6 Elgar's deconstruction of the *belle époque*: interlace structures and the Second Symphony

J. P. E. Harper-Scott

1. Autobiographical, intertextual, and socio-political content

Elgar's Second Symphony, first performed in 1911, has invited strongly extramusical interpretations.[1] A poetic epigraph from Shelley ('Rarely, rarely comest thou, Spirit of Delight!'), a loyal dedication to 'the Memory of His late Majesty King Edward VII', and two place-names at the end of the score ('Venice–Tintagel') are all signs which seem to point to meanings that reach beyond mere syntactic connections between notes. Authors have been inventive in exploring the implications of these broad hints, and their different hermeneutic interpretations may be arranged into three classes which correspond to what Lawrence Kramer calls 'hermeneutic windows'.[2] Taken together they amount to a range of interpretations whose breadth speaks to the symphony's trenchant expressiveness.

The simplest of Kramer's hermeneutic windows is the 'textual inclusion', which means for instance 'texts set to music, titles, epigrams, programs, notes to the score'. A 'less explicit version of the first' window is what Kramer calls 'citational inclusions', which includes 'titles that link a work of music with a literary work, visual image, place, or historical moment', as well as intertextual reference to other compositions, whether as direct quotation, more indirect allusion, or even parody or pastiche. The third, and for Kramer most complex, kind of hermeneutic window is opened up by 'structural tropes', by which is meant 'a structural procedure, capable of various practical realizations, that also functions as a typical expressive act within a certain cultural/historical framework'.[3] An example of this would be the musical topic of the march, which has musical characteristics that can be defined, and as a whole invites the listener to make broader social connections – for instance to ask if it is signifying something regal, military, imperial, or funereal.[4] By opening a fourth, 'mimetic window', using Martin Heidegger's analysis of the temporality of human existence to make connections between music's temporality and certain existential issues, it is possible to open up a still more complex view of the rich meaning of the symphony. An outline of the necessary philosophical ideas is given in section 4 and applied to interpretation of the symphony in section 11.[5]

---

[1] I am grateful to Daniel M. Grimley, Patrick McCreless, Charles Edward McGuire, Bernard Porter, and Matthew Riley for suggesting improvements to this essay.

[2] Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800–1900* (Berkeley, CA and London: University of California Press, 1990).

[3] All quotations from Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice*, pp. 9–10.

First among the interpretative strands of existing commentary on the Second Symphony there is the view that the autobiographical element in the work is strongest. This springs most straightforwardly from Elgar's reference to Venice and Tintagel in the score, and from the fact that in letters to his (almost certainly non-physical) lover, the 'Windflower' Alice Stuart-Wortley, he called it *her* symphony.[6] Both of these are textual inclusions. Exemplifying this hermeneutic approach to the symphony, Christopher Kent and Michael Kennedy look beyond the dedication to Edward VII to a deeper and more personal dedication of the symphony to the woman he loved best. Kennedy even delicately suggests that the symphony's biggest climax, the crisis of the Rondo, might convey something of the pain of Elgar's suppressed passion for the woman.[7]

Analysis of citational inclusions has naturally led writers to speculate on the significance of the Shelley poem with which Elgar enigmatically linked the symphony. Most agree that, as the full poem indicates, Delight is a flighty state not easily retained, and that the symphony does not long maintain the Delightful countenance of its opening bars. In his reading of the work, Brian Trowell largely dismisses the Shelley association as a red herring and suggests instead that lines from Tennyson's *Maud*, which Elgar associated in a letter with the Rondo climax, could mean that the work carries a remembrance of the composer's earlier suicidal thoughts.[8] Allen Gimbel, meanwhile, in a daringly imaginative essay, links the work with the *Preislied* from *Die Meistersinger*. This merely strengthens the view that the symphony was 'a love-letter to Mrs. Stuart-Wortley' – a conclusion which, it would appear from other interpretations, doesn't require intertextual support.[9]

---

[4] On the semiotics of 'topics', see V. Kofi Agawu, *Playing with Signs: a Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

[5] My own particular conception of music as a mimesis of human temporality is developed in my *Edward Elgar, Modernist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[6] The relevant quotation is this, from a short note to Alice Stuart-Wortley, then at Tintagel, dated 24 March 1911: 'I have asked Alice [Lady Elgar] to send you . . . the sketches of the (your) symphony.' *Windflower*, p. 82. See Christopher Kent, 'A View of Elgar's Methods of Composition through the Sketches of the Symphony no. 2 in E♭ (op. 63)', *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*, 103 (1976–7), p. 41–60, at p. 41. The 'Windflower' was the daughter of the painter Sir John Everett Millais, and her mother had previously been the wife of John Ruskin.

[7] See Christopher Kent, 'A View of Elgar's Methods of Composition', and Michael Kennedy, *Elgar Orchestral Music* (London: BBC, 1970), p. 62.

[8] Brian Trowell, 'Elgar's Use of Literature', in Monk, *Literature*, pp. 182–326, at 256–7.

On the broader issue of the structural tropes in the symphony, attention has been fixed by Jerrold Northrop Moore and James Hepokoski on what can broadly be defined the socio-political aspect of the symphony, something hinted at by its official dedication, by the martial stamp of much of the first movement, and by the state-funeral solemnity of the Larghetto. Moore attributes a short-range political dimension to the symphony, hearing it as a reaction to the Liberal Party's war against the Lords.[10] This is a charming hypothesis, but it seems unlikely that any composer, however strong his ambition to become a peer, could be moved to create a substantial masterpiece out of a feeling of concern at the tabling of the first Parliament Act.[11] The need to open a wider socio-political view seems indicated. Hepokoski does so intriguingly by suggesting that the motivic teleology of the work, directed (he argues) towards the theme representing 'Hans [Richter] himself!' in the finale (first given at fig. 139), gives the whole work an 'encyclopedic quality' that summarizes and bids farewell to the 'institution of the public concert' itself.[12]

2. Elgar's unimperialism

Any interpretation that places Elgar's music in a broader social or historical context must inevitably examine the composer's place in the history of the British empire. Imperialism (used as a watchword rather than a concretely defined concept) is of profound significance in the Second Symphony, but not at all in the way that might be supposed. A pile of accumulated critical baggage must be dealt with before the nature and role of Elgar's imperialism is clarified.[13]

---

[9] Allen Gimbel, 'Elgar's Prize Song: Quotation and Allusion in the Second Symphony', *19CM*, 12 (1989), pp. 231–40, at p. 239.

[10] Moore, *Elgar*, p. 597.

[11] The Act emasculated the Lords who were opposed to the Liberals' equalizing legislation for selfish reasons: landowners, represented by Tory peers, would be hit strongly by the Liberals' economic policies. In an early moment of glory, the then Liberal cabinet minister, a waspish Winston Churchill, was behind some of these important reforms intended to share the nation's wealth more equably. See H. C. G. Matthew, 'The Liberal Age (1851–1914)', in Kenneth O. Morgan (ed.), *The Oxford History of Britain*, updated edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 518–81, at pp. 574–6.

