

Elgar and Shaw

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Abstract: Edward Elgar, who would become the major British composer of his time, had read Shaw's "Corno di Bassetto" music columns in the London press in 1888-89, before Shaw had heard a note of Elgar's early music. "He was a musical critic and a good one," said Elgar later. After Shaw's critic days were over, in 1900, he heard the "Enigma Variations" (1897) and the new "Dream of Gerontius." He would become a friend, enthusiast and patron of Elgar, spurring on his creativity – an essential task, as Elgar was diffident and self-critical to the point of tearing up much of what he composed. Shaw opened him up with wit and praise and entrée to a new cultural landscape, Elgar began a lifetime of going to Shaw's plays, which were therapy for him. The relationship was good, too, for Shaw, as Elgar, a social and political conservative, helped make Shaw less extreme. This paper proves that the relationship evoked the best in both men's works.

In the first year of the new century English composer Edward Elgar wrote music for a play by George Moore and W. B. Yeats, *Diarmuid and Grania*, produced at the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin that October. In the next year, 1902, he entered a musical competition for an "Irish Symphony" by expanding on what he had written for the play. He didn't win any prizes, and that ended his music for the theatre. By then, Bernard Shaw had become one of Elgar's admirers, and a few years later responded to a suggestion by a London impresario, Colonel James H. Mapleson, that he write an opera libretto for the French composer Camille Saint-Sans by turning the proposal upside down. "Unfortunately," Shaw joked, "I have a prior engagement with Richard Strauss, which is at present hung up by the fact that I want to write the music and he wants to write the libretto, and we both get on very slowly for want of practice. I wonder whether Elgar would turn his hand to opera?"

The implication was that if Elgar wrote the music, Shaw would furnish a libretto—the only time he ever made such an offer. The two would form a mutual admiration society. Shaw, who always wanted to write music, knew he had no talent in that direction and wrote only a few forgotten songs. Encouraging Elgar was his route to musical composition. Elgar, who would become the major British composer of his time, had read Shaw's "Corno di Bassetto" music columns in London newspapers in 1888-89, before Shaw had heard a note of Elgar's early music. "He was a musical critic and a good one," said Elgar later, "in those dull days when the two [Oxbridge] Universities and the Colleges of Music used to do nothing but sit around and accuse one another of the cardinal virtues." Later, once Shaw and Elgar became close, they would discuss setting one of Shaw's plays to music, but, Shaw recalled, "I think we agreed to my view that he could do nothing with a play except what his [symphonic poem] Falstaff did with Shakespeare's."

After Shaw's critic days were over, in 1900, he heard Elgar's symphonic *Enigma Variations* (of 1897) and his oratorio *A Dream of Gerontius*. The haunting *Enigma Variations*, he recalled, "took away your breath. Whew! I knew we had got it at last." He would become a friend, enthusiast and patron of Elgar, spurring on his creativity—an essential task, as Elgar was diffident and self-critical to the point of tearing up much of what he had composed. Shaw opened him up with wit and praise and entrée to a new cultural landscape. At first there seemed little likelihood of that. Elgar claimed to have admired Shaw's critical pieces, written when he was trying, in London, to reach beyond a purely provincial reputation, but his first known reaction to a Shaw play was less than enthusiastic. Writing to a friend, the stage set designer Arthur Troyte Griffith, after reading *Man and Superman* in 1904, he responded to it, predictably, as the conservative Roman Catholic he was. "Bernard Shaw is hopelessly wrong," he objected, "as all these fellows are on fundamental things: amongst others they punch Xtianity & try to make it fit their civilization instead of making their civilization fit it. He is an amusing liar, but not much more & it is a somewhat curious p[oin]t that in the Don Juan [in Hell dream] scene he makes his characters 'live in the remembrance' (in figure, age, etc) just, or not just but very like [Cardinal] Newman in *Gerontius*. Extremes meet sometimes."

