

Podium Time with Elgar: A composer's use of time

Music is the journey from first note to last. Rather than being a glib cliché, in music, the journey – the time of the piece - is truly more important than the destination. Each era and each composer have their own relationship with this journey and this time; how they perceive and relate to time, and how they organize events within time. Does the future influence the present, or the present shape the future? Is the past attached or detached from the present? These concepts shape human culture and music. Understanding a composer's relationship to time provides insights into the language, constructs, context, and metaphor of their music – of this journey.

Mozart's (1756-1791) music gives us a glimpse of successive but not necessarily connected moments. His music explores and presents new moments, all offered within a code of good taste. As the masks of theater present both the tragic and comic, Mozart's music may present a gesture of military fanfare followed by a lyrical passage; a laughing, bubbling phrase that then sinks into a minor-mode tragedy, only to burst through as sunshine moments later. As a gemstone being held up to the light, we are shown the brilliancy and the shadows, and thrill to the tasteful beauty in which even the tragic and painful are expressed.

Beethoven's (1770-1827) relation to time is a process where the struggle and striving to achieve a goal is art's highest ambition. His music is linear and driven. The proof of man's greatness is his will and ability to shape and determine time. Beethoven throws musical material into space and shapes it in time. The sketches are drawn and re-drawn as if to test out possible futures for each idea. Only when Beethoven had created a future that met with his satisfaction, did he give the idea existence as notes on paper.

Wagner (1813-1883) spoke and wrote much on the proper tempo of music. Tempo and pacing, however, reflect how frequently the ear recognizes a new stimulus. As to his relationship with time, Wagner's music is a great example of Romanticism and its 'clinging' to the moment. His musical gestures are tenaciously leaning into the future and simultaneously stretching into a past. As a composer he expands the size of the present to encompass all the past and all the future. This concept was also integral to the philosophy of the era.

Bruckner (1824-1896) has one of the most peaceful relationships with time. For him, it may have been a pilgrimage: time is God-given and eternal. Bruckner has an earthly patience that is almost chaste. For example, the Andante slow movement of his Fourth Symphony has such a feel of pilgrimage, yet we never arrive. Throughout the movement we get C-major glimpses of some perfect sight of splendor that is never attained. He seems to withhold arrivals as a point of discipline and gives praise to the unattainable.

Mahler's (1860-1911) relationship to time is one of mistrust; it's slippery and fleeting. Time is not sensitive to Man's ambitions or fate, but rather a random, and possibly bitter, give and take of life and death. Time *here* as a Now is not to be believed. Only the time on some other plane is worth attaining; only this distant time is honest and loving. Mahler's music seeks to reach a promise of a union with some other time and place. Eternity, mountain tops, and angels - all show a future that is safe, gentle, and consoling.

Richard Strauss (1864-1949) uses time as a canvass for painting pictures and stories. His music says, sometimes pointedly, 'Once upon a time...'

Besides a composer's relationship with time, society has gone through ever-changing relationships with time. Using 1813 and 1915 as a frame, time went from something of nature or the heavens (out there) to being part of science, something absolute, studied and measured. The bursting energy of the Industrial Revolution made time a useful tool for measuring duration, i.e. productivity. The year 1813 is a significant demarcation; it is then we begin to see the use amongst musicians and composers of a new mechanical time device: the metronome. With the introduction of the metronome, the pulse and time of music is removed from bodily and human movement and shifts to that of a machine. Already in the early 1800s we have critics and writers concerned that this new device would have a detrimental effect on music. There is concern that music will take on a 'one syllable foot.' Indeed, 1813 sees the birth of the equally stressed, equally paced click-track of music that continues to today.

Throughout the nineteenth century the concept of time and history became an idea of progress, or meaningful continuation. Time was about organic growth, not a simple accumulation of successive

moments. Born out of this mind-frame is the music of the Romantic era, having a firm link between future, present, and past.

The nineteenth century also saw in Western Europe and America a growing disparity between Event Time and Clock Time. Clock Time is when happenings are scheduled and organized around a clock; we do something because the clock says 'it is time.' The rise of train schedules, concepts of 'being on time,' punctuality as a social expectation, these all entered into social interactions during the 1800s. Event Time is a cultural structure where happenings occur, conclude, and begin when the people or activity require. Events shape the time. This split between Clock Time and Event Time grows throughout the nineteenth century, creating what I like to call 'the tyranny of the click-track' as Event Time is gradually dismissed, suffering from its inability to be progress based, assisting neither science nor productivity. The music world, too, has accepted the concept of an absolute clock. Music has become an art ruled by Clock Time, an Absolute, mechanical time - with no attachment to the human body.