[12] Elgar labelled the theme 'Hans himself!' in the sketches. See James Hepokoski, 'Elgar', in D. Kern Holomon (ed.), *The Nineteenth-Century Symphony* (New York: Schirmer, 1997), pp. 327–44, at p. 339. A countervailing breath of gentle mockery animates Robert Meikle's reading of the symphony's closing movement. 'There is something about its placid, unruffled, even slightly self-satisfied air, that imparts the unmistakeable atmosphere of a Sunday bandstand in the park. The band is out of sight – probably just beyond the rhododendrons – and so we cannot hear all the instruments; but the lower ones come over quite well, and the occasional chirp from flutes, clarinets, and oboes is carried by the afternoon breeze.' Robert Meikle, '"The True Foundation": the Symphonies', in Monk, *Literature*, pp. 45–71, at p. 55.

There have been various reactions to the critical responsibility of analysing Elgar's historical situation. One, represented by Moore, is to transmute the imperial issue into a concern with pastoralism.[14] Michael Kennedy's approach in *Portrait of Elgar* is (to put it crudely) to claim that Elgar rejected the imperialism of his age.[15] Repudiating Kennedy, Jeffrey Richards has argued that although Elgar was 'steeped' in imperialism, it was of a benevolent kind, and therefore one we can happily embrace without experiencing post-colonial guilt.[16] Standing back a little from this position, Corissa Gould and Charles McGuire prefer to say that though definitely influenced by what they regard as the 'dominant ideology' of the age, Elgar's imperialism is clearly neither extreme nor wicked, and can be properly understood as merely an inevitable product of this part of our shared history.[17]

The marmoreal presumption uniting all these differing arguments is that Elgar's age, in every part of British society, was rank with imperialism. If Elgar lived between 1857 and 1934, the thought runs, he *must* have been an imperialist: it stands to reason that anyone whose skin was even slightly porous to the 'dominant ideology' of that time must have been infected by the airborne disease. But if this presumption is wrong, or a tendentious distortion of the historical record, then the entire question must be rethought from first principles.

Bernard Porter made a first tentative attempt at this in an article on Elgar's imperialism.[18] His argument hinges on two principal claims. First, that Elgar's background as a middle-class boy from Worcester cannot have made him an imperialist. (There is no documentary or musical evidence of an interest in empire before he met Alice.) Second, that the combination of the effects of fervid late-imperialist propaganda and the exigencies of marriage to his thoroughly imperial wife made him *assume* an imperial countenance. His conclusion is that

---

[13] I am indebted to Bernard Porter, whose comments on a draft of this essay helped me clarify my thoughts on Elgar's imperialism.

[14] See his *Elgar* and *Elgar: Child of Dreams* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004).

[15] Kennedy, *Portrait*. He is less defensive in his *The Life of Elgar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[16] Jeffrey Richards, *Imperialism and Music: Britain 1876–1953* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 45.

[17] Corissa Gould, 'Edward Elgar, *The Crown of India*, and the image of empire', *ESJ*, 13 (2003), pp. 25–35, and Charles Edward McGuire, 'Functional Music: Imperialism, the Great War, and Elgar as Popular Composer', in *Companion*, pp. 214–24. My breakdown of the critical fortunes of Elgar's imperialism mirrors that in McGuire's essay.

[18] Bernard Porter, 'Edward Elgar and Empire', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 29 (2001), pp. 1–34, reprinted as 'Elgar and Empire: Music, Nationalism and the War', in Lewis Foreman (ed.), *'Oh, My Horses!': Elgar and the Great War* (Rickmansworth: Elgar Editions, 2001), pp. 133–73.

> [I]f Elgar was an imperialist – and that is not a thing that matters greatly, being more a question of semantics or, at most, degree than of fact – he was not a 'natural' one; or a very deep or fierce one; or an 'inevitable' one because of the dominant imperial ethos of his time. He came to imperialism accidentally, through his marriage, and in order to find some sort of *social* space for composing, in the stifling social and artistic environment of his day.[19]

Daniel M. Grimley airs legitimate concerns that the context for Porter's discussion is not sufficiently widely drawn;[20] but this criticism has since been met in Porter's book-length study of imperialism in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists*.[21] Space here allows for only the most superficial assemblage of evidence from this deeply impressive (and, for the Saidists, unsettling) study.[22]

In a nutshell, the claim, prevalent in post-colonial studies, that imperialism was the 'dominant ideology' of British society in the nineteenth century is untenable because during that period there was no such thing as a single British society. The Industrial Revolution and the potential for political revolution (like that seen on the European continent) exacerbated divisions in the country which were already complex and profound. 'Britain in the nineteenth century, and for some way beyond, comprised not one but a number of "societies", each with its own value system and characteristic "discourse"; the differences between which are far more important in relation to the impact of the empire on Britain (and vice versa) than any features that might have been common to them all.'[23]

The classes, then, must be viewed separately in a history of imperialism in Britain; and the only truly imperial section of British society until the last decade or so of the nineteenth century was that containing the upper and upper-middle classes. These provided the colonial governments and civil servants who administrated the empire. Through most of the nineteenth century the middle and lower classes were inessential to the running and expansion of the empire, and as a rule the upper and upper-middle classes were happy to keep these – in the absence of universal suffrage – 'politically irrelevant'[24] groups at a distance.

Elgar was raised in the lower-middle class, and what is more, in the provinces. As Porter notes simply, 'imperialism was not an issue in

---

[19] Porter, 'Edward Elgar and Empire', p. 26.

[20] Daniel M. Grimley, review of '*Oh, My Horses!': Elgar and the Great War*, *ML*, 85 (2004), pp. 325–9, at p. 326.

[21] Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[22] 'Saidist' is the mischievous term coined for a follower of Edward Said in John MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 5.

[23] Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists*, pp. 22–3.

[24] Ibid., p. 133.

Worcester in the 1860s and 1870s'.[25] The middle and lower classes did not have to think about it. Non-human imports from the empire, such as clothing and food, were domesticated and anglicized; only the bric-a-brac brought back by ex-colonials (such as Alice Elgar's father) was an exception to this rule, in being genuine. Elgar had a room devoted to such bibelots at Severn House, but we should note that the house *was* called 'Severn House', recalling provincial Worcester, and not 'Pondicherry Lodge' or some other imperialist name,[26] and that after Alice's death Elgar handed the entire collection over to the Victoria and Albert Museum.[27] This is not the behaviour of a natural or fervent imperialist.

And there is no obvious reason why he should have been one; nothing at home or school could mould him that way. Provincials weren't naturally disposed to care about empire, and even the famous red maps showing the extent of empire 'cannot have appeared [in schools] before the 1880s',[28] long after Elgar removed his last pair of short trousers. Indeed geography, insofar as it was taught at all in middle-class schools during Elgar's schooldays, concentrated largely on maps of the Holy Land: the colonies didn't get a look in.[29]

The familiar *fin-de-siècle* propaganda was necessary precisely because a generation of middle-class children had been raised either to have a mild distaste for empire or else to be almost completely ignorant of it; Sir John Seeley's famous suggestion that Britain acquired its empire 'in a fit of absence of mind' was a reaction from a pro-imperialist against a nescience among the general population which, he believed, threatened the continued existence of the empire.[30] The new urgency in imperial thought at the close of the nineteenth century sprang from the competition between several empires for what would later be called *Lebensraum*, living space; 'securing it in this environment [of heightened competition among European empires] would require far more effort, and consequently more commitment, than before'.[31] Although socialism was still a middle-class politics and the Labour movement was young, the working classes were gaining in political strength, and were no longer irrelevant. With growing social challenges for the ruling elite the need to bind society together, to maintain the status quo, became important, and uniting the whole nation behind the imperial effort seemed like a solution to all manner of political problems. In short, an attempt was made to use imperialism as a 'social adhesive'.[32]

---

[25] Bernard Porter, 'Edward Elgar and Empire', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 29 (2001), pp. 1–34, at p. 5.

