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ELGAR'S QUINTET FOR PIANOFORTE AND STRINGS (Op. 84).

By H. C. COLLES.

The analyst, whether in chemistry or music, examines his substance to find out what it is made of, but in the latter case he must never lose sight of what it is for it is the art and not the science of the thing which gives it value. And the musical analyst must also be an advocate; he must try to bring conviction that the thing exists apart from its ingredients. That is what makes it difficult to analyse the latest and greatest of Elgar's chamber works, the Quintet for pianoforte and strings in A, Op. 84. Not that there is any doubt about it. For my own part, when I first heard the Quintet at the end of a concert which had contained both Elgar's Violin Sonata and his String Quartet (Opp. 82 and 83) it brought a flood of new life to the senses. I felt that despite the beauties of the other two, here was something infinitely stronger, something which said what neither Elgar nor anyone else had said before, and said it right.

Then the score was published, and I sat down to the study of it. After all, what can one say? The features lie clear upon the page. There are no rhythmic intricacies to unravel, no strange harmonies to the appreciation of which the eye may help the ear. The strings are used for no 'curious effects'; the pianoforte technique is such that any decent player will master it in an hour or two. Here lies the difficulty: to separate the elements of its composition and examine each minutely in its own test-tube may be to send the reader away with the impression that after all 'there is nothing much in it,' it can all be made to look so very obvious.

The Quintet is essentially a work in which the things which count are not the things which one can quote. It is a work of relationships, not one of epigrams. The words which here connect the quotation of its salient features can give only the poorest suggestion of its main content. But that is only another way of saying that it is a work to play, not to talk about—in fact, that it is music.

The whole is contained in a framework of three movements, the middle one being an *Adagio*, so that all that bundle of subtle sensibilities which the greatest composers, and Elgar with them, have expressed under the label *Scherzo* find no place here. Apart from the actual connection of the movements by the use of the same subject-matter, one mood pervades and unifies the whole work, and the *Adagio*—which never actually uses subject-matter from either of the two other movements—both carries on emotional suggestions from the first movement and prefigures what is to come in the *Finale*. With this unity of feeling there is also a progress of expression. The *Finale* enriches and amplifies all that we have passed through in the earlier stages.

There is a sense of reserved power, of hidden possibilities, in the first sounds that we hear. The pianoforte propounds its theme softly in three

octaves, while the detached figures of the strings mutter impatiently against it. (In this quotation and elsewhere the score is compressed):

Ex. 1. *Moderato*. $\text{♩} = 76$.
STRINGS.

The musical notation for Example 1 shows a string quartet and a piano part. The strings play a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, while the piano part provides harmonic support with chords and single notes. Dynamics include *pp*, *mf*, *p*, and *cres.*

In contrast with this idea is set a phrase for strings, the delicate chromaticism of which is like a plaintive question to the positive statement of the other:

Ex. 2. Str.
espress.

The musical notation for Example 2 shows a string quartet playing a chromatic phrase. The dynamics are *p* and *pp*.

Without any expansion of these primary ideas the composer plunges straight into a vigorous *Allegro* with the following:

Ex. 3. Strings.
Allegro.
Allegro. $\text{♩} = 132$.
Piano. *f*

The musical notation for Example 3 shows a string quartet and a piano part in a fast tempo. The strings play a rhythmic pattern, while the piano part provides harmonic support. Dynamics include *f*.

The strings are massed in octaves on the broad rising theme, and the features given here are immediately developed at some length.

It has been remarked—and with some truth—that this theme is not a particularly powerful one. If one regards the movement as an *Introduction* and *Allegro*, and this as the official first subject of the latter, it is at least legitimate to suggest that it is hardly strong enough to bear the stress which its position gives it. But the context goes to show that this is not Elgar's view. He does not, in point of fact, throw his weight heavily on this idea. It is merely one in a chain of ideas which belong to a first subject group, including the *Moderato* themes (Exx. 1 and 2), both of which are equally important in the highly-developed movement before us. This theme (Ex. 3) rises to a passion of energy in a string passage *con fuoco*, above which the pianoforte declaims the six chords with which it opened, and the whole breaks off on an abrupt cadence (A minor), succeeded by a prolonged silence.

