Sir Edward Elgar (1857-1934)

Ecce sacerdos magnus
Music for Chorus and Orchestra

Brighton Festival Chorus · BBC Concert Orchestra
Barry Wordsworth conductor

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This CD covers 26 years in Edward Elgar’s creative life and includes major works that are more usually performed without orchestral accompaniment. We can hear Elgar developing as a composer, confidently feeling his way towards the mastery of his trade that made him the natural first-choice composer to contribute to national events.

Elgar was born in The Firs, a small cottage in the village of Broadheath three miles north of the city of Worcester, in 1857. His father, William, who recorded his occupation as ‘pianoforte tuner’ on his second son Edward’s birth certificate, had rented the cottage during 1856. Music infused the new baby’s home, for friends of William often visited and music was heard during many an evening in the parlour. Lucy, Edward’s older sister, recalled evenings that “were thoroughly happy in our cottage home, and [we] sang and sang for the very joy of singing”.

In the spring of 1859, the Elgars moved back to Worcester where his father owned a music shop and it was there the young composer-to-be grew up. Although at one stage he took violin lessons in London, Elgar was essentially self-taught. He studied scores in the shop and absorbed music from performances in Worcester’s cathedral and St George’s, the Roman Catholic church where he was baptised. There he assisted his father as the church’s organist, a post to which he had been appointed in 1843. Edward first played the organ there in 1872, aged 15, and remained associated with the church until his marriage in 1889.

On October 9, 1888, the Bishop of Birmingham, Edward Isley, visited St George’s. For the event Elgar composed an imposing setting of *Ecce sacerdos magnus* (‘Behold the great priest’). He dedicated it to his childhood friend and choirmaster of St George’s, Hubert Leicester, to whom he later wrote: “Some special things had to be sung for which we had no music, thus I had to set to work & compose it all and copy out the parts!” For chorus and organ, *Ecce sacerdos magnus* followed Elgar’s trio of motets (*Ave verum*, *Ave Maria* and *Ave maris stella*) from the previous year. Those earlier settings – his Op. 2 – are well known but *Ecce sacerdos magnus* is something of a rarity.

It opens with the same notes (*Andante maestoso*) as Joseph Haydn’s setting of the Benedictus in his *Harmoniemesse* of 1802, which suggests two things. First, the Benedictus (if not the entire Haydn Mass) was sung at the Bishop’s visit. Second, it was taken far more slowly than nowadays. The Haydn Benedictus (unlike all the others) is marked *Allegro molto*. Conceivably a misreading of *Allegro mod.* to, it is taken so fast as to obliterate any discernible bond with Elgar’s anthem. Such speed is given the lie by the words themselves: ‘He came in Blessing’; and the ‘walking bass’ to which Haydn scholar HC Robbins Landon drew attention as “typical for Haydn’s late compositions”. Pointedly, he added: ‘*Vivace* in a Haydn Mass is by no means to be interpreted as if this tempo direction appeared in… a Haydn symphony or string quartet”.

Robbins Landon made those observations in notes accompanying a 1949 issue of the only *Harmoniemesse* recording to take the Benedictus at a speed sufficient to show its bond with Elgar’s *Ecce sacerdos magnus*. An excerpt from a radio broadcast by the Munich Cathedral Choir under Ludwig Berberich (its Kapellmeister from 1919) is included on this recording to allow listeners to hear the relationship themselves.

By the autumn of 1888, Elgar, aged 31, was now well into the journey that would transform him from unknown provincial musician to Britain’s leading composer. He had also become engaged to his pupil, Alice Roberts (1848-1920), who was to devote the remainder of her life to supporting and encouraging her future husband.
In 1897 Elgar’s growing reputation was marked by another Three Choirs commission following his oratorio The Light of Life for Worcester in 1896. GR Sinclair, the organist of Hereford Cathedral (whose bulldog Dan would become the subject of Variation XI in the Enigma Variations) asked Elgar for a choral work. The first performance of his Te Deum and Benedictus was given in Hereford Cathedral on September 12, 1897 as part of the festival’s opening service, orchestra and organ adding to the festivities. In March, Elgar announced that he was no longer proceeding with Sinclair’s commission, suggesting his heart was not in the piece. Seemingly unaware, Sinclair continued to press Elgar, inviting him to Hereford to discuss his work. Eventually Elgar took the completed composition to Sinclair’s home to receive the verdict: “It is very, very modern, but I think it will do”.