[26] The specific county-association of the house's name seems to have been significant to Elgar. The house had a Somerset name, Kelston, when the Elgars moved in, but Elgar changed it. See Robert Anderson, *Elgar* (London: Dent, 1993), p. 104.

[27] Anderson, *Elgar and Chivalry*, p. 313.

[28] Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists*, p. 66.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid., p. 169.

[31] Ibid., p. 165.

[32] Ibid., p. 168.

But to bring the majority of the population on board, the propagandists had to make the imperial project appealing to all, not just the upper classes who found imperial rule either diverting or self-aggrandizing. Hence the picture-painting of the 'mystical imperialism' of truth, right, and freedom, with which Jeffrey Richards associates Elgar's imperialist traits. 'The moralism of it is sometimes cloying, and can arouse suspicions of hypocrisy, but it was probably this that enabled the middle classes to stomach the empire at all.'[33]

So Elgar's imperialism came late, and was, according to Richards, of a 'mystical' sort. It follows from the evidence that Elgar's entire interest in empire was adopted as a result of the Roberts family's adverse reaction to Alice's choice of husband, one from the lower middle classes, whose interest (as a class) in empire was spread out on a scale between complete ignorance and manifest disinterestedness. What was used as social adhesive for the rest of Britain was probably used by Elgar as a marital adhesive. It seems very likely that he felt the need to prove to Alice, if not to her imperially steeped family, that he was recognizably 'of the right sort'. A chance remark by Elgar's daughter Carice at a tea party given to celebrate the awarding of Elgar's knighthood offers an insight into this aspect of the Elgars' marriage. 'I am so glad for Mother's sake that Father has been knighted', Carice said. 'You see – it puts her back where she was.'[34] How many thirteen-year-olds, uninspired by a mother's private grumbles, would be capable of such vicarious selfishness? The atmosphere in the Elgarian home is tangible even now.

Elgar appears to have copied Alice's imperial demeanour with a certain vim; but there is no evidence in his music or writing to suggest that he had a serious or informed understanding of empire. In fact all the evidence suggests that he had only the vaguest notion of what empire was. Unlike Kipling's, Elgar's was not an imperialism of experience; it was an imperialism of artefact and third-hand memory (communicated through Alice from her father and brother). Had he married his near-exact contemporary Emmeline Pankhurst instead of Alice Roberts, Elgar might have adopted revolutionary ideas in a similarly shallow manner. As it was, having made his bed with the daughter of an officer in the Indian Mutiny, he wrapped himself in an imperial aura which – because it exuded originally from domesticated artefacts redolent of a past when he had sat 'in the reeds by Severn side with a sheet of paper trying to fix the sounds & longing for something very great'[35] – could act as another portal to his precious, strength-giving youth. Judging purely (as one should, to avoid presumption) from the limited amount he wrote for empire, and the notable lack of a masterpiece among that music, it is difficult to agree with Richards that his was even a 'mystical' imperialism of the sort that pro-imperial propaganda could bring on. Elgar was not sufficiently optimistic to hope that a little island had the power (or political will) to spread truth, right, and freedom around a benighted world. So more than being 'mystical', Elgar's imperialism was romanticized and nostalgic – maybe not so very different from the imperialism of present-day conservatives who keep pink-bespeckled world maps in their vestibules or sing along heart-on-sleeve to 'Land of Hope and Glory' at the Proms.

---

[33] Ibid., p. 242.

[34] Rosa Burley and Frank C. Carruthers, *Edward Elgar: The Record of a Friendship* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1972), p. 174.

[35] Anderson, *Elgar*, p. 151.

The psychological need not to disappoint his wife was a powerful urge for Elgar, and given the circumstances of his upbringing and class position, and the general state of British society or societies in the nineteenth century, it provides today the strongest – probably the only strong – explanation for Elgar's late-assumed 'imperialism'. The traditional interpretation of Alice's role in Elgar's musical achievement is not entirely wrongheaded, simplistic and romantic as it is; but while his creative spark was definitely not extinguished when Alice died (as in the orthodox theory), one thing her passing definitely did almost entirely kill off was his uxorious imperialism: and it was only ever tweed-deep anyway.[36]

So, in considering the nature of the imperial impulse in this symphony – an aspect of its 'meaning' that should be gauged alongside the autobiographical and socio-political interpretations summarized above – we must bear in mind two essential facts: first that it was superficial, nostalgic, and romantic, and second that it was 'unnatural' and assumed relatively late in life, as a response to his marital situation. It was a nervous, class- (and in-laws-) conscious psychological tic. A solid interpretation of the meaning of the imperial element in the Second Symphony depends on holding this problematic context in mind. The importance of this will become clear in the final section of this essay.

3. Interlace structures

Elgar's music, in the Second Symphony as much as anywhere, communicates meaning through the dialectical interweaving of discordant threads: public and private, optimistic and pessimistic, conservative and modern, among others. To understand the music, an analysis must illuminate the germination and expansion of these threads on the levels of intramusical process and activity on the one hand and extramusical signification on the other.[37] On the purely musical level, such analysis must account for Elgar's technique of charting two parallel temporal courses, rooted in and given heft by a struggle between opposed tonalities – not a classical polarity between tonic and dominant, but a more radical opposition of tonalities whose presentation amounts to a crisis of hegemony, as each tonal focus vies for control of the whole structure. On the level of extramusical signification, of broader 'meaning', it means accounting for the 'narrative' effects of an elaborate interlace structure. And in this context it may be appropriate to bring the ancient poem *Beowulf* into the discussion.

---

[36] More imperialist music was written after Alice's death for Wembley in 1924, but it is rather bloodless and carries none of the conviction of parts of *Caractacus* or *The Crown of India*.

