

## A Week of Elgar in London with the Manhattan String Quartet

*Living in the afterglow of a week of Elgar in London with the Manhattan String Quartet*

By Inge Kjemtrup



Edward Elgar's String Quartet in E minor, Op. 83, his only string quartet, seems to elicit only lukewarm feelings in many string players, me included.

When I was living in California, and a violinist in my regular Wednesday quartet suggested playing the Elgar, it was with a great theatrical sigh that I agreed.

Pity that unfortunate violinist who had tried to persuade us of the piece's worthiness, only to be part of a frustrating struggle with the confusing tempo and mood switches, from jagged rhythmic passages to lush lyricism. The play-through was generally salvaged only by the nostalgic, tender second movement.

When I moved to London 17 years ago, I soon discovered that British players were more comfortable with the quartet and its quirks, though in that understated British way, they never made the hard sell for it. I also had to admit that British players often brought a certain flair to it, not unlike the home-court advantage Americans have in Gershwin. Still, Elgar's Quartet remained pretty much *terra incognita* for me. And that, it seemed, was that.

Or that was that until I signed up for the Manhattan String Quartet's (MSQ) annual European string-quartet conference this past January. We would be studying Elgar's Quartet in London. No reason to panic though—as the luggage tag the MSQ sent to all the participants in advance of the conference advised: "Keep calm and play string quartets."

I had been to several of the MSQ European conferences before, but this was the first one where I had local knowledge. I was soon reminded that the MSQ, now in its 15th year of presenting conferences in European cities from Paris and Prague to Vienna and Parma, is a well-oiled machine.

An advance team of violist John Dexter and second violinist Cal Wiersma rolled into London twice in 2014, in search of rental cellos (most cello participants would need to rent an instrument), a concert venue, a final night dinner location, extra coaches, and so much more.

Cab drivers in London have to memorize 700 London locations before they can get a cabbie's license—getting “The Knowledge,” as it's known. In the course of guiding the advance team of MSQ around the town, I felt my own “Knowledge” was under scrutiny, but I dispensed advice and ideas as usefully as I could.

My happiest recommendation was the young cellist Jonny Byers as one of the extra coaches. Jonny, originally from Belfast and now a freelance London musician and member of the Badke Quartet, has a special talent for coaching amateurs.

By the time the first participants arrived at the Doubletree Hotel, not far from the Houses of Parliament and the River Thames, the MSQ had most of their questions answered. The brand-new hotel served as HQ for the coaching sessions and for lunch, when commuter participants like me joined those staying in the hotel to compare notes on our week.

Still, it was a bit odd, for this conference to be taking place in London. Although he lived in London on and off, Elgar didn't like the British capital much. His heart was in Worcestershire, the rolling countryside to the northwest of the capital. Born in 1857, Elgar was one of Britain's greatest composers, and his music and his outlook were shaped in no small part by his formative years in Worcestershire.

One afternoon, in the atmospheric University Women's Club in Mayfair, we heard from Elgar biographer Michael Messenger. A director and vice-president of the Elgar Foundation, Messenger traced the early years of the composer, the son of a music shop owner and piano tuner in the town of Worcester. The area's vibrant music culture shaped the young Edward.

His father was the organist with the Catholic Church, and the Anglican Church of England, with its glorious Cathedral in the center of town, was important in the musical life. Elgar studied the violin and the piano, and later worked as a conductor and teacher, taking the kind of gigs a peripatetic musician must, including conducting the staff orchestra at the Worcester County Pauper and Lunatic Asylum. Messenger noted that Elgar enjoyed working that bit of personal history into conversation: “When I was in the lunatic asylum...”

Elgar occupies a curious place in the world's classical music pantheon: He is hailed as a significant figure in his native Britain, but is less praised elsewhere. His genius is acknowledged for a handful of works: the cello concerto, the piano quintet, his two completed symphonies and a few of the massive choral works.

But as the MSQ began studying the work they, they began to see why it had been the right choice. “The Elgar, while certainly not easy by any stretch, had the appeal of just being beautiful, with emotional, Romantic harmonies and melodies,” explained Dexter.

Elgar wrote the quartet in 1918, after having composed little of importance during the First World War. “I cannot do any real work with the awful shadow over us,” he wrote. “Everything good & nice & clean & fresh & sweet is far away—never to return.” (It's been argued that the Cello Concerto, also in E minor and also completed in this period, is Elgar's strongest statement about the war.)