The Te Deum opens with a vigorous 4/4 Allegro maestoso 19-bar introduction in F major which briefly changes to B-flat major before the chorus enters proclaiming its faith. In the later quiet passage praising God that He ‘didst not abhor the Virgin’s womb’, the key changes to G major, a brief moment of repose before the return to the home key and the celebration of God’s glory. As Jerrold Northrop Moore has pointed out, this is a composition where “the diatonic themes were developed with persistent chromaticism”. The Te Deum ends in the world of Anglican supplication with a hushed (ppp) 10 bars for the orchestra.

The Benedictus sustains the key and atmosphere at a steady 12/8 before changing to 4/4 and D major at ‘That we being delivered out of the hands of our enemies’. Before the Gloria, Elgar’s setting ends in keeping with the atmosphere he has sustained: ‘guide our feet into the way of peace’. With that, we are wrenched back to the Te Deum as Allegro maestoso, ff leading to fff, brings the listener firmly back to earth.


1911 was a significant year for Elgar. His Second Symphony was performed in May for the first time and he had two works premiered in Westminster Abbey during the Coronation of King George V on June 22. Although the Elgars came to the Abbey rehearsals, they declined to attend the ceremony thereby missing the first performances of his Coronation March and Offertory Anthem O Hearken Thou, infused by the note of resignation in the final bars of his Second Symphony and the dark colours of the March. The Anthem creates a powerful sense of consolation which, although possibly out of sympathy with the mood of a Coronation, has stood the test of time and is more than in keeping with the Communion Service it heralds.

Elgar draws his text from Verses Two and Three of the Fifth Psalm, opening with a short, four-bar orchestral prelude before a memorable falling phrase of a fifth on the words ‘O hearken Thou’ (pp to ppp) begins the anthem. In the key of A Flat throughout, O Hearken Thou ends as it began: an accompanied prayer never rising above mf.

The Elgars spent much of the winter of 1903-04 in Alassio, Italy. During a walk, Elgar met Joseph Armitage Robinson, the then Dean of Westminster. The pair immediately established a friendship and Robinson, a distinguished scholar, assisted Elgar with a number of questions he had about the libretto for The Apostles. Robinson was knighted in 1911 and the following year Elgar, whose association with Anglican priests lasted most of his creative life, dedicated his setting of the 48th Psalm – Great is the Lord – to him.


Elgar had begun work on the anthem just after completing his Violin Concerto with which it bears thematic similarities. He delayed sending it to his publishers, Novello, but eventually wrote to Henry Clayton, the company’s secretary, on March 29, 1912:
“I am sending a gigantic Anthem to the firm which I fear will be commercially not much to you – the organ part is important & must be on three staves: it is very big stuff of Wesley length but alas! not of Wesley grandeur.”  Commissioned for the 250th anniversary of the Royal Society, it was first performed in its version for organ under the direction of Sir Frederick Bridge on July 16, 1912. The Wesley (Samuel Sebastian, 1810-76) comparison is not without foundation as this substantial work bears similarities to the structure of some of his anthems.

Great is the Lord is in four sections for six-part choir and bass solo beginning Moderato in D major with a change of mood and key to Allegro moderato in F sharp minor at ‘For lo! The kings assembled themselves’. There follows a slower passage for the solo: ‘We have thought on thy loving kindness’; the orchestra providing a subtle, meditative accompaniment before the chorus re-joins at ‘Let Mount Zion be glad’. It ends as it began, with music closely related to the Violin Concerto.

