indeed we have a mystery and a miracle.”

Vaughan Williams, recorded for the programme the year before his death at the age of 86, also recalled his first encounter with Elgar’s music and his first, somewhat awkward, first encounter with the man himself.

“My first knowledge of Elgar’s music was a performance shortly before 1900 of the [Enigma] *Variations*.

“I had been advised by a friend to go to a Richter concert and hear a work by Dohnanyi, of all people, so I went. The Dohnanyi was all right but the *Variations*! Here was something new yet old, strange yet familiar, universal yet

of his Cello Concerto when he approached me rather truculently and said ‘I am surprised, Dr Vaughan Williams, that you care to listen to this vulgar stuff’. The truth was, I think, that he was feeling sore over an accusation of vulgarity made against him by a well-known musicologist who, Elgar probably knew, was a friend of mine.

“I did not meet Elgar again for some years, and then he was always gracious and friendly. He came to hear a performance of my *Sancta Civitas* and gave it generous praise, and he told me that he once thought of setting those words himself. ‘But I shall never do so now,’ he said.

“To this I could only answer that this made me sorry that I had ever attempted to set the words myself.”







A stellar line-up at the Malvern Festival, where Elgar and Sir Barry Jackson were introduced by their mutual friend George Bernard Shaw. Back row, left to right: Birmingham composer Sir Granville Bantock, Sir Barry Jackson, Elgar, unidentified, Sir Cedric Hardwicke. Front row: Dame Edith Evans, George Bernard Shaw



# Fate denied us Elgar's beef and beer opera

Terry Grimley looks at  
the tantalising story of  
Elgar's lost opera and its  
links to Birmingham Rep

Having given up composing major works throughout the 1920s, Elgar began work on two – his first opera and a Third Symphony, in the early 1930s.

The opera, *The Spanish Lady* – a loose adaptation of Ben Jonson's Jacobean comedy *The Devil is an Ass* – was a collaboration with Sir Barry Jackson, founder of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, who had a house in Malvern and promoted a festival there dedicated to his and Elgar's mutual friend, George Bernard Shaw.

Here is Jackson's account of his role as Elgar's librettist, as told to the BBC in Birmingham 50 years ago:

"Although I was among the listeners at the first performance of *The Dream of Gerontius* I never had the pleasure of meeting Sir Edward Elgar until the years of the Malvern Festival, and it was through my friend George Bernard Shaw that we eventually did meet.

"Later on when I got to know Sir Edward rather better, and when he wanted an afternoon out with his dogs, a walk on the hills, he used to come up to me and spend perhaps an afternoon.

"It was during that time that he told me... that he had an idea at the back of his head that he must compose an opera. So naturally I fell for the suggestion of the opera, having a rather theatrical mind, and asked him what subject he proposed to take, because the libretto of an opera is really all-important.

"Elgar told me that he wanted to write something that was thoroughly and very typically English – roast beef and beer – and could think of nothing better than one of the plays of Ben Jonson. I knew perhaps the better known plays of Jonson, and said 'Oh, which one do you fancy?' and he said 'Well, *The Devil is an Ass*.'

"This play was a complete stranger to me. I said to him 'Well, as it's a sort of adventure, for goodness sake don't lay on too heavily', because I thought the chances of its production would be very, very rare if it was made into a very, very elaborate spectacle and so forth with a very large



But he would have none of that at all. He said 'No, if I write an opera it's going to be a grand opera, and it's going to be very grand and it's going to out-*Meistersinger* the *Meistersinger*'.

"So well, he set to work and he made some sketches, and we often went over to Marl Bank [Elgar's house] and went through these sketches on the piano, and he was obviously very pleased with what was happening.

"He talked about it a great deal, he wrote me a number of letters on the subject, and then came a commission from the BBC to compose a symphony and the opera had to be laid aside, never to be resumed, because fate decreed that before any more work could be done to it, poor Sir Edward had passed.

"You know, during those latter days, which were extremely sad to me, that was very poignant, I was allowed from time to time to go in to see him... and then at last one day he said to me 'If ever you hear anyone whistling this little tune' - and he rather feebly whistled an air from the Cello Concerto - 'if ever you're walking on the hills and you hear that, it's only me. Don't be frightened.'"

An orchestrated performing version of the remaining sketches of *The Spanish Lady* has been completed by the Elgar scholar Percy M Young, providing around 45 minutes of tuneful and entertaining music.

The style recalls Victorian operetta - which is not altogether surprising because Elgar raided his early works, including one from as long ago as 1879, to provide material. Some musicologists cite this as evidence that Elgar's creative spark had burned out and object that there is little evidence that he was adding anything new to the old material.

So Elgar, born into the age of the oratorio, never did complete an opera. His few surviving stage works, such as the ballet *The Sanguine Fan* and the incidental music to *The Starlight Express*, both written during the First World War, hardly rate among his great masterpieces, but they are characterful pieces which deserve to better known.



Elgar's friend Barry Jackson