The idea of structural interlace has been a commonplace in *Beowulf* criticism since 1967, when John Leyerle first codified it.[38] It is drawn from that feature of seventh- and eighth-century Anglo-Saxon art, but in fact common to most peoples through history (with its ultimate roots, perhaps, in prehistoric Mesopotamia), whereby bands are 'plaited together to form a braid or rope pattern'.[39] Its effects, some of them spectacular, are familiar from stone sculptures, jewellery, and monastic copies of sacred texts (with their elaborate 'carpet pages') from the period.[40] Frequently zoomorphic, the 'heads' of each plait sometimes bite into their own tails and so create a sense of infinite movement. Retaining the animal element in the dragon motif, *Beowulf* employs a literary form of the lacertine interlace – the so-called *entrelacement* which was an essential part of medieval Continental literature, although *Beowulf* appears to be a rare use of the design in England.[41]

> The device is self-conscious and the poets describe their technique with the phrases *fingera serta* and *texere serta*, 'to fashion or weave intertwinings'. *Serta* (related to Sanscrit *sarat*, 'thread' and to Greek *σειρo*, 'rope') is from the participle of *serere*, 'to interweave, entwine, or interlace'. The past participle of *texere*, 'to weave, braid, interlace', is *textus*, the etymon of our words text and textile. The connection is so obvious that no one thinks of it. In basic meaning, then, a poetic text is a weaving of words to form, in effect, a verbal carpet page.[42]

The stylistic connection across art forms is plain enough. But it is the interlace's effect on the narrative which is of chief concern to Leyerle, and is of most interest to a critic of Elgar's Second Symphony. The interlace structure allows the author to bring different temporal strands into meaningful interaction, as if they overlap as threads before continuing on their separate courses. In the structure of *Beowulf*, two threads, utterly separate temporally, interact in this way. The first thread follows Beowulf's story, the principal interest of the poem; the second recounts certain significant events from a different narrative time, involving Beowulf's king Hygelac. The *Beowulf*-poet splits the two temporal threads into episodes and weaves them around one another 'to achieve juxtapositions impossible in a linear narrative'.[43] In each case, the interweaving of temporal strands has an explicit narrative purpose. Before embarking on his expeditions, Beowulf recalls how similar actions had led to his own king's downfall. The positioning of these temporal interweavings is, on one level, easily understood: juxtaposition of a scene of hope with a baleful prophecy signifies that Beowulf's deeds will lead eventually to his unravelling, and the destruction of his people. But the device bears a structural burden just as great as its narrative one.

---

[37] Agawu calls the twin pillars of this dialectical approach 'introversive semiosis' and 'extroversive semiosis' respectively. See Agawu, *Playing with Signs*.

[38] John Leyerle, 'The Interlace Structure of *Beowulf*', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 37 (1967), pp. 1–17. Reprinted in *Beowulf: a Verse Translation*, trans. Seamus Heaney, ed. Daniel Donoghue (New York: Norton, 2002), pp. 130–52. Page references are to the reprint.

[39] Leyerle, 'The Interlace Structure of *Beowulf*', p. 131.

[40] They are also seen in the currently popular, and superhumanly tasteless, modern 'Celtic jewellery'.

[41] See T. A. Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth* (London: HarperCollins, 1982), pp. 144–50.

[42] Leyerle, 'The Interlace Structure of *Beowulf*', pp. 139–40.

> The four Hygelac episodes, like all the narrative elements in the poem, have positional significance; unravel the threads and the whole fabric falls apart. An episode cannot be taken out of context – may I remind you again of the etymology of the word – without impairing the interwoven design. This design reveals the meaning of coincidence, the recurrence of human behaviour, and the circularity of time, partly through the coincidence, recurrence, and circularity of the medium itself – the interlace structure. It allows for the intersection of narrative events without regard for their distance in chronological time and shows the interrelated significances of episodes without the need for any explicit comment by the poet. The significance of the connections is left for the audience to work out for itself. Understatement is thus inherent in interlace structure, a characteristic that fits the heroic temper of the north.[44]

The emotionally red-hot surface of much of Elgar's music, the Second Symphony not least, might seem incommodious to understatement. But while the dialectic of the public and private, life-affirming and depressive Elgar seems obvious enough from the surface of the music and the opposition of moods such as the ebullience of the work's opening and the deep meditative sadness of the Larghetto, the subtlest dialectic is reserved for the level of structure. Here juxtaposition is more difficult to spot, more cunning and understated in its arrangement. But the exact positioning of certain broad structural gestures – the relations unfolding between two jostling tonal centres – is just as essential to the form of the work and its 'meaning' as the interlace structure is to *Beowulf*, its use perhaps as self-conscious as the poet's use of *entrelacement*.[45] In the interweaving of two tonal threads – two temporal identities tracing their own courses but necessarily overlapping in the musical time which is common to both – Elgar tells the greater part of his tale. To miss it is to risk failing to appreciate the total hermeneutic significance of the way the fabric of the symphony is woven.

---

[43] Ibid., p. 145.

[44] Ibid., pp. 145–6. The 'understatement' characteristic of the 'heroic temper of the north' is what J. R. R. Tolkien called the Northern 'theory of courage' ('*Beowulf*: the Monsters and the Critics', in Christopher Tolkien (ed.), *The Monsters and the Critics, and Other Essays* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1983), pp. 5–48, at p. 20), and W. P. Ker identified in the belief in *Ragnarök*, the Twilight of the Gods, as 'absolute resistance, perfect because without hope' (W. P. Ker, *The Dark Ages* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1904), p. 57). In the face of the certain annihilation of *Ragnarök* no individual, however heroic, can hope for ultimate triumph; and pure, unambitious courage for courage's sake is therefore 'the great contribution of early Northern literature' (Tolkien, '*Beowulf*: the Monsters and the Critics', p. 20). It is very likely what W. B. Yeats had in mind when he referred to Elgar's 'heroic melancholy' in a letter to Elgar, 23 March 1902, in *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. John Kelly, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986–97), vol. III, p. 163. See also ch. 8 of this volume.

4. Existential responsibility

I must outline one more structure before offering an analysis of the symphony, this time an existential rather than an artistic one. The philosopher Martin Heidegger gives the name 'falling' (*Verfallen*) to an existential structure of Dasein (Heidegger's term for the human way of being). It is a counterpart of Dasein's 'thrownness' (*Geworfenheit*), the state of its being thrown into an existence already rich in cultural and historical data which suggest (and limit) possibilities for future ways of being. The sense of 'thrownness' might be grasped by considering the situation in which Gregor Samsa finds himself when, in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, he awakes one morning transformed into a giant bug, asking himself who, what, where, and when he is, and what is to be made of the situation now and in the future. All Dasein is thrown, by birth, into a situation, if rarely one so peculiar, and it is Dasein's responsibility to itself to work with the available possibilities allowed by its situation in space and time and form, to carry out the lifetime's project of constructing a self which is 'authentic' because responsive to personal development as an individual being, rather than the sheepish ('inauthentic') mimicry of other Daseins. In the 'moment of vision', the *Augenblick*, Dasein sees its own 'authentic' future and decides to work towards it resolutely by making a series of choices which, being responsive to its history and situation, will bring it into being. In the *Augenblick* Dasein chooses itself and begins the process of creating itself *as itself*, not merely as a copybook version of something which the mass of popular opinion offers as a possibility.[46]

---

[45] The structure is definitely as self-conscious in the case of Elgar's First Symphony, written as the result of a bet that he couldn't compose a symphony in two keys at once. See Kennedy, *Elgar Orchestral Music*, p. 54.

[46] Insofar as the unfolding of music in time is a mimesis of the temporality of human existence – a claim that cannot be justified here – it is appropriate to say that music has *Augenblicke* too, moments that define its 'authentic' form and identity, even when this means flying in the face of generic or structural expectations raised by a musical tradition. The musical *Augenblick* is discussed in detail in my *Edward Elgar, Modernist*, and it will be invoked again briefly towards the end of this study.

