



# Looking for Elgar's Piano Concerto

Margaret Fingerhut



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How excited would you be if someone asked you to make the world premiere recording of a work by Elgar? The dust had not long settled from the resounding triumph of the first performance of Anthony Payne's realisation of the sketches for the Third Symphony in 1998, when I was told that Elgar had also had a projected "Piano Concerto". Could a realisation of this Piano Concerto be comparable to the Third Symphony, and similarly take the musical world by storm? The slow movement I had been asked to record had been edited from an original manuscript sketch by the distinguished Elgar biographer, Dr. Percy Young, at the request of Harriet Cohen in 1957. Initially, he arranged it for piano and strings, but later added wind and brass for a performance by Leslie Howard in 1979. It was a very short movement, but with an utterly beguiling theme, a typically Elgarian lilting melody that lingered wistfully in the mind, redolent of some nostalgic longing.

Diaries and letters mention the "Piano Concerto" several times from 1914 onwards, and when Elgar improvised five pieces at the piano for a historic recording in 1929, he used the lilting slow movement theme as the basis for the fourth improvisation. It appears that the intention to write a piano concerto was in his mind for a period of over 20 years, but the sketchbooks reveal an almost total lack of enthusiasm for it.

Elgar's own piano playing was idiosyncratic to say the least, but it was competent enough to have been an essential tool in his compositional process. However, he seems to have had an intrinsic dislike of the typical "virtuoso" style of piano playing, as he wrote to Alice Stuart Wortley (his "Windflower") in 1911: 'I do not like piano solo players' playing but I love yours... I would not think of asking you to play to ordinary people who would not understand what poetical playing really is.' Elgar loved to hear Alice play the fragment for the Piano Concerto that he had composed (i.e. the slow movement theme), and there are several entries in Alice Elgar's diary to this effect: 'A.S.W. came and played the lovely Piano Concerto piece' (10th January 1914); 'A.S.W. came to tea and played the lovely phrase of Piano Concerto' (26th October 1916).

In January 1917 Alice records how Elgar himself played the sketch to another close friend, the actress Mary Anderson de Navarro: 'E. played his lovely fragment of Piano Concerto over and over again'. The following year a meeting with the pianist Irene Scharrer prompted him to promise her the first performance of his long-delayed concerto. The fact that the piece was still virtually non-existent is evidenced by another letter to Alice Stuart Wortley in August 1919 in which, having

just completed his cello concerto, he writes: 'I want to finish or rather commence the piano concerto which must be windflowerish...' Here he is again in another letter to Alice in June 1924: 'I am doing the piano concerto but do not tell anyone as I may switch off at any moment - as is usual'.

If I had drawn a blank in my detective work at the British Library, I was hoping that a visit to Percy Young in Wolverhampton would prove more enlightening. I spent a delightful day with him, hearing as much about his beloved Wolverhampton Wanderers as about Elgar! There was the added thrill for me to be able to play the piano in his living room that had once been Elgar's and that had been bequeathed to him by Elgar's daughter Carice. But, already well into his nineties, Percy's memory of the details and sources he had used for his arrangement had long faded.

As disappointing as it was for me in the end not to have been able to ascertain exactly how much of the movement was Elgar and how much was Percy Young, I put these thoughts aside when I recorded it; after all, the theme was undeniably Elgar's, and it was undeniably hauntingly beautiful. It's easy to see why the recording has subsequently become a firm favourite on Classic FM!

(Subsequent to Margaret Fingerhut's recording, David Owen Norris, has recorded to considerable acclaim a three movement work for piano and orchestra constructed by Robert Walker from the Elgar Improvisations. There has been a BBC documentary about the freshly minted three movement 'Elgar Piano Concerto', though Walker wrote in BBC Music Magazine that 'I haven't written Elgar's Piano Concerto. I've written a late-Romantic piano concerto using ideas by Elgar', ed.) ■

Margaret's CD of Percy Young's realisation of the slow movement of Elgar's Piano Concerto is available on Classico CD334. She has recently returned to the concert platform after an operation and an extended period out with a "frozen shoulder". Her next London appearance will be for the Hendon Music Society on 28th April, playing Mozart and Poulenc with the Zephyr Ensemble at John Keble Church, Edgware. She has a highly acclaimed discography for Chandos and will be resuming her recording schedule with a concerto by the little known English composer Edgar Bainton, with the BBC Philharmonic. She will also be recording a disc of solo piano works by Alexandre Tansman. Margaret taught for a number of years at the RNCM, and also has a special relationship with the Birmingham Conservatoire. This summer she will be a tutor at the Darlington International Summer School. She will give a presentation on Elgar at the EPTA UK Warwick conference on July 29. [www.margaretfingerhut.co.uk](http://www.margaretfingerhut.co.uk)