It is possible that extremes did meet here, and that Shaw got something out of the dream-vision of *Gerontius*, which speculated on evolution, extreme age, the loss of Eden, and salvation. Elgar's oratorio referred also to a Devil, and Shaw would have the Devil as a character in his dream interlude, while the other characters in the dream would be, to quote Newman, "out of the body," beyond "space, and time." More suggestions of Elgar may have turned up in a later play Shaw called his "metabiological Pentateuch, *Back to Methuselah*—in what Newman called "the garden shade" of Eden. Elgar's early impact may have been more than Shaw ever recognized. The creative process is a mysterious one, and the computer that is our brain may store ideas in the memory for a long time before they emerge transformed. Elgar, for example, was an enthusiastic amateur chemist, with a laboratory erected in his garden that led him into chemical metaphors. In a University of Birmingham lecture on critics he gave in 1909 he had defined Bernard Shaw chemically, observing that in Shaw's writings "there was a substratum of *practical matter*, or to put it chemically, to volatile and pellucid fluid, held in solution, matter which was precipitated into obvious solid fact by the introduction of the reader's *own common sense*." Nitrogen iodide, he explained further, is formed "when an excess of aqueous ammonia is added to a solution of iodine in potassium iodide." In Shaw's fantasy *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles*, written in 1934, just after Elgar died—which could have awakened dormant memory—is an eccentric character, Iddy—actually named Phosphor—whose father, he claims, was a biological chemist, the reason Iddy grew up as a "nitrogen baby" fed on nitrogen-enriched food.

After *Man and Superman* Elgar would see other Shaw plays, at first largely to see his friend Troyte Griffith's sets. One occasion was the London revival of *The Devil's Disciple* in 1907, which Elgar found "unconvincing." Apparently he read a lot of Shaw, to have singled him out wryly in his Birmingham lecture. Elgar saw *Getting Married* the next year, and pronounced it "fine." In 1912 he and his wife saw *John Bull's Other Island*, with its humane and mystical—but unfrocked—Irish priest, Father Keegan. Moved, to her surprise, the ultra-pious Alice Elgar, who was a profound influence on her husband, wrote, "Most delightful. The noble & ideal left in instead of the poison of [the] other B. Shaw." In 1913 Elgar saw *The Doctor's Dilemma* and *Androcles and the Lion*. He also saw *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* in a revival, and Shaw's feminist satire *Fanny's First Play*.

Although Elgar was a committed playgoer, the Shaw and Elgar circles of friends did not intersect, and the men did not meet until March 1919, at a luncheon arranged by Lalla Vandervelde, wife of a Belgian Socialist politician who had lived in London during the wartime occupation of their country. An occasional actress, Lalla had played in Shaw's home-front farce *Augustus Does His Bit*, which the Elgars had seen. (They would soon see her again in Shaw's *Arms and the Man*.) The other guests were Elgar and the art critic Roger Fry. Elgar, so Shaw recalled in a letter to Virginia Woolf, confided that he had "enjoyed my musical criticisms when he was a student and remembered all my silly jokes. . . . We two plunged into a conversation into which Roger could not get in a word: in fact we forgot all about him."

When in 1931 Shaw collected his *Saturday Review* musical columns of 1890-94 as *Music in London* he would inscribe on Elgar's copy, "The title is wrong. There was no music until you came." Now he knew he also admired the man.

Within days of Madame Vandervelde's luncheon, Shaw was a visitor at Elgar's home in Hampstead, 42 Netherhall Gardens, where the composer's Piano Quintet was given a private run-through in the oak-floored music room dominated by a grand piano. In a thank-you note the next day Shaw wrote that the music "knocked me over at once," but ever the honest critic he added, "You cannot begin a movement in such a magical way as you have begun this Quintet and then suddenly lapse into the expected." The work did have its problems, as Elgar did not write as well for the piano as he did for strings. Shaw, a good amateur pianist, explained, diplomatically, "There are some piano embroideries on a pedal point that didn't sound like a piano or anything else in the world, but [were] quite beautiful, and I have my doubts whether any regular shop pianist will produce them: they require a touch which is peculiar to yourself, and which struck me the first time I ever heard you larking about with a piano."