Give unto the Lord is another anthem written for an Anglican institution, in this case for the Sons of Clergy Festival in St Paul’s Cathedral on April 30, 1914. Elgar’s setting of Psalm 29 was requested by – and dedicated to – Sir George Martin, organist at St Paul’s from 1888, who had transcribed Elgar’s Imperial March for organ. It is a contrapuntally bold work: a vigorous setting of vigorous words that ends in quiet supplication with the poignant lines: ‘The Lord shall give strength unto His people; the Lord shall give the blessing of peace’; words that acquired added resonance the following August when Britain declared war on Germany. Largely in E flat, it modulates to D major at ‘the Lord is full of majesty’ before returning to the home key two bars before ‘The Lord sitteth above the waterflood’.

By 1895, Elgar’s reputation had begun to move beyond the confines of Worcester and Malvern. His Organ Sonata (a four-movement work on a symphonic scale) was composed for a visit of American organists to Worcester and his Three Bavarian Dances for Orchestra would be premiered at Crystal Palace in October 1897. These dances were separated by Elgar from his largest composition of 1895, Scenes from the Bavarian Highlands. Setting six poems by Alice Elgar, it was dedicated to ‘Mr and Mrs Henry Slingsby Bethell, Garmisch, Bavaria’, owners of the villa where the Elgars stayed during the summers of 1893-95 and 1897. These joyful settings convey the love the couple developed for the area during some of the happiest times in their marriage. In his programme note for the first performance, Elgar wrote that the work was composed “as a tribute of esteem and affection to my many friends among a noble and simple people”.

Included on this recording are two non-liturgical works. On April 7, 1893, Elgar’s Spanish Serenade, a setting of words by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, was given its premiere in Hereford’s Shire Hall eleven days before his choral setting of The Black Knight, also with words by Longfellow, was first performed in Worcester. Elgar had orchestrated the Serenade the previous June on hearing that it had been accepted for publication. In Longfellow’s play The Spanish Student a group of musicians – complete with “a bagpipe, guitars and other instruments” – serenade a gypsy girl, Preciosa, standing at the open window of her chamber. The singers are led by Chispa, servant of Preciosa’s lover, Victorian, who appears on the balcony as the song ends. Composed during the summer of 1892, Elgar’s first version was for two violins and piano but then, as he told his friend Charles Buck, he scored it for “muted strings, tambourine & all sorts of games!” Elgar creates a contrast between the opening lines of each verse and the warmth of the words ‘She sleeps;’ his setting suggesting a Spanish accompaniment with guitars.

The poems and Elgar’s music were influenced by the sights and sounds of the Bavarian Alps, notably the autumn Schuhplattler dance which Elgar witnessed in the town of Garmisch. Rosa Burley, headmistress of the Mount School in Malvern who accompanied the Elgars on their 1893 visit, described the dancing: “The vigorous hand-clapping over and under the legs and the twanging zithers, had a gaiety which I have never forgotten”.

Elgar delivered the first five songs by hand to his publishers at the end of March 1895, the sixth following by post two weeks later. Rejected by Novello, they were published instead by Joseph Williams in an SATB version in 1896. By the spring, Elgar had orchestrated the songs for their first performance on April 21, in Worcester’s Public Hall, which he conducted. If Wagner influenced The Black Knight, Elgar’s Bavarians have more in common melodically and rhythmically with Dvořák. Their delightful, uninhibited naïve quality disguises some of the more complex writing. Elgar may have had a hand in the poems, largely indicating to Alice Elgar how to match her words to the rhythms and melodies he was composing which, in turn, mimicked some of those heard in the area around Garmisch.

‘The Dance’ refers to the nearby village of Sonnenbichl where Elgar enjoyed the local “bright brown ale”! ‘False Love’ is a tale of a poet-lover abandoned in favour of another and is given the sub-title ‘Wamberg’, a village to the west of Garmisch which the Elgars visited in 1894. Further south is Hammersbach, the name Elgar gave to his charming and subtle ‘Lullaby’, a piece which shows his growing confidence as a melodist. A mother comforts her son wistfully thinking of the music-making she is missing. ‘Aspiration’ refers to the chapel of St Anton situated on the Wank mountain near Partenkirchen, the words suggesting a winter scene as pilgrims pray in the chapel.

