

Historical Melodrama? Edward Elgar's *Sospiri* op.

70



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In many ways we can view Edward Elgar's *Sospiri* op. 70 as an historical relic; a picture-postcard of a long-forgotten age, passed over for Germanic monoliths and Parisian verve. A time when brief, highly-charged atmospheric studies were the *plait jour* of chamber concerts, and publishers would produce little else for the consumption of music lovers, teachers and concert goers. It belongs to a time which history leads us to believe that music-lovers affections were dominated by Brahms, Debussy and early Stravinsky, and the longevity of these great masters pays testament to that. However, for the many who heard their music in local chamber concerts, or faithfully reproduced round the family piano it would be music akin to *Sospiri* which claimed their affections.

These short, melodramatic pieces were generally not written by the great composers of the day, in fact in many cases both the pieces, composers and the publishers have been forgotten, cast aside like the many early twentieth-century British partsong and oratorio writers who have similarly failed to stand the test of time. The popularity of these works stems largely from their simplicity of both form and design; they are uncomplicated, instantly recognisable, easy to play and with a constant tugging at the emotional heartstrings. They are turn of the century companions to film music (listened to without the film) or the ever-penetrating 'mood' music which pervades daily life.

Elgar composed *Sospiri* (Sighs) in 1914 and dedicated it to the first violinist of the London Symphony Orchestra, William Henry Reed (1876 – 1942). Reed was a great friend of Elgar's and as well as giving succinct technical advice would perform in premieres of three late works: the Violin Sonata, String Quartet and the Piano Quintet. The work belongs to the pre-war selection of pieces that include the *Wand of Youth* Suites (1907 – 08), Violin Concerto (1910) and the ode *The Music Makers* (1912), though the melancholic and rapt nature of the piece hints towards the sense of elegy that consumes the Cello Concerto (1919). *Sospiri* is simple in form and design, there is an overriding sense of melodrama, and the brevity of the piece is matched only by the amount of emotional weight Elgar packs into the thirty-four bars. In short, *Sospiri* is a concise example of the 'historical melodrama' which history has chosen to forget.

So the question begs to be asked: if this genre of music has long since ceased to be remembered by music historians and concert-goers alike, why does *Sospiri* still receive performances and recordings today? Why is this piece still in our musical-conscious? The easiest answer to this would be to suggest that *Sospiri* has claimed its place on the back of

Elgarian harmonic trait. This sense of a subtle bi-tonality extends throughout the piece as modality and tonality (of D minor, G minor and F major) jostle for position; the final cadential progression to the relative major (bars 32 – 34) is serene, but hardly emphasises a strong tonal centre.

Ex. 1 also highlights another of the mature Elgarian traits, that of the rising third or fourth, followed by a descending seventh; this melodic feature can be found throughout Elgar's work (a famous example being the opening theme of the *Enigma Variations*), and is prevalent in *Sospiri*. That this falling interval is prevalent in a work entitled 'Sighs' is no real surprise, this expressive, yearning quality is a mannerism of Elgar's work and has taken on an almost 'English' quality in its use by later composers. Its presence in *Sospiri* is all the more striking, when we consider the conjunct nature of most of the melodic music around it (as shown in Ex. 1).

Harmonically, *Sospiri* fits into the standard Elgarian mix of almost naïve diatonicism with richer chromatic passages, this dichotomy undeniably enforcing the dual personality of the composer. The work opens with two bars of pure root-position D minor, setting the mood and harmonic palette for the piece. With the opening melody (bars 3 – 10) we move through (modal) D minor via an augmented 6th chord to G minor and back, before finishing the phrase precariously on a diminished 7th chord which quickly resolves to F major. Nothing too outlandish here then, but this relatively simple tonality is offset by the next six bars (11 – 16) where the harmony becomes more involving, increasing the harmonic rate of change, moving chromatically through various key areas to a dramatic alternation of chords vii and V in D minor (bars 17 – 18), which cadences back to the opening tonality. The reprise of the opening theme provides nothing new harmonically, Elgar choosing to move seamlessly to the relative major for the final bars and cadence.

Perhaps what shows *Sospiri* to be late-Elgarian the most is the brilliant and colourful scoring and incredible attention to textural detail which are salient features of Elgar's mature style. *Sospiri* is scored for string orchestra with harp and ad lib organ (or harmonium), and Elgar makes the most of the sonorous and sustained collection of instruments. His ability to write for strings and especially string orchestra is well-known, and is reflected by the relatively large body of work for these instruments. *Sospiri* is no different to the larger string orchestra works in terms of textural awareness, in the opening bars Elgar makes several telling textural choices: dividing and muting the cellos, violas and second violins, combining this with alternating pizzicato/arco double bass and arpeggiated harp chords. The ethereal first violins of Ex. 1 enter without mutes above this dark, thick texture. As the

harmony becomes more chromatic, so the texture thins accordingly; no longer do we have simple homophony now the piece breaks into more expressive, contrapuntal music expanding upon the falling seventh of earlier.