Elgar responded on March 11, 1919, enclosing the score and confiding, "It was a proud moment to see you enter my room," and he closed with praise for "the vast intellectuality of your dramatic work." Shaw was now energized as an Elgar missionary, and wrote a long piece for *Music and Letters*, published in January 1920, contending, "Elgar is carrying on Beethoven's business. The names are up on the shop front for everyone to read. ELGAR, late BEETHOVEN & CO, Classics" Earlier, Shaw had been a missionary for Wagner, but now claimed that Elgar's "musical mind was formed before Wagner reached him," and Shaw didn't find that a handicap, as Elgar wrote "in the Beethovenian sense." If he were king, or Minister of Fine Arts, Shaw declared, "I would give Elgar an annuity of a thousand a year on condition that he produce a symphony every eighteen months."

In September 1921, after moving from Hampstead to the country, Elgar returned to conduct a Promenade Concert at Queen's Hall. The program included his symphonic fantasy *Falstaff*. Shaw was in the audience, and postcarded Elgar that he had never heard it before, and thought it was "perfectly graphic to anyone who knows his Shakespeare." It was, he wrote, "the true way to set drama to music"—perhaps a hint, but Elgar in return only sent Shaw his own program notes to the music. Elgar would see *Heartbreak House* with delight, and take its Lady Utterword (Edith Evans) to dinner and to a recital of his music. Soon Elgar would see Shaw's *Pygmalion*, *Candida* and even the lengthy *Back to Methuselah*, which took two sittings. By this time he and Shaw were good friends, and when Tory critic Sidney Colvin made cutting comments about Shaw to Elgar, the composer diplomatically put Colvin down, observing, "I don't think we shd. have 'liked' Aristophanes personally, or

Voltaire (perhaps) but I cannot do without their work. GBS's politics are, to me, appalling, but he is the kindest-hearted, gentlest man I have met outside the charmed circle which includes you. . . . As a child & as a young man & as a mature man, no single person was ever kind to me, so my heart goes out to any man or woman of assured position as G.B.S. who helps others. Enough."

The British public was unenthusiastic about British music, and Elgar in particular. They appreciated his *Pomp and Circumstance* marches, which had already become identified as the epitome of English music. They were not interested in anything more formidable, which became embarrassingly obvious at a London performance of Elgar's oratorio *The Apostles*—a fund-raiser for the Westminster Abbey Restoration Fund. Almost no one came. Shaw loyally expressed his unhappiness in a letter in the *Daily News* (June 9, 1922), writing, "It would be an exaggeration to say that I was the only person present, like Ludwig of Bavaria at Wagner's *premieres*. My wife was there. Other couples were visible at intervals. . . . I distinctly saw six people in the stalls, probably with complimentary tickets." He was, he confessed, "unspeakably ashamed. . . . I apologize to posterity for living in a country where the capacity and tastes of schoolboys and sporting costermongers are the measure of metropolitan culture."

The middle 1920s, after the triumph of *Saint Joan*, were a fallow period for Shaw, and even more so for Elgar, who complained that his music brought him little money. The only financial gain from orchestral performances was that music-lovers bought piano arrangements as they would now buy recordings. Yet Shaw knew that Elgar lived in comfort and style despite financial disappointments, and recognized in the years before the recording industry became big business that a serious composer had to live on commissions, and that meant that he had to compose.

Having trouble beginning anything new he wanted to keep at, Elgar confided in Shaw, who replied on a postcard that after a hiatus in writing for the stage he had been at work again, and had completed a political fantasy, *The Apple Cart*. It will seem, after *Saint Joan*, he confessed, like "a hideous anti-climax. It is a scandalous Aristophanic burlesque of democratic politics, with a brief but shocking sex interlude." The play would be, he added, performed at the new summer festival at Malvern, not far from Elgar's Worcestershire home. "Your turn now," Shaw cajoled. "Clap it"—that is, in the sense of concocting hastily—"with a symphony." He kept pressing Elgar to write something for Malvern, and at the least to turn up as invited guest. The producer at Malvern, Birmingham impresario Barry Jackson, Shaw wrote, although it was clearly Shaw's own idea, "In his first enthusiasm . . . was bent on getting from you an overture for *The Apple Cart*, but on obtaining from [conductor Adrian] Boult a rough estimate of the cost of an Elgar orchestra, and letting his imagination play on the composer's fee, . . . went mournfully to his accountants...."

