Elgar's Violoncello Concerto

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THE ARTISTIC VALUE OF ENGLISH FOLK-DANCE

The physical and recreational benefits to be derived from the practice of folk-dance are too obvious to need setting forth. Indeed, they have perhaps somewhat obscured the artistic value of the movement.

This article cannot end more fitly than by drawing attention to a couple of enthusiastic tributes to its artistic importance,—tributes the more valuable because they come from widely different sources. The first will be found in our correspondence columns, in a letter from Mr. Tobias Matthay. The second is a quotation from an article in the *New Statesman* of August 30, 1919, from the pen of Mr. W. J. Turner—a critic who is not given to rash praise of his country when art is concerned:

Many people have heard of the English Folk-song Society who have never seen a performance of any of Mr. Cecil Sharp's pupils, and I am sure that to those

MR. WILLIAM KIMBER, HEADINGTON MORRIS DANCER

who have not seen their dancing it comes as a revelation. A demonstration was given on the lawn in the grounds of the Memorial Theatre by eight dancers, with Miss Avril as violinist and Mr. Sharp at the pianoforte. As a great admirer of the Russian Ballet I must honestly declare that never at the Russian Ballet have I seen anything so beautiful. On the grass one got pure movement without a sound except from the instruments. The effect was extraordinary. So perfectly in time and so liquid were their movements that one could have almost wept for pleasure. No one who had not seen it could imagine the pure loveliness of the Morris Jig ('Heart's Desire') danced by a single girl dancer. It is impossible to over-praise the work Mr. Cecil Sharp has been doing. It has been taken far too much for granted in the past, but I hope future producers of Shakespeare's plays will consult Mr. Sharp, for I am sure it will be to the advantage of the theatre.

How enthusiastically we should hail any foreign dancers of whom such words as the above were written! And what a pity it is that the director has such a painfully abrupt and English name as 'Sharp!' A few more syllables and a sneeze at the end would make it an asset of untold value to the Society.

ELGAR'S VIOLONCELLO CONCERTO

BY H. C. COLLES

Elgar's Violoncello Concerto (Op. 85) comes as a pendant to the chamber works in much the same way that the Violin Concerto (Op. 61) was a pendant to the first Symphony (Op. 55). The glow of his first symphonic creation was still on him when Elgar took in hand to write a violin concerto for Kreisler. He approached the work in the same buoyant spirit, and carried it through with the same exuberant delight in the construction of a big design from a wealth of highly coloured melodic tesserae. The Violin Concerto might be regarded as a second symphony with an important *violino principale* part.

When it was known that Elgar had composed a Violoncello Concerto, thought naturally reverted to the Violin Concerto and raised expectation of something in a similar vein. The work was performed, and the first impression was one of disappointment. It was a performance insufficiently rehearsed. Some people complained that the writing for the solo instrument was poor, others found that the orchestration was curiously thin. All these and many other things were said to account for the disappointment, and they had some truth in them, but those who disparaged the work most seemed to comprehend its standpoint least. Perhaps the composer had not quite realised his own standpoint. If he had he would not have employed an orchestra of the same size as that of the Violin Concerto: for the whole texture of this work is that of chamber music rather than orchestral music, of the sonata rather than the symphony. Its interest depends on the development of certain clearly defined melodic ideas used with more continuity than were those of the earlier works, but less arresting individually. Instead of the rich mosaic we have a pencil drawing, heightened by simple washes of instrumental colour, and the impression formed at a first hearing—that the amount of colour hardly justified the use of so large a paint-box—is confirmed by a study of the full score.

The Concerto is now published in an arrangement for violoncello and pianoforte by the composer, and has lost very little in the process. Anyone who has tried to play either of the Symphonies or the Violin Concerto in pianoforte arrangements knows how different is the case with them. However skilfully the thing may be done, one is always conscious of the makeshift, but here a good violoncellist and pianist can sit down to enjoy the music together

and forget if they will all about the orchestra in a duet sonata. The general form of the work can be compared to those sonatas of Beethoven's middle period described as *quasi una fantasia*, which is as far from the traditional one of the Concerto as anything could be. The essential of Beethoven's form in the two Sonatas of Op. 27 is that instead of putting the greatest intellectual energy into a first *Allegro* he reserves such forces for the *Finale*, merely using the opening to set a mood and create an atmosphere.

Elgar's opening fulfils the same function with complete freedom from pretentiousness :

Ex. 1. *Nobilmente.*

The short recitative phrase for the violoncello is a motto reappearing in the later movements and also giving melodic suggestions for their principal themes. It is not dwelt on with any insistence in this its first shape, but the violoncello in an *ad libitum* ascending passage leads the way to the *moderato* first movement, the theme of which is outlined by the strings :

Ex. 2.

The gentle undulation of this melody, with its rhythmic regularity, takes possession of the score for the next thirty-six bars. Its six-bar rhythm, always divided into sequential passages of two bars each repeated in different shades of tone and different degrees of emphasis, is curiously uneventful ; but this very fact serves its purpose in heightening the effect of the more broken rhythm when it appears in the next idea propounded by the clarinets and bassoons :

Ex. 3.

