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Romantic Topics in Elgar's Cello Concerto

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Abstract

Completed in 1919, just after the First World War, Elgar's Cello Concerto is often considered to be his "war requiem." However, most discussions of his war works focus on his highly patriotic choral pieces and recitations written and premiered during the war itself. And while other composers throughout mainland Europe responded to the desolation of the war with various anti-Romantic impulses, Elgar's musical language throughout the concerto remains Romantic, especially through his use of pastoral, nostalgic, and chivalric topics.

Elgar's earlier recitation *Une voix dans le désert* illustrates his approach to pastoralism, especially through his use of harmony in the middle section. Nostalgia and retrospection were familiar qualities in his other music, often suggested through use of recapitulatory techniques and changes in orchestral texture, as in his orchestral work *Dream Children*, the Second Symphony, and the Violin Concerto. Finally, the concert overture *Froissart* evokes a chivalric mood through the use of fanfare figures and rhythmic figures representing galloping hoof-beats. Given their deployment in works associated with text and/or program, the implications of these topics' presence in the Cello Concerto becomes evident, and readily comprehensible. While these topics connoted innocence and boyish naïveté before the war, they take on a distinctly pessimistic and hopeless tone in post-war contexts. Through his use of pastoral, nostalgic, and chivalric topics in the concerto, Elgar was able to respond to the war, expressing England's resulting loss of innocence, while continuing to appeal to the conservative tastes of English audiences.

Completed in 1919, just after the First World War, Elgar's Cello Concerto is widely considered to be his own "War Requiem." The Cello Concerto, however, is never mentioned in discussions of Elgar's war works. Instead, such discussions focus on Elgar's highly patriotic choral works and recitations, including *Carillon*, Op. 75, and *The Spirit of England*—both written and premiered during the war.¹ While other composers throughout mainland Europe

¹ Diana McVeigh, "Elgar, Sir Edward (William)," *Grove Music Online* (2001), <https://doi-org.unco.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.08709>, accessed September 15, 2019.

responded to the desolation of the war with various anti-Romantic impulses, Elgar's musical language throughout the concerto remains Romantic, especially through his use of chivalric, nostalgic, and pastoral topics. After outlining the characteristics of each of these topics, I will compare Elgar's use of them in earlier works to his use of them in the Cello Concerto.

Chivalry: *Froissart* Concert Overture, Op. 19 (1890)

Characterized by fanfare figures, rhythms imitating hoof beats, and frequent sudden key changes, the chivalric style harkens back to a simpler time.² Chivalry in music was a concept that Elgar had explored previously in his concert overture *Froissart*, among others. Named for the 14th century French author, the overture portrays knightly triumph, particularly through the use of fanfare flourishes and dotted rhythms (see Example 1, with Audio Example 1).

² Jonathan Bellman, "Aus alten Märchen: The Chivalric Style of Schumann and Brahms," *Journal of Musicology* 13, no. 1 (Winter 1995), 119



Example 2. Elgar, Concerto for Violoncello and Orchestra, Op. 85, IV, mm. 218–227.

While chivalry was often associated with a “rite of passage,” for young boys to become men, Elgarian chivalry is also associated with the idea of nobility and righteousness. Indeed, one of Elgar’s favorite novels, *The First Violin* by Jessie Fothergill, describes a violinist’s quest for love through music. Aidan Thomson describes, in his article “Elgar and Chivalry,” the success of this “knightly quest” of finding love as “associated with the transcendental nature of music, which possessed the moral righteousness that had previously been the preserve of the church.”³ Thus, music was a noble field for Elgar to pursue, and the use of the chivalric topic (usually with the expressive marking *nobilmente*) expresses this innate nobility in humankind. This marking is used in several of Elgar’s works, most notably in his piano transcription of “Nimrod” in the *Enigma Variations*. *Nobilmente* appears three times throughout the Cello Concerto: twice during cello recitative sections. Here, the cello takes on the role of a heroic, knight-like character. It also

³ Aidan Thomson, “Elgar and Chivalry,” *19th-Century Music* 28, no. 3 (Spring 2005), 258.

appears in the fourth movement, where the soloist is joined by the entire cello section in unison (see Example 3, with Audio Example 3). While the previous *nobilmente* statements by the solo cello express grief and lamentation, this section is distinctly triumphant in character.

The image shows a musical score for Elgar's Cello Concerto, specifically rehearsals 59 and 60. The score is written for a cello soloist and a piano accompaniment. Rehearsal 59 starts with a 'Tempo Iº nobilmente' marking and a forte (f) dynamic. The piano part has a 'poco rit.' marking. Rehearsal 60 starts with a 'Tempo Iº' marking and a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The piano part has a 'ff' dynamic. The score ends with a '8va bassa.....' marking.

