

Coaching Notes

Edward Elgar
String Quartet, op. 83
Duration: 23'

- I. Allegro Moderato
- II. Piacetole (poco andante)
- III. Allegro molto

The Armistice, November 1918, marked a return to work on a string quartet. By now Elgar had completed the Violin Sonata and was simultaneously working on a piano quintet. Compositional work at this time was often interrupted and Elgar spoke of 'broken threads.' He preferred to work in the countryside, but necessary trips to the city, as well as health concerns for both Edward and Lady Elgar disrupted Elgar's work. Ideas for this string quartet had already been formed in March, as Lady Elgar notes in her diary, "E. began a delightful quartet. A remote & lovely 1st subject. May he soon finish it." The second movement *Piacetole* was first to be finished and Lady Elgar described it as "captured sunshine." Elgar himself later said that this movement had "something in it that has never been done before."

As the piece finally neared completion in December, Lady Elgar notes, "E writing last movement of quartet – very impassioned & carrying one along at a terrific rate." And on 11 December 1918, "E finished composing the last mvt. of the quartet. Most fiery & sweeps along like a galloping of squadrons."

At first view, the piece shows many examples of chords in first inversion. If performed within the usual constructs of inverted harmony, quartet players would think vertically and emphasize the instability of the harmony, letting the chord feel 'upside down' and wobbly. Within the framework of counterpoint, however, the piece comes to life as an organic, linear monologue compiled of many voices. Elgar's frequent use intervals of the third, parallel motion, and successions rather than progressions, set up the two-part and three-part texture. Rarely, does Elgar give the four-voiced quartet four distinct voices.

When preparing this piece for performance the most important issue is that of voice leading, a combination of stacking and blending of voices within a horizontal and linear framework. When do players blend and when do they bring out their instrument's special qualities? The voice leading will shape the color, flow, and character of the piece and therefore requires an ongoing process of conscious decision-making throughout rehearsals.

The first violin is rarely the *de facto* lead line, and in most cases the line will need to blend and add color to the second violin or viola part. As the first violin plays into the higher register, not only should the pitch be secure, but the tone-center pure and unsqueezed. This quartet calls for a first violinist who floats and blends, adding color without excessive vibrato. The first violin is sometimes used to expand the total canvass area of the music, without actively leading the ear.

Most second violinists will be familiar with blending and "shadowing" the first violinist at an octave, yet in this quartet the second violin is often a lead color, or, blends within the viola color. The viola part is rather prominent, sometimes playing above the violins. The violist can feel comfortable with a non-violin sound, especially in the upper registers. The natural characteristics of the viola, you may call this pungent or resonant, are valuable and dramatic additions to this quartet writing.

In addressing the voice leading question, remember that parallel motion creates a one-voice effect. This means that the voices involved in the parallel motion will need to blend, rather than be separated as a melody and accompaniment. The general rule is that the lower of the pair or group provides the core sound while upper notes add color and fullness within this lower note.

I. Allegro Moderato

The first measure gives us our first glimpse of the counterpoint and linear writing that plays a central role in this composition. For example, in measure one, the first dotted-quarter chord can be seen harmonically, i.e. vertically, as an E minor chord where most likely the doubled root in the first violin would get prominence. If we regard this harmony as something that “happens to be created by counterpoint,” rather than a melody-harmony-accompaniment paradigm, then the voice leading takes on another role. Notice the parallel thirds (sixths) between the first violin and viola as the music moves forward. This parallel motion, viewed from the perspective of counterpoint, creates one voice. The lower voice of parallel intervals will be the core sound and color. So in terms of “who is on top,” balance the first chord with the viola leading, in anticipation of the forthcoming parallel motion and counter-punctual texture.

The same considerations are important in the third measure. Here, one option is to view the prominent line as flowing from the first violin line, B - F, and then echoed by the second violin line, B - F, followed by another echoed pair on A - E. The first and third beats in this measure, however, have the violins in parallel motion. If we think linearly and treat the parallel lines on the first and third beats as one voice, the lower voice leads and the first violin adds color; the line becomes richer. Rather than simple echoes between voices, the phrase now flows through a colorful F - C, B - F, then C - B, and A - E. The ear is further drawn to the second violin line by the graced C on the third beat.