The year 1913 brings us to a significant moment in Clock Time with the performance of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. Here after the pressures of nineteenth century progress and constrictions of Clock Time, I see Stravinsky's relationship to time in this piece as one of teasing the click-track. He dances around it, punches it, gives it prominence and then disregards it. He could have written the piece out to conform to a click-track, but rather, he makes fun of it.

A new concept of enormous consequences appears in 1915. Oddly, however, society and the music world have yet to respond to this major idea. Einstein most daringly said time is relative. It is relative upon where you are, who you are, on space and velocity. Times are many: Performers' time, Listeners' time, Acoustical Time, Concert Time. That trumpet player waiting and counting out 56 measures of rest is in slow-moving Tacit Time. And yet, musicians and performers relate to time as an Absolute. Notes are right or wrong based on their happening according to one Absolute Time - a time built on a firm structure of mechanics.

With this framework in place, let's turn to Elgar and his relationship to time. Looking at some of Elgar's score markings, the most unique is his use of tempo words. Beginning with the *Apostles* in 1903, Elgar uses an abbreviated system to designate *Accelerando*, *Largamente*, and *Ritardando*. He

simply gives the first letter, adding a dotted line to the point where the tempo designation is to end. *Nobilmente* is firmly tied to the works of Elgar. Although it appears in earlier sketches, the word first appears in print with *Cockaigne*, Op. 40 in 1901. The marking then appears in *Coronation Ode*, Op. 44, 1902; *Introduction & Allegro*, Op. 47, 1904-5; *In the South*, Op. 50, 1904; *Pomp and Circumstance March* Op. 39, No. 4, of 1907; *Symphony No. 1*, Op. 55, 1907-8; the *Violin Concerto*, Op. 61, 1910; *Symphony No. 2*, Op. 63 in 1911, and others. It is interesting that Elgar referred to such tempo markings as 'time words.' In an example from the *Piano Quintet*, Elgar notes to his publisher that he has written out a viola line to sound faster, thereby avoiding the use of the time word *accelerando*.

Elgar's concepts of time are played out in his frequent meter changes as he moves fluently between duple and triple meters. In doing so his music often gathers energy or relaxes energy, depending on whether it shifts to more inner-rhythm pulses or relaxes with fewer inner-rhythm events. Elgar's First Symphony, especially the first movement, has numerous examples of these changes. At rehearsal 9 the music shifts from duple to triple while the over-all beat pattern (in two) remains the same. The horns gather and increase energy and provide a gesture of gusto. At rehearsal 17, after a rush of inner rhythms, sometimes eight notes per pulse, the music shifts into triple meter, suddenly with just three events per measure-pulse. As a climax to the exposition, such a release of energy brings a thrill to the listener. These moments of tension and energy release in Elgar's music are also familiar gestures in the vibrant swagger and joy of *In the South*.

Elgar will also use time as a way to expose new character within the same material. An example of presenting the same material in different time occurs in the first movement of the First Symphony, where a 'grazioso theme' initially in the clarinet line at rehearsal 11, bursts out in a horn line now stretched over four measures - the gusto *tutta forza* of rehearsal 17 mentioned above. The hint of this idea to come is subtle; it may qualify as an instance of foreshadowing. The most intriguing use of time as a means to present musical material in very different characters is also in the First Symphony. The scurrying *Allegro Molto* violin line of the 2nd movement morphs into the beautiful *Adagio espressivo* melody of the 3rd movement. Time allows the music to shift from a gesture of scuttling texture to one of full emotional warmth and color.

Elgar's compositions also relate to time through blurred meters. The first movement in the First Symphony, especially, has many moments where duple and triple meters are occurring at once, or even where parts of the orchestra slip into triple while the rest remains on duple. The last movement, in contrast, is surprisingly stable in this regard. It is significant that the climax at rehearsal 146 is a mix of duple and triple, the orchestra having gradually shifted, instrument by instrument, into a 6/4 time signature by this arrival. The meter blurring comes to a definitive halt with the 2/2 at rehearsal 147, and the appearance of the opening march idea that brings the symphony to its finale.

Elgar seems to use the harp (piano in the chamber music) to effect a 'wave of a wand' that removes, stops, or blurs any pulse or flow of time. In the first movement of Symphony No. 1 there are moments (after rehearsal 21, before and after reh. 30, and after reh. 53) where the harp line momentarily silences any pulse. The clarinets or flutes then gather up time again and move forward with a perceivable pulse.