Example 3. Elgar, Cello Concerto, Rehearsal 59–60.

Nostalgia: Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 61 (1910)

Elgar is well-known for nostalgia and retrospection in his music: works such as *The Wand of Youth* (ca. 1869) and *Dream Children* (1902) present an idealized, nostalgic view of childhood.⁴ Other works, such as the Second Symphony, Violin Concerto, and Cello Concerto, present a distinctly nostalgic character despite the absence of text.⁵ In his article “Elgar and the Art of Retrospective Narrative,” Michael Allis identifies three techniques that Elgar uses throughout his *oeuvre* in order to evoke feelings of nostalgia: changes in harmonic structure,

⁵ Michael Allis, “Elgar and the Art of Retrospective Narrative,” *Journal of Musicological Research* 19, no. 4 (August 2000), 313–316.

cantabile
 espress.
 p
 cresc.
 f
 p
 mf
 95
 f nobilmente
 cresc.
 f
 pp
 cresc.
 96
 ten.
 espress.
 sf
 mf
 cresc. molto
 ff
 Ped.

Example 5. Elgar, Violin Concerto, Rehearsal 94–96.

Example 6. Elgar, Violin Concerto, mm. 81–91.

Example 7. Elgar, Violin Concerto, Rehearsal 101.

Similar instances of structural recall occur throughout the Cello Concerto. Repetitions of the opening recitative occur throughout (see Examples 8 and 9, with Audio Examples).

Violoncello: *Adagio*. $\text{♩} = 66$. *ff nobilmente*, *sf*, *sf*, *sf dim.*, *p*.

Pianoforte: *Adagio*. $\text{♩} = 66$. *fp*, *pp*.

Example 8. Elgar, Cello Concerto, mm. 1–8.

Violoncello: *Lento. Recit.* $\text{♩} = 18$. *pizz.*, *p*, *f*, *ff*, *sf*, *pp*. *Allegro molto.* $\text{♩} = 138$. *arco*.

Pianoforte: *Lento.* $\text{♩} = 18$. *p colla parte*, *f accel.*, *sf*, *pp*. *Allegro molto.* $\text{♩} = 138$.

Example 9. Elgar, Cello Concerto, Rehearsal 18.

In Example 9, the stark contrast in articulation from the previous sustained *arco* chords to the dissipating *pizzicato* presents the pain expressed in the opening as a distant memory. This memory, however, grows in intensity: supporting harmony changes suddenly to C major, reaching an unexpected climax at the end of the bar. *Pizzicato* variations on this opening idea are presented throughout the introduction of the second movement, interrupted each time by a fleeting *allegro* phrase which becomes a main motive for the second movement proper.

Another restatement of the opening recitative occurs during a brief cadenza at the opening of the fourth movement. This corresponds not with the opening chords of the recitative,

but with the ascending scale beginning in the anacrusis to measure seven (see Example 10, with Audio Example 10).



Example 10. Elgar, Cello Concerto, IV, mm. 18–19.

The original statement of this material lacks harmonic support, leaving decisions about the character of this section open to interpretation. This initial statement, while hesitant, can be played in a hopeful mood before resigning to the pessimistic theme that follows. The introduction of diminished harmony as well as the addition of fermatas between phrases in this later statement, however, creates a more fragmented and fatalistic character. These thoughts are put aside at the *a tempo*, where ascending diminished arpeggios signify the soloist's resolve to continue.

Similar to the Violin Concerto, themes from both the slow movement and the first movement are recalled in the finale, creating an emotional climax of the piece. Written in a slow triple meter, the third movement is characterized by large, expressive leaps in the solo cello, as well as lush orchestral interjections. While much of this movement expresses grief, the soloist reaches peace near the end, where indications of *tranquillo* designate a new outlook and character (see Example 11, with Audio Example 11).



Example 11. Elgar, Cello Concerto, Rehearsal 39–41.

Towards the end of the fourth movement, the solo cello explores several different characters and emotions within a short period of time, similar to the Violin Concerto. After expressing wistful reminiscence, true pain and confusion, the cello finally reaches this *tranquillo* melody from the third movement: this time in A-flat major (see Example 12).



Example 12. Elgar, Cello Concerto, IV, mm. 327–331.

What follows is a final restatement of the opening recitative (see Example 13, with Audio Example 12-13). While the cello's restatement of this motive is almost verbatim in terms of note content, the articulation differs in both the solo cello as well as the orchestra. Here, the cello line is more accented, and is punctuated by decisive chords in the orchestra, contrasting with the

ominous drone that was present at the opening of the concerto. This change in articulation and context of the recitative represents a change in attitude for Elgar. What began as a wailing lament, unsure of how to continue in a new world, ends with resolve.



Example 13. Elgar, Cello Concerto, Rehearsal 72.

