

In the South (Alassio), Op. 50

Edward Elgar

Edward Elgar holds sway as the ultimate representative of the Edwardian Era, the late-Imperialist moment of British history named after the monarch who reigned over it — Edward VII, who on July 4, 1904 (three and a half months after *In the South* was premiered) turned the composer into Sir Edward. The son of an organist in Worcester, Elgar enjoyed a none-too-spectacular career early on, deputizing for his father in church lofts, picking up a bit of instruction on violin, serving as bandmaster at the Worcester County Lunatic Asylum, and, in 1882, acceding to the directorship of the Worcester Amateur Instrumental Music Society. The following year he received a public performance of one of his compositions, an orchestral intermezzo, and very gradually built a reputation from there.

By the mid-1890s Elgar had become a name to reckon with. In 1899 the British public got its first taste of what would become the most performed of Elgar's major instrumental compositions, his Variations on an Original Theme (Op. 37), popularly known as the *Enigma Variations*. The following year his oratorio *The Dream of Gerontius*, deemed by many to be his masterpiece, established Elgar as Britain's leading composer, a perfect embodiment of the plushly comfortable, healthily vigorous spirit of the Edwardian moment. A follow-up oratorio, *The Apostles*, confirmed his mastery of that genre when it was premiered in October 1903, with the financial support of his friend and champion Frank Schuster, after which Schuster suggested that an all-Elgar Festival might be in order. Covent Garden seconded the idea and scheduled three concerts for March 1904, which might include performances of *Gerontius*, *The Apostles*, and a new work — perhaps, if the composer felt it possible, a symphony.

In November 1903, Elgar and his wife, Alice, left for a vacation on the Italian Riviera. Bordighera proving not to their liking (an “Anglicised paradise,” the couple reported), they proceeded down the road to Alassio, and there they remained until late February 1904. Plans for the festival continued back in England, but by the beginning of January Elgar had informed his publisher that “this visit has been, is, artistically a complete *failure*,” that they “have been *perished* with cold, rain & gales,” and that “the Symphony will not be written in this sunny (?) land.” Nonetheless, he added, “I am trying to finish a Concert overture for Covent Garden instead of the Sym.”

The weather improved and the Elgars began enjoying various excursions, including a visit to the village of Andora. There they

IN SHORT

Born: June 2, 1857, at Broadheath, Worcestershire, England

Died: February 23, 1934, in Worcester, England

Work composed: early 1904, drawing on sketches made in 1899 and 1902; completed on February 21, 1904; dedicated “To my Friend, Leo F. [Frank] Schuster”

World premiere: March 16, 1904, as part of an Elgar Festival at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, in London, with the composer conducting the Hallé Orchestra

New York Philharmonic premiere: November 6, 1904, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which would merge with the New York Philharmonic in 1928)

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: November 21, 2009, Riccardo Muti, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 19 minutes

took in a Roman bridge and a ruined hillside chapel where they were surprised to encounter a shepherd “dressed in a sheepskin [who] unconcernedly drove his flock along the path and out of sight.” The composer explained in a 1907 interview:

In a flash it all came to me — the conflict of the armies on that very spot long ago, where now I stood — the contrast of the ruin and the shepherd — and then, all of a sudden, I came back to reality. In that time I had composed the overture — the rest was merely writing it down.

Elgar quickly plunged into his composition in earnest, creating what was effectively a tone poem filled with references to his Italian surroundings: a melody he had attached to the name “Moglio” (which for some reason delighted him inordinately), a heroic buildup of chordal textures meant to evoke ancient Roman soldiers, a *canto popolare* of the sort the shepherd might sing (though Elgar

insisted it was entirely of his own invention). The boisterous opening theme, redolent of Richard Strauss, did *not* have an Italian pedigree; Elgar had penned it in 1899, when he titled it “Dan triumphant (after a fight),” in honor of a dog named Dan.

The Covent Garden Elgar Festival was a huge success. On the final evening, one newspaper reported:

After the interval, Dr. Elgar was accorded an enthusiastic greeting. Then in his forceful, energetic manner the composer raised his bâton and the new concert overture struck at once the note of the joy of living in the midst of “blue Ionian weather.”

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, triangle, orchestra bells, two harps, and strings.

Sources and Inspirations

Although there is no question that *In the South* is full of descriptive content, the score as published makes no overt reference to Romans or shepherds or anything else. Elgar did, however, inform his friends Percy Pitt and Alfred Kalisch, who were preparing an analysis of the piece to include in the program for the first performance, that two poetic passages served as a motto for this work. Both are inscribed on his manuscript of the score:

... What hours were thine and mine,
In lands of palm and southern pine,
In lands of palm, of orange blossom,
Of olive, aloe, and maize and vine.
(Tennyson, *The Daisy*)

... a land
Which was the mightiest in its old command
And is the loveliest ...
Wherein were cast ...
... the men of Rome!
Thou art the garden of the world.”
(Byron, *Childe Harold*)



Elgar, in 1900