

EDWARD ELGAR (1857-1934): CELLO CONCERTO IN E MINOR, OP. 85

The Cello Concerto belongs to the group of Elgar's late works that includes the piano quintet and string quartet, as well as the three violin sonatas. Elgar composed the Concerto during 1918 and 1919. Although begun in London, the major part of it was written at Brinkwell's, the Elgar's country cottage in Sussex.

Elgar was very pleased with his new work, describing it as a 'real large work and I think good and alive.' The first performance took place, conducted by the composer, at the Queen's Hall, London on 26 October 1919, in the opening concert of the London Symphony Orchestra's first post-war season. Albert Coates, who allowed composer and soloist little time for rehearsal, conducted the bulk of the programme. The resulting performance was predictably poor. 'Never, in all probability, has so great an orchestra made so lamentable a public exhibition of itself,' commented Ernest Newman in *The Observer*. Nonetheless, the Concerto's great merits were quickly recognised and appreciated.

Although Elgar uses a full orchestra, the orchestration is economical. Consequently the solo part, which is almost continuous, never has any difficulty in speaking against the accompaniment. The four movements are linked in pairs. Both the first and second movements commence with a cello recitative, and the slow movement leads directly into the finale.

The work opens with the cello playing a recitative-like phrase that recurs in the second and fourth movements. The first movement proper then gets under way with the violas introducing the principal melody, characteristic of Elgar's later, wistful, style. A second subject appears on the clarinets and passes to the cello. These two themes constitute the movement. The re-appearance of the cello's opening phrase, played *pizzicato*, announces the second movement. This is a scherzo, and has the rushing character of the *moto perpetuo*.

The core of the Concerto is the third movement, a heart-felt adagio. The brass is silent, and the orchestra is reduced to just

strings with clarinets, bassoons and horns. The cello plays throughout, acting as a focus for Elgar's lyrical meditation. The end of the movement appears as a question, which is answered in the finale that follows without a break. Following the first and second subjects a passage appears consisting of themes from the previous movements. As in Elgar's Violin Concerto, the cadenza for the cello is accompanied. The mood reverts to that of the adagio. The opening recitative reappears for the final time, now confident and assertive before the rondo theme is briefly resumed, and the Concerto brought to a swift conclusion.

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Adagio – moderato
Lento – Allegro molto
Adagio
Allegro, ma non troppo

