

11 The later orchestral music (1910–34)

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Whatever Elgar actually said concerning ‘absolute music’ in his Birmingham lecture on Brahms’s Symphony No. 3, and whatever he actually *meant* to say, to view his own symphonies and concertos as ‘purely tonal pattern-weaving’, to use Ernest Newman’s phrase, would be to deny an essential – perhaps *the* essential – aspect of one’s experience of them.¹ A more productive approach is to see these works as ‘fixing’ by means of a highly sophisticated compositional technique a series of emotional states or attitudes, these being bound up to a large extent with aspects of the composer’s own life. Various comments by Elgar confirm – or, at the very least, suggest – that this is the case. Indeed, both the Violin Concerto and Symphony No. 2 have prefatory inscriptions that point to extra-musical impulses, their enigmatic nature increasing the listener’s desire to search for ‘meaning’. Meanwhile it could be said that *Falstaff*, described by the composer as a ‘symphonic study’, differs chiefly to the extent that the subject-matter is precisely identified and specific events illustrated. What follows is an interpretation of Elgar’s later orchestral music (the works already mentioned, plus the Cello Concerto and Anthony Payne’s elaboration of the sketches for Symphony No. 3) that pivots around what this particular author perceives to be its emotional meaning, but argued from observations about technique intended to provide snapshots of Elgar’s symphonic approach.

Violin Concerto in B minor, Op. 61 (1910)

With the remarkable success of his Symphony No. 1, Elgar gained the confidence to attempt in the Violin Concerto one of his most ambitious structures. It is one of the longest examples of the genre, lasting fifty minutes in the composer’s famous recording with Yehudi Menuhin and closer to fifty-five in Nigel Kennedy’s 1997 recording.² It is not simply the length that marks Elgar’s ambition, however. Rather, it is the musical language – gauged not in terms of style (clearly, Elgar’s approach can only be regarded as conservative when measured against contemporary works by Debussy and the emerging modernism of Schoenberg and Stravinsky) but in terms of the music’s relationship to the generic and formal conventions with which it engages, and

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the way in which these conventions are manipulated to produce a highly individual mode of utterance.

A central feature of Symphony No. 1 is the opposition between those parts exhibiting a ‘public’ manner, and those concerned with ‘private’ feeling.³ This is seen at the outset in the contrast between the opening A^b processional (the ‘motto theme’) and the deeply restless Allegro first-subject group. The ‘heart’ of the work is the introspective third movement (Adagio), confessional in tone, while the symphony ends with a massive tutti, apparently affirmative and celebratory – a public ceremonial.⁴ It is clear from the Violin Concerto’s inscription that it, too, will revolve around the public/private dichotomy: ‘*AQUÍ ESTÁ ENCERRADA EL ALMA DE . . .*’ (‘Here is enshrined the soul of . . .’) is a public declaration, but the dedication, to Alice Stuart-Wortley (who is ‘enshrined’ by the ‘Windflower’ themes), is private, as is the reason for the Spanish.⁵ The genre of the concerto has particularly strong opportunities for exploring the public/private dichotomy, through the contrast between the soloist as individual and the orchestra as collective, and – in the case of the Violin Concerto – the contrast between virtuosic display (a defining aspect of the concerto as a public event) and the inward-looking lyricism for which the instrument is so well suited. Elgar exploits these opportunities to the full. But he also turns expectation of what is to be ‘public’, what ‘private’, on its head, to remarkable effect.

Central to the character of the Violin Concerto – to the image of it that one carries away after a performance – is the nature of the cadenza, which is placed towards the end of the final movement. Cadenzas are traditionally highly public, and are signalled as such by the entire orchestra and conductor stopping to admire the soloist as he or she goes through various virtuosic contortions and bold (originally unscripted) thematic developments. Elgar, however, constructs his cadenza as a very private space. As Ernest Newman observes in an essay on the concerto published just before its first performance, ‘The Cadenza . . . is an interlude of serious and profound contemplation, as it were the soul retiring into itself and seeking its strength inwardly, in the midst of the swirling life all around it.’⁶ Far from standing back and allowing the soloist full rein, the orchestra accompanies, however lightly, as an extension of the ruminations. Another aspect of the public/private dichotomy in the work as a whole is the contrast between ‘the idyllic’ and representations of reality, and this too forms a vital aspect of the cadenza. For while, as the cadenza begins, ‘it sadly *thinks over* the 1st movement’,⁷ it also contains long stretches of warm, optimistic B major – an idyll glimpsed, or even inhabited, before the shift to B minor at fig. 104 leads to the impassioned shift flatward at fig. 105. The end of the cadenza sees the possibility of recapturing the idyllic, only for the anticipated close in a serene D major to be sidestepped at the last moment by the return of the

