James Hepokoski
Lincoln Center
24 January 1999

Elgar: Introduction and Allegro, Op. 47
Reflections on a "Welsh Tune"

From time to time I find myself in situations where I am talking about my enthusiasm for Elgar's music only to be met with puzzlement. Sometimes I learn that the person either does not know Elgar's more extended music at all (maybe only the *Enigma Variations*) or that the person has never really connected with Elgar (perhaps remembering the first *Pomp and Circumstance* March badly performed in countless graduation ceremonies or parodied in television commercials). What also happens in these conversations is that I am asked which pieces by Elgar they might listen to. And always, always—the first piece that I suggest is the *Introduction and Allegro* for Strings and String Quartet—a fourteen-minute composition from early 1905, originally written as a specialty piece for an all-Elgar concert to be presented by the newly formed London Symphony Orchestra—then only a few months old.

I consider the *Introduction and Allegro* to be a perfect composition, a celebratory work of the highest order. Elgar himself referred to the new piece in a letter to one of his patrons, Frank Schuster, as "the string thing [--] most brilliant with a *real tune* in it however." A real tune indeed! What I'd like to focus on here is just that "real tune"—on its significance and what it might mean in the context of the entire piece.

The "real tune" in question is surely one of the most affecting in Elgar—altogether typical of the "intimate" side of the composer—the secret heart of the composer, one might say. We first encounter the tune about a minute into the piece, shortly into the introduction. It emerges as a quiet voice in the still shadows, a memory introduced tenderly by the solo viola.

I&A, mm. 17-43 ---- 1:08-2:30 (Benjamin Britten, English Chamber Orchestra)

This melody surfaces four times in four different ways (twice in the introduction and twice in the sonata-form Allegro), and writers on Elgar usually refer to it as the "Welsh tune." This is because Elgar himself associated it with the Welsh folk-singing style and with a particular set of circumstances in his life. Some three or four years earlier, in August 1901, a somewhat depressed Elgar.....(I should say that he was a man given to streaks of dark depression, sometimes near-suicidal depression—alternating with its opposite, an almost boyish exuberance and zest for life).....In August 1901 a somewhat depressed Elgar had been coaxed to take a restorative holiday in Cardiganshire, Wales—seacoasts and nearby cliffs. . . very remote surroundings from those in his usual life. We are told both by the composer and by his host, Rosa Burley, that Elgar was especially struck by the warm, spontaneous singing that he heard from the Welsh people in and around the seaside villages and islands. Whatever songs he heard, it's clear that Elgar was interpreting them as musical images of simplicity, purity, and wholeness. As Rosa Burley described the experience, "it was so natural and beautiful." In his program notes for the *Introduction and Allegro*, Elgar gave a similar, but high-poetic, account of all this (is it true?). He told us that while in Wales in 1901 he had been particularly struck while sitting on a high cliff with a musical sketchbook, when a series of heartfelt songs wafted up from far below: (I quote) "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." [SING] He also tells us that, on the spot, he

jotted down the opening phrase of our tune [SING], though of course its destination was unclear.

Now, the first thing to notice in this story is that, as Elgar recounted it, he was invoking a familiar late-Romantic image: the modern artist—in part the alienated genius—perched high above the "natural," non-reflective world, the genius "hearing" and being "inspired by" sounds from that more naïve world (which he has left behind or transcended). (One thinks, for example, of Berlioz's *Harold in Italy.*) The defining aspects of the image are twofold: first, artistic "elevation" or at least separation of the composer himself from the simpler world of everyday assurances; and, second—because of that separation—the faraway incompleteness of what he was actually hearing: tunes of which one is permitted to get only hazy images or fading echoes. All this is implicit in Elgar's story.

Soon thereafter he toyed with the idea of composing a "Welsh Overture," probably with this tune in the center. One early sketch marks it for English Horn, while another suggests that it might be turned instead into an art song. The theme needed its proper context. But there it lay in the sketchbooks for two or three years, like hidden gold—until the "Welsh tune" and its falling thirds were jogged back into Elgar's mind, he claimed, when he had a similar experience near his Herefordshire home in England. Once again (and again, is it true?), while in the countryside, he heard an indistinct song in the distance (and I quote) "far down our own Valley of the Wye . . . [and] the singer of the Wye reminded me of my [Welsh] sketch." Once again: Elgar high above—the singer far below—the indistinct song: a duplication of the Welsh image, now "brought home" to Elgar's English Midlands. At about the same time, in the context of the London Symphony Orchestra commission in 1904, Elgar's close friend

August Jaeger (from the publishers Novello) had suggested that he write a dazzling, virtuoso piece for strings—one that might even feature, as Jaeger put it, "a *modern fugue* for Strings."

