

PROGRAM NOTES

October 15, 2017

The three works on tonight's program have commonalities. Each was composed on demand: Bach's for a ducal patron; Elgar's to celebrate the newly formed London Symphony Orchestra, and specifically to emulate a Brandenburg concerto that his publisher and he had experienced together; and Bartók's to fulfill a commission from a rich Swiss conductor. Beyond the similarities in their geneses, the three works are each a *concerto grosso*, in which a small contingent of players is profiled against the ensemble as a whole. The form was prevalent in Bach's day, but its occasional use since has been a self-conscious reverting to that historical model.

Introduction and Allegro for String Quartet and String Orchestra (1909) — —

Edward Elgar (1857-1934)

There's a considerable likelihood that Edward Elgar accompanied you on a major journey. As you marched down the aisle to receive that diploma, you probably stepped to the cadence of "Pomp and Circumstance." Ironically, this onetime rebellious British colony of ours was evoking the glories of the British Empire at its peak. A further irony is that the composer of the triumphant march and other such fustian exhibitions had long felt marginalized by the English establishment—as a Catholic, as a country boy and as the son of a tradesman. (His father owned a music store.) He failed in his first attempt to take a foothold in London, and recognition took a while, culminating in his knighthood at the age of 60. So there may be a trace of overcompensation in the officious Elgar.

But there is another side to Elgar—the poetic, idyllic. (Robert Schumann was "my idol.") In the present work, the grand, assertive, quasi-Baroque, organ-like opening bars of the Introduction are countered by a private, searching wisp of a phrase that hints at the main subject of the upcoming Allegro. It in turn yields to a tune (played by the solo viola) that Elgar authenticates as follows: "In Cardiganshire, I thought of writing a brilliant piece for string orchestra. On the cliff, between blue sea and blue sky, thinking out my theme, there came upon me the sound of singing. The songs were too far away to reach me distinctly, but one point common to all was impressed upon me, and led me to think, perhaps wrongly, that it was a real Welsh idiom—I mean, the fall of a third [five keys apart on the piano]. Fitting the need of the moment, I made the tune which appears in the Introduction...and in the *Coda* [epilogue] of this work; and so my gaudery became touched with romance....The sketch was forgotten until a short time ago, when it was brought to mind by hearing, far down our valley of the Wye, a song similar to that so pleasantly heard on Ynys Lochtyn. The singer of the Wye unknowingly reminded me of my sketch...[A]lthough there may be (and I hope there is) a Welsh feeling in the one theme...the work is really a tribute to that

sweet borderland where I have made my home.” (The Wye river marks the boundary between Wales and Elgar’s western England.)

A third aspect of Elgar, without which the ceremonial and the intimate would be irrelevant, is his consummate musicianship. Largely self-taught as a composer, he was the organist of his local church in Worcester from his teens on. Not much later, he earned his living teaching violin. And he taught himself bassoon in order to play in an amateur wind ensemble. Moreover, always and everywhere, Elgar found it irresistible and easy to add countermelodies to whatever was highlighted. Such contrapuntal virtuosity is on display in the middle section of “Introduction and Allegro”: “no *working-out* part but a devil of a fugue instead.” (E.E.) This idiosyncratic move is surely in response to the Baroque genesis of the commission—the publisher had suggested “You might even write a *modern Fugue* for Strings, or *Strings & Organ*.” In a *tour de force* worthy of Bach, the subject of the four-voiced fugue is eventually combined with a figure originally played by the lower strings as accompaniment early in the Introduction.

Formally then, the work consists of a quasi-improvisatory Introduction: after the grand call to attention, the main theme of the upcoming Allegro is foreshadowed; an element of the central fugue appears in cellos and basses; and the “Welsh” tune is introduced in the viola, dropped, taken up again, and never concluded.—The main body of the work, the Allegro, consists of bookends around a central fugue. In the outside wings, the protagonists are the upward reaching main theme; a scurrying second section; a grand recall of the organ-like opening of the Introduction; and the Welsh tune, receding from memory in the exposition, triumphantly affirmed in the recapitulation. The work concludes with a brief farewell wave to the Allegro theme.