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soloist's very first B minor utterance. This leads to the return of the bustling main material of the finale, which is the most public movement of all in its almost relentless display. One should guard against being overly reductive with respect to a work replete with 'key moments', but it seems appropriate to describe this as *the* key moment of the work. For it to be appreciated fully, however, we need to know something of its context within the work as a whole.

Ernest Newman got to the heart of the Violin Concerto (and Elgar's music in general) with these comments:

As in the Symphony, we always get the feeling that we are not listening to mere music-making, not witnessing a mere attempt to fill a conventional form, but following up a long and always interesting trail of human experience; all this music has been lived before it was put on paper. It all has the same highly-strung, nervous quality as the Symphony; and in the naturalness of the sequence of its moods, the ebb and flow of passion in it, it gives us the same impression as its predecessor of the thinking controlling the form, instead of the form controlling the thinking.⁸

The first movement is a fine demonstration of 'the thinking controlling the form', and of the way in which the soloist is constituted as the experiencing subject. The orchestral exposition comprises a succession of six themes, the first four of which make up the first-subject group.⁹ This is a good example of Elgar's 'mosaic technique': short-breathed two-bar themes, usually treated immediately in sequence, are bound together by a fluid (and remarkably rich) harmonic continuum in which tonal centres are suggested rather than confirmed, in the manner of Wagner's roving tonality.¹⁰ The opening itself is ambiguous: bar 1 suggests D major, but the latter part of bar 2 and bar 3 suggest B minor; neither key – or any other – is confirmed during the course of the section. The arrival of the second-subject group four bars after fig. 4 is marked simply by the character of its first theme, the second of the two 'Windflower' themes, adumbrated from fig. 4 (the first is at fig. 3), and by the initial relaxation in harmonic rhythm. The music here is not particularly stable, tonally speaking, either: the third bar after fig. 4 points towards a cadence in C♯ minor, so that when an A major triad ensues the section begins with an interrupted cadence. For two bars it seems as if A is going to establish itself (it is an odd choice of key for a work in B minor, until one remembers the D major slant of the opening), but again there is no firm cadence to confirm it, and from one bar after fig. 5 sequential treatment takes the harmonic flow to distant territory. Only with the strong F pedal (V of B minor) from fig. 6 does a clear indication of the tonic emerge. It is the soloist's first phrase that finally leads the way to the work's first perfect cadence (at fig. 9⁺³).

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In exerting control, the soloist is marked as the central character – not merely as ‘the master’, as Tovey suggests,¹¹ but as the subject whose experiences are laid bare. Throughout the rest of the work there is little doubt that we are ‘seeing’ things from the point of view of the solo instrument. Rarely is it silent. The later part of the development section (from fig. 23) is the only passage in the first movement (apart from the orchestral exposition) where the soloist does not play, but even here the persona is not absent: the orchestra is an extension of the soloist’s world, projecting an inner turmoil. The transformation of the second-subject theme at fig. 24 is an excellent example of Michael Kennedy’s point about themes being ‘inflated after their first appearances to a size where they threaten to burst’.¹² And this notion of ‘extension’ is perhaps supported by there being little sense of the conflict between orchestra and soloist that is often seen as characteristic of the Romantic concerto; indeed, there is remarkably little dialogue as such. As is usually the case with Elgar, the recapitulation is substantially reworked, and becomes increasingly concerned with a public face, the coda (from two bars after fig. 42) involving itself with fairly conventional virtuoso gestures. It begins with the ‘Windflower’ second-subject theme, underpinned by a B *major* 6–3 chord in a glimpse of the cadenza’s idyll.