‘On the Alm’ refers to a high pasture where grazing cattle were tended by a peasant girl living in a hut during summer, to where her lover impatiently climbs. To the north of Garmisch is the town of Murnau where members of a shooting club pursued their activities by the Staffelsee lake. Alice Elgar seems to have witnessed a competition which she describes in her poem and set with great momentum by Elgar as he brings his happy collection of songs to a conclusion.

The cycle occupies a unique place in Elgar’s music; no other major work of his has the lightness and gaiety of Scenes from the Bavarian Highlands. Perhaps the musicologist Hans Keller came closest to the point: “Granted the style is light, the substance slight; perhaps you have to be not an Elgar specialist in order to perceive, nonetheless, a perdurable touch of elemental genius”.

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3 Dr Donald Hunt, editor of From the Bavarian Highlands (Elgar Complete Edition, 2016, p.xii) points out that “Schuhplattler has come to be associated with the songs (or perhaps more so with the dances). Elgar’s annotation on his manuscript full score reads: “The words imitated from Schnadhüfpfler & Volkslieder”, a Schnadhüfpfler” being an improvised four-line poem or song, often incorporating yodelling. The word is a corruption of Schneiderhüfpfer, literally ‘cutters’ dance’, indicating its harvest-time associations.

O Lord save thy people and bless thine heritage.
Govern them and lift them up for ever.
Day by day we magnify thee;
and we worship thy Name ever world without end.
Vouchsafe, O Lord to keep us this day without sin.
O Lord, have mercy upon us. Have mercy upon us, as our trust is in thee.
O Lord in thee have I trusted let me never be confounded.

**1 Ecce sacerdos magnus** for Chorus and Orchestra

Ecce sacerdos magnus
qui in diebus suis placuit Deo,
et inventus est justus.

Behold the great priest,
who in his days pleased God,
and was found righteous.

**2 Te Deum Laudamus**

We praise thee, O God: we acknowledge thee to be the Lord.
All the earth doth worship thee: the Father everlasting.
To thee all Angels cry aloud: the heavens and all the powers therein.
To thee Cherubim and Seraphim continually do cry.
Holy, Holy, Holy: Lord God of Sabaoth;
heaven and earth are full of the Majesty of thy glory.
The glorious company of the Apostles praise thee.
The goodly fellowship of the Prophets praise thee.
The noble army of Martyrs praise thee.
The holy Church throughout all the world doth acknowledge thee;
the Father of an infinite Majesty; thine honourable, true and only Son;
also the Holy Ghost the Comforter.
Thou art the King of glory O Christ.
Thou art the everlasting Son of the Father.
When thou tookest upon thee to deliver man thou didst not abhor the Virgin's womb.
When thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death thou didst open the kingdom of
heaven to all believers.
Thou sittest at the right hand of God in the glory of the Father.
We believe that thou shalt come to be our judge.
We therefore pray thee, help thy servants whom thou hast redeemed with thy precious blood.
Make them to be numbered with thy Saints In glory everlasting.

**3 Benedictus**

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel for he hath visited and redeemed his people;
And hath raised up a mighty salvation for us in the house of his servant David;
As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets which have been since the world began;
That we should be saved from our enemies and from the hands of all that hate us;
To perform the mercy promised to our forefathers and to remember his Holy Covenant;
To perform the oath which he sware to our forefather Abraham that he would give us;
That we being delivered out of the hands of our enemies might serve him without fear;
in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of our life.
And thou, child, shalt be called the Prophet of the Highest for thou shalt go before the
face of the Lord to prepare his ways;
To give knowledge of salvation unto his people for the remission of their sins,
Through the tender mercy of our God
whereby the day-spring from on high hath visited us;
To give light to them that sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death and to guide our
feet into the way of peace.
Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost;
As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be world without end. Amen.

