

# ELGAR'S MUSIC FOR ST GEORGE'S CHURCH WORCESTER

by CHRISTOPHER KENT  
*Lecturer in Music, University of Reading*

Address given at the Annual General Meeting, 25 June 1983

IN 1829 the Catholic Emancipation Act was passed by Parliament, and in the same year the Roman Catholic community in Worcester began worship in its newly-completed church of St George. A tradition of performing choral and instrumental settings of the Ordinary, and elaborate motets at the Benediction and Offertory at High Mass began to evolve. The repertoire was drawn from the works of Classical and early Romantic composers with settings by Haydn, Mozart, Pergolesi, Hummel, and Weber. 'The character of the music and its rendering attracted many good singers, both Catholic and Protestant, to join the choir' wrote Hubert Leicester, who also quotes from a report of the performance given by the St George's musicians at the opening of Hereford Roman Catholic church in 1839:

We have seldom been fortunate enough to hear more exquisite performances of sacred music . . . The band and chorus were chiefly composed of the vocal and instrumental performers in the Catholic choir of Worcester,—a choir which is justly allowed to be one of the most distinguished and talented in the West of England.

This was the situation when William Henry Elgar, at that time not yet a Roman Catholic, was appointed organist in 1842, a post he was to hold until c1883. Initially, at least, he appears to have maintained the tradition, albeit with professional stiffening from his friends among the vocal and instrumental personnel of touring opera companies.<sup>1</sup>

His second son, Edward, the future composer, played the organ at Mass for the first time on 14 July 1872, at the age of 15, and so began an involvement with the music of St George's that was to

<sup>1</sup>For these references to the music at St George's, Worcester, see Hubert A. Leicester, *Notes on Catholic Worcester* (Ebenezer Baylis & Son, Worcester, 1928, particularly pp.33-5).

continue almost unbroken until 1888. In this paper I shall endeavour to survey Elgar's compositions for his church through the fifteen years c1873-88.

An incomplete Fugue in G minor for organ, one of Elgar's earliest surviving compositions (now part of Add. MS 49973A in the British Library [BL]), is believed to date from the early 1870s. It reflects his self-tuition both from the organ tutors of Rinck and Best and from Cherubini's *Course on Counterpoint and Fugue*. The latter is a rigorous and thorough method: part one covering species counterpoint for two to eight voices, imitation, and double counterpoint: and part two, fugue with exercises. It is in the light of the competence of this and other early contrapuntal sketches in manuscript that Elgar's professed ignorance of contrapuntal theory in later life is not to be taken too seriously. In this essay, the four-part exposition is complete, including a redundant entry and a regular countersubject. A facsimile of part of the MS appears in *An Elgar Companion*, ed. Christopher Redwood (Sequoia, Ashbourne, 1982).

[At this point, a recording of Dr Kent's performance of the G minor Fugue fragment was played.]

Elgar's music was essentially instrumental rather than vocal, and it may be suggested that his early encounters with movements from Viennese Classical Masses may lie at the root of his mature habit of deriving vocal lines from instrumental textures. The extent to which Elgar had also immersed himself in the Classical orchestral repertoire is reflected in the *Credo*, surviving in the Jesuit Archive (MS 18/2/2/2), composed in July 1873 (under the pseudonym 'B. Pappenheim') on a *pot-pourri* of themes from Beethoven's 5th, 7th, and 9th symphonies and one from Schubert's 9th. This practice was not without parallel in the 19th century, as witness an adaptation from Beethoven's 3rd symphony quoted by Nicholas Temperley, *The Music of the English Parish Church* (Cambridge University Press, 1979, ii, p.135), but in Elgar's case its real significance lay perhaps in its value as an exercise in key relationships which are dramatically appropriate to the text. After beginning with the opening of the A minor Allegretto of Beethoven's 7th symphony (EXAMPLE 1), he moves flatwards through F major ('Genitum non factum') to begin the central 'et incarnatus est'

section with the beginning of the Adagio of Beethoven's 9th symphony transposed into A flat major (EXAMPLE 2). He then alters the word-order of the text and repeats the phrase 'crucifixus . . .' as a kind of ritornello. This is set to the opening theme of Schubert's 'Great' C major symphony, changed to the minor mode, and extended sequentially. At 'et resurrexit' he returns to the tonic major (A) with the second subject group of the first movement of Beethoven's 5th symphony (EXAMPLE 3). Viewed as a whole, the key structure of this piece anticipates Elgar's mature preference for flatwards or 'plagal' key relationships which he outlined in one of his rare technical discourses in a letter to Jaeger which Percy M. Young prints in *Letters to Nimrod . . . 1897-1908* (Dennis Dobson, 1965, p.276).