Even so slight a variation of rhythm as this becomes significant, and the phrase is susceptible of much melodic extension. The whole suggests the placidity of a quiet country in which the small details of foliage and the movements of human life seize the attention. Viewing the movement analytically, one cannot fail to regret the limitation which the constant employment of phrases of two bars imposes, but accepting this limitation, one is charmed by the varying melodic turns given to the melody which flows on in a scheme of quiet beauty developing the pastoral idea. That idea is further emphasised in the orchestration, in which clarinets and bassoons constantly alternate with the strings, while the solo instrument develops a free descant on the ideas which they suggest.

Like everything which Elgar writes, it hints at some personal experience of which we can share the feeling though not the facts. Shortly before the end of the movement the 9-8 rhythm of Ex. 2 returns, combining with that of the pastoral theme, and after one short climax of orchestral tone it sinks to a calm ending.

While the lower strings still hold the last note of the first movement, the violoncello breaks in with string *pizzicato* chords, suggesting the opening notes of the recitative, Ex. 1, and the second movement opens with a free passage in which such chords are contrasted with a fragment of what is to be its principal theme :

Solo. *Allegro molto.*

Ex. 4.

It asserts a more agitated feeling than anything which has preceded it. The whole orchestra joins in an impulsive *accelerando* and *crescendo*, which is answered by a fine declamatory *cadenza*.

The movement to which this leads is an *allegro molto*, in which the solo instrument is in the foreground, developing the idea of Ex. 4 with brilliant scale passages, using almost entirely the higher register of the instrument. The orchestration is exceedingly light, flutes and clarinets combining in duet passages with the soloist, and as in the first movement, although here the mood is more vigorous, the continuity of the texture is remarkable. The second subject itself makes its appearance as a conclusion of what has preceded it :

Ex. 5.

The figure A is immediately taken up by the orchestra and emphasised, producing a strong element of contrast with the perpetual movement of the developments from the principal theme.

Each time it comes it sheds a ray of strong light on the half-tones in which its surroundings are placed; but again the movement is inconclusive. The light flickers and goes out in a *Coda* which seems intentionally designed to evade any suggestion of climax such as makes the conventionally-effective ending of a *scherzo*.

There is a silence before passing to the third movement. This is a perfect little miniature slow movement in B flat major, 3-8 time, some sixty bars in length. The solo violoncello and the strings are closely combined, and of the wind instruments only clarinets, bassoons, and two horns are used to give an occasional touch of colour. It is so continuous in design, that it would be impossible to quote a fragment as a representative theme. But for the fact that it ends on the dominant chord, it would be completely independent of its surroundings; but this ending links it to the last movement.

As in the case of the Beethoven sonatas pointed to as a parallel in form, it is the *Finale* which sums up the purpose of the ideas suggested in the earlier movements.

The orchestra enters with a strong, dance-like rhythm, which the solo instrument presently shows to be connected with the recitative of Ex. 1:

Ex. 6. *Allegro*.

(a)

SOLO.
Moderato quasi recit.

(b)

The recurrence of Elgar's favourite *nobilmente* direction identifies the mood of this recitative with the opening one, but the application of the term to such passages as these is in itself a change of view from what the earlier works suggested as his interpretation of nobility. Even in the Pianoforte Quintet *nobilmente* is associated with a grandiloquent manner. The passage where it appears shortly before the end of the *Finale* in that work is one where the strings present a version of the principal theme in a unison *fortissimo*; but here *nobilmente* seems definitely dissociated from anything like a display of magnificence. The writer of the programme notes to the first performance (Mr. Henry Coates) said, 'As to the poetic and emotional basis of the work one has the composer's sanction for saying that it is perhaps appropriately expressed in the term *nobilmente* which is prefixed to the beginning of the score.' And since the whole work seems of set purpose to avoid the type of emotion with which Elgar used to associate the word, one can only feel that he is giving a more intimate meaning to it in applying it here.

The recitative is expanded into a stronger *cadenza* than that which preceded the second movement, so that each time it recurs as an introduction throughout the Concerto greater emphasis is laid upon it. It is cut short by a

single chord on the full orchestra, and then the *Allegro* enters, the solo violoncello leading with the dance theme (Ex. 6a), now in E minor and expanded into an 8-bar tune.

With this idea the whole atmosphere of the work becomes clearer. Positive statement takes the place of elusive suggestion. One is reminded of the *Finale* of Brahms's double Concerto, not in any textual resemblance, but simply in this emergence into full daylight by the arrival of a sharply-cut rhythm. There are a number of contrasting episodes concerned in the development of the movement, amongst which the following is the most definite in its contrast of sentiment:

Ex. 7. SOLO.
Allargando.

A flowing semiquaver figure for the violoncello, punctuated by light chords and figures of accompaniment on the strings and wood-wind, carries on the rhythmic design of the first theme and adds to its interest:

Ex. 8.

