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# Edward Elgar: A maestro you can bank on

## Edward Elgar's face may have been removed from the £20 note, but in the year of his 150th anniversary he remains one of this country's most popular classical music draws. Jessica Duchen reports

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Earlier this week, it was announced that the image of Sir Edward Elgar, with his trademark handlebar moustache and fathomless, dark eyes, is definitely to be taken off the £20 note. Britain's greatest composer is to be replaced with a far-less familiar face, that of the 18th-century philosopher and economist Adam Smith, along with a picture of a pin factory. The timing could hardly be worse: this year marks the 150th anniversary of Elgar's birth and celebrations of his music are in full swing up and down the country. Someone in the decision-making echelons of the Bank of England must have judged that Elgar is just not relevant to modern Britain any more.

Maybe the most surprising thing, though, is that Elgar is still incredibly popular. Musical organisations all over the UK clearly think so. It's difficult to find a British orchestra that isn't celebrating Elgar's anniversary this season. The biggest bonanza comes courtesy of the Philharmonia Orchestra and arch-Elgarian conductor Andrew Davis, who are about to launch a major festival entitled Elgar 2007, featuring a national tour with 18 concerts in 13 venues from 11 April to 2 June and bolstered by plenty of state-of-the-art resources: the composer's major works available for download from the orchestra website; a touring exhibition; a series of recitals, interviews, film shows and study days; and even a set of sound-samples and ringtones, if you so desire.

And that's just the start. The Royal Liverpool Philharmonic offers a series in May conducted by Vernon Handley, with highlights including The Dream of Gerontius in Liverpool Cathedral, and, later, violinist Philippe Graffin in a rare performance of the original version of the Violin Concerto, which he unearthed and recorded last year. The Royal Philharmonic presents an anniversary gala at the Royal Albert Hall in June, with Julian Lloyd Webber as soloist in the Cello Concerto. The Elgar Foundation is staging a three-concert celebration in the composer's native town, Worcester; the London Philharmonic brings some of Elgar's less celebrated works to the Royal Festival Hall in the autumn and, during the

summer, the Three Choirs Festival will raise a glass to a composer whose works have long been part and parcel of this popular cathedral-based event. Far from vanishing, this year Elgar is everywhere.

But why do we still care about Elgar? On the surface, it could be easy to dismiss him as dated: a Victorian gent in tweeds riding a bicycle through the Malvern Hills, composing music shot through with nostalgia and redolent of the End of Empire. His output included stately marches, introverted religious oratorios, two (and a bit) symphonies on a grand, traditional scale, a couple of concertos for slidey string soloists and a piece of orchestral fun called Enigma Variations, caricaturing his friends. He was never one for matching the latest trends. In the second decade of the 20th century, ground-breaking composers like Stravinsky, Debussy and Schoenberg appear to have passed him by, and he never responded to jazz. As for the annual bawling of "Land of Hope and Glory" during the Last Night of the Proms - well, jingoism, the spirit of England, conservatism with a small "c" and Sir Edward Elgar OM have somehow become inextricably intertwined in our national consciousness.

Still, if any of that was truly what Elgar is about, his works would have disappeared from the concert hall years ago. The music itself belies most of those preconceptions. His gift for flowing, inspired melody may seem passé, his nostalgia for a vanishing world is entirely of its pre- and post-First World War era, yet his individual voice still sings out with a sincerity and strength that goes straight to the heart. Elgar's warmth, sorrowful atmospheres and intense sensitivity had little to do with England or the British Empire, but sprang from a deeper, more personal source within his own psyche. Indeed, he spent most of his young years struggling as an outsider against the force that he's credited with representing: the British Establishment.

Elgar was born on 2 June 1857 in the hamlet of Lower Broadheath, close to Malvern and Worcester, the son of William Elgar, a piano tuner, and Ann Elgar, who had converted to Catholicism and set much store by her faith. The cottage is now a museum, its small rooms and pretty garden testament to the happiest side of the boy Edward's early childhood. The family soon moved into Worcester, where William Elgar started a music shop. Edward, who was no prodigy, received little formal education, leaving school at 15, and in music was almost entirely self-taught. He learned the violin as well as the organ and reached young adulthood with little idea of becoming anything other than a jobbing musician. He freelanced as a violinist in local orchestras and once played under the baton of the Czech composer Antonín Dvorák, who would soon be among his biggest influences. He also became bandmaster at the Worcester and County Lunatic Asylum, and penned some of his earliest works for his charges there to play.