Heidegger calls this complete set of Daseins (of which every Dasein is also logically a member) 'the They' or 'the One' (*das Man*) – the 'they' or 'one' in such sentences as 'I'm becoming a coal miner because that's what *they* expect me to do', or 'I leave my bottom waistcoat button undone because that's what *one* does.' Although no Dasein could ever responsibly be wholly oblivious to 'the they' – we write in English or wear shoes on our feet because 'one does' – nevertheless it is possible, realizing one's ownmost character as an individual existent, to freely and authentically choose to live out a script which 'they' provide. One's own marriage is not necessarily untrue to oneself simply because in every age of modern human history 'one tends to get married'. The nature of one's interpretation of the script of marriage might be very personal. So inauthenticity does not snuff out being; it is merely a specific mode of being in response to one's thrownness.

'Falling' gives a firmer definition to inauthenticity. 'The term does not express any negative evaluation' (especially not a theological one), 'but is used to signify that Dasein is proximally and for the most part *alongside* the "world" of its concern.'[47] This is a natural response to thrownness. If we wake up as a bug, or indeed as anything else, we must concern ourselves with the arrangements of our 'world' (in the sense of a network of interrelating objects, persons, and responsibilities, rather than in the sense of a planet) in order to make sense of what choices are available for us to make in future life. It is unhelpful to ourselves not to conduct such an examination. But, crucially, 'in falling, Dasein *itself* as factical Being-in-the-world [i.e. as an existent with a specific historical and spatial location within a social and geographical situation], is something *from* which it has already fallen away'.[48] That is to say that it is an inbuilt risk of falling that it can lead Dasein away from its primary concern, which is the need to assess and understand its status as an individual, and to make choices which will advance its personal existential project, its '*own* life' (as opposed to a life that others might envisage for it).

So generally, and this is pertinent to an examination of the meaning of Elgar's Second Symphony, Dasein 'falls' into a concern with other people, 'the they'. This is comforting because, in trying to understand one's place in the world, it is useful to have companions who have already, collectively, gone some way towards reaching an understanding of what it means to be a Dasein. But unfortunately convention and 'the way things have been publicly interpreted' obtrude on all discourse with 'them', and discussion with other Daseins naturally descends into 'idle talk' (*Gerede*), a 'tranquillizing' gossip which offers pre-packaged answers to basic questions (‘What am I to do with my life?’; ‘Can a man like me be a politician?’; ‘Would marriage be the right way for me to seek happiness?’) but does not, perhaps, rise to the level of insight. Nevertheless, it is *tempting* to accept the common wisdom of the masses on basic life questions, not least because if one toes the line it is likely that support will be given to fulfil the requirements of the imposed script. ‘Idle talk and ambiguity [‘ambiguity’ means the difficulty of telling whether a public conception is a genuine understanding or not], having seen everything, having understood everything, develop the supposition that . . . [they] can guarantee to Dasein that all the possibilities of its Being will be secure, genuine, and full.’[49]

---

[47] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 7th edn, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962; orig. edn 1927), p. 220.

[48] Ibid.

But what is the nature of the support that ‘the they’ gives Dasein in its task of responding to its thrownness? First, it is conditional: misstep or abandon the script and ‘they’ will most likely say that one is making a dreadful mistake or (depending on how wide of the mark one steps) bringing shame on the community. Second, and more important, it is patronizing, even if one accepts its beneficent aid willingly. It pays no respect to the individual potential of a Dasein to say ‘You really must get a degree rather than pursue vocational training’, even if what motivates the suggestion is genuine concern for the well-being of the individual (‘I’m only saying this because if you don’t get a degree the government will punish you’). Every Dasein must be allowed to self-define.

Even in a bare-bones presentation like this, Heidegger’s notions of falling, idle talk, and the *Augenblick*, when taken together, can offer a sophisticated means of understanding motivation and responsibility which links the personal and historically situated to the social and transhistorical. If it all still seems very abstract so far, the flesh put onto the bones in the concluding section of this essay will show that however abstruse they may be, these observations are never empty or unimportant. They can translate music’s gestures into comprehensible meanings.

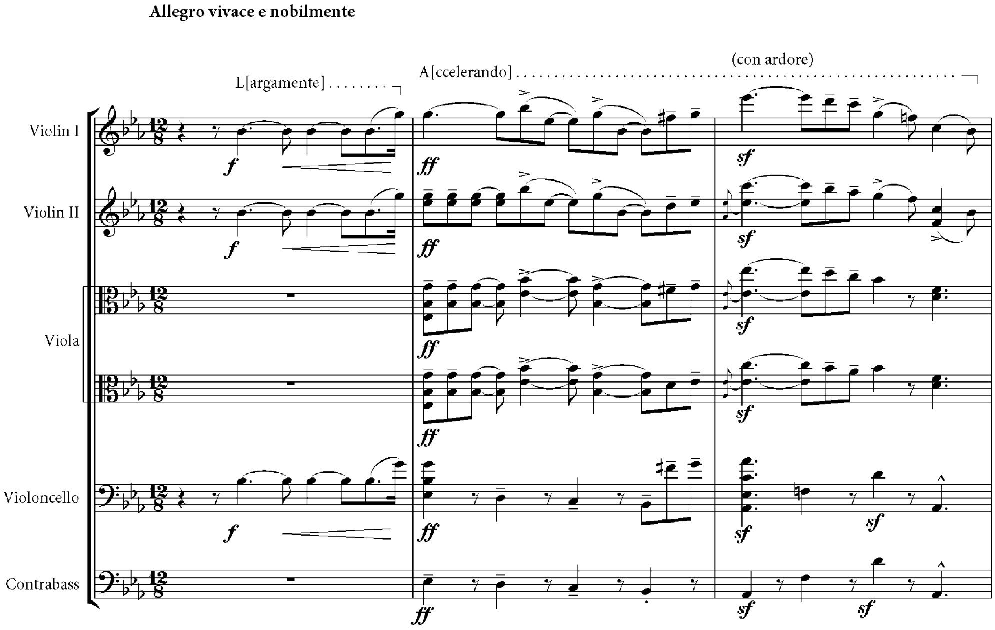
5. The first thread

The Second Symphony, like the First, opens with non-thematic material whose function is principally to act as a call to attention. The First Symphony opens with a drum-roll on the initial tonic, A♭, the Second with a *largamente* throb on a three-octave B♭, leaping to a two-octave G (Ex. 6.1, which shows only part of the texture). Not inappropriately, a similar gesture heralds the opening of *Beowulf*, whose first word is ‘hwæt’. This word has been variously

---

[49] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 222.

Ex. 6.1 Symphony no. 2, *Hwaet*-gesture and opening theme (string parts only)



rendered in translation as ‘Listen!’, ‘Hear me!’, ‘Attend!’, and ‘So’,[50] but the best idiomatic English-English translation is probably ‘Right’.[51] Expressing the function of these openings in terms of J. L. Austin’s philosophical linguistics, one could say that the locutionary force of each (i.e. the sense of the utterance) is practically nil, its illocutionary force (what the ‘speaker’ is doing with it) is merely to draw the listener’s attention to the fact that a discourse is about to begin, and the perlocutionary force (the effect it has on the hearer) is to encourage the listener to stop shuffling about or gossiping, and turn his or her attention entirely to the art-work.[52] It is worth mentioning this because during the course of the first movement, the symphony’s *hwæt*-gesture gains locutionary force – as it were, finds that it has something to say about the event it is introducing – and this impacts upon the ‘narrative’.

