

Cello Concerto in E minor, Op. 85

- i. Adagio; Moderato**
- ii. Lento; Allegro molto**
- iii. Adagio**
- iv. Allegro; Moderato; Allegro, ma non troppo; Poco più lento; Adagio**

Edward Elgar enjoys a curious reputation in his own country. To many, he is the composer of overtly nationalistic music such as *Pomp and Circumstance*, the musical incarnation of Edwardian imperialism. Although early works such as the *Enigma Variations* and *Imperial March* garnered him praise and fame, it is his later works from 1918-1919 that are much more autobiographical in content – none more so than the Cello Concerto in E minor.

The Concerto was mostly composed between 1918 and 1919 at Brinkwells, a cottage in the Sussex woods where he wrote three other chamber works – the Violin Sonata, String Quartet and Piano Quintet. Like these other Brinkwells compositions, the Cello Concerto is a deeply introspective work which reveals much about the composer's state of mind: an aging artist concerned about his waning popularity, his wife's failing health, and reflecting on the horrors of the First World War. Despite a grossly under-rehearsed première at the Queen's Hall on 27 October 1919, it has since been established as perhaps the finest cello concerto in the repertoire, alongside Dvořák's, and the only work of Elgar's to enjoy regular performances outside the English-speaking world.

The Cello Concerto is an emotionally draining work not only for the players but also the listener, its overwhelming mood one of melancholy and autumnal world-weariness. The first movement opens with a declamatory, grandiose statement by the soloist leading, in almost improvisatory style, into a lilting melody; there is a wistfully lyrical middle section before the opening melody returns. Elgar utilises a full-sized romantic orchestra but the skill and restraint of his instrumental writing frequently gives the impression of chamber music, allowing the soloist effortless domination. Elgar was himself a string player, and his idiomatic writing is most on show in the second movement. Ushered in by solo pizzicato, it is a *molto perpetuo* scherzo in G major which displays the composer's dry, sarcastic sense of humour but also hints at his pre-1914 panache. The third movement is a heartrending Adagio in the remote key of B-flat major, characterised by an intense pathos; even in its brevity,

Elgar manages to write a seemingly unending melody yet still underpin it with a sense of harmonic restlessness. The finale, a vivacious rondo, is the longest and most expansive movement but even this is often overshadowed by an autumnal melancholy. There are reminiscences of earlier movements – a hushed quotation of the slow movement and one final reprise of the Concerto's opening recitative – before the work is swept to a brusque conclusion.

A 62 year-old Elgar described his Cello Concerto as 'a man's attitude to life'. The composer's own attitude to life when he composed this masterpiece was bleak, an existential depression and persistent nostalgia for what he called the 'old times'. At the end of the score he wrote *Finis. R.I.P.* – intentionally or not, he had signalled the Cello Concerto as the end not only of his creative life, but also the end of a war, and of an age.