“Introduction and Allegro” was first performed in an all-Elgar concert of the LSO in 1909. It is dedicated to the Yale University professor who had arranged for the bestowal of an honorary doctorate upon Elgar. It was at that ceremony that “Pomp and Circumstance” was first performed, launching the tradition.

“Brandenburg” Concerto Nr. 5 (ca. 1720) **Johann Sebastian Bach** (1685-1750)

The underlying idea of the *concerto grosso*—a smaller group of players profiling themselves against a larger group—had emerged almost a century before Bach’s contribution to the genre, in the works of Stradella, Corelli, and Torelli. Vivaldi’s, however, are the ones contemporaneous with and possibly influential on the Brandenburgs, for instance in having established the three-movement, fast-slow-fast expectation. (Handel’s *concerti grossi* were composed some 20 years after Bach’s.)

Models aside, the circumstances of Bach’s employment at the time of composition tended to suggest the form. In his 30s, he had found at the court of Prince Leopold von Köthen-Anhalt (a tiny principality among the checkerboard of such that constituted ‘Germany’) an employer with the musical understanding and commitment to have assembled an elite group of 17 court players. Significantly, they were salaried

in two classes, depending on whether they were considered ensemble or solo. The implication of *concerto grosso* would not have escaped Bach. It seems clear that he composed the five works in this series for performance in Köthen and then sent a copy to the Margrave of Brandenburg (with a dedication in French, German being too barbaric a tongue for court use) to fulfill a commitment he had made on the occasion of his visiting Berlin to purchase a harpsichord. It is probably that instrument that aroused in Bach the daring to compose what is, in effect, the first keyboard cadenza ('riff') in music history—and he didn't do it tentatively either!

In this fifth of the six concerti in the set, Bach exploits differently in each of the three movements the possibilities inherent in three soloists—flute, violin, harpsichord—in front of the assembled strings. The first movement opens with a unison statement by the *ripieno* (the worker strings) of a melody that unwinds in several tethered coils, a common Baroque manifestation known as "*Fortspinnung*" ("spinning on"). The three *concertino* instruments then introduce their own idea, extend it, and exchange it among themselves, while the *ripieno* alternately provides accompanying chords and restates fragments of its opening statement, in background to the trio. Two-thirds through the movement comes the cadenza, before the movement ends with a literal restatement of the opening.

The second movement, with the indication *Affettuoso* ('tender'), in a related minor key, is reserved for the soloists alone. They sometimes comment on each other, and sometimes harmonize. The harpsichord provides the chordal underlay throughout, in addition to its own melodic interjections.

Not about to yield the stage, the *concertino* initiates the lively third movement, flute, violin and harpsichord tossing among themselves a folkish dance tune, until the *ripieno* eventually joins in. In this movement, the collective is not differentiated by its own thematic idea, but becomes a further purveyor of the main theme—first the violas, then the violins, and so on. At times, the lead players among the *ripieno* themselves become additional soloists.—In 'A-B-A' form, the movement ends with a literal repeat of the first 232 measures.

Divertimento (1939)

Bela Bartók (1881-1945)

The Divertimento—or "entertainment"—is an attempt to write a light piece in a dark time. Bela Bartók was deeply alienated from his native Hungary, to whose culture he was inextricably linked, as it joined the Fascist movement overtaking large parts of Europe; he would emigrate to America within a year. For the duration of the composition of the Divertimento he found refuge in a summer home of the wealthy Swiss musical patron Paul Sacher. Sacher had previously commissioned from Bartók the Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion and the Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta. (He commissioned from most of the major European composers — Stravinsky, Martinu, Honegger, Frank Martin, Hindemith, Henze, Strauss, Lutoslawski, Dutilleux, Birtwistle and Boulez, as well as from Elliot Carter— works for the Basle

Chamber Orchestra that he founded and conducted for fifty years.)

