

ELGAR COACHING NOTES

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Edward Elgar (1857-1934)

Sea Pictures, Op. 37

In October, 1898, the Norwich Festival asked Elgar for a short choral work for 1899. His preoccupation with *Enigma Variations*, and its premier in the spring of 1899, delayed his start on this commission. In January 1899, however, the festival recommended the project be a *Scena* for a young contralto Clara Butt (1872-1936) who had already been engaged. The songs were written with her voice and wide range in mind, and with her occasional requests. It's possible the key of the last song was shifted from E-major to D-major to accommodate Ms. Butt's high A at the end. As is, the endings of songs III and V are higher than most contralto repertoire reaching G and A respectively.

In the summer of 1899 Elgar orchestrated *Sea Pictures* and it premiered in Norwich on October 5th, 1899. Two days later he performed *Sea Pictures* in the piano-vocal version in London.

Some material for *Sea Pictures* is drawn from earlier ideas. *In Haven* is a reworking of *Lute Song* from 1897. The opening orchestra phrase of *Sabbath Morning* has roots in the polka *Helica*, written when Elgar was working at the Powick Lunatic Asylum in 1883. His job there gave Elgar practical experience in composing regularly for varied instruments. (The director of the County Lunatic Asylum at Powick believed in the therapeutic use of music and had his staff form an ensemble to perform for the clients. Elgar was hired to conduct and teach these amateur musicians, and to compose works for them to perform at the Friday evening dances. Elgar held this job from 1879-1888. The second half of the 19th century saw the rise of psychiatry. "Mental Science" was a popular discipline and considered an important part of the national public health program. Asylums were not unusually at this time.) *Where Corals Lie* uses sketches from a quadrille dance also from his Powick days.

With the exception of *In Haven*, all the texts chosen for the song cycle are from Victorian poems in the style called dramatic monologue. In a dramatic monologue, the poem first sets a

scene with a description. The speaker then comments on how the place has changed, or evokes memories, feelings, thoughts, etc. This dialogue creates an interaction between an outside place and a private meditation, during which a transition of sort happens: something is resolved, discovered or determined. The poem may later circle back on itself, returning to the beginning scene, but with the character now having gained insights and change.

The performer should decide who is speaking: it is not the poet, but a fictitious character. The text is descriptive rather than narrative and sets about at achieving a transformation through monologue. Rather than thinking about the story, consider the impact of the surveyed thoughts and feelings. Consider the metaphors within the texts: the sea has long been a metaphor of the mind. What is the shadow? Eyelids? A Swimmer?

Feelings, sensations, and metaphors, don't require temporal linear-ness the way a narration would. Therefore, harmonic progressions aren't progresses, but rather descriptive changes in mood or thought.

Regarding the choice of text: it is interesting to note that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's works were well-known at the time. It's possible that Elgar read the slightly less popular, Roden Noel poem in one of the *Canterbury Poets* anthologies published in the 1880's and 90's. Richard Garnett and Adam Lindsay Gordon were much less known, but both did appear in an anthology published in 1888 called *Sea Music Anthology*.

The poetry of this era did not necessarily reflect the personal experiences of the writer. In fact, the style itself asked for the writer to be different and separate. With this in mind, I caution against the prevailing habit of looking for specific details of Elgar's personal life within the song cycle. That Elgar chose texts that are introverted and reflective, often centered on loss, is an indication of the then current zeitgeist in poetry. If one thinks that the *Sabbath Morning* is a narration of Elgar's time and feeling of the loss of Helen Weaver,

the lost love of Elgar's youth, you will miss the looming metaphors and affect of dramatic monologue. To literalize this music is make it an account of facts, when it is a dramatic monologue that seeks transformation. Keep in mind "What transformation is happening?"

I. Sea Slumber Song

words by Roden Noel (1834-1894)

The music clearly sets up the sea imagery, conveying crashing waves and gentle bobbing. The opening vocal line with repeated pitches sets up a mood of peacefulness. Consider the effect of the moment at measure 8 where, after very tight writing between voice and piano, the voice is finally detached from the within the piano line with the words *slumber*.

At rehearsal B, play with the effect of the piano being very low, or deep, while rocking gently in a half-note pulse. The gentle ocean sways, without plodding, and will be more comforting if the sound is full and sustained. A tempo slightly faster than the noted 40 might be needed to successfully join the ear in a rocking image. The speaker's monologue begins at measure 13. At m.17, *hush thee* is in a low register: make use of this to convey a very warm, consoling, protective feeling. Needless to say the vocal vibrato throughout this song cycle should not be on automatic pilot. At m.20, consider evoking gentle, not scurrying, ripples in the inner voices of the piano: the lower line leads, with the upper octave adding color.