His own view, Shaw teased, was that "six bars of yours would extinguish (or upset) the A[pple] C[art] and turn the Shaw festival into an Elgar one; but that it would be a jolly good thing so. So I demanded overtures to *Caesar*, to *Methuselah* (five preludes), and a symphonic poem to *Heartbreak House*, which is by far the most musical work of the lot." He was only half teasing. Had Elgar warmed to any musical introduction to, or interpretation of, Shaw, very likely G.B.S. would have found some subterfuge to provide the money himself. The closest they would come to a joint work was when, in Malvern days, Elgar did ask Shaw to write an opera libretto for him. Shaw replied that his plays had a verbal music of their own "which would make a very queer sort of counterpoint" to Elgar's music. He suggested to make his point that Elgar take *Androcles and the Lion* and try setting a single

page. "You will find," said Shaw, "that you cannot make an opera of it, just as you could not make an opera of Shakespeare's *Henry IV*. But you may make another *Falstaff* of it. That is really your line."

Elgar did go to Malvern. It was arranged that he would open a Shaw exhibition at the Malvern Public Library. On September 19, 1929 his informal opening remarks were taken down as he wished only in the third person. To introduce anything about his friend Shaw, he began, was one of the greatest honors he ever had. He had the best of all qualifications, Elgar claimed. He had read Shaw's works "from beginning to end." Some of them may have been "rather shattering to the nerves" of his audience. He often thought that Shaw offered the British public his plays "in the spirit in which Sterne gave the ass a macaroon"—to find out "what the dickens it was going to do with it." Shaw responded that Elgar was one of the best living composers. "I am seriously and genuinely humble in his presence. I recognise a greater art than mine and a greater man than I can ever hope to be." Tactly, the September issue of the *Musical Times* observed that it was "apparently the only public utterance in which Mr. Shaw has acknowledged himself to be second to any creative artist, living or dead."

For the 1930 Brass Band Festival at the Crystal Palace—a national competition still ongoing, but now at the Albert Hall—Elgar was commissioned to write the test piece, which had to be performed by each of the many competitors. From earlier sketches he put together his attractive *Severn Suite*, which he dedicated to Shaw. Elgar planned to attend with Shaw, but back trouble kept him at home. Loyally, G.B.S. attended, and sent the composer a long typewritten report on September 28, 1930. "heard the *Severn Suite* yesterday only eight times," Shaw wrote, as extreme hunger and the need for catching the 5.10 train at King's Cross forced me to surrender before I ceased to find new things in it. . . . Nobody would have guessed from looking at the score and thinking of the thing as a toccata for brass how beautiful and serious the work is as abstract music." On the flyleaf of his inscribed copy of the score Shaw wrote that Elgar had dedicated the work "to me; so my name may last as long as his own." Only once otherwise did he evidence such humility about a living artist—when he declared that he might in future be known only as subject of a bust by Rodin.

Elgar's seventy-fifth birthday got his creative juices flowing a bit. His search for a subject gave Shaw an idea. On September 30, 1932 he wrote to the imperious John Reith, the director of the BBC. Shaw was on the BBC's Committee on Spoken English, and his own talks on the air were popular broadcasts. He offered a "suggestion":

In 1823 the London Philharmonic Society passed a resolution to offer Beethoven £50 for the MS of a symphony. He accepted, and sent the Society the MS of the Ninth Symphony. In 1827 the Society sent him £100. He was dying; and he said "God bless the Philharmonic Society and the whole English nation."