Four years later, in 1877, Elgar had acquired the technical ability and confidence to compose a setting of the *Credo* unaided (this is now also in *BL Add. MS 49973A*). Although there is little to commend its bland opening (EXAMPLE 4), some powerful dynamic contrasts compensate for moments of insecure part-writing. The conclusion (EXAMPLE 5) sports an appalling passage of enharmonic chromaticism which would appear to relate to his work from Charles Catel's *Treatise on Harmony*, especially sections on 'avoided cadences', 'non resolutions of progressions', and 'chromatic and enharmonic modulations from C major to every major and minor key'. Catel's work was known to Elgar through an English translation by Mary Cowden Clarke.

In the following year he took the opportunity to write a purely instrumental piece for the church, using an ensemble of two flutes, two oboes, clarinet, and strings. It is most probable that this included members of what was called the 'Shed' wind quintet.<sup>2</sup> The piece is entitled *Intonation*, a form not commonly found after about the mid-17th century. The Intonations of the Renaissance and Baroque are normally toccata-like flourishes of diatonic chordal sequences played on the organ to set the pitch for the choir. In the

<sup>2</sup>So called because it rehearsed in the garden shed of the Leicester family in Worcester. The five sketch books used by Elgar between May 1878 and late 1882, now in the possession of Dr Percy M. Young, are known as the 'Shed Books'. They contain not only drafts of his music for this quintet but similar material which relates to his church music and to other secular works of that period.

first section of Elgar's example the winds and strings are contrasted antiphonally (EXAMPLE 6). The unison opening theme was reworked in 1879 as the first subject of *Shed No. 6* for wind quintet (*BL Add. MSS 60316A-E*).

Elgar's first composition for both voices and instruments was performed on 29 June 1879: a motet for four-part chorus and a small ensemble of flute, oboe, (clarinet?), and strings to the text:

Domine salvum fac Reginam nostram Victoriam et exaudi nos  
in die qua invocaverimus te. Gloria Patri . . . (&c).

As Queen Victoria's Coronation took place on 28 June 1838, this motet (now in *Shed Book IV*, pp. 42-6) would appear to have been composed to mark the 41st anniversary of that event.

The style of the opening orchestral passage is clearly Classical, over a repeat of which the voices enter in unison. The contrasting second theme in the dominant for voices alone, and the return of the opening as a quasi-recapitulation before the Gloria suggest that Elgar was beginning to experiment with sonata structure (EXAMPLE 7).

His interest in sonata form is confirmed by an intriguing recomposition of the second movement of Mozart's F major Violin sonata of 1788 (K.547) as a *Gloria* (*BL Add. MS 49973A*) made in the following year, 1880. As this is really a piano sonata with obbligato violin it was comparatively straightforward for Elgar to transfer the piano part to the organ, suppress the violin part, leaving the way clear for the text to be sung by the choir, either in simple chordal style, or fitted to the melodies with varying degrees of fluency or clumsiness (EXAMPLE 8).

The year 1880 also saw the composition of two settings of the hymn 'O Salutaris Hostia' which were eventually to be the first of Elgar's church compositions to be published.<sup>3</sup> A further setting for solo voice and organ, to be found in a manuscript now at the Elgar Birthplace, is dated 17 April 1882, and this also exists in an incomplete version scored for large orchestra (*Shed Book I*, p.10). (EXAMPLE 9).

<sup>3</sup>(i) In F for SATB and Organ in *The Complete Benediction Manual*, ed. A. E. Tozer (Cary, 1898). (ii) In E flat for SATB and Organ in *Modern Church Music for Catholic Choirs*, ed. A. E. Tozer (Cary, 1889).