Elgar's true gift for orchestration becomes apparent with the return of the opening theme at bar 20. Harmonically and melodically this is a simple reprise of the earlier material and a lesser composer may have orchestrated it in exactly the same way; however with Elgar's incredible ear for sonority this section becomes a shimmering, spine-tingling variation on the theme (see Ex. 2).

Ex. 2: Bars 20 – 23, highlighting textural detail:

The musical score for Ex. 2 (bars 20-23) features four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The Violin I part has a melodic line with a *sonoramente* marking and a dynamic of *mp*. The Violin II and Viola parts play a tremolo accompaniment with dynamics *ppp*, *mfp*, and *fp*. The Violoncello part has a melodic line with a *sonoramente* marking and a dynamic of *mp*, and a tremolo accompaniment with dynamics *ppp*, *mfp*, and *fp*. The score is in 3/4 time and features a variety of articulations, including accents and slurs.

As Ex. 2 shows, the multiply divided tremolo strings (again muted) glisten in their accompanying role, with the off-beat accents acting as brief glints of light further electrifying this texture. For the first time in the work all the ensemble are playing; the arpeggio harp providing an airy, treble sonority to the music; the organ providing the more dark-hued, bass timbres necessary to underpin this textural essay. The texture is thick and rich, with multiple doublings at octaves or unisons, reinforced by a static double bass. Elgar heightens the tension in this section with his use of the main melodic theme, as Ex. 2 shows it now returns an octave lower, doubled by a divided, un-muted cello at the unison. This decision gives the melody a completely different feel to when it first appeared; no longer does it have a light, ethereal quality now it is darker, more serious and sonorous augmented by the cello in its

higher register. It is another masterstroke to return the theme an octave lower, as it now sits embedded deep within the texture, changing the mood and focus of the music.

Although for the most part *Sospiri* is homophonic, it is another slightly unconventional and original textural aspect that earmarks the composition, that being the tightly interwoven dialogue between the melody and the accompaniment. In the more chromatic, polyphonic music (bars 11 – 18) the melody and harmony becomes blurred as the arpeggiated nature of both give rise to a somewhat imitative, contrapuntal section. This seamless move between homophony and polyphony are again mature Elgarian traits, and the movement garnered in the more chromatic section makes the perceived stasis of the reprise all the more auspicious and exceptional.

As mentioned earlier *Sospiri* is simple in form and design, indeed the form of the work can be seen as a straightforward ternary form (ABA) with a short cadential coda. The simplicity of form would have been essential in the understanding of these turn of the century works, in a work so short drastic experiments in form would have been overlooked or redundant. However Elgar's decision to stick to this simple form (with the coda and two bar introduction) should not distract from the level of original thought and composition that takes place in *Sospiri*, for the simplicity of design makes the listener focus more on the sophistication that is subtly taking place in the music. It also gives the composer a free orchestral reign to make the changes to the reprise section which work so well.

In many ways the time when *Sospiri* was composed would represent the zenith of Elgar's popularity, in the years 1900 – 1914 he would become as popular as any British composer on the continent and in Russia. The First World War would curtail performances of his works abroad, partly because he would become forever associated with Britain and British imperialism, partly because so many of those who championed his music were German. When the war ended and anti-British sentiments were appeased Elgar was no longer in vogue, and new dissonant and jazz-orientated sounds were filtering into continental musical life. The genre of melodramatic music into which *Sospiri* fits was somewhat Germanic, and the publishers of these pieces were no longer looking for foreign composers to fit the bill.

The reasons for the disappearance of the 'historical melodrama' are unknown, though the change in musical climate in post-war Europe meant there was little time for the trivial and ephemeral. This combined with less finances available at provincial level for arts and the rise of the recording industry meant for a different way in which people consumed

music. Elgar would not return to this genre, and indeed apart from the Cello Concerto he would complete little in the final fifteen years of his life.

However, *Sospiri* remains and provides us not only with a brief glimpse into a forgotten world, but with a short and beautifully poised Elgarian miniature, perfectly highlighting the compositional facets of Elgar's work. For a composer whose music is so often ascribed the dubious accolade of 'Englishness', *Sospiri* provides us with a hint of Elgar's Germanic lineage, not just in the potential target-audience for the work, but in the fact that Elgar's music would never sound so like Mahler, and less like the Malvern Hills.

Bibliography

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