That the slow movement, like the cadenza, inhabits a much more private space is signalled not only by its material, but also its key: B \flat major is as far removed from the bustling B minor at the end of the first movement and the beginning of the third as can be imagined.¹³ Newman described the music as inhabiting a ‘dream-world’; Michael Kennedy writes of it as being ‘unequaled in Elgar’s work as an expression of passionate regret’.¹⁴ One would not want to argue against either of these views, though it is worth noting that, in a later publication, Kennedy relays Elgar’s own comment to Vera Hockman (a young violinist present at a gathering to hear the test pressing of the Elgar/Menuhin recording on 2 September 1932) that, in the coda, ‘two souls merge and melt into one’; this suggests that the ending, at least, has little to do with regret.¹⁵ The *Andante* is certainly not an untroubled movement, but it is within its boundaries that the idyllic is most sustained, especially in the opening section (up to fig. 47), with its echoes of the dreamy opening of Part II of *The Dream of Gerontius* and a serene cadence onto G major at one bar before fig. 47.¹⁶

The Violin Concerto is no less rich in thematic interconnections than Elgar’s other large-scale orchestral works, and the second movement has clear links with the first, as Ex. 11.1 shows. The last movement, too, employs a variety of reworkings of the initial shape (Ex. 11.1 e, f and g). Significantly, the most literal recollections are reserved for the cadenza – not only of the very opening, but also of fig. 35 at fig. 105, and of five bars after fig. 53

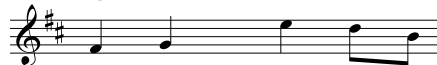
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Example 11.1 Elgar, thematic transformation in the Violin Concerto

a) I, b. 1



b) I, Fig. 1



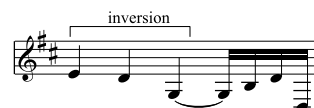
c) II, Fig. 47



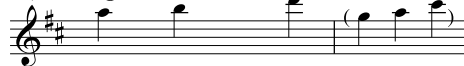
d) II, 5 bars after Fig. 53



e) III, 5 bars after Fig. 66



f) III, Fig. 68



g) III, Fig. 94



h) III, Fig. 116



(Ex. 11.1d) at fig. 106, both recalled at pitch. It would be an exaggeration to say that the sideslipping to B minor at the end of the cadenza – the readjustment, as it were, for re-entry into the public world – is a betrayal of the cadenza's interior landscape. But in the midst of the closing rhetorical flourishes – which include a grand final transformation of the opening shape in the key most associated with the idyllic, B major (see Ex. 11.1h) – it is difficult not to feel regret for the loss of the intimate.

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Symphony No. 2 in Eb, Op. 63 (1911)

‘Loss’ has been one of the central topics in commentaries on Symphony No. 2, prompted by the subdued ending, the dedication ‘to the Memory of His late Majesty King Edward VII’, and the inscription from Shelley, ‘Rarely, rarely comest thou,/Spirit of Delight!’. Hepokoski speculates that the ‘Spirit of Delight’ might be:

Not just one thing, we may suppose, but many. Some of the likeliest candidates, none of which excludes the others, are the innocence, faith, and purity of the ‘clean’ world of youth; the only partially sublimated erotic fantasy of his love for Alice Stuart-Wortley; the once-healthy tradition of the genre of the symphony and the culture for which it had bracingly stood; the exuberant, unproblematic joy that music had brought to the composer in his ‘learning days’ before its enchantments had been subjected to the processes of rationalization and marketplace competition.¹⁷

However, while some of the symphony is clearly concerned with mourning, Elgar himself referred to ‘the whole of the sorrow [being] smoothed out & ennobled in the last movement’.¹⁸ This suggests a cathartic process, and there is much to support this interpretation. For instance, the augmented version of the so-called ‘Spirit of Delight’ theme (beginning at one bar before fig. 168; cf. the last two quavers of bar 2 and bar 3 of the first movement) has a breadth and harmonic poise that suggests acceptance. And while the main melodic lines descend, adopting the conventional attitude of mourning, they are counterbalanced by the upward-moving scales and arpeggios of fig. 168ff and (crucially) the ascent in the first violins at fig. 171. The scoring is amongst Elgar’s most luminous, nowhere more so than in the final progression (from two bars after fig. 171); and the final chord’s dignified fade to pianissimo epitomises the ennoblement that Elgar refers to.