His family's modest means and tradesman status, as well as their Catholic faith, inevitably counted against Elgar's hopes of moving up the social ladder. A romance in his early twenties with a violin student, Helen Weaver, went as far as

an engagement, which was scuppered when her parents forbade the couple to marry. Helen subsequently emigrated to New Zealand. In 1889, Elgar married Alice Roberts, the daughter of an army major-general; she had been one of his pupils and was nine years his senior. This match, too, perhaps unsurprisingly, incurred the fury of her family.

Alice was to become a vital support and spur to Elgar. But it has emerged that the ghost of his love for Helen never quite left him. It could be her character and emigration that are evoked in the most mysterious of the Enigma Variations, unnamed and quoting Mendelssohn's overture Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage. It could equally well be Helen who was the underlying inspiration for the "Windflower" themes of the Violin Concerto, one of Elgar's most personal creations, with * * his own instrument - and hers - at its core; at the concerto's head sits the typically enigmatic inscription, "Herein is enshrined the soul of..." In 1916, Helen's son, Kenneth Munro, was killed at the Battle of the Somme, and a recent film, Elgar's Enigma by the New Zealand director Annie Goldson, now suggests that this incident may have inspired Elgar's Cello Concerto. Was Elgar's sense of heartbroken nostalgia evoked for a lost world, a lost love or the conflation of both? We'll never be certain, but what is sure is that the feeling of agonising loss in his music communicates as strongly now as it did when he penned those notes.

Thanks to Alice's ambitious urgings, the newly married Elgars moved to London to be closer to the action and to give Elgar the opportunity to make himself known to musical decision-makers. At first they lived close to Crystal Palace, and Elgar was there almost every day, soaking up the concerts, immersing himself in the works of Wagner, Mendelssohn and more. The Elgars only daughter, Carice, was born the following year, 1890. But Elgar's career proved less easy to galvanise and the sojourn ended in disappointment. London, it seemed, was not for them: the fogs made them ill, and beyond the publication by Novello & Co of the overture Froissart, there seemed little hope of any breakthrough. Elgar had to resume his teaching activities in Worcestershire; eventually they admitted defeat and moved back to Great Malvern.

That, though, was not the end of Elgar's career, but the beginning. It was for the great choral festivals of the surrounding cathedral towns that he began to write the oratorios that slowly helped to build his reputation, The Black Knight, King Olaf and Caractacus among them. At Novello, he met the editor A J Jaeger, who was to be his greatest professional adviser, confidant and supporter in the years ahead; and when he was 42 years old, the German conductor Hans Richter championed the Enigma Variations, premiering them in London in 1899 to long-awaited success.

After the premiere of the First Symphony in 1908, Elgar's future finally seemed assured. Commissions and appointments flowed thick and fast: the great violinist Fritz Kreisler requested a Violin Concerto in 1910, and the next year Elgar won

the principal conductorship of the London Symphony Orchestra, produced his Second Symphony and was appointed Order of Merit. An indian summer of composition in the years during and immediately after the First World War found the mature Elgar at his finest: the String Quartet, Violin Sonata, Piano Quintet and Cello Concerto were among the masterpieces he produced. He was named Master of the Queen's Musick in 1924 and baronetcy followed in 1932.

Success, though, does not always seem to have agreed with him. Suffering a lingering insecurity, the legacy of his disadvantaged background now that he had reached the top of his profession, he often upset people with his brusqueness, touchiness and chips on both shoulders, not least about the appalling remuneration that composers tended to receive. Worse, after Alice's death in 1920, he wrote few works of any significance. Arguments persist as to why. Was it the lack of financial need? Was he too busy performing, recording and going to the races? Or did he really suffer a creative block following his bereavement?

The composer's emotional life wasn't exactly dead. He had always enjoyed close friendships with women, especially Alice Stuart-Wortley, the daughter of the painter Millais, who was married to a Tory MP; he nicknamed her "Windflower" to avoid calling her by his wife's name. After Alice Elgar died, he conceived a brief passion for the dynamic young Hungarian violinist Jelly d'Aranyi, whom he treated to expensive dinners, a trip to the British Museum and an unfortunate scene over tea and a book at his Hampstead home that left the girl "cursing old men". Later he became close to another violinist, Vera Hockman from the London Symphony Orchestra, who spent much time with him and his beloved dogs in his declining years. Nor was he lacking in any spirit of adventure: he took a six-week cruise up the Amazon in 1924, a journey lavishly recreated in the award-winning novel Gerontius by James Hamilton-Paterson.