Counterpoint is significant in Elgar's relationship to time because counterpoint allows the ear to hear multiple times 'at once.' We are able to distinguish and somehow comprehend the flow of more than one line when voices interact counter-punctually. Most importantly, counterpoint creates a relationship between vertical events (comparing the *Now* of multiple voices), rather than horizontal (comparing temporally *now-to-next*) events. Furthermore, we experience how multiple voices can engage each other as *equals*. This is a rich metaphor, displayed beautifully in the 2-voiced opening of the First Symphony. Here a walking low line engages an upper voice that sometimes moves 'in sync,' sometime lingers in its own time. The ear stays with both voices and experiences the effects of each new pairing. Unlike a melody-harmony relationship where the top melody is the main event, here it is the newly-created moments of voice combinations.

Most people think of marches when they think of Elgar, and musicologists have commented that Elgar's marches are used as 'a vehicle for personal rhetoric.' Marches, like dances, present time that doesn't progress. As a treadmill, they keep you moving and feeling energy, but are without a destination or sense of change; they celebrate a moment. Mahler's marches, for example, often degrade into futile efforts, trying in vain to exert energy and passion into something that goes

nowhere. Mahler's relationship to time in this progress-less click-track seems that of mortality; each step taken means one less step left to live. Elgar creates marches, but then, possibly knowing they lead nowhere, uses the march to reaffirm the *Now*: We are still here, and this is ok.

One of the most evocative aspects of Elgar's music is this ability to create moments of *Now*; moments when music isn't about progress, but rather about accepting the next *now*. Elgar's compositions convey a philosophy sensed through this relationship to time: we can hope for a better future, but without a promise of a better future or an afterlife, humans should have a hearty satisfaction in the *now*. The *now* is eternal. It is as if to say, 'Progress is not an issue for the artist, Being is.'

Elgar's compositions create, through the use of marches, silencing of the click-track pulses, blurred and shifting meters, and counterpoint, a musical journey that thrives outside of Clock Time, free from a mechanical click-track or Absolute Time. His music is the portrayal of Event Time. Podium time with Elgar therefore serves the music and is a medium for emotion - and human events. For the conductor this means confronting music making without the domination and convenience of a click-track. A conductor will need to make choices and prioritize between the musical gestures and the clock. This means being comfortable with the flow of events, shifts in pacing, and pulselessness. For example, the opening of the First Symphony begins with two pulse-free gestures prior to the start of the march-like idea. The conductor will need to consider the effect of creating pulses with their arm-beats even though there are intentionally no pulses in the music. Nine after rehearsal 29 is another example of a suspension of pulse and meter; here it sets up a shift from duple to triple and a change in mood. There is no reason for the conductor to insert a pulse and disregard the clocklessness of this moment.

This type of music and time perception calls for conductors to revisit our conducting habits. Event Time in music represents the temporal needs of the *musical gesture*, giving this priority over the demands of a ticking clock or the dexterity of the conductor. A good example is at rehearsal 17 of the First Symphony, where Elgar makes a duple to triple shift as mentioned above. The meter marking says that the old measure equals the new measure. When the measures remain the same the result is a *slower moving* pulse in the new

triple-meter and a gesture of wonderful ease of 'victory' in the *tutta forza* horn line. The previous duple meter has become packed with rushing eighth-notes, full of events, and then suddenly – space, soaring horns, a joyful release.

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 a stumbling of duple steps at the quarter-note in 3 beats of 1-2, 3-4, 5-6.

We have a persistent habit of conducting this new meter in 3 beats to the measure, creating, not a relaxation and possible triumphant musical gesture, but an increase of tension - visually enforced by frantically beating arms. We do it this way because 'it's the way it's done.' Apparently, Elgar himself was unsuccessful in conducting the new triple meter in one: to do so requires a tempo of 52 beats per minute, about the lower limit for conducting arm movement. It is difficult to keep a clear pulse going when the hand and arm move this slowly. I could easily see an orchestra having trouble sustaining a *fff tutta forza* without the inner beats, and also see how the rapid eighth-notes in the violin lines could 'need a beat.' But this is 2010 and our orchestras can do this – hopefully, conductors can, too. [I remind readers that the opportunity to conduct the première of Copland's *Appalachian Spring Suite* in 1945 was turned down by Koussevitzky because he claimed it was 'un-conduct-able.'] We need to question the explanations behind 'it's the way it's done.' 'Because' it wasn't possible 100 years ago is not reason to give up on the musical gesture and stick with what easily suits our baton and the click-track. Musical gesture, expressed in *its* relative time, allowed a flowing poetic foot, and given moments of *Now* – this is podium time with Elgar.

In a letter of 1903 Elgar writes: 'I only know that my things are performed – when they go as I like – elastically and mystically...' Through Elgar's music the conductor, orchestra, and listener have the rare opportunity to share a journey in time – shaped in the mysticism of human events and the elasticity of the human pulse. The time of this music journey from first note to last is not Absolute Time, not Clock Time, but very Human Time; a divine gift of great art.

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