Next, the first phrase of Ex. 2 steals in again on the strings—*moderato, molto espressivo*. Its question cannot be disposed of by an explosion of energy; it begins to answer itself in what follows, a subdued episode (A major) in which the two violins lead, over a pianoforte accompaniment:

Ex. 4. VI.

Pfte.

It is clear that the harmony here owes something to the suggestion of Ex. 2, and the broken rhythm to that of the string parts in Ex. 1. The threads of the *moderato* are already beginning to be drawn together. It sways to and fro with a feminine waywardness, heightened presently by the *pizzicato* chords which the lower strings add to the accompaniment. Presently with an inconspicuous modulation into E major the rhythm hardens, as it were, and a tune emerges which, if one may be forgiven an antiquated term, is the true 'second subject':

Ex. 5.

All parts sink their identities in the expression of this peculiarly 'Elgarian' theme, with that 6th rising and falling again which has been Elgar's own

ever since the days of 'Caractacus.' Hesitation and questioning give way before it; for the time being he revels in a wealth of tone—now *fortissimo*, now *pianissimo*—but always dwelling with fervour on this one feature.

However, the sense of disquiet comes again as the strings begin to break their rhythm into the detached phrases of Ex. 1, and the whole of that idea proposes itself for development in the key of B minor. The parts are reversed. The strings give out the cold plain-song melody while the pianoforte takes up the commentary. It assumes a more lyrical character in a form of which the pianoforte part is quoted here:

Ex. 6.

the strings sustaining the melody and enriching the harmony. After repetition and expansion the violoncello also introduces:

Ex. 7.

which comes from the pianoforte part of Ex. 3, and each of the strings enters separately with this above the arpeggio accompaniment of the pianoforte. The plot thickens when again the impatient semiquavers are added above this in the form of:

Ex. 8.

&c.

and rises to an intense climax *giusto* dominated by these two features. The pianoforte again comes into a position of leadership with its theme from Ex. 3 (and Ex. 7) in bold chords. The strings break off as it marches in, *grandioso*; they renew their clamour in an agitated *crescendo* of the triplet quavers (see Ex. 3). Three times the pianoforte makes its assertion, each time in a more aggressive statement of a new harmonic sequence. The strings respond with increasingly vigorous

passages until, with a deliberate *ritenuto*, they mount the scale to restore the theme (Ex. 3) in its entirety.

We are now technically at the return of the first subject heralding the recapitulation; emotionally what follows is the very crown and zenith of the development. The exuberant spirit of Ex. 3 is carried on and wonderfully expanded. Great use is made of the triplet figures in sequential passages begun thus:



and ranging widely over various keys, till at last the triplets get intensified into the form of the semiquaver figures in Ex. 1, and then Ex. 4 makes its reappearance. But its second coming is quite different from its first. There is no sudden cessation of energy, no interpolation of the questioning Ex. 2. On the contrary, Ex. 4 strikes in with bold chords in the pianoforte part, arriving on the crest of the wave. There is a pause, a sort of stoppage of the breath as its presence is recognised, and then strings and pianoforte alike burst into a strenuous presentation of it, *fortissimo, con fuoco*, as far as possible in mood from the hesitancy of its original statement. The climax is reached and the energy wanes, so that when Ex. 5 ultimately succeeds in its place it comes in a tender and reflective mood. Though sequences of key are comparatively unimportant in modern sonata-form we may note in passing that in this recapitulation Ex. 4 is mainly in E and Ex. 5 mainly in B, that is to say, avoiding the conventional return to the prevailing tonality (A).

The return is left for the *Coda*, which is concerned with the *moderato* themes (Exx. 1 and 2), gradually returning them to their elementary forms after all the powerful crises of the movement are past. The *Coda* begins with a version of Ex. 6, the rhythmic movement of which gradually subsides until over a *tremolo* A on the pianoforte Ex. 2 makes itself heard in its original form on the strings. When the pianoforte answers this with Ex. 1, also in its original form, the strings burst in with a dramatic *sforzando* of the semiquaver passages. But the protest fails; their murmurs die away as the melody sinks to a perfect cadence and the movement ends *pianissimo*.