SOLO.
p

Str. Cor.

Fag. Cl. Str. Fl. Ob.

That first theme itself has a very extended development in the middle of the movement, in the course of which sweeping *arpeggios* over the strings of the solo instrument accompany modifications of the tune on the orchestra. A complete recapitulation, more brilliantly scored than the first statement, leads to a *poco più lento*, one of those extended *Codas* which are frequently amongst the most interesting features of Elgar's work.

The dance rhythm dies away upon a low C sharp, and the time changes to one of four slow crotchets. Over the rhythmical pulsations of this note, used as a pedal, the strings introduce a chromatic figure which is strongly insisted upon:

Ex. 9.

This is worked to a tense emotional climax, at the height of which the violoncello enters *con passione* with a phrase of melody which was important in the third movement.

It is treated in dialogue between the soloist and the full orchestra until, after a strenuous outburst of tone, a *diminuendo* dwells thoughtfully upon another feature from the slow movement, including a repeated rise of an octave in the solo part against a chromatically descending bass. All movement ceases upon a delicately poised dominant chord. Then the recitative (Ex. 1) breaks in practically in its original form. The dance rhythm (Ex. 6a) is resumed *pianissimo* by the orchestra, and with a rapid *crescendo* is carried quickly to a vivid ending.

This account has referred with some fulness to the instrumentation, although it was pointed out at the beginning that it is a much less conspicuous feature of the work than is usual with Elgar. The published pianoforte score gives very little indication of the instruments used, in fact the beginning of the second movement is the only place where instruments are indicated at all, and therefore it seemed that those who become acquainted with the Concerto through the publication might be helped by some description of its colouring. It is, for example, important to know that the third movement is scored for a very much smaller orchestra than the rest. Personally, I cannot help wishing that the whole had been treated as a work for solo and small orchestra, in fact as a chamber concerto of which we have so few modern examples. The whole style of the work would favour such treatment, and the balance of solo and *tutti* would be more surely found. Perhaps it is not too much to hope that without abandoning the original score the composer will issue some time an arrangement for small orchestra. A still more important consideration is that the work should be heard again in a performance for which every detail has been fully thought out. When this is done, and when it is listened to with the knowledge of its content that the published score can give, there can be very little doubt that the consistent beauty of thought which sustains it will be fully appreciated.

MODERN BRITISH COMPOSERS

By EDWIN EVANS

VIII.—HERBERT HOWELLS

It is impossible to devote prolonged attention to British composers who have come forward during the last twenty years without becoming conscious of a strong endeavour, conscious in some, unconscious in others, to realise that peculiarly elusive quality which we term the English atmosphere. In so far as it is conscious it necessarily comes under the heading of nationalism, a word the abuse of which threatens to become a bugbear. Nationalism is

not an ideal. It is at best a means to an end, which when the end is accomplished, loses its artistic value and, as we have seen with the Russian composers, is quickly dropped by those who feel sufficiently emancipated to dispense with it. It is an antithesis to internationalism which, properly understood, is an ideal condition for all art. But in music, internationalism has grown to mean two definitely opposite things. The development of musical history has burdened us with a false internationalism which consists in holding the door wide open to all that is German or in harmony with the German tradition, and keeping it barely ajar for whatever music may develop independently of that tradition. During the war this was commonly called being broad-minded, and if any of us criticised it, we were reminded that 'art has no frontiers.' It is not internationalism but imperialism which holds frontiers in such light esteem. Much of the greatest art in history has existed precisely by virtue of its frontiers. The ancient pride that divided culture into Hellenic and barbaric had no doubts about frontiers, but who can deny its fruitfulness? But there is a true internationalism which consists in awarding sympathetic attention to all artistic endeavour whatever the tradition may be to which it owes allegiance. That is the state towards which current musical opinion is striving, and in the transition from the false to the true internationalism, the temporary phase of nationalism has rendered incalculable services—services whose value outweighs the theoretical objections that one may have to the self-conscious, or even aggressive elements which helped to foster it. Such objections are frequently made, for instance, to the use of folk-song as thematic material, and they might be valid if the music which results from the technical exploitation of traditional material represented the final goal to which its authors were striving, but I know of no composer who so regards it. It is one of several means of transition from the false internationalism which had a peculiar regard for an idiom plainly though indirectly derived from German folk-song, to a true internationalism in which all idioms alike will be admitted to full citizenship.

It is necessary to bear these considerations in mind when turning to the work of Herbert Howells, as few of the younger composers are so much exposed to misinterpretation. His compositions are rich in traits which, whether they have any affinity with folk-song or not, are recognisably English; but if these were cited as evidence of nationalist tendencies, there is little doubt that he would promptly and energetically, if not wrathfully, dissociate himself from any such movement. There is no contradiction in this. There might have been twenty years ago, when it was practically impossible for an English composer to write, otherwise than self-consciously, music that was recognisably English. Then only those who deliberately avoided it could escape the classic idiom, and it is the weakness of nationalism that it is deliberate. Now the tyranny of idiom, if not