St. Luke 1, vv. 68-79
O Hearken Thou
O hearken Thou unto the voice of my calling, my King and my God; for unto Thee will I make my prayer. My voice shall Thou hear betimes, O Lord: early in the morning will I direct my prayer unto Thee, and will look up.

Psalm 5, vv. 2-3

Great is the Lord
Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, In the mountain of his holiness; Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion, On the sides of the north, the city of the great King, God has made himself known in her palaces for a refuge. For, lo, the kings assembled themselves, They passed by together. They saw it, then they were amazed; they were dismayed, they hasted away. Trembling took hold of them there, And pain as of a woman in travail. As with the east wind that breaketh the ships of Tarshish. As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the Lord of hosts, In the City of our God: God will establish it for ever. We have thought on thy loving kindness, O God, in the midst of thy temple. As is thy name, O God, so is thy praise unto the ends of the earth: Thy right hand is full of righteousness. Let mount Zion be glad, let the daughters of Judah rejoice because of they judgments. Walk about Zion, and go round about her: tell the towers thereof.

Psalm 29

Give unto the Lord
Give unto the Lord, O ye mighty, give unto the Lord glory and strength. Give unto the Lord the glory due unto his name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.

The voice of the Lord is upon the waters: the God of Glory thundereth: it is the Lord that ruleth the sea. The voice of the Lord is mighty in operation; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty. The voice of the Lord breaketh the cedars; yea, the Lord breaketh the cedars of Lebanon. The voice of the Lord divideth the flames of the fire. The voice of the Lord shaketh the wilderness And strippeth the forests bare.

In His temple doth everyone speak of His glory. The Lord sitteth above the water-flood; and the Lord remaineth a king for ever. The Lord shall give strength unto his people; the Lord shall give his people the blessing of peace.

Psalm 48

Mark ye well her bulwarks, consider her palaces; that ye may tell it to the generation following. For this God is our God for ever and ever: He will be our guide even unto death. Amen.
Spanish Serenade
Stars of the summer night!
Far in yon azure deeps,
Hide, hide your golden light!
She sleeps!
My lady sleeps!
Sleeps!
Moon of the summer night!
Far down yon western steeps,
Sink, sink in silver light!
She Sleeps!
My lady sleeps!
Sleeps!

Wind of the summer night!
Where yonder woodbine creeps,
Fold, fold thy pinions light!
She sleeps!
My lady sleeps!
Sleeps!

Dreams of the summer night!
Tell her, her lover keeps
Watch! while in slumbers light
She sleeps!
My lady sleeps!
Sleeps!

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

False Love
Now we hear the Spring’s sweet voice
Singing gladly thro’ the world
Bidding all the earth rejoice.
All is merry in the field,
Flowers blossom in the grass,
Blossoms blue, red, white they yield.
As I seek my maiden true,
Sings the little lark on high
Fain to send her praises due.
As I climb and reach her door,
Ah! I see a rival there,
So farewell for evermore!
Ever true was I to thee,
Never grieved or vexed thee, love,
False, Oh! false art thou to me.
Now amid the forest green,
Far from cruel eyes that mock
Will I dwell unlov’d, unseen.

Lullaby
Sleep my Son! O slumber softly,
While thy mother watches o’er thee
Nothing can affright or harm thee;
Sleep, oh! sleep, my son.
Far away zithers play,
Dancing gay, calls today,
Vainly play, zithers gay,
Here I stay all the day.
Happily, guarding thee peacefully.

SCENES FROM THE BAVARIAN HIGHLANDS

The Dance
Come and hasten to the dancing,
Merry eyes will soon be glancing,
Hal! my heart up-bounds!
Come and dance a merry measure
Quaff the bright brown ale my treasure,
Hark! what joyous sounds.
Sweetheart come, on let us haste,
On, on, no time to waste,
With my heart I love thee!
Dance, dance, for rest we disdain,
Turn, twirl, and spin round again,
With my arm I hold thee.