As the piece goes through key changes, put thought into how the keys, chords and resulting color and texture affect the feelings, rather than reasoning out some sort of harmonic *progression*. For example, the E-flat chord in m.45 is followed by a loose bridge of chromatic color and then a G-major chord, which by now can be called the *slumber chord*.

These chords are not a question of structural significance but rather significant in terms of the affect and impact on the transformation that the poem seeks. I personally see that E-flat major chord as being magical: the successful transformation to *sleep*. The pulse of the sea pauses, the singer at *ad lib.* creates a moment out of time. We then slip through a bridge to a G7 slumber pause. Again, it is *ad lib.*, out of a definite pulse, and with no hurry to reiterate the last *good night*.

As a side note: the word *Elfinland* has an interesting history worth considering. Folk lore tells about elfins who abduct musicians in order to have them perform for the Elfins' own entertainment. These fairies make the musicians play through the night, completely exhausting them. At dawn the musicians are allowed to return to their normal life. As a reward for their services the Elfins supposedly substitute the musicians' original instruments with ones that are of much better quality. It was considered a sign of great musicianship to be kidnapped by Elfins and receive this gift.

II. In Haven (Capri)

words by Caroline Alice Elgar (1848-1920)

As mentioned, this text, written by Elgar's wife, doesn't use the Victorian poetry style of dramatic monologue. The subtitle *Capri* refers to a vacation at this place before Alice met Elgar.

III. Sabbath Morning at Sea

words by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861)

The opening phrase and measure 32, etc. *molto maestoso* is not a Wagner march as it is unfortunately often depicted. Let this phrase be more of a meditative pacing; let the contrasting triplet lead the phrase. Be conscious of the 2 to 3 contrast through out this whole piece as a means of metaphor.

After rehearsal C, m.18, the G7 chord, a pizzicato chord in the orchestral version, marks a new place of mind along the transformation. And a transformation definitely occurs between measures 19 and 36.

The *tranquillo* and *colla parte* at measures 23-24, usually disregarded, removes the ticking of time. Let forward moving pulses be silent and *impassive* for these two measures. *Even the intent* – stretch these in m. 29. Step gently through the four chords of m.35 leading to rehearsal F. Remember, a transformation is occurring.

At rehearsal G, m.42, could this be a sign of the cross? Rehearsal H is a return to the opening scene, but with the speaker now having gained an insight. Note that rehearsal H to m.63 is *pp*, with only the voice rising

to *p* at m.59. At rehearsal L hold onto the 2nd beat and release with slow energy at each repetition of this rhythm. At rehearsal M: *Of drop their eyelids*: give this phrase much thought.

IV. Where Corals Lie

words by Richard Garnett (1835-1906)

This movement has so much seduction of time. Try to let go of the metronome pacing and allow for stream of emotion-moments. In measure 29, notice that the words are *Yes, press my eyelids close*, and not *closed*. The last chord, B-major, is to be relished.

V. The Swimmer

words by Adam Lindsay Gordon (1833-1870)

The poem *The Swimmer* is from 1870. The poet A. L. Gordon, not to be confused with the Gordon of Khartoum who is tied to Elgar's First Symphony, is a National Poet of Australia. Elgar uses 4 ½ of the original 13 stanzas of the poem. The place is set within the first 1 ½ stanzas of text: Elgar uses 39 measures for this. The speaker's monologue, beginning at measure 40, is one stanza of monologue now portrayed in 38 measures of music. Elgar then jumps over 8 ½ stanzas of the original monologue to bring us to measure 78. This measure starts with the new Elgar word *So* replacing the *See!* in the original, and brings us back to the place-scene. The piano reverts to tremolo and descriptive music. The stanza and a half of descriptive text is now compressed into 19 measure of music. The next monologue begins at measure 110. Here the final half a stanza of text is stretched over 38 measures of music.

Be aware of the role of the words as outer-descriptive or inner-monologue, and again ask "What transformation does the poem seek?" The music publisher Boosey released a new piano-vocal version in 1998 and a new orchestral version in 1999. The piano-vocal edition makes note of the change in *The Swimmer* from *See!* in the original poem to *So* in 4th stanza. In *Where Corals Lie*, the poems says *Where all the land*, whereas Elgar uses *Where all the lands* in all versions. There are some unnoted differences between the piano and orchestral versions. In *The Swimmer* the orchestra version and original poem has *Swift waves under*, where the piano-

vocal reads *Swift waves sunder*. In the 2nd to last line of the same song there is a disputed choice of words. The orchestra version reads *strifes forbidden* and the piano-vocal, as well as original poem has *straits forbidden*.

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