In short, in response to the commission Elgar now brought together a number of differing conceptions in the *Introduction and Allegro*. First, the fourteen-minute work would be in two-section, overture format—that is, a somewhat extended, prefatory introduction (about 3 ½ minutes) followed by an allegro that was more-or-less disposed in free sonata-form. (Its most recent Elgarian predecessors were the *Cockaigne* Overture and the Overture *In the South*.) Second, the work would be written not merely for large string orchestra, but for strings supplemented by a more intimate string quartet placed in front of the orchestra. Clearly, this was intended to recall the concerto-grosso formats of Corelli and (especially) Handel, perhaps also with nods to the string orientation of Bach's Brandenburg Third. For Elgar, strings plus string quartet would be a textural reference to the distant Baroque past (yet another valley below, as it were), and this texture, in part, would also help to set up the brilliant "modern fugue." Third, there was the elaborate fugue itself, which occupies the middle-section of the sonata form, that is, its development section, treated as a dazzling centerpiece—filled, as Elgar put it, "with all sorts of japes and counterpoint." And fourth—somehow apart from the central *display-fugue*—the larger purpose of the piece had to pivot instead on the fortunes of the nostalgic "Welsh tune"—the evocation of a simpler, whole past, now *distant* (far below), lost to modern times. The "Welsh" tune was now to serve both as intermittent, shadowy side-events in the course of the otherwise mostly shiny-bright piece and, ultimately, as the climactic string apotheosis at its end—which we'll hear in a few minutes.

But let's stop and think about this melody—how Elgar might have meant for it to affect us. This "Welsh" tune has two crucial features. One is its repetitive circularity, its sense

stepping out of linear time through subtly expressive repetitions of a single melodic idea [SING]. As is typical of Elgar, we hear this short thematic shape restated on different pitch levels, led through different harmonic colorations, each with different emotional pulls. The first part of the nostalgic tune consists of four statements of this idea, as if trying to capture it, to make its indistinct pastness more fully present. Four brief statements: the nostalgic Welsh idea, its immediate repetition, its intensification one step higher [SING] (something like a ray of hope, "if only"), and its immediate collapse a step lower, with resigned minor-mode inflections (perhaps like a sad realization of non-recoverability, "But no! Alas!").

We'll hear it in a moment, but second, it's of utmost importance to notice that Elgar never permits this nostalgic tune to conclude. In every appearance—every appearance!—he brings the tune to a potential end point (in musical terms, right up to the cadence point), then draws back from the cadence, evades it, either loops back into another repetition of the whole theme or drifts off to other ideas or non-related keys, as if breaking off the idea with ellipsis dots [. . . . .]. It's as though Elgar were suggesting that the purity of the "Welsh" tune, welling up from the cleaner valleys of the past, could in fact be fully recovered or "made real" for us, if—if—we could manage to bring that distant idea to a real, cadential conclusion. But that closure never happens—and that, surely, is its point. Here, for example, is what we might expect from the tune:

Welsh tune, breaking off at end. 1:08-1:49 [**SING predicted conclusion**: "And there it is, a completed reality."]

But this crystallizing of the theme in a conclusion—a cadence—is what Elgar never gives us. To suggest a verbal analogy, it's as if in this tune Elgar were saying: "If only we could bring this lost tune to completion, then it would - -" or "We could recover the wholeness of the past if only we - -" What he would mean verbally is "if only we could finish this sentence." What he means musically is: "if only we could bring this 'Welsh' tune to a completed cadence or musical ending." But surely the point of the *Introduction and Allegro* as a whole is that this never happens. For example, listen again to its first statement and repetition one minute into the piece:

Welsh tune (1st time "loop" back to repetition / 2nd time: drift off harmonically) 1:08-2:40

Because of this theme's persistent inability to bring itself to an end, it takes on the character of a musical *mirage*, a musical vision that can never be concretized in a cadence. And that, I think, is exactly Elgar's point. In modern times, such cleanness and purity can never be more than a delicious mirage from the past, something that dissolves into vapor when we try to grasp it or make it real. This way of understanding the theme would be in perfect accord with what we know of one facet of Elgar's personality: his intense, lifelong feeling of nostalgia for lost childhood wonder—a common theme of poignant yearning and regret found, of course, in much late-Victorian and Edwardian culture. (We find it also in Lewis Carroll and, especially, in such works as the Scotsman J.M. Barrie's evocation of "Neverland" in *Peter Pan*, published in 1904, only one year before *Introduction and Allegro*).