Dance, makes the world and life grow brighter
As we dance along.
Come dance!
As I climb and reach her door,
Ah! I see a rival there,
So farewell for evermore!
Ever true was I to thee,
Never grieved or vexed thee, love,
False, Oh! false art thou to me.
Now amid the forest green,
Far from cruel eyes that mock
Will I dwell unloved, unseen.

Lullaby
Sleep my Son! O slumber softly,
While thy mother watches o’er thee
Nothing can affright or harm thee;
Sleep, oh! sleep, my son.
Far away zithers play,
Dancing gay, calls today,
Vainly play, zithers gay,
Here I stay all the day.
Happily, guarding thee peacefully.
Aspiration
Over the height the snow lies deep
Sunk id the land in peaceful sleep;
Here, by the house of God we pray,
Lead, Lord our souls today.
Shielding, like the silent snow
Fall His mercies here below:
Calmly then like the snowbound land.
Rest we in His protecting hand,
Bowling we wait His mighty will,
Leads, Lord and guide us still.

On the Alm
A mellow bell peals near,
It has so sweet a sound;
I know a maiden dear
With voice as full and round.
A sunlit Alm shines clear
With clover blossoms sweet;
There dwells my maiden dear,
And there my love I meet.
There flying with no fear
The swallows pass all day
And fast, my maiden dear,
See chamois haste away.
I cannot linger here,
I cannot wait below;
To seek my maiden dear,
I to the Alm must go.
The mountain’s call I hear,
And up the height I bound;
I know my maiden dear
Will mark my johé sound.
Rejoicing come I here
My flaxen-haired sweetheart,
I love thee, maiden dear,
Nay bid me not depart.

The Marksman
Come from the mountain side,
Come from the valleys wide,
See how we muster string
Tramping; along.
Rifle on shoulder sling,
Powder and bullets bring,
Manly in mind and heart,
Play we our part!
Sure be each eye today,
Steady each hand must stay,
If in the trial
We Victors would be.

Benedictus
Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini.
Hosanna in excelsis.
Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.

Sharp is the crack! ’tis done,
Lost is the chance or won.
Right in the gold is it?
Huzza! the hit!
The sun will sink and light the west
And touch the peaks with crimson glow,
The shadows fill the vale with rest,
While stars look peace on all below.
In triumph the we take our way,
And with our prizes homeward wend
Thro’ meadows sweet with new mown hay,
A song exultant will we send.

C. Alice Elgar

He has appeared with orchestras worldwide, including the Philharmonia Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Ulster Orchestra, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Toronto Symphony, Sydney Symphony, New Zealand Symphony, Rotterdam Philharmonic, and Seoul Philharmonic.

In a distinguished career with the BBC, he has made many appearances at the BBC Proms, and conducted the Last Night of the Proms with the BBC Symphony Orchestra in 1993. In his 17 years as Principal Conductor of the BBC Concert Orchestra, he toured extensively, including to Japan, the United States and China.

He has enjoyed a close association with the Royal Ballet in London for over 40 years. Tours with the company include performances in New York, Copenhagen and Taipei, and at the Aldeburgh Festival. His work with the company is available on a number of DVDs including the world premiere production of Christopher Wheeldon’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. He has also conducted productions for the New National Theatre Tokyo, The Australian Ballet, Leipzig Ballet, Christopher Wheeldon’s company Morphoses, the ballet of the Opéra National de Paris, and Birmingham Royal Ballet.

The most recent releases in his extensive recording catalogue are discs of Tchaikovsky and Elgar with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. A recording entitled “Last Night of the Proms” with the BBC Concert Orchestra has achieved enormous success, as have his albums with Bryn Terfel and the London Symphony Orchestra, the first of which won a Grammy Award.

Barry Wordsworth holds honorary doctorates from the University of Brighton and the University of Central England in Birmingham, and is an Honorary Fellow of Trinity College of Music.