
Stop, Look, and Listen!

Musical Diversions and Commentary — by Rodney Flora

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Issue 01



What is this? Well, at the moment, this is an experiment. Now that I am retired, it is an outlet for the skills that I have developed and honed during my career, and during this period of social isolation to open up a wider world of classical music to my readers and give us something to focus on other than dreadful news and the tedium of isolation. Besides, music is itself a healthy preoccupation and a source of enjoyment and fulfillment. I hope this will make a small contribution to that.

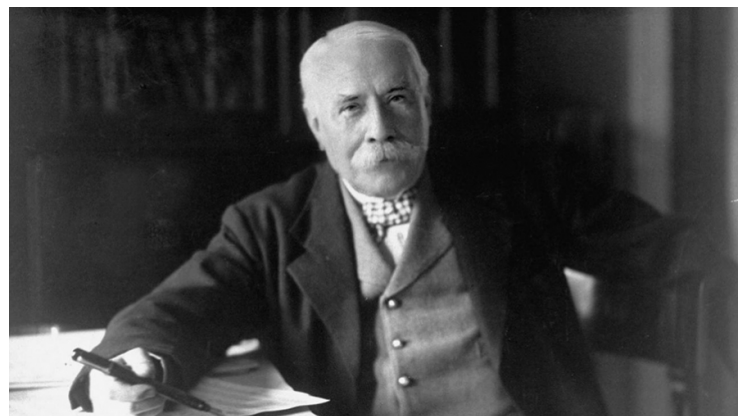
Who am I? I've spent my 40+ year career as a professional classical music broadcaster, more than 15 of those years as Music Director for a major Boston classical radio station and the last 10+ years as music director for a classical network that distributes programming to stations around the country. My role was very much a curatorial one, finding and evaluating music and recordings that fit our format and identity as a serious yet accessible source of classical music, and then creating appealing programs that showcased that music to best advantage.

I intend this to be a more or less monthly publication, but that will depend on your continuing interest and mine. I hope it will lead to discussions and (virtual) social interactions. Right now the opinions expressed are all mine, but yours are welcome too.

FEATURED COMPOSER - Sir Edward Elgar

In my opinion, Elgar is an under appreciated composer, except possibly in Britain. In a musical universe dominated by Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart everyone else seems somehow second rate, but that is a myopic view. I wouldn't want to live in a world without Bach but that doesn't mean there isn't a whole lot of other worthwhile music out there waiting to be discovered and appreciated.

Now while Elgar isn't exactly undiscovered or unknown, I expect at least some of my readers will be unfamiliar with his story, and may only know his music through *Pomp & Circumstance March No. 1* (the graduation march), and perhaps "Nimrod" from the Enigma Variations, but there is much more to him and his music than that! His music is sometimes characterized as merely swaggering jingoism, but that is overly simplistic and suggests a lack of familiarity with the breadth and depth of his output. There is, as I say, much, much more to it.



DOCUMENTARY - ELGAR: THE MAN BEHIND THE MASK

Elgar was a complicated and brilliant man who, despite success late in life, never overcame his early insecurities. But it is those very complexities and insecurities that inform and enrich his music and that enable it to speak to us so powerfully on a very human level. Although on the surface he looked to be the clichéd Victorian or Edwardian gentleman, he was in fact that almost mythical creature, a truly emotional and passionate Englishman. I admit to being an unabashed Elgar fan and I've always liked this BBC documentary very much. It has been absent from YouTube for quite some time and who knows how long it will be available this time, but I think it is well worth watching.

Elgar: The Man behind the Mask

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-s7iR3fC0zc>

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LISTENING

There are a lot of Elgar pieces I could recommend to you, but so as not to overwhelm you with choices I make the following few recommendations to get you started:

Enigma Variations (Variations on an Original Theme, Op. 36) This is the work that “made” Elgar’s name and finally established him as a major composer in 1899 at the age of 42, a long time to wait. There are lots of recordings, and lots of good ones. Start here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P2OhGH3rFi4>

There is also a recording of Elgar conducting in the early 1930’s.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kaPtKoL-FsM>

Elgar was a very good conductor of his own music, which wasn’t always the case with composers. Copland was good too, Stravinsky was dreadful.