In reaction to complications of personnel having arisen in connection with some of the commissions above, Sacher specifically requested of Bartók a piece for a small ensemble of strings only. In his initial response (February 1939), the composer already raises the possibility of a work treating folk-dance themes. By June, he is contemplating, additionally, that the work be “a kind of *concerto grosso*.” It is probable that the idea of a Baroque form came to him in ironic tribute to his being commissioned by a wealthy patron—as Bach was, for instance; a letter to his son comments on the relationship, if not on its musical implication.

On the first of August 1939 he took up residence in a chalet (replete with piano moved up the mountains from Bern!) in the Bernese Oberland put at his disposal by the Sacher family and got to work. To his wife he writes, “‘Divertimento’ indicates, loosely speaking, amusing, entertaining music. In any case, it entertains me; whether it will fare the same with a worthy audience remains to be seen.” Sacher writes to Ditta Bartók that on a visit to the chalet he found her husband at work in his bathing suit.—The outside movements were composed simultaneously, while jottings were accumulating for the middle, more somber one. Notwithstanding its very considerable compositional sophistication, the work flowed, and was finished in 17 days.

Though Bartók had had an eminent earlier career as an ethnomusicologist, collecting the folk music of Eastern Europe (and even North Africa), the tunes of the *Divertimento* are “in the manner of”—they’re invented, not appropriated. Underlying the outside movements are resonances of the *verbunkos*, or recruiting dance. The 18th-century Habsburg rulers of the Austro-Hungarian Empire recruited indigent young men by plying them with drink, fitting them into the tight-vested, fur-helmeted, heavy-booted uniforms of the Hussars, and having them dance to music played by gypsies hired for the occasion. The *verbunkos* then became a staple of Hungarian and pseudo-Hungarian concert music: see Liszt, Brahms, etc.—The opening melody of the first movement, over a ‘strumming’ accompaniment, is at the same time ‘authentic’ in its non-Western scale and Baroque in its long spinning forth of a multi-segmented idea (remember the opening to the Fifth Brandenburg!). The repeated notes of the strumming will interject themselves seemingly at random throughout the movement as loud, disruptive repeated octaves, at the same time obscuring the overall (‘sonata’) form and providing a unifying element. A second theme, harmonically more conventional, has assonances of beer gardens. A third exchanges timid wisps from a fragment of the opening idea. A fourth cascades. The development concentrates exclusively on the opening material, before all ideas are recalled (though not in order, and often upside-down) in the recapitulation. A closing section simultaneously meditates on the opening phrase and adumbrates what will turn out to be the theme of the third movement. Canons—overlapping identical melodic fragments—occur frequently throughout, an academic discipline in a populist setting.

It’s hard to hear the second movement as “entertainment,” though it has been pointed out that the 18th-century divertimento had as a subspecies the *notturmo*, or

night-piece. In the remaining few years of his life, Bartók was to write two more nocturnal masterpieces (the slow movements of the Third Piano Concerto and of the Concerto for Orchestra). On this particular night, the moon is well hidden by the clouds. In the darkness, there is writhing. The main idea, returned to repeatedly in ways exposed and hidden, is of three adjoining tones twisting around each other. The second idea is repeated strident octaves, like those in the first movement, with the dactylic (short/long) rhythm of Hungarian speech. The middle section of this middle movement is horror out of Hieronymus Bosch: over a hypnotic drone dirge, those proximate tones (as in a trill) rise out of the depths to an immense wailing, then extinguish. —After a brief combination of the three ideas—twisting, octaves, trills—an equally brief return of the opening leads into a long coda that while retaining all previous ideas in artful allusions seems to come to reconciliation and peace; the section includes several traditional, reassuring chord progressions.

The last movement is a boot stomper and finger snapper. In the midst of things, a fugue, right-side up and upside down. Near the end, out of nowhere, a little schmaltzy Viennese polka. (Hitler had annexed a welcoming Austria a year earlier.) The old world! And then, in frenzy, to the present.

Michel Singher