There is little of the ‘private’ here, despite an approach towards a more intimate tone between figs. 170 and 171: if the sorrowful aspects of the slow movement were prompted by Elgar’s feelings at the death of his friend, Alfred Rodewald, the symphony ends as a public commemoration of the composer’s much-revered monarch.¹⁹ Indeed, the movement has a civic air from the very start, established by the character of the material and by the relatively conventional form.²⁰ Robert Meikle goes so far as to say of the opening theme that ‘There is something about its placid, unruffled, even slightly self-satisfied air, that imparts the unmistakable atmosphere of a Sunday bandstand in the park.’²¹ The second theme, meanwhile, at fig. 139, overflows with pomp, and was labelled ‘Hans himself’ when first sketched in 1903 with reference to the first conductor of Symphony No. 1 (and a champion of Elgar’s music in general), Hans Richter.²² Equally grand is the

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third theme: marked *nobilmente*, it too is supported by a walking bass and is marked to be played 'sul G'. The form, meanwhile, though not as stiff as Meikle suggests,²³ pays rather more obeisance to convention than Elgar is generally wont to do: the three themes articulate a straightforward progression from the tonic to the dominant via the subdominant; the beginning of the development is heavily signposted, by a French sixth (one bar before fig. 145); and themes two and three are transposed to the tonic in the recapitulation (the final 'triumph' of the tonic is celebrated by peals of horn notes at four bars after fig. 164, an addition to the equivalent passage in the exposition at fig. 143).

But if Elgar's 'passionate pilgrimage of a soul' (as the composer also described the symphony)²⁴ is conveyed here via conventional tonal signposts, the journey in the first movement is rather less orthodox. As Tovey points out, 'The tonic, Eb, stands firm at the outset and the drift towards another key is sudden and decisive. But when that other key appears it proves an iridescent mixture of several keys, remote enough for the home tonic itself to appear in its new surroundings as one of the chords of the main theme in the second group.'²⁵ Ex. 11.2 (the music between figs. 8 and 9) gives some idea of this iridescence. The first phrase is cast in an expanded G major, ending on V/V, but the second veers more decisively away. Indeed, at figs. 9 and 10 the music is back in Eb, however fleetingly. It is only at the big climax at fig. 20 that a clear secondary tonal centre emerges, with V/V setting up the close of the exposition in Bb at two bars before fig. 22. In the recapitulation the climax returns transposed to the tonic, in traditional fashion, but little else about the tonal relationships between the exposition and recapitulation conforms to expectations. Meikle charts these relationships, and regards them as 'haphazard':²⁶ 'The effect is that we lose all sense of the tonal pressure, of the exploitation of tension between the tonic and other keys – whether the traditional "related" keys or not – that had hitherto been fundamental to the symphony as manifested through sonata-form structures.'²⁷

But to say this is to fail to recognise the significance of the element of fantasy in Elgar, in which movement from point to point no less logical in itself often takes precedence over large-scale patterning. The truer picture, though, lies in an interaction of both approaches, and some evidence for this may be found in Elgar's comment on the genesis of Symphony No. 2 as reported by Charles Sanford Terry:

In every movement its form and above all its climax were clearly in his mind. Indeed, as he has often told me, it is the *climax* which he invariably settles first. But withal there is a great mass of fluctuating material which *might* fit into the work as it developed in his mind to finality – for it had

Example 11.2 Elgar, Second Symphony, first movement, figs. 8-9

8 *pp* *espress.* *legato*

vln 1

+ vln

bsn

cl. 1

vln

vc.

vc/db

cresc.

dim.

db.

9

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been created in the same ‘oven’ which had cast them all. Nothing satisfied him until itself and its context seemed, as he said, inevitable. In that particular I remember how he satisfied himself as to the sequence of the second upon the first subject in the first movement.²⁸

Elgar’s sketch outline of the third movement, reproduced by Kent (who describes it as ‘a kind of musico-literary précis’), further supports this view.²⁹

While there is little in this outline to suggest that sonority was uppermost in Elgar’s mind when conceiving his ‘great mass of fluctuating material’, it is clear from his lecture on orchestration that it must have been.³⁰ In a symphony that is particularly impressive in terms of sonorous imagination, the dreamy first span of the first-movement development section (figs. 24–35) stands out. This is the only part of the first movement to explore an interior world to any degree (a world that is nightmarishly transformed in the third movement: compare figs. 28 and 119). It is impossible to divorce sonority and harmony here: the initial shift from a B \flat triad to the A \flat –C–E natural augmented triad is not merely coloured by the spacing of strings and horns – rather, the harmonic character depends upon it. The melodic figure seems new, but in typical Elgarian half-light fashion it is linked with the ‘Spirit of Delight’ theme via the descending semitone (here F–E, in bar 3 E \flat –D).