Although the meaning of these repetitions is not made explicit through the use of text or a program, these instances of structural recall can cause the listener to reevaluate past events, giving, in the words of Michael Allis, “an emotional or philosophical significance to the altered reference.”⁷ While Elgar often used retrospective elements in prior works, his use of nostalgic elements here represents his reaction to the war and its consequences.

Pastoralism: *Une voix dans le désert*, Op. 77 (1915)

Romantic in its origins, English pastoralism developed as a response to the modernist styles used elsewhere in Europe. As various high modernist idioms became increasingly popular, critics and scholars looked down on English pastoral music as escapist and reactionary. In his

⁷ Allis, “Elgar and the Art of Retrospective Narrative,” 304.

book *English Pastoral Music: From Arcadia to Utopia*, Eric Saylor argues that pastoralism was a further development of England's musical language:

In pastoralism, we see a response to late Romantic ultrachromatic language that involved recasting and reinterpreting tonality rather than abandoning it, emphasizing values of craftsmanship and tradition rather than expressionist subjectivity.⁸

This recasting of traditional Romantic techniques proved to be an effective method of reflecting on and responding to the cultural changes caused by the war. Indeed, many English composers who lived through or served in World War I chose to write in a pastoral style, resulting in a variety of characteristics and approaches, depending on each composer's individual experiences and attitudes toward the war. Commonalities include rhapsodic melodies starting low in a range and rising, often with little harmonic movement, compound meter, and moderate tempo. Pastoral music tends to feature string-dominated timbres, with upper woodwinds emphasized as well. Additionally, pastoral music typically features triadic harmony and pitch centricity without using traditional means to reinforce the tonic. Finally, pastoral music tends to favor thematic fragmentation and repetition over motivic development.⁹

Unlike Elgar's previous war works, *Une voix dans le désert* has a distinctly pessimistic tone. By the time this was written in 1915, it had become obvious that the war would not end in a short time: trench warfare and large casualties on both sides revealed that the war would have grave consequences. The work is made up of three main sections: fatalistic descriptions of a war-torn country frame a hopeful ideal depicting "When the Spring Comes Round Again." Elgar's orchestral writing similarly reflects the mood of the text: the first section features chromatic chords in the strings, along with a marching accompaniment. The second section, with soprano

⁸ Eric Saylor, *English Pastoral Music: From Arcadia to Utopia, 1900-1955* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 4.

⁹ Saylor, *English Pastoral Music*, 20.

solo instead of recitation, is written in a *cantabile* style featuring widely spaced chords and unprepared modulations.¹⁰ *Une voix dans le désert* represents a change in Elgar's perception of the war and its consequences.

Similarly, the first movement of the Cello Concerto features mournful outer sections framing a more hopeful middle section. After the opening cello recitative, the orchestra begins a winding melody in 9/8 time, which is then repeated by the solo cello (see Example 14, with Audio Example 14).



Example 14. Elgar, Cello Concerto, Rehearsal 2–3.

Accompaniment during this section is sparse to nonexistent: the viola section's initial statement of this melody is unaccompanied, while the cello's repetition is accompanied by drones in the low strings and horns and alternating diminished and tonic chords in the clarinets. Unlike Saylor's observations, this melody starts high in range and gradually moves lower. The melody is not developed, but repeated, growing in intensity until it reaches a climax triggered by the solo cello's ascending E melodic-minor scale. Now, the 9/8 theme is played by the full

¹⁰ Saylor, *English Pastoral Music*, 61–63.

orchestra with increased harmonic movement. This high moment is short-lived, however, as sparse texture returns with the cello's restatement of the theme.

The middle section of the movement, in E Major, seems more hopeful at first. The strings' gently rocking Siciliano rhythm, combined with markings of *dolcissimo* in the solo cello suggest memories of a simpler time (see Example 15, with Audio Example 15). Repeated half step motion in the cello, however, along with leaps and nervous running notes, express yearning and anxiety. The *dolcissimo* melody returns, less stable and more yearning than its previous statement. The *stringendo* figure returns again, this time marked *largamente* at the arrival on the high G. This hope turns out to be short-lived, as the cello eventually returns to the original 9/8 melody. The movement ends in a manner similar to the way it began, with an ominous drone on E played by the cello and bass sections.



Example 15. Elgar, Cello Concerto, Rehearsal 8.

Given their deployment in works associated with text and/or program, the context of the appearance of Romantic topics in the Cello Concerto becomes evident, and readily comprehensible. While these topics connoted innocence and boyish naïveté before the war, they take on a distinctly pessimistic and hopeless tone in post-war contexts. Through his use of chivalric, nostalgic, and pastoral topics in the concerto, Elgar was able to respond to the war,

showing England's resulting loss of innocence, while continuing to appeal to the conservative tastes of English audiences.