The Romantic traits of this piece, particularly the suave melodic contours, and sensitive chromatic shadings suggest that the Classical pastiche phase of Elgar's evolution is concluding. A series of 19th-century assimilations —Dvorak, Schumann, Verdi, and Wagner, to name but a few—now begin to impinge on his 18th-century foundations. From this amalgam what is quintessentially Elgar emerges. The first hint of this in his church music is a setting of the Offertory text from the Proper for the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity: 'Benedictus sit Deus Pater . . .' It is scored for four-part chorus, strings and organ, and is dated 7 May 1882 (Shed Book V, pp. 26-8), but sadly it is incomplete. Yet, from the wistful melodic undulations and delicate nuances in dynamics of its compound-time metre it is clear that Elgar is discovering his own voice. This music (EXAMPLE 10) is certainly not unprophetic of the *Serenade for Strings*, Op. 80.

During the winter of 1883-4 W. H. Elgar was forced to resign his post at St. George's. His son's sketch books contain no more music for the church until after he was appointed organist in his own right in November 1885 following a short interregnum by a Mr Foster. Discipline in the choir appears to have become lax during the interregnum, so much so that at the Feast of the Assumption in 1886 Elgar and his choirmaster Hubert Leicester issued the following ultimatum to the members:

In order to put the choir on a satisfactory footing and to ensure regular and punctual attendance at the Services and Rehearsals, we find it necessary to request you to sign the enclosed Conditions of Membership and to return them to the Choirmaster, before the end of the present month, if you wish to remain a Member.

EDWARD ELGAR Organist.

HUBERT LEICESTER Choirmaster

—Jesuit Archive MS 18/2/2/2.

Some of Elgar's compositions for St George's of the period 1886-88 are more widely known. From 1886 these include a chant for the *Stabat Mater* (MS at the Elgar Birthplace, in G; incomplete in F in BL Add. MS 49973A) and some 27 chants for the Litany, of which four were published by Cary in 1888 as *Four Litanies of the B.V.M.* The three motets of Op. 2: *Ave Verum Corpus*, *Ave Maria Gratia Plena*, and *Ave Maris Stella* date from c1887, though No. 1

awaited publication until 1902, Nos. 2 and 3 until 1907 (all by Novello).

The manuscript of *Ave Verum Corpus* (again, BL Add. MS 49973A), entitled 'In memoriam W.H. obit. Jan. 27 1887', has two underlays: the Gradual 'Ave Verum' and the Offertorium from the Missa pro defunctis. Elgar noted on the manuscript that the melody was 'very like "Love Divine" in *The Daughter of Jairus*' by John Stainer. A case of unconscious recollection? Perhaps so, for when Stainer's cantata was first performed in 1878 (Worcester Three Choirs Festival) Elgar played in the orchestra. All three motets were revised before publication. In the case of *Ave Verum Corpus* the end was lengthened by six bars (EXAMPLE 11).

The visit of the Bishop of Birmingham to St George's on 9 October 1888 to inaugurate branches of the 'Apostleship of Prayer' and the 'League of the Sacred Heart' occasioned a new motet: *Ecce Sacerdos Magnus*, the Gradual at the Missa de Confessore Pontifice. Elgar had to work fast, as he later related in a letter to C. W. Buck:

Our Bishop has been down . . . & for the special service some special things had to be sung for which we had no music . . . I had to set to work and compose it and copy out the parts! Had to get it in anyhow & broke my neck doing [it]. Anyway the leading paper says, the new composition was 'exquisite' so I suppose 'twas good enough . . .

—*Letters of Edward Elgar*, ed. Percy M. Young (Bles, 1956, p.38).

This piece is an example of the budding professional composer in Elgar, producing the goods to order and with due concern for the abilities and limitations of the performers involved—'the choir is awful and no good is to be done with them', he wrote in a letter also given by Dr Young (p.56)—thus the 'safe' unison opening. Yet it projects the accentual patterns of the text expansively, and with an air of solemnity that befitted the occasion. If Elgar's hand was restrained by the modest capabilities of his choir, some compensation was at hand with the instrumentalists who were available. Although *Ecce Sacerdos Magnus* was published for four-part chorus with organ by Cary in 1888, it was accompanied by orchestra at its first performance. The autograph band parts survive in BL Add. MS 58054 for oboe, 2 clarinets in A, bassoon, 2 trumpets in A,

trombone, timpani, and strings (probably 4,2,2,2,1). Even the fairly capacious west gallery of St George's must have been pretty crowded. The scoring is secure and effective, with the climaxes sonorously amplified, and more delicate nuances of varied tone colour that fore-shadow Elgar's mature mastery of the orchestra.<sup>4</sup>