Equally striking in sonority are the string chords that frame the second movement (see Ex. 11.3, which reproduces the opening). Comprising two strands of parallel 6/3 chords circling in inversion, the modal (C Aeolian) harmony foreshadows a Vaughan Williams trait, but such investment in the expressive power of diatonicism already occupied a central position in English practice: as Jeremy Dibble has shown, the broad, surging tune beginning at fig. 68 has strong parallels with the (harmonically more orthodox) slow movement from Parry’s Symphony No. 4 (which Elgar heard under Richter in 1889), and beyond that with the music of such figures as S. S. Wesley.³¹

***Falstaff*: Symphonic Study in C minor, Op. 68 (1913)**

Jerrold Northrop Moore has described Elgar’s study of one of the largest (in several senses) characters in English literature as one of the composer’s most chromatic works, in which diatonicism has a very specialised role: ‘*Falstaff* was the story of disintegration to a point where there was nothing left to emerge out of any personal past. In writing it Edward upset the diatonic basis of his own expression. Here for the first time his themes were predominantly chromatic and short-breathed; the “old-world state”

Example 11.3 Elgar, Second Symphony, second movement (opening)

The image shows a musical score for the opening of the second movement of Elgar's Second Symphony. The score is written for strings and is in 4/4 time. The tempo is marked "Larghetto" with a metronome marking of 60. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The score begins with a dynamic marking of *pp* (pianissimo). The strings play a series of chords and moving lines. A box containing the number "67" is placed above the first staff. The score includes dynamic markings such as *dim. p* (diminuendo piano) and *f* (forte). The notation includes various string techniques like slurs, accents, and dynamic hairpins.

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of diatonic melody was reserved for “what might have been”.³² One might wish to interrogate aspects of this statement (we have already seen that the themes of the Violin Concerto are relatively short-breathed, for instance, and a distinction should be made in *Falstaff*, as in all Elgar’s works, between chromaticism as ornamentation and chromaticism as organising principle), but the nostalgic role of diatonicism is certainly of central importance. Nostalgia is most obviously to the fore in the Dream Interlude (figs. 76–81), which depicts Falstaff reflecting on his time as page to the Duke of Norfolk. Described by Elgar as ‘simple in form and somewhat antiquated in mood’, the Interlude is cast entirely in A minor with Aeolian inflections (the final cadence at three bars after fig. 80 employs the flattened seventh, for instance), apart, that is, from a brief excursion to F in the seventh to the tenth bars after fig. 79. Nostalgia in music is a slippery concept, little explored in the literature. It cannot be discussed in depth here, but some of the means by which it is created in the Dream Interlude can be suggested. Firstly, the Interlude’s self-contained nature lifts it out of the narrative stream of the rest of the work: time stops, or at least, a different (reflective) kind of time is entered into. Reinforcing this sense of removal is the simplicity of utterance within the context of the generally more chromatic, and thematically and contrapuntally more ‘artful’, textures of the rest of the work. As in parts of the Violin Concerto, the *fact* of the diatonicism symbolises that which is yearned for, ‘the idyllic’; the sense of longing is created by the way in which the diatonicism is *used* – the wide melodic intervals, the sighing appoggiaturas, the arching inner parts (as at fig. 79). The second interlude, the pastoral scene at Shallow’s orchard in Gloucestershire, also A-based, is more diversified in its material and tonal excursions, but has a similar melancholic effect.

The violin solo in the Dream Interlude inevitably conjures up the figure of Elgar himself, and it is indeed difficult to resist seeing the work as autobiographical in some sense.³³ Certainly there are parallels between Falstaff’s changing relationship with the King and Elgar’s changing relationship with his musical public: *Falstaff* was composed only two years after the premiere of Symphony No. 2 received a less than rousing response from a small audience, sending Elgar into one of his periods of despair.³⁴ The later work, too, had a lukewarm reception.³⁵ Ernest Newman suggested why: ‘The style of the score shows us in many places quite a new Elgar, and one that the public used to the older Elgar will not assimilate very easily.’³⁶ One aspect of this new style was a leaner, less expansive manner, with fewer of the big *nobilmente* tunes for which Elgar was (and still is) popularly known. A near-exception is Prince Hal’s theme, first heard at fig. 4 and reprised at fig. 127 to form the work’s apotheosis at his coronation: at first the theme appears to have all the hallmarks of Elgar’s *nobilmente* mode, but it is soon unsettled