Symphony No. 1 in A♭ major, Op. 55 (Also ***Symphony No. 2*** if you just can’t get enough. Each almost an hour long but well worth the time in my opinion.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2OXU-TTDhHU>

For a taste of his chamber music try: ***Violin Sonata in E minor, Op. 82***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TjeG-WRJC8w>

Elgar Cello Concerto in E minor Op. 85 (One of my very favorite pieces)

Jacqueline du Pre set the bar very high for this piece. Her recording with Sir John Barbirolli is legendary.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6HqkrwgbsZ8>

Alternatively: Cellist Anastasia Kebekina is wonderful, full of fire and passion. The orchestra is not great but it gets the job done.

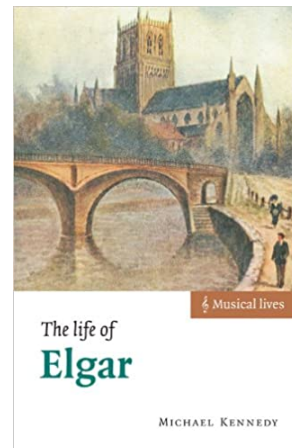
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7pi7IxZSYfQ>

Normally I like Truls Mørk’s playing but his Elgar seems too cool and distant to me.

RECOMMENDED READING

For those who would like to read a biography of Elgar in book form, I can recommend *The Life of Elgar* by Michael Kennedy.

This 2004 biography of Elgar draws on letters and documents which have become available in recent years. Michael Kennedy, a leading scholar of British music as well as a distinguished musical biographer, uses the new material to uncover the composer's complex personality, his many moods, and his passionate but complicated relationships. He examines his moments of high creativity and productivity and his low moments of morose self-pity and feelings of being an outsider. As the son of a shop keeper, a provincial, and a Catholic this sense of alienation was not without foundation in highly stratified, class-conscious Victorian Britain.



“DISCOVERIES”

One of the things I have always enjoyed is “discovering” little known composers and their music. Obviously someone has already discovered them or there wouldn’t be recordings for me to discover, but they are not generally well known.

Without doubt there are many obscure composers who richly deserve their obscurity, and I have certainly listened to lots of those. In many cases they are technically competent, but either sorely lacking in ideas or the skills to develop them, and often both. It’s like a story without a plot, characters come and go randomly without really doing anything or being developed, the music seems like it might be going someplace but never gets there. Sometimes it’s just endlessly “treading water” and there doesn’t seem to be any point to it at all. Needless to say, these are a waste of time, and I won’t waste your time with them.

But there are gems to be found in the mud if you are willing to “kiss a lot of frogs” along the way (and mix a lot of metaphors). Here are a few ‘cello works that I particularly like. They come from the late Baroque, Classical, and late Romantic/early 20th century stylistic periods respectively. I’d love to hear what you think of them.

Willem de Fesch (1687-1761) Cello Sonatas (1750)

Dutch composer and cellist. Moved to London in his early forties and played in Handel’s orchestra.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kwKmDajlD3A>

Carl Stamitz (1745 - 1801) - Cello Concerto No. 2 in A Major: II. Romance: Andantino

German/Czech composer. You may have heard the name (or that of his father Johann) but I’ll bet you don’t know this music. The rest of this concerto is also on YouTube as are his other five. All of them are good.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLvXZ0Zsu7E>

Dora Pejačević (1885-1923) - Cello Sonata in E minor, Op. 35 (1919)

Croatian woman composer of an old noble family. Born in Budapest. Impressive talent!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-chTjgzSkQs>

For more biographical information on any of these composers I suggest Wikipedia as an easy starting point.

COMING IN FUTURE ISSUES

As you may readily imagine *women composers* is a particularly rich area to search for unrecognized or under-recognized compositions. I have found a lot of good music there. Much more coming in future editions.

Please send me your opinions and reactions to this newsletter and its contents. Also share your own discoveries. I haven't listened to all of the available recordings of the pieces I recommend so if you know of a better one share that too.

If you prefer not to receive this newsletter in the future let me know or just delete it from your inbox. Likewise if you know of anyone who might like to receive it send me their email address or give them mine so they can request it.

Next Time: George Frideric Handel, and more.