As in *Beowulf*, the monochrome simplicity of the *hwæt*-gesture allows Elgar to seize the listener’s wandering pre-symphonic attention and snap it directly to the first real object of interest, in this case the work’s first melodic material, which Elgar associated with Shelley's 'Spirit of Delight'. Its steady march-like tread – thirty-three of the first forty-five bars have strong bass notes on each of the four beats of the bar – will inevitably link the familiar musical topic in the listener's mind with symbols of empire. Of course the British empire is not the only thing in human history that has marched: American schools and universities do it too, and quite often to Elgar's music (perhaps the first time was when Elgar was awarded an honorary doctorate at Yale),[53] but the musical signs are suggestive enough, even without the dedication to the late Emperor of India, to justify the instinctive association in this symphony.

---

[50] The sources are *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, trans. Roy M. Liuzza (Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Press, 2000); *Beowulf: a New Translation with an Introduction*, trans. Burton Raffel (New York: New American Library, 1963); *Beowulf: A Verse Translation*, trans. Michael Alexander, 2nd edn (London: Penguin, 1995); and *Beowulf*, trans. Seamus Heaney (London: Faber and Faber, 1999).

[51] *Beowulf: A Student’s Edition*, trans. E. L. Risden (Troy, NY: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1994).

[52] See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962); revised edn by J. O. Urmson and M. Sbisà (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

Fig. 6.1, which is not intended to be comprehensive, tabulates some of the most important motives in the symphony, of which the principal melodic signifier of 'Delight', appearing in three movements, is motive 2. The combined effect of the *hwæt*-gesture and the exposition of motives 1–2 is, in structural terms, to give the movement's *Kopfton*, g^2, supported by the root of the tonic, E♭, a strong gestural spotlighting. So Elgar opens one of his most conventional symphonic formal sections. Ex. 6.2, a middleground Schenkerian reading of the exposition, demonstrates the relative orthodoxy of the voice-leading design, and Fig. 6.2 gives a formal summary of the movement.[54]

In the P-section, where the primary thematic material is exposed, $\hat{3}$ is prolonged by simple neighbouring motion and a third-descent from b♭^{2} to g^2 (motive 3, fig. 1:1–4). This third-descent is enlarged into a first-order progression (containing an octave transfer) that stretches from figs. 5 to 17:4, ultimately prolonging the *Kopfton*, which is regained at that point.[55] In the first transitional section, TR1, the first step of the third-progression, b♭^{1}, is prolonged between figs. 5 and 6 by a quick rising fifth-progression moving in tenths with the bass (motive 5, with its lower-fifth-reinforced, compulsive chromatic rising movement),[56] and after the eruption of motive 6 at fig. 7, bass and melody fall back, still together in a linear intervallic pattern of

---

[53] Moore, *Elgar*, p. 462.

[54] In this formal summary and the commentary that accompanies it, abbreviations are used for primary, secondary, transitional, or closing thematic sections or materials ('P', 'S', 'TR', and 'C'-sections or -materials, respectively).

[55] It is typical of Elgar to extend a middleground progression across a sonata form's internal subdivisions (here from TR1, through S1, to TR2). The rhetorical weight in his sonata plans is often thrown onto the second S-section, where a secondary thematic idea which is stated first in a gentle form reappears in a substantially more forceful guise. The First Symphony has an almost identical treatment of the S-materials in its first movement (cf. 11:5–10 and 17:1–16), and in *Falstaff*, the secondary theme associated with Prince Hal (first given at fig. 4) undergoes a series of transformations which, viewed whole, carries a weighty hermeneutic burden. (See my *Edward Elgar, Modernist*.) The first-movement secondary materials of the Violin Concerto are treated in a similar fashion, although not purely within the confines of the exposition.

[56] The rising fifth progression, with bass and soprano moving with each other in tenths, is a favourite Elgarian middleground formation. It is used in the S1 section of the First Symphony's first movement, and again in that work's finale. See my *Edward Elgar, Modernist*, Chapter 3.