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The musical score for Example 11.4 consists of two systems. The first system has three staves: a woodwind staff (labeled 'vc., hn. + bsn'), a string staff, and a bass staff. The woodwind staff begins with a box containing the number '4'. The dynamics are marked as *mf* and *cresc.* in the woodwinds, and *ff* in the strings. The second system continues the woodwind and string parts, with a *cresc.* marking in the woodwinds.

by the rather awkward restart in the minor in the fifth bar (Ex. 11.4) – a premonition, perhaps, of the tragedy to come.³⁷ It is the final playing-out of that tragedy – Falstaff’s dissolution and death after being banished by the King – that is most likely to have bemused Elgar’s listeners, and which still shocks today. As Daniel Grimley observes, ‘The function of the final bars [from the eleventh bar after fig. 146] . . . is to undermine the retrospective effect of the preceding passage’,³⁸ a passage that ends with a warm, affectionate cadence into C major after recalling a theme identified by Elgar in a letter to Ernest Newman as representing ‘the undercurrent of our failings & sorrows’.³⁹

The final bars deny ‘any sense of transfiguration, or of Falstaff’s narrative presence. Rather, the coda turns towards an objective, hard-sounding E minor, and the impersonal military rhythm of the King’s theme. The effect of the final pizzicato string chord is deadening, in sharp contrast to the warm glow of Falstaff’s death.’⁴⁰ The subdued final reprise of Prince Hal’s theme that leads up to these events (figs. 144–5) is sad, but not bitter: there is no trace of irony, suggesting that, in Elgar’s eyes, Falstaff nobly accepts his fate. Falstaff is thus a victim of the public/private dichotomy, his private, carefree relationship with the Prince being rejected of necessity on the latter’s ascent to the throne.

If Elgar could not himself quite avoid all sense of bitterness at the public’s reaction to *Falstaff*, we should not underestimate the difficulties and potential confusions confronting the listener trying to ‘assimilate’ it. It is not just a question of the disorientating ending: there are also problems surrounding

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the work's programme and form. Elgar balked at describing the work as 'programme music'. In an interview with Gerald Cumberland published in *The Daily Citizen* of 18 July 1913 he had this to say on the matter:

it must not be imagined that my orchestral poem is programme music – that it provides a series of incidents with connecting links such as we have, for example, in Strauss's 'Ein Heldenleben' or in the same composer's 'Domestic' Symphony. Nothing has been farther from my intention. All I have striven to do is to paint a musical portrait – or, rather, a sketch portrait.⁴¹

However, his own published description of the work goes some way towards encouraging the listener to treat it as such,⁴² leading to some of the problems outlined by Kennedy.⁴³ The form, meanwhile, is highly complex, mixing, as Grimley suggests, 'elements of sonata, rondo and variation forms'.⁴⁴ None of this detracts, however, from the irresistible sweep of the work, much of which is due to an impressive and (*pace* Kennedy)⁴⁵ striking variety of thematic invention, manipulated with considerable virtuosity.

Cello Concerto in E minor, Op. 85 (1919)

The thematic invention in the Cello Concerto is less open-handed, and if *Falstaff* represents something of a retreat from the orchestral opulence of Symphonies Nos. 1 and 2 and the Violin Concerto, the Cello Concerto is even more pared down. This partly serves the need to ensure that the soloist will be heard in the middle of the texture, but it also reflects the deeply melancholic nature of the work.

A good deal of Elgar's music is melancholic. This seems to reflect his personality. He was frequently disillusioned, as letters to friends show, and the diminishing of his output in the latter part of his life (the Cello Concerto was the last major work completed) suggests he was gradually taken over by despondency. A number of reasons have been put forward for this, including the collapse with the onset of the First World War of the society he had idealised and within which he had struggled to gain recognition, the death of friends, and increasingly poor health. A letter to Alice Stuart-Wortley indicating the latter also describes his feelings about the war:

Terrible gun-firing, raid, etc. etc. . . . I am not well and the place is so noisy & I do not sleep. The guns are the quietest things here. I long for the country & Stoke. I think all the time of it – and you. I have been thinking also so much of our lost festivals – no more music . . . Everything good & nice & clean & fresh & sweet is far away – never to return.⁴⁶

