

Coaching Notes

Edward Elgar

Symphony No. 1, op. 55

Duration: 50-54'

I. Andante. Nobile e semplice

II. Allegro molto

III. Adagio

IV. Lento - Allegro

With the First Symphony of Edward Elgar we step into a world where the journey is truly more important than the destination. Time, from beginning to final note, is the essence of the performance. When approaching this work keep the use of Time in mind. How do I best *use time* for the music's sake? From the choice of tempo and pacing to hand movements and subdivisions, how can I give the music the time it needs? How can my guidance of time serve the music? (See *Podium Time with Elgar: A composer's use of time* for more ideas about how composers relate to time.)

The opening is a gesture of a pulse-less picture frame that sets off the music-time from the real-world time. Beating through these two moments will inadvertently set up a pulse, a bouncing ball – exactly what is not desired. At measure 3 the music moves in two counterpoint voices; the staccato bass and the legato upper line. It's these legato lines that need stacking so that they combine to be one voice. Decide which voice is the core sound and then ask the other players to put their sounds inside this core sound. First add all the players who are at the same octave. Then ask the higher octave to add their note inside as warmth to the lower octave, rather than as a lead color. The higher octave is more a polish to the overtones. A reminder about clarinets written at the octave: the second clarinet line should be a tad louder or fuller than the 1st clarinet line. This keeps the balance and hence intonation stable in the clarinets and winds.

The opening phrase, after the initial two measures, can be thought of as 4 measures plus 3, or 3 plus 4. The top voice and bottom line are un-synchronized as the top line prefers 4 plus 3, the bottom line feels 3 plus 4. Regardless, know that you are stretching seven bars without a distinctive march foot of one-two, one-two. Bring out the long poetic foot, the lingering held notes while the bass line continues. Before rehearsal 2, the carat marking (^) brings out the highest note within the first thirty-two measures, the A-flat. The carat marking calls for a slight separation between this note and the previous one, so it is not a legato emphasis, but an articulated detached emphasis. The lower octave still needs to be the leading sound during this section. Consider the way the two-voiced counterpoint sets up new vertical combinations. Do the notes engage to create a pull toward the future or a focus on the present?

Rehearsal 3, with the entrance of the full brass section, is a good place to get in the habit of noting the dynamics within the brass section. Keep an ear and eye to when the dynamic markings are individualized rather than being a blanket dynamic for the whole section. It is easy and tempting for players and conductors to get swept up in the energy of the moment, thinking everyone else has the same loud dynamic marking. (Rehearsal 147-148 is a perfect example of this.) Coming into rehearsal 5, let the lower string line lean into the last note of the measure - leading into the next beat via a step (E-flat to F; C to D-flat; G to A-flat). Give the first note the agogic lean and the second note (the first of the new measure) a sense of release. I find this foreshadows the Allegro, with its accented eighth-note and 'release' quarter. As with the beginning, the 2 measures at rehearsal 5 are pulse-less. What came into pulse has now slipped away. Our next 'sense' of this march-like idea is at rehearsal 18 when it briefly appears in its own vague pulse.

Allegro: At The fifth measure of the Allegro, the accents alternate between the upper and lower voices forcing the ear to move between voices. Shape the upper line; stack the lower as to be heard as one voice, with its own accents. The idea is that the ear can hear the two voices with separate 'diction' and sentences.

Three before rehearsal 7, the *largamente* (L....) is rarely, if never, done. This is a case for not simply repeating what 'is done' because it has 'always been done that way.' There are numerous tempo events in Elgar's music which appear to have been passed down through tradition as 'the way' simply because conductors were unable to achieve anything else. In the earlier years of orchestral playing it was difficult to 'get' an orchestra to slow at this point, so we have simply decided "that's the way it is done." Now days there is no reason why a competent conductor, combined with the high standards of orchestral playing that we are blessed with today, can not pull off a *largamente* where Elgar asks for one. Our earliest recordings of this piece don't have a convincing slowing; Elgar struggled with this hurdle himself. However, nowadays, the *largamente* should be added to our orchestral vocabulary. How much L.....? Enough to give the events, the *sonore* in the timpani, the huge leap down to G-natural in the low strings, trombone, and tuba time to happen. Something collapses here. At rehearsal 8, stack the *sonore* line so that each player knows who has the core sound. Think counter-punctually rather than tune and harmony.

Between rehearsals 8 and 9, bring out the dotted-quarter tied to eighth-note figure as the cello line climbs higher. Note that it is given *sf* in the basses, tuba and low wind lines. It's easy to get caught up in the grand brass chords or the upper strings flourishes, but stack them well so the ear can hear them while noticing the dotted figure and catching a glimpse of the cello line as it adds tension - building to the high G above the treble clef before crashing down into rehearsal 9. Rehearsal 9 is less an arrival than a restless floundering and slow sinking into ambiguous rhythms and pulses.

Events between rehearsal 11 and 12 are an unwinding and loosening of pulses and harmony. Let the violin and clarinet lines stretch with slow energy above the ripple in the harp and second violin line. Six before rehearsal 12, these two measures set up a little circling of A, B-natural, B-flat, stated twice each over the duration of a measure and a half: the B-natural moment getting the agogic lean. During the A moments, I like to give preference to the figure of quarter-eighth-quarter note. This little *grazioso* figure emerges but then tucks back under the *espressivo* legato line. After two circles of A, B, B-flat, three before 12, the expected A-flat suddenly is an A-natural, and the next legato line begins on C-sharp. Shape this little passage, get inside and draw the listeners inside, too. One caution is to avoid being so centered on events that each beat is equally-weighted. This 'one syllable foot' effect is not just unmusical, but blurs the bigger scope that the listener is trying to follow. The two measures before rehearsal 12 are as if to take a deep breath to prepare for intimate thoughts or mediation. Keep the pulse gentle and undulating.