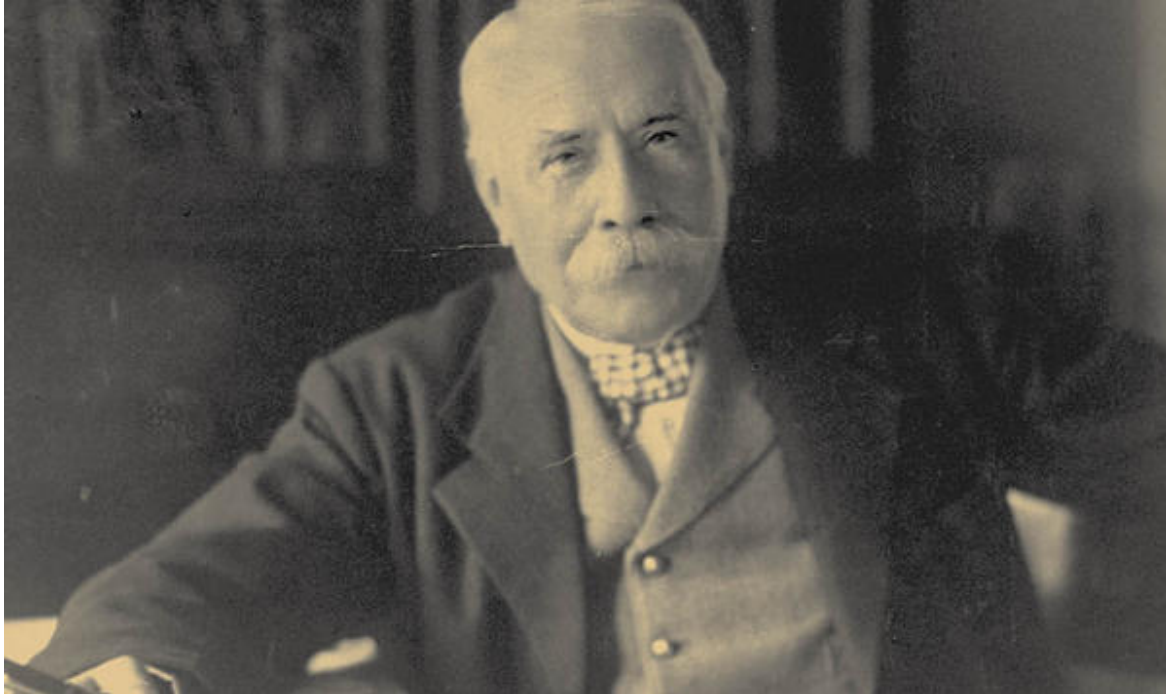
**Manhattan String Quartet**

When the war started, one of Elgar's first thoughts was for the innocent animals on the battlefield. "The men, and women, can go to hell—but my horses. I walk round & round this room cursing God for allowing dumb brutes to be tortured."

There were eerie echoes of this when I, along with two others from my quartet, saw *War Horse*, the National Theatre production now playing on London's West End. The play tells the story of a horse drafted into World War I, and the terrible things that happen to it and its various "owners." Life-size puppets that are operated by up to three people portray the horse and other animals in the production. It's difficult to convey in writing just how spellbinding and powerful this stagecraft is.

Then there's the quartet. As MSQ violist John Dexter told me in a post-conference interview, "When you sit down and read it, you don't tend to think, 'Oh man, I just love this piece to death.' Your first reaction is, 'this is interesting but I don't really get it.'" As the MSQ thought about which composer to play in London -- Britten? Walton? Elgar? -- Dexter listened to a recording of the Elgar Quartet because he didn't know it and had never played it: "My initial reaction to it was good, but with its give and take, constant shifting of tempos and moods, and the unusual harmonies that come up, it was a piece that was little bit hard to get a good grip on."

Before the war, Elgar had dabbled with composing a quartet, making some sketches in the 1870s, and then 30 years later, inspired by correspondence with the first violinist of the Brodsky Quartet, Adolph Brodsky. But it was not until March 1918, shortly after the cessation of conflict, when he was at his London home, Severn House, that he started his work in earnest. His wife, Alice, wrote, "E began a beautiful Quartett. A remote and lovely 1st subject. May he soon finish it." He did finish the quartet—and the Piano Quintet and the Violin Sonata—later that year at their Sussex cottage, Brinkwells.