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The melancholic vein of the Cello Concerto has hardly been a bone of contention. Here, for example, are a few statements from Kennedy:

- ‘The Cello Concerto, of all Elgar’s orchestral works, is the most elusive and withdrawn, the most subdued in its orchestral dress.’
- [regarding the main 9/8 theme:] ‘This is overpoweringly the music of wood smoke and autumn bonfires, of the evening of life; sadness and disillusion are dominant and the music comes perilously close to what Jaeger would have called a ‘whine’ of self-pity.’
- [regarding the music towards the end of the work]: ‘Elgar recalls a theme from the slow movement, and the music assumes a nihilist note that is unequalled in intensity elsewhere in his output, surpassing even the note of agony and ruin in *Gerontius*.’⁴⁷

The most immediate expressions of melancholy in the Cello Concerto lie in Elgar’s use of the minor key, relatively slow tempi, yearning suspensions and appoggiaturas, chromatic inflections, and wide melodic leaps. But since melancholy is a phenomenon that is sustained in time – which might be said to feed on the passing of time – it is likely to arise most powerfully from formal organisation, and this can be seen clearly in the first movement, which is obsessed with return on several levels.

The movement as a whole is an arch shape (Figure 1). So too is the A section. This peaks with a tutti version of the melody initially played by the violas, only to fade to a quieter version; it is significant that, of the six statements of the melody, the climactic fourth and fifth are the only ones to begin on the tonic E, the others beginning more tentatively on the supertonic.⁴⁸ There is nothing tentative about the end of the A section, however, despite the low dynamic level: indeed, there is a grim finality about the E at one bar before fig. 7, with the augmentation of the final part of the long descent, G–F♯–E, giving particular weight to the tonic’s arrival (as does the articulation: two pizzicato attacks leading up to the bowed E). After this, much of the rest of the movement is characterised by attempts to break away from the atmosphere of brooding. Section C, which lifts the spirits a little with its shift to the major mode, comes closest to achieving this through its more mobile harmony. But a good deal of it is ruminative (musical daydreaming, almost) rather than purposefully directed, and the final outcome, after the melodic peak (two bars after fig. 10, repeated at two bars after fig. 12), is a listless collapse onto the dominant, presaging the seemingly inevitable return of section B.

In B¹ and A¹ attempts to inject greater impetus are made through the addition of several new gestures. Thus in B¹ there is a more ardent delivery of the melodic peak (compare the second and third bars after fig. 13 with the fourth bar after fig. 7); while in A¹ the bar before the scalar run-up to the

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climactic e''' is lent greater impetus by a series of appoggiaturas (compare two bars before fig. 16 with two bars before fig. 5), and in the second bar after fig. 16 there is a new rhetorical statement from the soloist, *ff*, *molto sostenuto* and accented. In interpreting these, it seems appropriate to bear in mind the following comments by Hepokoski on the symphonies:

the two Elgar symphonies survey the composer's general world vision. That vision ranges widely, from the expansive or boisterous to the desperately conflicted and, further, to the fully interior, intimate, and private. But it is touched throughout by a melancholy awareness of the dreamlike quality and transitoriness of things: ghosts of unsustainability, regret, and loss of innocence lurk everywhere. In this valedictory world the magnificent, *fortissimo* moments of attainment and affirmation seem simultaneously to be melting away, and Elgar often shores up such moments with rises and underswells in unexpected places, as if he were trying to sustain an illusion forever slipping away from his grasp. In such an environment of dissolution, diminuendos and simple descending sequences can take on enormous expressive significance.⁴⁹

The additions to B¹ and A¹ all attempt, not so much to shore up *ff* moments (though the rhetorical statement from two bars after fig. 16 might come into this category), as to recover the more affirmative outlook of section C, while the scalar ascents to e''' seem like desperate attempts to *create* affirmative moments in the first place.