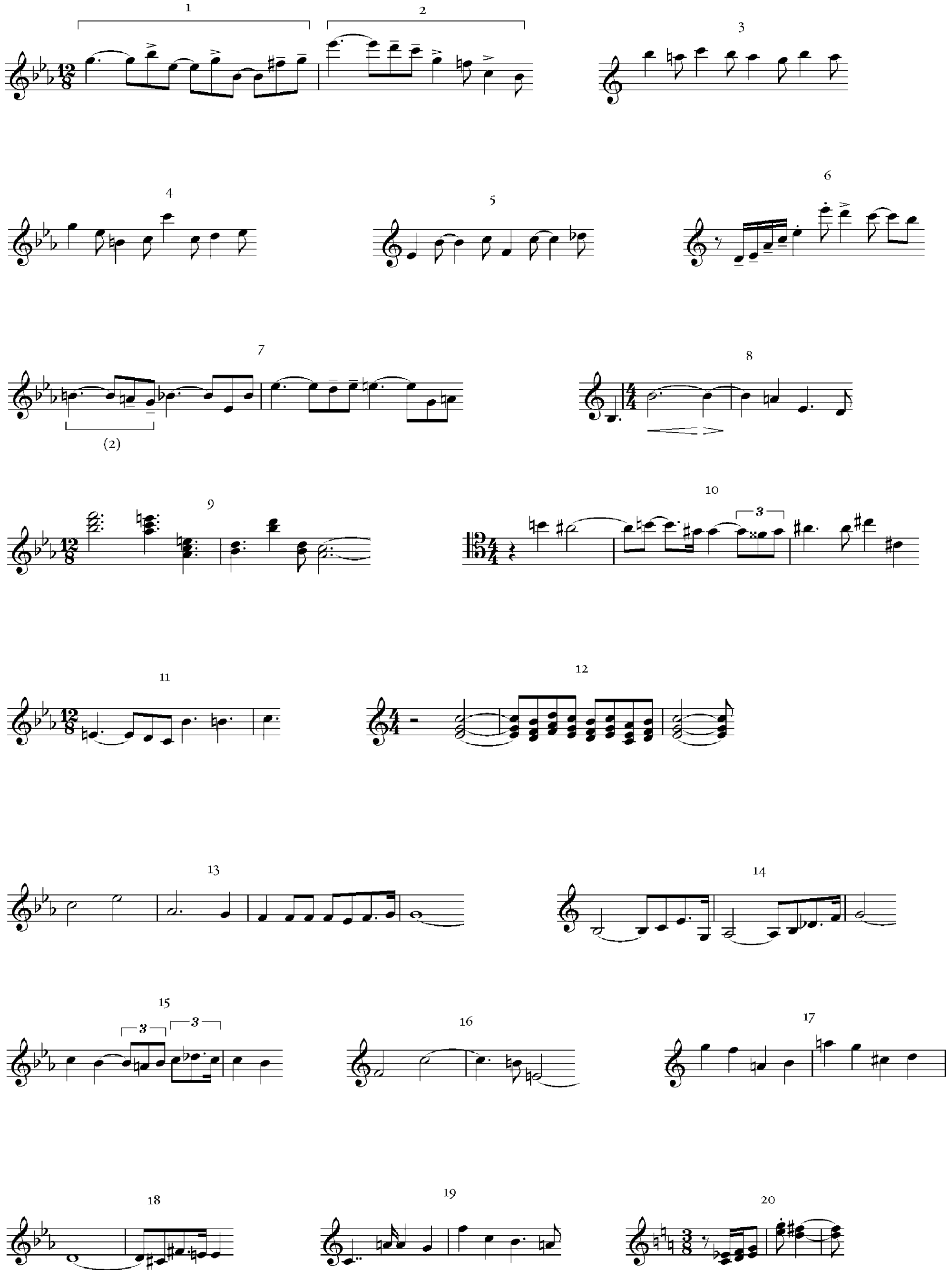


Fig. 6.1 Symphony no. 2, motives

consecutive tenths, to prepare the entry of the melodic b♮^{1} which, in S1, will act as a chromatic neighbour to b♭^{1}.

The first section containing secondary materials does not, in Elgar's hands, always establish the secondary key area, and in a sense this is not unusual.

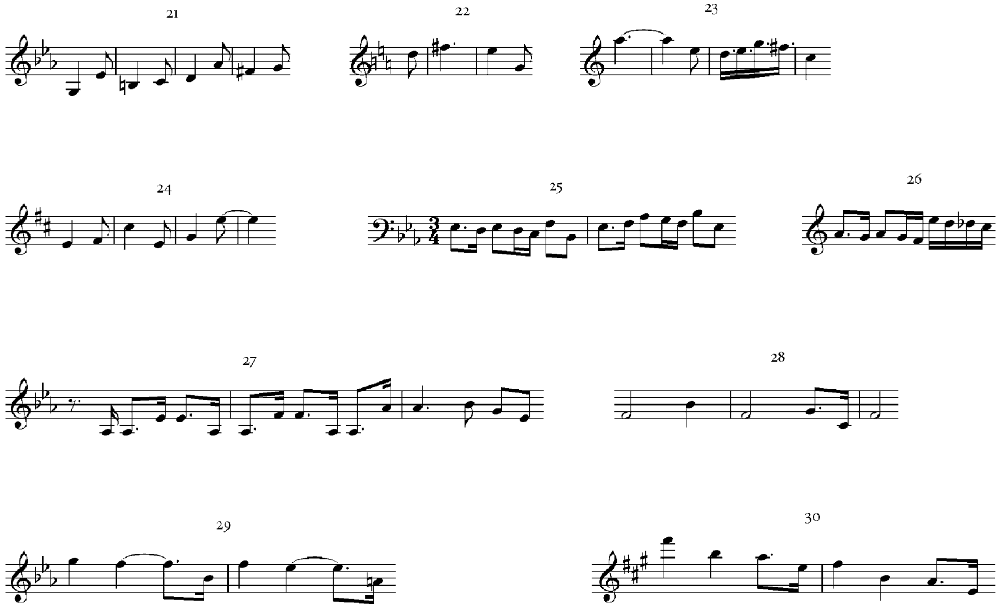
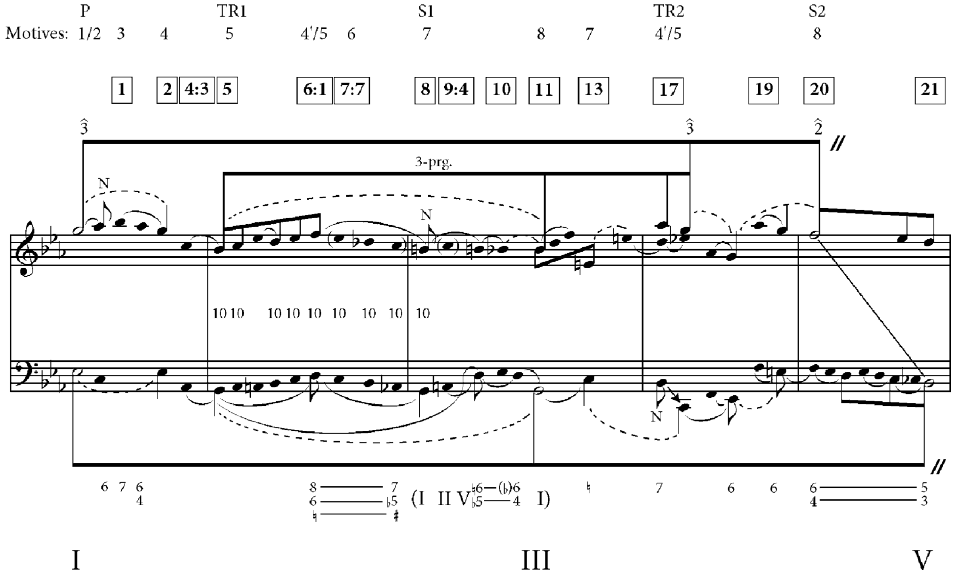

21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30

Fig. 6.1 (cont.)

Ex. 6.2 Symphony no. 2, middleground graph of first-movement exposition


P
TR1
S1
TR2
S2
Motives: 1/2 3 4 5 4′/5 6 7 8 7 4′/5 8
1
2
4:3
5
6:1
7:7
8
9:4
10
11
13
17
19
20
21
3̂
3̂
2̂
3-prg.
N
N
N
10 10 10 10 10 10 10 10 10
6 7 6/4
8/6/♮ 7/♭5/♯
(I II V♮6/♭5 (♭)6/4 I)
♮
7 6 6 6/4 5/3
I
III
V

James Hepokoski considers the drive towards an exposition's 'essential expositional closure' (EEC), a strong and well-prepared perfect cadence in a sonata's second key, rather than the straightforward arrival of a second key at the beginning of the S-section, where the S-materials are introduced, to be

Exposition	Introduction	Bar 1
	P	0:2–4:4
	TR^1	5:1–7:7
	S^1	8:1–14:6
	TR^2	15:1–19:4
	S^2	20:1–21:6
	C	21:7–23:4
Development	E	24:1–34:7
	P	35:1–38:4
	TR	38:5–40:3
Recapitulation	Introduction	41:1–6
	P	42:1–44:4
	TR^1	45:1–7
	S^1	46:1–51:7
	TR^2	52:1–58:4
	S^2	59:1–60:5
	C	61:1–62:4