Perhaps Elgar's lack of late output was more to do with fading fashions than with his inner life. He knew his works were going out of date and that, though now a national figurehead, he had no part in the new century's ongoing musical evolution. He was the last, perhaps the only English Romantic. British composers had never been much in favour of hearts worn on sleeves the way he wore his. Among his peers and juniors, eccentricity was certainly present, like the bizarre figures of Peter Warlock and John Foulds; so was insouciance, through Arthur Sullivan, and impressionism, through Delius and Bax. But the central European influences that Elgar espoused - Schumann, Wagner, Brahms, Dvorák and Richard Strauss - were usually held at bay. Most of the prominent Establishment composers who preceded Elgar, such as Hubert Parry and Charles Stanford, wrote largely for the church. Stanford, Elgar's bête noir, who taught at the Royal College of Music, became the most influential, his pupils including Gustav Holst, Vaughan Williams, Herbert Howells and Frank Bridge. Elgar never taught composition, though he was briefly Professor of Music at Birmingham University from 1905 to 1908, where he managed to alienate his contemporaries in a lecture series when he declared: "English music is white: it evades everything."

There was some Elgarian influence in the bravado, imaginative richness and ceremonial flair of William Walton's music. But if Elgar's romanticism had any other legacy, it was cut short by the early deaths of its most promising protagonists: George Butterworth, gunned down in 1916 at the Battle of the Somme; and the half-African Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, a Stanford pupil whom Elgar recommended for a commission from the Three Choirs Festival with the words: "He is far and away the cleverest fellow going among the young men."

Butterworth was close to Ralph Vaughan Williams, and his music, though deliciously expressive, might have evolved later along his friend's lines rather than Elgar's. But Coleridge-Taylor revered Elgar. His "The Song of Hiawatha" captured the imaginations of choral societies and his wonderful Violin Concerto of 1912 nails its colours firmly to a Romantic mast. In 1911, questioning the loss of melody, feeling and charm in the new music around him, he wrote: "Soon the builders [of art] will have the time to love again - when the turmoil is hushed somewhat - to give the world a few tender and personal touches amidst the strife." But Coleridge-Taylor died the following year aged only 37; and by that time, Romanticism, too, was well and truly dead, and not just in Britain.

What of Elgar's much-vaunted "quintessential Englishness"? It has little to do with "Land of Hope and Glory" - the composer came to hate the words, although he appreciated the royalties. Instead, it's more or less accidental, evolving from his passion for nature, which he conceived in the Malvern Hills while he was a child. "There is music in the air, music all around us, the world is full of it and you simply take as much as you require," he remarked; and on a souvenir mug from the Elgar Birthplace Museum, one can read the poetic epithet: "The trees are singing my music - or have I sung their's?" Sometimes nature's influence is more direct: the fabulous Piano Quintet of 1918, with its angular, oddly Spanish rhythms, was partly inspired by a group of gnarled trees, which, legend fancied, was a group of Spanish monks petrified in divine retribution for performing black magic. It wasn't that Elgar loved the nature around him because it was British. Rather, he loved the British landscape because of its natural beauty.

A hundred and fifty years after his birth, Elgar may be anathema to the Bank of England, but he is still recognised as arguably the greatest composer the UK has produced. As a global musical force, Britain today is virtually unmatchable in terms of its quantity and variety of live performance. But beyond Britten, Birtwistle and The Beatles, only a handful of later 20th-century British composers have emerged as even mildly significant figures in the international sphere. Elgar was not the end of an era; he was a one-off. His legacy is, in the end, little more than himself: the music, the passion, the voice of longing. But that's enough, and maybe that's why we still care about him. Even if he has to vanish from the £20 note, Elgar's own notes are likely to survive for a great deal longer.

Elgar 2007 celebrations take place around the country (www.elgar.org), starting with concerts by the Philharmonia Orchestra ( www.philharmonia.co.uk;) 08006 526 717, 11 April to 2 June.