



Sir Edward Elgar

(1857-1934)

Cello Concerto in E minor, Op. 85

By the beginning of 1917, with worries over money and health adding to the strain caused by the First World War, Elgar was anxious to leave London and find seclusion in the country. In April his wife Alice found and rented 'Brinkwells', a cottage near Fittleworth in Sussex, deep in the kind of wooded countryside he had always loved. It was here that he conceived, and worked on, three chamber works – his Violin Sonata, String Quartet and Piano Quintet – and the Cello Concerto.

Together, these pieces amplified a strain of haunted longing mixed with sadness and resignation which had always been present in Elgar's music, but which had not surfaced so forcefully before. The pre-war world of Edwardian opulence and swaggering self-confidence was now irretrievable, and comparing the Cello Concerto with the Violin Concerto of 1910 brings out some telling contrasts. The two works use a virtually identical orchestra, but compared with the Violin Concerto's rich scoring, the Cello Concerto is strikingly spare and restrained. This

is partly a matter of balance with the lower-lying solo part, but also indicates just how much Elgar's emotional landscape had changed in the intervening years.

The chamber works have their own kind of enchantment, wistful and eerie by turns. The Cello Concerto adds an unmistakably tragic tone as it appears to confront a profound sense of loss and an uncertain future. The soloist's opening flourish strikes out boldly but immediately falls back, answered by the melancholy slow downward drift of the violas' main theme. The movement's two big climaxes, lasting no more than a few bars, show it to be capable of a certain proud nobility. The second main theme, introduced by clarinets and bassoons, brings a degree or two of greater rhythmic animation, but is still wistful at heart.

The soloist plays a short cadenza-like passage that recalls the concerto's opening as a link to the flickering, scurrying second movement. Like the first it is emotionally ambiguous – it has energy, but also a withdrawn, slightly furtive air.

The *adagio* is a short but profoundly moving elegy, all the more poignant for being in a major key, with its conclusion left open-ended, leading into the finale. This starts with an energetic anticipation of its main theme, but hesitates while the soloist muses on this and another recollection of the opening of the work. The movement eventually gets into its stride and for a while seems to recapture some of the old certainties. Eventually they are overtaken by the *adagio's* sorrow, and a heart-stopping return of the soloist's flourish from the start of the first movement. The last few *allegro molto* bars end the concerto on a note of curt, almost grim, defiance.

"A real large work and I think *good* and alive", Elgar called the concerto. But its life is shot through with the most powerfully understated heartache.