This was also to be Elgar's last vocal work designed primarily for Roman Catholic liturgical use. In May 1889, a few days before his marriage, he left St George's for wider horizons and aspirations. In this brief survey of his early church music I have made some attempt to examine his self-tuition and stylistic evolution in this defined field of activity. Although only some dozen or so works have been discussed in this paper, which represent somewhat less than half his surviving output for the church, they reveal the Classical foundations of Elgar's style, which gradually absorbed Romantic nuances. From his early Classical self-tuition he drew an aesthetic creed which was to form the cornerstone of his mature style. This was expressed in an excerpt from a letter of Mozart of 1781 which he kept framed on his writing-desk:

The passions, whether evident or otherwise must never be expressed to disgust, and music even in the most terrific situations must never give pain to the ear, but ever delight it and remain music.

[The paper was amply illustrated in delivery by means of tape-recordings of all the music examples in performances specially organised and directed by Dr Kent.]

#### Acknowledgements

The author and the Church Music Society express grateful thanks to Dr Percy Young, Father Edwards, SJ (of the Jesuit Archive), and to the Trustees and Curator of the Elgar Birthplace for making unpublished manuscript material available for the preparation of this paper. The Society is also indebted to the Sir Edward Elgar Will Trust for any copyright permission which may be involved. In the following extracts from original MSS Dr Kent has systematised some tiny details in accordance with textual evidence.

<sup>4</sup>Although a full score accompanies the band parts in the British Library autograph manuscript, it is interesting to note that the score was not copied until after the first performance since the vocal parts are on strips pasted in from a cut copy of the published edition.

Ex. 1

*Allegretto* *Cre-do in u-num, in unum De-um*

Ex. 2

*Adagio* *Et in-car-*

*Na-tus est*

Ex. 3

*Allegretto* *Et re-sur-re-xit ter-ti-a di-e*

*Et re-sur-re-xit, re-sur-re-xit*

Ex. 4 *Cre-do in u-num De-um, Pa-trem om-ni-po-ten-tum, fac-to-rem coe-li et ter-rae*

S. A. T. B.

ORGAN

pp etc.

(Ex. 5 cont.)

a-men, et vi-tam ven-tu-ri sae-cu-li, a-men

molto cresc. f etc.

molto cresc. f

Ex. 5 *Et vi-tam ven-tu-ri sae-cu-la, et vi-tam ven-tu-ri sae-cu-la,*

S. A. T. B.

ORGAN

ff [Gt.] [Sw.] cresc. etc.

Ex. 6

[f] Str. w.v. etc.

Ex. 7

*Allegro* Do - mi - na, sal - vem fac Re - gi - nam

nos - tram Vic - to - ri - am, Vic - to - ri - am. etc.

Ex. 8

Al - o - ri - a

in ex - cel - sis De - o. etc.

Ex. 9

Sw. *p*  
 Gt. Gamba

Gt. *p*

CONTRALTO [OR BARITONE]

*rall.* *p* *[a tempo]*  
 0 sa - lu - ta - ris Hos - ti - a, Tuas coe - li pan - dis

Gt. Sw.

(Ex. 9 cont.)

*mf*  
 os - ti - um, Bel - la pre - munt hos - ti - li - a

Gt. *f* etc.

Ex. 10

[Andante tranquillo]

*pp* Org. Str. *pp*  
 c. b. y. pizz. *p*

*pp*

(Ex. 10 cont.)

Be - ne - dic - tus, Be - ne - dic - tus sit — De - us Pa - ter.

Handwritten musical score for Ex. 10, continuing from the previous page. It features three systems of music. The first system has a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The second system has a vocal line and a piano accompaniment, with "etc." written at the end. The third system is labeled "Org." and shows organ accompaniment. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is common time (C).

Ex. 11

in ex - a - mi - ne. *piu lento* O cle - mens

Handwritten musical score for Ex. 11. It shows a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is common time (C). The score includes markings for "rit" (ritardando) and "pp" (pianissimo). The phrase "etc." is written at the end of the vocal line. Below the score, there are two boxes: "Ending of 1887" and "Extension of 1902 (W.S. scripsit)".