**Edward Elgar**

The next January, back in London, a group of musician friends performed the quartet, the Violin Sonata, and the first movement of the Piano Quintet. Alice was entranced by the second movement, describing it as being “like captured sunshine.” That movement, marked “Piacetevole” (peaceful), is a strong contrast to the two energetic movements that surround it, especially the Allegro molto Finale, that another Elgar biographer, Jerrold Northrup Moore feels “marks Elgar’s farthest advance into what was beginning to be called ‘modernism.’”

The British String Quartet (Albert Sammons, WH Reed, Raymond Jeremy, and Felix Salmond) gave the premiere of the quartet at London’s Wigmore Hall on May 21, 1919. “The fertility of his musical invention in the new chamber works is amazing,” wrote one critic. The music was published that same year and dedicated to the Brodsky Quartet.

For each week of the Manhattan’s conference (there are always two separate weeks), 12 quartets, mostly Americans, but some Brits as well, studied the quartet with the aid of the MSQ and its colleagues. Dexter views it as a collective exploration: “My quartet and your quartet and everybody here, we are all in the same boat, we are all studying this piece on whatever level we are at.”

His coaching philosophy is more about advising rather than insisting on one way of playing. “To me it’s less about how I think piece should go, and more about listening to how it is going in the group, and trying to discuss what it is that doesn’t seem to work for me as a listener at that moment.”

After all, Dexter and the MSQ certainly understood the quartet’s challenges.

“There are so many patterns that repeat themselves endlessly, and where the main line of musical thought is divided among two or three or sometimes four players. Your part is the most important part maybe one bar out of four. Even though your line continues and you want to play

it as a complete musical thought, you have to pay attention to this larger musical line that threads its way throughout the group.”

As is always the case on the MSQ European conferences, a pilgrimage to a composer’s home or work site was a centerpiece of the week. Our destination? Worcestershire, where we’d visit the house where Elgar was born, and the region he returned to again and again.

That captivating countryside, framed by the Malvern Hills, served as a touchstone for Elgar and his music, according to one of his leading biographers, Jerrold Northrop Moore. Moore was the distinguished guest at our first stop, a lunch at the Wood Norton, a country manor house turned restaurant and hotel.

Moore shared his love for Elgar and his music, though his remarks on the Elgar Birthplace Museum, which we were about to see after lunch, were rather less enthusiastic. I began to think of it as a guide of “What Not to See” at the museum—Moore evidently feels it suffers overmuch from provincialism, making unworthy of the great composer.

Strolling around the museum myself a while later, I was not so jaded. Seeing Elgar’s scores, letters, personal mementos in the main museum, and then entering Broadheath, the cottage where he was born was surprisingly moving.

Our day in Worcester was rounded off with a trip to the cathedral for evensong. We took our seats behind the cathedral boys’ choir, which faced each other across the center quire. The young singers ranged in age from the eldest in his early teens down to two tiny little boys, whose hands barely reached the long desk where the sheet music was laid out. I watched an older boy guided a younger boy, moving his finger showing the way through the music.

It was the second week of January and their singing of Britten’s A New Year Song was evocative in the cold cathedral: “Here we bring new water for the well so clear/for to worship God in this happy new year.” It was a high point of the week for Dexter, who was moved by singing in that vast space, “realizing all that that meant to Elgar himself.”

After a week of getting our fingers around the Elgar, I along with my fellow quartet members and all other workshop participants, were filled with anticipation as we walked into the Westminster Cathedral Hall to hear the MSQ’s own take on the Elgar. The Elgar was on the program’s second half, after a first half with Haydn’s G minor Quartet Op. 74, No. 3, and a string quartet by the American composer Craig Walsh. The two MSQ violinists, relative newcomer Curtis Macomber and Calvin Wiersma, swapped parts, with Wiersma playing first on the Haydn and Macomber on the rest. Dexter on viola with Chris Finckel on cello provided the reliable underpinning.

This week of delving into Elgar certainly changed by view of the composer, and of his quartet. That stuffy neo-Victorian mustachioed face concealed a free spirit inside—the music revealed it and so did his telling remark to an interviewer late in life: “My idea is that there is music in the air, music all around us, the world is full of it and you simply take as much as you require!”

Next year the conference goes the German harbor town of Hamburg to study Brahms’ Third Quartet. Another adventure beckons, another chance to breathe the air and see the landscape familiar to a composer while in the always-enjoyable company of the Manhattan String Quartet.