The most significant 'return' in the work – that which seals its fundamentally melancholic nature – is that of the four bars of recitative that open the work just before the end of the fourth movement (at fig. 72). This comes after the most highly charged section of the work, the *Poco più lento* from fig. 66 that emerges from the sonata form that constitutes most of the movement (in terms of bars numbers, at any rate). The intensity is born of chromatic, roving harmony, coupled with liberal use of appoggiaturas and the generally high tessitura of the soloist. The material initially evokes the idiolect, rather than the substance, of the languorous slow movement: it is not until four bars after fig. 71 that the slow-movement theme itself emerges, following a passage of liquidation draining the music of the will to move forward. Supported by a texture that lacks the rhythmic impetus of its original context, the theme is transformed into a wistful reminiscence – of music which itself has been described as nostalgic. Although the bass lines moves steadily downwards by step from five bars after fig. 71, there is little sense of goal-directedness: the final step to the orchestral E that supports the return of the work's opening seems inevitable enough, but the preceding V⁷ in 6/4 position is only just sufficient to fulfil conventional cadential requirements. The unforced acceptance of the return of the work's initial state is a

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graphic symbol – an enactment, almost – of melancholy. It is followed by what I can only describe as the musical equivalent of a ‘stiff upper lip’ – the self-consciously energetic music of the final fifteen bars. Whether or not one agrees with Hepokoski’s interpretation of the closing passage of Elgar’s Symphony No. 1,⁵⁰ the ending of the Cello Concerto cannot be taken at face value.

Coda: The Sketches for Symphony No. 3, elaborated by Anthony Payne (1998)

It will not have escaped the reader’s notice that a good deal of attention has been accorded in this chapter to the way in which works end, and that these have all been regarded as having a fundamental effect on what they are ultimately ‘about’. One of the biggest tasks facing Anthony Payne in his famous elaboration of Elgar’s sketches for a Third Symphony was to invent the ending, about which the composer left no clue.⁵¹ It is a testament to the stature of his achievement that he has created one of the great Elgarian perorations, inspired by one of Elgar’s finest miniatures, ‘The Wagon Passes’ from the *Nursery Suite* (1931): a processional based on the off-beat accompaniment pattern of the movement’s first theme (bars 17ff.) builds from bar 303 to a climax at bars 311–13 before subsiding to what Payne describes as a tying-up of ‘one or two loose thematic ends to strengthen the web of the work’s symphonic dialectic’. This ‘tying-up’ Payne describes as follows:

The allusion to the first movement’s open fourths in the scherzo’s uncanny cadence is picked up with a further reference, given to the first violins over the final C minor chord. At the same time, the basses and bassoons quietly resolve the cadence which the solo viola had left hanging in mid-air at the end of the Adagio.⁵²

All the works discussed in this chapter recall thematic material from earlier in the work. The effect here may seem less dramatic, but it is no less powerful, the resolution of the viola theme and the final tam-tam stroke bringing a profound sense of rest after ‘the blaze of a consuming vision’ of which Payne writes.⁵³

Payne’s own estimation of his achievement was ‘the building of a frame, or perhaps rather a context, to display the exceptionally rich expressive qualities and the symphonic potential in Elgar’s material’.⁵⁴ The result is indeed a persuasive demonstration that, contrary to the opinion of some commentators, Elgar’s powers of invention had not left him. Like the Cello Concerto and *Falstaff*, Symphony No. 3 was clearly going to be pared down in comparison with the earlier orchestral works: there is less thematic material,

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more economical working-out, and less opulent textures, while the first-movement exposition is placed within repeat marks. However, as Payne points out, Elgar's vision as he (Payne) translates it is 'different in its sheer breadth of emotion from any of his other symphonic works'. Thus the second movement employs a 'lighter manner' that goes 'far beyond his established symphonic practice', while the slow movement is of 'searing intensity . . . tragic in its import', with the sketches containing some of Elgar's most elliptical harmony.⁵⁵ One can only speculate how Symphony No. 3 might have been received had Elgar finished it. Beside Webern's Concerto, Op. 24, Berg's *Lulu* Suite, or Bartók's Fifth String Quartet, all written in the year of Elgar's death, it would obviously have seemed deeply conservative in technique and aesthetic outlook to a disinterested observer. And to a British public suspicious of such 'progressive' works but willing to accept the milder modernisms of native works such as Vaughan Williams's Fourth Symphony (the harsh dissonances of which serve to reinforce the conservative framework) or Britten's *A Boy was Born*, both also completed in 1934, it would hardly have seemed less so. By the standards of much twentieth-century composition, Elgar's style advanced little. He was a conservative all his life. But his final, partial vision demonstrates no less than the early ones the dangers of valuation according to a progressivist yardstick.