What I am suggesting, then, is that there is something in the theme itself—in each of its appearances—that suggests it is a mirage, a Neverland, an "if-only, futile search for

permanently lost wholeness." What's more, this aspect of the theme invades the entire conception of this *Introduction and Allegro*: The whole work, from one perspective, may be seen as a grand attempt to make this Neverland mirage real, to place it in a context where it will be able to complete itself and become tangible once again—through the structural processes of music. From this perspective, the three-minute introduction can be seen as a plotting-out of the sonata-form-to-come, all considered in the context of the London Symphony's commission of a subtantial and brilliant work. There are three musical ideas in the introduction: First, a resplendent, ultra-formal G-minor exhortation at the opening—the intention, the commission itself, "let's build a grand piece—a grand sonata for strings." Almost immediately after it, a second, new idea merges, which will be used as the main theme of the Allegro: "And this will be our sonata's first subject" (in the manuscript, Elgar wrote the words, "Smiling with a sigh" over this melody). The third idea is the nostalgic "Welsh" tune ("and this will be the sonata's lyrical, "second subject"—perhaps the Neverland sigh itself?—can it be recaptured, made real, in the sonata?). In the Introduction Elgar might well be illustrating the commission and his plan for themes. Here's the first two minutes of the introduction, with this hypothetical narrative overlaid—and right after, a touch of the Allegro's first subject.

> Introduction, first 1:48 (Exhortation-Formal Occasion / 1st theme: smiling w/sigh / 2nd "recapture Neverland"—the valley below .... fade out)—DON"T STOP TAPE----directly to:
>
> Beginning of Allegro, first subject: (3:41-4:01: "smiling with a sigh") 20" only

But then something strange happens in the Allegro. The Introduction had seemed to promise that the Neverland "Welsh" tune would serve as its second theme, but in fact what we

find at the exposition's end is that no room at all was left for the proposed second theme to appear. In other words, the exposition proper is marked, above all, by the absence of this second theme—it's "left out" (more images of loss and non-recoverability). And this is why, between the end of the exposition proper and the development, the tempo and dynamics collapse, and the nostalgic tune-mirage—the vision, the ghost—suddenly emerges in the string quartet, *pianissimo*, muted, and shot through with cold, shivering tremolos and pizzicatos, music that eventually pauses, incomplete, on glassy *ponticello* textures: "And was there no room for Neverland in this exposition?" Here's the end of the energetic exposition:

Exp-End—Collapse (Exhortation)—Welsh tune—**Beginning of Fugue** 5:50-7:40

This vigorous fugue occupies the central development—remember that for Elgar's advisor, Jaeger, this was the initial impulse for the work—and before too long we enter the recapitulation. But this is a recapitulation with a difference. In the last four or five minutes of the piece Elgar manages things in such a way as to try to incorporate the "Welsh" tune into the very end of the recapitulation—its fourth and last appearance—as if to make amends for leaving it out earlier. This is our last chance to try to recapture it, to make it "real." The grand conclusion of the recapitulation is surely the great moment of the piece—the "do or die" moment at the very end. Here, finally, the "Welsh" theme is not merely brought back quietly, as in its prior, ghostly appearances, but in a richly warm, all-embracing *fortissimo*, as a rich and resonant apotheosis—one of the most luxurious string sonorities in all of orchestral music. "Ah!", we might think, "At last! Here the mirage will finally turn real—strong, solid, and clear. Here past memories will be recaptured. Here, surely, the fortissimo dynamics will remain

stable, and here, surely, the theme will finally be brought to a magnificent completion—to the end of the sentence—to a cadential close!"

But this does not occur. What at first tumbles forth as rich, culminating promise turns out to be only the most intense presentation of the mirage—of the voices from the valley below. For the listener, I think, the crucial point is that that the mirage, even here in its most magnificent sounding, is always threatening to slip away. Lurking behind the glorious sound is more than a touch of panic. Time and again the vision threatens to break apart, to dissolve, to vaporize—and time and again the dream is propped up again by sheer emotion and will.

As we hear this conclusion, we might understand it, then, not as attainment, but more as a last embrace of—and trembling farewell to—the Neverland illusion. What is most heart-wrenching in this music is that the "adult" Elgar refuses to let the mirage slip: He keeps returning to it one last time, one last time, another last time, as if begging it to stay....before finally leaving it behind, drawing the curtains on it, bidding it a brusque farewell—stiff upper lip and all that—in a concluding ten-bar rush of formal and "official" music. Let's conclude our session with the ending of *Introduction and Allegro.* In the presence of such remarkable music, surely we must leave the last word to Elgar.

I & A: Conclusion: 12:38-14:09

And now, thank you, Sir Edward, and thank you all---and . . . . let's go to the concert.