At rehearsal 2, the second violin and viola lines are in thirds and the first violin doubles at an octave. Over the next seven measures there is rich and unusual color as the second violin and viola line alternate core positions in the parallel thirds. The first violin floats above at an octave, adding a hue of brilliance and enlarging the space of the audio-palette. Consider Lady Elgar’s word “remote” as a suitable adjective for the first violin part. If the first violin becomes too prominent in this piece, the effect will be ‘whiny,’ and give the music a feeling of being on tiptoes, rather than rich and earthy. When I hear reviewers say that the quartet is “not an easy work to bring off,” it is this mis-stacked feeling they are hearing, most likely due to a vertically presented harmony.

Rehearsal 3, for example, looks much like the opening measure. However, the first dotted-quarter is more ambiguous. The second violin and viola are unisons, just a third above the cello G, creating a strong G major configuration. The cello even uses the previous F-sharp to move up to a ‘tonic.’ As written, it could be a warm and gentle G major harmony. But the first violin has an E, tightly packed in above the second violin and viola. The first violin could declare the E as a root of an E minor harmony in inversion. However, the earlier A-sharp -B in the viola part creates a beautiful succession of parallel thirds between the viola and cello. The linear texture continues in thirds between the 1st violin and viola. I would hesitate to let the music lose the linear texture at the downbeat of rehearsal three by letting vertical and harmonic voice leading disrupt the flow. The quartet players will need to consciously stack this chord and shape it with the desired quality and character.

Measure 68 is another place in the first movement where the first violin isn’t ‘top.’ The cello part pushes the music forward with accents every beat as it climbs into the treble clef. The first violin in its ‘remote’ upper line is like a ghost line; we know it is there, feel it, but don’t consciously focus on it. At rehearsal 10, bring out the graced viola line. I read the *Sostenuto* in the violins, and later cello part, to mean ‘use full bows.’

The quarter-note tied to eighth-note figure of the first movement easily falls into a rhythm with accents on every quartet note. Where not specified as accented, try thinking across the bar line. Use the phrase markings that Elgar gives and let the quarter-eighth be a very forward moving, horizontal line. Galloping, not stomped.

At the close of the first movement I prefer the D - B of the first violin part in measure 147 played as one gesture that lingers gently. *After a breath*, the next (and closing) gesture begins on beat four with the low B.

II. Placevole (poco andante)

This movement is a beautiful example of two and three-part inverted counterpoint at the tenth. In a rather *tour de force*, Elgar achieves a highly lyric and colorful movement out of a concise counterpoint framework. Around this time (1918) contemporary music journals carried debates about the training of composers in counterpoint - and whether it wasn't an obsolete skill, both academically and in practice. I can easily imagine Elgar, in this atmosphere and as a self-taught composer, taking a special pleasure in creating a movement of a string quartet (four-parts) using two-part counterpoint, inverted and at the tenth.

The given voice, *cantus firmus*, was traditionally assumed to be, at least until around the time of Purcell, in the tenor voice. At the beginning of this movement, the *cantus firmus* is indeed given to the quartet's tenor voice, the viola. A counterpoint line is built below, in the cello. The third voice created by an inversion of this counterpoint line. The tenor has a C, the cello line an A. The inversion of this 3rd is an octave above the tenor, or C. Beginning the second measure, the tenor line has a B, the cello an E, the third voice is an inversion of this interval at a tenth. The fifth becomes a sixth, the G. This is one possible way to create a third voice from a *cantus firmus* and counterpoint line. I tend to feel that Elgar created the lower line first and build the top line as an inversion, although it is possible to assemble such counterpoint using other methods. The 3rd part is often freer and more florid. At rehearsal 18, the tenor voice is in the 2nd violin part, the cello adds the lower counter line, and the viola is now the inverted and florid line. Two measures later, the viola is again the tenor. A glance ahead to rehearsal 20 shows how easily Elgar moved the Tenor voice among the instruments. In measure 41, the 1st violin has the tenor line, the viola is the lower counterpoint and the 2nd violin carries the inverted (delayed and syncopated) line. In the next measure the 2nd violin is the tenor voice and the cello becomes the counterpoint. After two more measures of this arrangement, the 1st violin exchanges roles as the tenor with the viola. The frequent parallel 3rds is one mark of inverted counterpoint at a tenth, as is the avoidance of fourths and fifths. Chromatic alterations are allowed where needed or "according to the scale," as Richter's *Treatise in Counterpoint* states. An example of this chromatics is the raised and lowered B in measures 7-10. [Ernst F. Richter, Professor of Music at Leipzig Conservatory, was a much sought-after and influential teacher. His manual from the 1870's, *Lehrbuch des einfachen und doppelten Contrapunkts*, was translated from German and adapted for use in many schools throughout Europe.]

