

## COACHING NOTES

Edward Elgar (1857-1934)

Piano Quintet, op. 84

Duration: 35-40'

I. Moderato

II. Adagio

III. Andante - Allegro

In a letter of 1903 Elgar writes: "I only know that my things are performed –when they go as *I* like – elastically and mystically..." He is exasperated "when they are conducted squarely & sound like a wooden box..." This piece sets up a contrast between playing 'in a wooden box' and 'mystical.' Unfortunately the quintet has received negative commentary, possibly due to a misunderstanding of this interplay. The music, in a rather jarring manner, veers from the serious opening of ridged rhythms and plain chant to vulgar debauchery and camp. The clipped, almost repressed gesture of the opening can not sustain its demure attitude as the contrast between pious and hedonistic urges of man is played out. By rehearsal 50, the attempt at *con dignita* at rehearsal 44 dissolves towards impulsive furies of Bacchus-like thumping piano rhythms. Running throughout, the cello voice seems to play the role of enticing us to 'come out and play.'

At rehearsal 1, the cello offers playful suggestions to try something less severe. After rehearsal 1, measures six through nine, think through which player of the string chords has the third of the chord and give that full warmth. If the fifth is doubled have the higher octave(s) put their sound into the lower octave. Keep the fifth less prominent than the root or third. And the seventh of the chord, of course, gets a bit of 'spice.' At rehearsal 2, where a resolute *Allegro* tries to be serious, these first four measures are easily played with equally heavy stress on each beat. Agree on a poetic-foot, as the ear fatigues if all the notes are equally stressed. Which of the seven chords is most stressed and which is least?

After rehearsal 4, the serious idea now sounds a bit drunk. Here Elgar has written a wonderful phrase where the upper strings and cello combine perfectly; a little release from the sound before the *pp* notes in upper strings allows the ear to follow the cello's hesitant (expectant?) G-sharp. Lean into the pair of slurred eighth-notes and give a crevice of air between them and the final half-note. At rehearsal 5 we face the exotic enticement of guitar-like pizzicato, pulling the serious idea further off track.

Even more irrational drunkenness appears at the *poco animato* of rehearsal 6 and includes a sudden burst of self-pity and bittersweet indulgence. The music at rehearsal 8 once again attempts the original seriousness, but by rehearsal 10 the cello line leads us off track again. The music firmly moves from square-ness to wild as the music heads into *giusto*. Although the theme here has no direct relation, it reminds me of Richard Strauss' Till Eulenspiegel theme as he is railing at the universe.

At rehearsal 13 the piano voice attempts to put the breaks on with the *largamente* chords but completely breaks down into mere *tremelos*. Rather than seeing this moment as an embarrassing, cheap show of salon writing, see it for the camp and irony it creates. By the *tutti* at rehearsal 14, the Till-like rant is full-blown. The music at rehearsal 18 is simply vulgar, so go with it, and enjoy the

return of the seductive guitar at rehearsal 19. The cello voice continues its own protesting throughout, now almost seeking narcissistic attention.

The phrasing and slurs in this piece offer opportunities to portray all of this dramatic character. What happens between the end of slurs and the beginning of the new notes? Is it just a change of bow direction? Play with the edge-sound and form clear character and energy. Consider the use of *portamento*, especially in the slow movement.

At rehearsal 44, *con dignita*, think through the voice leading: which string voice is the core sound? Let the others then put their sound into that core sound. Rehearsal 69 is the music's last attempt at *nobilemente*, before the Till character wins out with *animato* to the end.

Check for an error in the second violin part: three before rehearsal 61 should be slurred, as in the first violin part.

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