It is passages (11- 12) such as these that are often the least tended to in rehearsal. What should sound like transitional material is often left ragged and allowed to just happen while we prepare for the next big tune. Give this section, these 10 measures, a sense of transformation, rather than just a loose gathering of material that bridges events. We can experience the beautiful theme at reh. 12 because of the collapse into rehearsal 9, the restless floundering at 10, and the transformation distilling and preparing our minds and emotions for rehearsal 12. Have a definite concept of what you'd like to achieve between rehearsals 9 and 12. If the character hasn't been filled out during those stages, the theme at reh. 12 will be without conviction. After reh. 12, measures 3 and 4 in the second violin line (and m. 5/6 and 9/10 in the flute) these are accent markings in *pp*, not *diminuendo* markings. (See also rehearsal 38.) Give the first note of each figure a gentle nudge, yet with slow energy. Here is an example of when playing 'rhythmically' will kill the spirit of the music. The gesture here is one of effortless wisps in the breeze. There is no reason why the flute line must be nailed down to the click-track.

Seven before reh. 13, is another place where the music is often left ragged and un-clarified. First fold together the cello and viola lines so that they create one voice. Then decide between the flute, violin 1 and 2 line, when each line comes forward or withdraw. For example, seven before 13, start with the cello-violin line emerging from the flute cascade with the duple figure and then F-sharp. Then move to the octave leap in the first violin line, then the accented figure in the second violin line, leading into the flute swell that flows into the violin swell and onto the flute/viola swell. All this is laid out as one voice to allow the ear to hear the counter ideas of the viola and cello. Rehearsal 12 to 13 requires

solid left-hand playing from the violins even though the passage might be light, gentle and moving slowly. Even top-notch players may need prompting on this.

Eight before reh. 14 the music pulls inward as the cello and flute blend into one line; second violin and viola another. The first violin line is a third voice. Shape each cleanly so we can hear the 3-voice idea. The use of portamento here in the *dolcissimo* will help define the counterpoint.

Reh. 17 is marked “dotted-whole equals old whole note.” So the measures should remain the same and the result is a *slower* moving pulse. The dotted-half, quarter, half figure is all that is happening per measure. Conducting the triple meter in 3 is ‘standard practice’ here, but it creates two things which don’t reflect the music. First, it *increases* the energy level and motion, emotionally and visually, as if the new section unleashes an intense, close-fought clashing of swords. Our focus is on every step, every half-note, rather than the sweep of a four-bar idea. The meter marking of “whole-note equals dotted-whole note” says broad energy; full and outward, not tight and punchy. Second, with our beats stressing *three equal-weighted* pulses per measure, we miss the transformation of the little *grazioso* figure that was peeking through before rehearsal 12. This petite *grazioso* idea is now broadly and audaciously stretched across four measures creating the peak of the exposition. These cross-rhythms are then followed by a gathering of energy in *one blistering stroke* from flutes and violins. The tuba and low strings project a *full-measure sweep* rather than stumbling in duple steps of 1-2, 3-4, 5-6 at the quarter note. Usually these notes are so weighted with vertical heaviness that they can’t create a forward leaning. Keep the cross-rhythm feeling going even through the *allargando*.

At reh. 21 the harp line ‘wave of wand’ gives a great example of Elgar’s burring of the click-track and a release from the progress of time. The first three measures of rehearsal 21 have triple and duple meters occurring at once, causing the removal of any certain meter. Use as little metrical beats as possible while the click-track, with a wave of the wand, loses its influence and fades. I would ask the harpists to place the start of the rolled chord on the beat, and to spread it widely without out a strict rhythmic shape. At the second appearance of this gesture, the violinists even have a grace note prior to the beat, so ask the harpist to start on the beat. Create as little verticalness and ‘square-ness’ in the flow as possible in the approach to reh. 22. Bring out the contrast between the staccato rhythmic figures at reh. 22 and the legato line - even marked *sonore* in the viola line. Between here and reh. 23 the music spirals downward losing energy, without a sense of confident, regular pulse until reh. 23 when it begins to gather energy through the rising eighth-notes.

Shape the music with a poetic foot and long lines at reh. 23. The flute and clarinet lines are gliding unaccented syllables, only touching earth on the accented quarter note, the 2nd measure of 23. The violin line, too, 3 measures later, has a long poetic foot with only one stressed foot. As mentioned before, too much attention and stress to each beat creates a new, unwanted musical genre - “Edwardian Disco.” Ideally the rushing notes of the lower strings beginning at 23 would just move along without any noticeable foot - just one long sweep - until 4 before 24.

At rehearsal 24 the gesture is of stretching, trying to break out of some binds with leap-step, leap-step and back again. Note the brass sections individual dynamic markings. Take a moment to develop your own concept of this significant gesture. Flip back to the opening and decide what has happened between then and now. What has occurred in the meanwhile?

One last comment about the first movement: I think of a picture frame 5 before rehearsal 30, a neutral place where time is neither here nor there - just a moment of non-pulse to set off the next idea, the 6/4 violin solo. Make sure the pick-up gesture does have a 6 feel as a rounded flowing gesture with little verticalness. Why does Elgar bring in a solo violin voice at these at moments? Reh. 30 brings in the stretching idea, now more gently and in the third bar there is a unique gesture - an odd moment of no click-track, just a color chord, it blossoms, warm and gentle, and passes to another line spoken by solo violinist. Magical.