I can't know for certain if this counterpoint is the 'never done before' aspect that Elgar has mentioned. Certainly Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, all use counterpoint to some extent in their quartet compositions. Implementing the inversion and at a tenth, and using two or three-part writing for a four-voiced ensemble, is much less usual. Elgar did say to his friend Tryote Griffith later in life, when pressed to reveal the novel aspect, "Nothing you would understand, merely an arrangement of notes." In such a linear piece, it is also interesting that Elgar, when facing interruptions and mental blocks while composing the piece, uses the phrase "broken threads."

The second movement requires flexibility as the fluctuation between blend and distinction can change with each moment of music. For example, the cello leads (solo) at three before rehearsal 18, and for two measures is the highest voice. Let these measures bring out the unique qualities of the cello in that tessitura. And at rehearsal 18 give the viola two measures of lead as the florid soprano line: the 2nd violin is the tenor.

Linear music thrives on texture and space. With the first violin entrance at rehearsal 19, stack the violins with the second violin leading and the first adding the upper octave as color, joining to create a one-voice parallel part. Note that the second violin, viola, and cello are all stacked tightly around the middle range, and the first violin is the lone high note. As before, if the first violin line becomes the center of attention, the music will get whiny and edgy.

At measures 41-44 the violin and cello echo each other on the same pitches. Let the difference in instrument color come through and alternate from viola to cello. Let the viol, with its unique viola character, be expressive in its upper range in measures 46-50. After rehearsal 21 the oddly spooky tone color comes from the parallel sixths. As a general rule here, bring out the lower of the pair, whether in sixths or thirds.

For the mini hairpins in this movement, for example after rehearsal 21, I'd prefer they came from almost moving in and out of the 'sweet spot' of the string - a blossoming of sound, neither forced or pushed - rather than from a change in bow speed or vibrato. The energy level then stays the same, but the sound expands, breathes, and blossoms. Rehearsal 33 is another example of the first violin line widening the sound palette, adding texture and space; use a solid left hand and gently float the sound.

III. Allegro molto

Stacking issues are immediately apparent in the first measures of the third movement. The viola and cello start in octaves: use the lower line as the core sound. The first and second violins are in parallel thirds, then in sixths: the bottom note provides the core sound. As throughout, lead the listener through a linear succession of events, rather than harmonic progressions.

Also, in the first measure, and appearing throughout the movement, bring out the sixteenth notes and their moving line. Be careful too, of over accenting the downbeats. Let the movement continue forward, across bar lines, emphasizing the horizontal threads.

In regards to voice leading in a contrapuntal piece, remember that the ear will also naturally hear and distinguish the outer voices more easily than the inner voices. If a strong inner line is desired, give it a distinct color and texture. When stacking voices, realize that the higher-pitched tone will be heard first by the ear (listener). So beginning all voices of a chord together "at the same time" may sometimes actually mean having the high notes start after the lower-pitched notes have been voiced.

This quartet goes beyond the usual hierarchical ideas of melody, accompaniment and harmonic progressions and returns to that of linear equi-voiced successions. The construct is not even that of a conversation between speakers and listeners, or questions and answers, but rather that of four voices, (or paired voices combined to create one) in constant flow and flux, building a unique monologue.