The music is resumed in the *Adagio* (E major, 3-4 time) by the strings alone, in a calmer atmosphere than any which the first movement suggested. The viola leads with the principal melody here given, the two violins and violoncello harmonizing it very simply:



When the pianoforte enters it is to add an embroidery of quavers to the outline of the strings, and the tune is developed, more especially the features of its second phrase, at considerable length but without any departure from its principal key. A second thought is found in the next quotation, where the new departure of the pianoforte is checked by the more impulsive entry of the strings, in which something of the mood, though not the form, of Ex. 2 obtrudes upon and breaks the placid surface of the music:



(Compare the violoncello arpeggio in Exx. 11 and 2.)

From this arises a fresh tune in the first violin part which, while rhythmically connected with the principal melody (Ex. 10), has lost the serenity of its original:



It is taken up by the violoncello and leads to some development of the arpeggio figure from Ex. 11, and from these elements and more especially the syncopated rhythms of Ex. 11 the music flows in emotional complexity. Presently the viola again introduces the melody of Ex. 10, now in the key of F major and over an elaborate pianoforte accompaniment in triplet quavers. It is the first phrase of the tune which now bears the stress, and its character is heightened by a new harmonization which induces modulation through the flat keys. The tune soars aloft on one instrument after another, while the bass is constantly impelled downwards, giving a great expansion of view; presently the syncopated rhythms of Ex. 11 are joined to its features and a

passionate climax is reached. At the culminating moment the rhythm tightens into a new figure of drooping paired quavers, the strings coinciding with the right-hand pianoforte part (here quoted):

Tempo giusto.

Ex. 13.

8va.....

PIANO.

3 3

and the strength ebbs through a long sinking sequence, *poco a poco più tranquillo al Tempo primo*.

From this point to the end of the movement there is no new material, though the old is treated in the light of past experience and the recapitulation is very far from being a repetition. The *Tempo 1^{mo}* is of course the full return of Ex. 10 with its first harmony played broadly by the strings over a pianoforte accompaniment in triplet quavers. The discussion of Exx. 11 and 12 with the ideas arising from them is very much condensed, the latter being limited to one emphatic statement. The principal theme (Ex. 10) has so burnt itself into the composer's imagination that he cannot bear to be parted from it for very long, and he seems in haste to reach the *Coda*, where he can ruminate over its features with affectionate recollection. In the course of the *Coda* the violoncello arpeggio from Ex. 11 mingles with the dreams of the principal tune, and just before the end features from Exx. 11 and 10, the beginning of the one and the cadence of the other, are merged together in a final reconciliation.

It is significant that the *Finale* opens *Andante* with the subject-matter of Ex. 2; thus not only carrying us back to an important aspect of the first movement, but also strengthening the impression of an identity, already hinted at, existing between that theme and the passage with which the *Adagio* ended (Ex. 11).

Its question is again propounded, first gently, then forcibly by the strings, and the pianoforte, taking up the sinuous arpeggio of the violoncello, sweeps it into a semiquaver figure which rushes through an *accelerando* of four bars to an emphatic chord. A rhetorical pause is followed by the bold entry of the idea which now takes possession of the course of events, and is 'the conclusion of the whole matter':

Ex. 14. STRINGS.
Allegro. ♩ = 126. Con dignità.

f. 8ves.

PIANO.

cres.

Played in octaves by the strings, with the bald support of detached phrases of chords on the pianoforte, its strong major character is at once unmistakable. Immediately upon this plain statement follows an expansion in which the melody leaps by ever-widening intervals, and the prevalent rhythm of the first bar becomes more and more insistent. A whirling figure of arpeggio grows up in the pianoforte part as the strings expound this rhythm. The idea is driven home by a firmly-knit re-statement of the tune (Ex. 14), leading to a climax at which Elgar's favourite *Nobilmente* makes its appearance as a direction for the first time in this score. From this point the tide of energy again recedes, and passing through a *diminuendo* in which the melodic contours become less precipitous, the theme at last evaporates in the upper registers of the strings. The pianoforte now enters with a new subject:

Ex. 15.

simile.