This is by far the most creditable incident in English history.

Now the only composer today who is comparable to Beethoven is Elgar. Everybody seems to assume that Elgar can live on air, or that he is so rich and successful that he can afford to write symphonies and conduct festivals for nothing. As a matter of fact his financial position is a very difficult one, making it impossible for him to give time enough to such heavy jobs as the completion of a symphony; and consequently here we have the case of a British composer who has written two great symphonies, which place England at the head of the world in this top department of instrumental music, unable to complete and score a third. I know that he has the

material for the first movement ready, because he has played it to me on his piano. Well, why should not the BBC, with its millions, do for Elgar what the old Philharmonic did for Beethoven. You could bring the Third Symphony into existence and obtain the performing right for the BBC for a few thousand pounds. The kudos would be stupendous and the value for money ample. . . . He does not know that I am meddling in his affairs and yours in this manner. . . .

Reith immediately invited Elgar, and Shaw duly postcarded his congratulations as if the idea were a surprise. Inevitably Elgar learned that the idea was G.B.S.'s—"the wonderful plan which you invented," he wrote to Shaw when the £1000 commission was formalized. "I am overwhelmed by the loftiness of the idea & can only say *thank you* . . ." Shaw prodded him to produce it. "Remember," he wrote, answering an Elgar letter, "you have to catch up to Beethoven." But early in the next year it became obvious that he could do little if anything to further the 141 pages of musical notations, drafts and scribbled directives for the new symphony, and he wrote anxiously to John Reith before hospitalization for exploratory surgery that if the music did not "materialise" he would return the "sums you have paid on account." The operation revealed inoperable cancer. Elgar's removal to a nursing home was doubly appalling to him, as he worried that he could not afford the £50 a week it cost, and he sent Shaw a note apparently to ask assistance in withdrawing from the commission. Shaw seems to have destroyed it after paying a visit to Reith after which Elgar's financial concerns were dismissed. Shaw had made a gift to Elgar earlier in the 1930s of £1000, and now may have quietly paid additional hospital and nursing expenses, although he could not tell the proud composer that. He had once proposed to Elgar an autobiographical Financial Symphony—"Allegro: Impending Disaster. Lento mesto: Stony Broke. Scherzo: Light Heart and Empty Pocket. All[egrett]o con brio: Clouds Clearing." A few months later he urged Elgar, "Trust to your mighty Life Force and damn the doctors. . . ."

In a shaky hand, Elgar worked on the slow movement of his symphony—its opening and closing—but he could do little more. He died on February 23, 1934, and Shaw wrote sadly to a mutual friend, "Like Beethoven's tenth, [it] died with the composer." Yet enough of it had survived for it to be completed more than half a century later by Anthony Payne, and performed by the BBC Symphony in 1998 to critical kudos.

"Having friends like you," Charlotte Shaw had written to Elgar for her husband as well as herself in 1932, "is the one thing in life worth having when one reaches the age of GBS & myself." Elgar would respond that "the world seems a cold place to me when you are both away." At the Gloucester Festival in the summer of 1934, for which Shaw had suggested, knowing fully well that Elgar wasn't up to it, the setting of his Christ and Pilate dialogue, an earlier Elgar work, *The Kingdom*, was performed, and both Shaws were there. "I cannot tell you how we all miss Edward Elgar," Charlotte wrote to Nancy Astor. "We loved him . . . & when another man got up into the Conductor's Chair it was hard to bear."

When G.B.S. lay dying in 1950, Lady Astor was one of the few old friends he permitted to visit. He told her that he wanted two pieces of music at his funeral, "Libera Me" from Verdi's *Requiem* and Elgar's *We are the Masters*. Very likely he meant "We are the Music-Makers." But a friend upon whom Lady Astor depended upon for musical expertise suggested that Shaw may have meant "We are the Ministers" from Elgar's *The Apostles*. The selection was hardly in character for Shaw, or even the later Elgar, but it was appropriate in any case that the music of his countryman should play Shaw out.