

Elgar: Have we been hearing what he really wrote?

By Jessica Duchon

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It is Elgar as we have never heard him before: a newly revealed version of the composer's epic Violin Concerto. The French violinist Philippe Graffin has made it his mission to resuscitate Elgar's original vision of the work, according to manuscripts that have been lying for decades in the bowels of the British Library. Graffin's breathtakingly romantic account, with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra under Vernon Handley, brings the work closer to the composer's initial intentions than any recording to date, by sifting out numerous alterations made to it by its dedicatee, the composer and violin superstar Fritz Kreisler.

Since the work is indisputably one of the greatest violin concertos in the repertoire - certainly the greatest by a British composer - it does seem extraordinary that nobody has made the content of those manuscripts widely known before. Rumours about them have been rife among cognoscenti, and lectures have occasionally been given on the subject, but Graffin is the first violinist to record the results. For him, it's the culmination of some intense detective work.

It all began years ago, in Paris, where the teenaged Graffin fell in love with the concerto, only to find that his teachers at the Paris Conservatoire did not consider it suitable material for a young French virtuoso. Graduating from the institution at just 17, Graffin "jumped on the first plane to Canada", to study with the Hungarian violinist and professor Lorand Fenyves, who let him plunge into the piece. "It was from Mr Fenyves that I first heard that Kreisler's input had been considerable," Graffin recalls. "In certain passages, he kept saying, 'This is so Kreisler!'"

Much later, learning that the British Library had the original manuscripts, Graffin's curiosity was aroused. It was the composer David Matthews who gave him the impetus to see the work in Elgar's own hand. Matthews was a guest at Graffin's Consonances music festival at St Nazaire. "He told me that the manuscripts contained many differences from the published version," Graffin says. Elgar had been a violinist himself, but nowhere near the calibre of Kreisler. "David mentioned that Elgar's violin-playing background was very different from Kreisler's, and that this could be seen in the manuscript," Graffin explains. "So I went rushing back to London to have a look for myself."

The mystery deepened with the revelation that Elgar's main instrumental adviser for the work had not been Kreisler at all, but the leader of the London Symphony Orchestra, William Reed, a close friend. "There's a well-known anecdote about the way Reed used to go round to Elgar's apartment on New Cavendish Street and play parts of the concerto from pieces of paper scattered all over the room," Graffin says. Kreisler was away on tour a great deal, and although Elgar composed the concerto with him in mind, the last-minute changes he made were incorporated into the published work and have been played as standard ever since.

In the British Library, Graffin researched in minute detail the two manuscripts and a series of drafts, comparing them note-for-note with the printed version. "With most pieces of music, there's almost no difference between the final manuscript and the published score," Graffin says. "But this was absolutely extraordinary: I counted more than 40 places where the published version is different."

Why did Kreisler change so much? "I think Elgar was worried about the playability of certain passages, often with good reason, and Kreisler, a more experienced soloist than Reed, found some excellent solutions." Other changes, though, may have been slotted in only for effect. "There are some little details that are pure Kreisler. For example, instead of a 'sforzando' for emphasis, Kreisler would put in a decorative trill or turn - his own short pieces are full of them."

So how does this change the way we hear the Elgar Violin Concerto? "It's a little like reading a private diary," says Graffin. "You may know the person well, but now you start to understand the reasons for their actions. It's a process of evolution. The music isn't only to be served; it is to be experienced. I think the plasticity of the final results doesn't matter - it's the emotions generating them that count.

"I took the notes for granted until I saw the manuscript. Then I realised that the concerto's composition was an ongoing process that probably Elgar had just had to stop in time for its publication. Otherwise he could have spent his whole life trying to figure it out! Perhaps it gives a licence to the performer, now that the source is readily available, to look at the manuscripts and make their own choice. This version makes the concerto more completely Elgar's. In the end, it belongs to him, not Kreisler."

If the Violin Concerto's premiere in 1910 did not match Elgar's original intentions, neither did that of the Cello Concerto in 1920, but for a different reason. While Elgar waited with the young soloist, Felix Salmond, to rehearse with the orchestra, the conductor Albert Coates, who was wielding the baton for Scriabin's Poem of Ecstasy in the same programme, grabbed more than his fair share of rehearsal time. Too little was left for the concerto, and the performance was a disaster. It took years for the work to recover.

The cellist Raphael Wallfisch feels a personal responsibility to redress the balance on Elgar's behalf: his wife happens to be Albert Coates's granddaughter. "The concerto has suffered from that premiere's unsatisfactory legacy," Wallfisch says. His recording, again with the RLPO, follows a new

edition of the score by Jonathan Del Mar. "Unlike the Violin Concerto," Wallfisch says, "only one actual note is different - but it's a prominent note that changes the emotional colour of the unaccompanied passage leading into the second movement. I always find, when I play it, that people around me start to look pale and anxious!"

Tying up the new recordings in a neat bow, Graffin and Wallfisch have recently founded a piano trio with the pianist Jeremy Menuhin, son of Yehudi, who recorded the Elgar Violin Concerto with Elgar himself conducting. Are these musicians united by their quest for authentic Elgar? "It's pure coincidence," says Wallfisch, smiling.

Philippe Graffin's Elgar Violin Concerto (Avie Records) and Raphael Wallfisch's Elgar Cello Concerto (Nimbus) are both released in April