

Below are the programme notes from the first performance of Elgar's Cello Concerto on 27 October 1919.

CONCERTO for Violoncello and Orchestra

Edward Elgar

(First Performance)

Solo Violoncello - Mr. FELIX SALMOND

Conducted by THE COMPOSER

In writing this work the composer has fulfilled a desire he has had for some years past.

The music was composed during the past summer, in the country, and bears the opus number 85. It is in E minor, and in four movements. The problems of the balance between the solo instrument and the orchestra, which in the case of the 'cello presents special difficulties, has been carefully considered and the solo part is on somewhat new and unconventional lines, with the object of securing the maximum of effect. As to the poetic and emotional basis of the work, one has the composer's sanction for saying that it is perhaps appropriately expressed in the term *nobilmente*, which is pre-fixed to the beginning of the score, and for the constant use of which Elgar has often been chaffed by his musical friends.

I. There is a short introduction, *recitativo*, in which the following theme –

Adagio
nobilmente
sf
sf
sf
sf dim.
p < ff

is given out by the soloist. It appears in varying forms later on in the work. The movement proper, *moderato*, begins with this subject –

Moderato
p
Solo
pp

played by violas. Its *flottant* rhythm, indefiniteness of key, and the mysterious chord on which the soloist enters all help to give a romantic, almost mystic feeling, to the music. After some repetitions, by both 'cello and orchestra, a new section is reached, with a fresh melodic idea. This, which cannot be conveniently quoted in short score (since solo and orchestra are so closely interwoven) has a genial spring-like lilt. The music expands into some impassioned phrases for the 'cello and there are striking dialogue passages between the woodwind and the solo instrument. The first theme now reappears in the musical fabric, and the movement ends softly with a shortened version of it, in which the orchestral basses again join in unison.

II. Here also there are a few introductory bars (in which a striking *pizzicato* phrase for orchestral strings may be noted) the soloist having prelude passages, that may fancifully suggest a search for a theme. Soon the theme is found, a gay *scherzando* melody, with which the solo instrument rushes along, lightly accompanied by the orchestra.

Allegro molto
pp leggierissimo

While this is in full swing there is a momentary change of mood with this tender *cantabile* melody given out by ‘cello,



and replied to by orchestra. The lively first subject is soon resumed, but from time to time the calm beauty of the new theme interposes itself between brilliant passages constructed from the other.

III. The *Adagio* may perhaps be described as a ‘song without words’. Although of brief length, it is emotionally the climax of the whole work, and is practically one long lyrical line from beginning to end, therefore offering no set theme for quotation. ‘Cello and orchestra begin softly, and the music, tranquil at the outset, gradually increases in intensity, with some passages of very expressive quality for the ‘cello and broadens out until a great climax is reached, after which the calm mood of the opening eventually returns. The closing cadence is curious, for it is in F (the movement is in B flat), but the latter key is ‘touched’ at the commencement of the finale, which is, of course in E minor. In the scoring of the *Adagio*, by the way, a small orchestra, without brass, is used.

IV. This begins with the *recitativo* of the first movement, which is now given a more heroic character. The fiery principal theme which has a touch of humour is then announced –



and soloist and orchestra alternate with this for some time, until we hear the second subject –



This eventually leads to a *bravura* for ‘cello, with a light orchestral accompaniment, and here we have almost the only concession which the composer (himself a string player) has made to the conventional virtuosity of the instrument.

A striking reappearance is made by the first theme, the whole of the orchestral ‘cellos joining the soloist, and a few bars later the double-basses add their weight also. The full orchestra then takes it up to a brilliant climax. The second theme recurs in shortened form followed by a fanciful presentation of the principal subject, by flute, clarinet and bassoon, in octaves, accompanied by *pizzicato* chords from solo ‘cello, two loud chords for strings breaking in on this somewhat delicate orchestral colouring with startling effect. For a few moments the music becomes tranquil in character, but a dramatic change is brought by the *Coda*. The ‘cello gives out this poignant phrase –



which gradually broadens out into some passages of almost anguished feeling. There is a return to a more restful mood with a reminiscence of the slow movement, and eventually we hear a repetition of the opening *recitativo*. The movement ends with a final statement of the principal subject, in broad dignified form, over a strongly accented bass, thus finally asserting the *nobilmente* feeling of the work.