Pfte. *p*

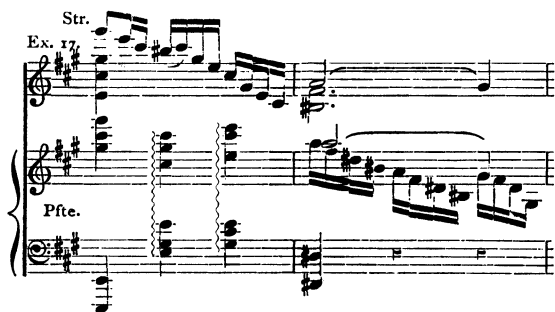
Str.

less determined in character than the last, but impelled by a nervous, restless motion. The strings join in, and the chromatic sequence of its later bars is developed until the strings brush it

aside with running arpeggio figures in triplet quavers leading to a resolute passage in which the two forces, strings and pianoforte, answer one another antiphonally :



This recalls something of the latter part of the first movement (compare Ex. 9), and combining with features from Ex. 15 brings presently a resumption of the principal theme (Ex. 14), now in the dominant key, E major. It is only a brief reference; the composer turns from it almost petulantly with an impulsive new figure :



and the cadence in the key of F sharp minor, towards which the music takes its course, is reached by a passage which includes a noteworthy figure in the viola part :



We now reach the middle section where development of the main material would normally be expected, but this is refused. All of what follows until the definite return of the principal subject is in the nature of a big parenthesis. It might be compared to the middle subject of the old Rondo form, but its ideas are definitely reminiscent of the course which has been traversed in the earlier movements. A long mysterious passage over a sustained C sharp in which the parts move about in shadowy arpeggio figures of varying shapes prepares the way. Then a version of Ex. 1 appears in hollow-sounding chords. It is

dismissed with a reference to Ex. 17, and the viola figure of Ex. 18, and then the two violins *con sordino* suggest the ghost of Ex. 5 with a tenderness that marks the composer's special love for its outline. It too is interrupted by the viola figure (Ex. 18) running up the scale and shifting the tonality, but it persists till a passage of strong declamatory chords dispels it. The vision of the past is driven away by the return of Ex. 14 with its broad daylight character banishing the night, for though it enters softly in the lower strings it takes complete possession at once and passes direct to further development of its own features. Nevertheless, save for one spasmodic *fortissimo* the general colour of the recapitulation is subdued. As in the first movement, Elgar refuses to repeat the same music in the same mood; he shows us all the time fresh aspects of his thought. He has a long course before him; from this point onwards he continually gathers an accumulating strength until the work ends in a blaze of light. Thematically he passes in review all the aspects of the first part of the movement, included in the quotations Exx. 14, 15, and 16, finally reaching an apotheosis of them in the reappearance of Ex. 15 *grandioso* and a last triumphant reference to Ex. 14.

The difference of workmanship between this movement and the first have by now been made sufficiently clear. While the first takes a number of extraneous ideas of more or less equal importance, draws them into relation with one another and shows their cohesion, the *Finale* is dominated by the overmastering personality of one idea, to which all others not only in its immediate environment, but in what has gone before, are made tributary. In order to bring out this fact it has been necessary to pass over many details on which it would be interesting to dwell. I must hope that this sketch of the structural outline of the whole Quintet has shown that, far from being a fortuitous patch-work in sonata form, the work is sustained by a single emotional impulse, multiform in its expression but constant in its aim. Often we find the composer looking about him, sometimes we have seen him look back. But always he presses forward, and keeping always the end in view he leads us on till at last, the end reached, he leaves us with the sense of a great and satisfying experience.

Interludes.

Here are three recent utterances on a fact so familiar that most of us have long since forgotten it :

The mention of singers, by the way, reminds me that they are, generally speaking, the least musically educated of all executants.—(Sir Henry Wood, in the *Sunday Evening Telegram* of August 17.)

My own objection to the prima donna is that, as a rule, she represents merely tone and technique without intelligence. I am sure that some day an American genius will invent an instrument that will be to singing what the pianola is to the piano; and then the prima donna's occupation will be gone.—(Mr. Ernest Newman, in 'A Musical Motley'.)

All the great song-writers of the world have laboured in vain so far as the diva is concerned.—(Mr. Edwin Evans, quoted in the *Observer* of October 5.)