Fig. 6.2 Symphony no. 2, formal outline of first movement

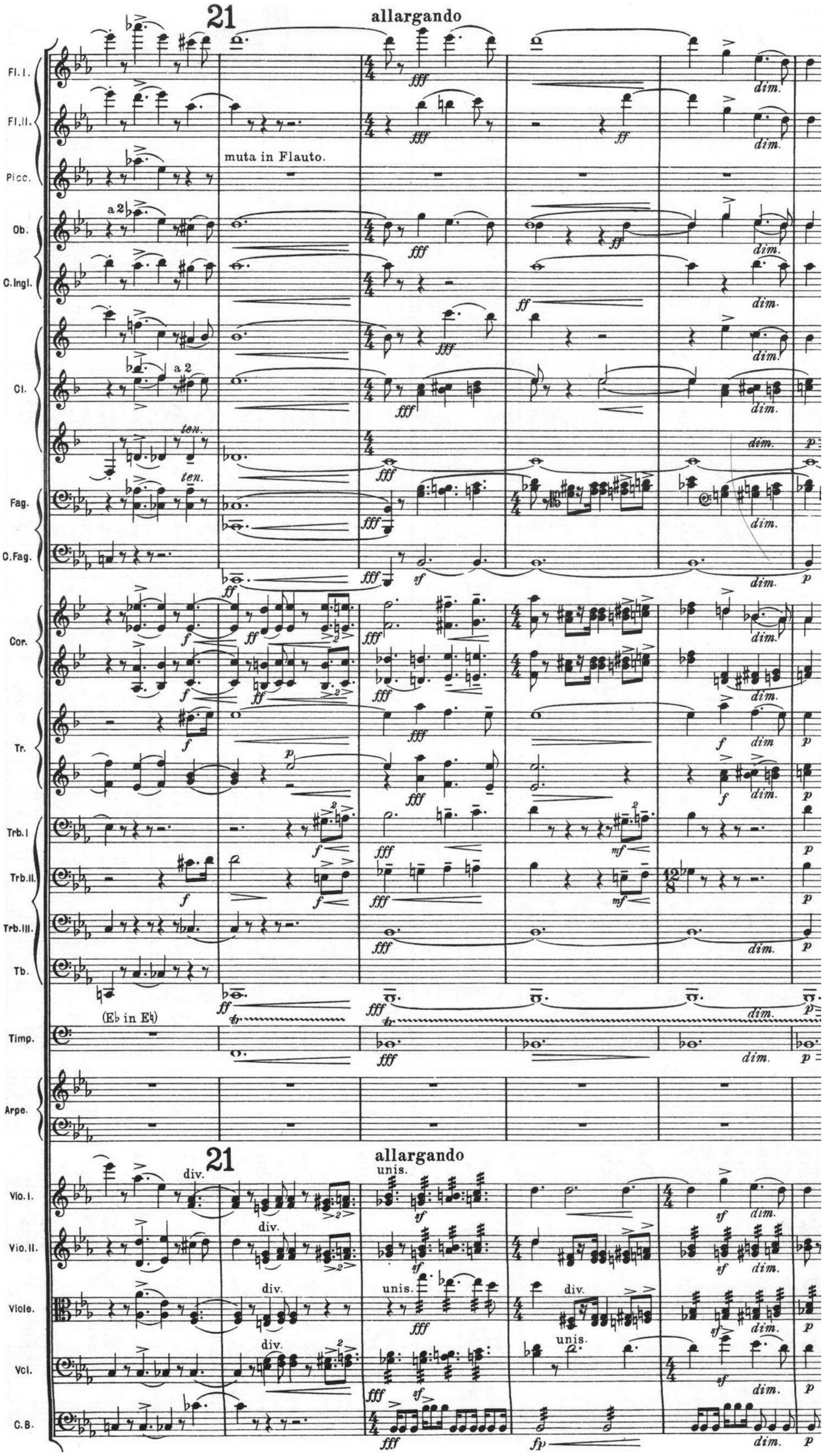
the more essential structural function of the S-section in all sonata forms.[57] Elgar's characteristic practice is to split the S-section in two, interposing a second transitional section between the two halves, and to establish the secondary key only at the end of the S2 section. The effect is to transform the philosophical meaning of the arrival of the 'expected' alternative key of a sonata design. The secondary key is not arrived at by virtue of what Adorno, writing about Mahler, characterizes as the sonata form's overweening, 'Idealist' control of musical materials, but rather as a culmination reached through a wholly free and individual impulse.[58] In the first S-section of this movement, Elgar mixes the mode of the bass arpeggiation which is cementing the tonic E♭. Motive 7 gives the major-mode colour at fig. 8, motive 8 the minor colour at fig. 11. But the minor mode is not firmly established as the secondary key: the S1 section is, structurally, a 'failed', or at least (and to use a more dispassionate word) an 'open' one. When its miniature ternary form is rounded by the return of the A section (motive 7) at fig. 13, the key is not G but C, a key that will grow in importance later.

---

[57] James Hepokoski, 'Beyond the Sonata Principle', *JAMS*, 55 (2002), pp. 91–154.

[58] Theodor W. Adorno, *Mahler: a Musical Physiognomy*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992; orig. edn 1960).

Ex. 6.3 Symphony no. 2, arrival of the structural dominant, first movement


21
allargando
Fl. I.
Fl. II.
Picc.
muta in Flauto.
Ob.
a2
C. Ingl.
Cl.
a 2
ten.
Fag.
C. Fag.
Cor.
Tr.
Trb. I
Trb. II.
Trb. III.
Tb.
(E♭ in E♮)
Timp.
Arpe.
div.
unis.
Vio. I.
Vio. II.
Viole.
Vcl.
C.B.
fff
ff
f
mf
sf
fp
dim.
p

Structurally this C that functions as VI/E♭ is a preparation for the arrival of the real secondary key of the exposition, B♭. TR2 prolongs VI, changing its mode, and builds tension breathlessly with the aid of the rising, yearning motive 5 (figs. 18–20), before discharging it all on the arrival of S2, the goal of the exposition, with motive 8 and its supporting bass movement grinding out the eventual and massive arrival on V/E♭ which comes in two waves. First the melodic $\hat{2}$ which brings about an interruption in the *Ursatz* arrives at fig. 20:1 (over a bass F, V of the eventual V/E♭). Then the bass B♭ arrives twice: first at fig. 21:2 (*fff*, and with a local V–I cadence provided by the timpani) and then again, when a chromatically rising motion in brass and woodwind reaches that far, at 21:3 (Ex. 6.3). Once attained, the music comes to a rest, almost seeming to tread water for eleven bars, on the dominant.

Both the formal ordering of the parts of this exposition and the voice-leading structure of its middleground levels are quite orthodox by early modernist standards. Certainly there is none of the First Symphony's obvious surface conflict between 'immuring' and 'immured' tonalities (A♭ and A minor in that symphony's first movement): although E♭ plays a relatively small role in the structure of the exposition, the keys that take up most of the music – G major/minor, C major/minor, and B♭ – can all be interpreted as falling within in an orderly I–III–(VI–)V bass arpeggiation supporting the movement's tonic. The melodic 'thread' signifying the 'Spirit of Delight' (especially motive 2) is never reined in, and although the tone of the S2 section jars against the vivacity of the bulk of the exposition, on a first hearing this will probably not concern most listeners. In short, the symphony appears to open in an untroubled, life-affirming spirit one could fairly, and without pressing parallels with Shelley too far, call 'delight'.

6. The second thread

But the situation changes abruptly as the development opens (fig. 24). Here is a quite different mood, which within the space of sixteen bars develops into what Elgar called 'the *most extraordinary* passage I have ever heard – a sort of malign influence wandering thro' the summer night in the garden'.[59] If the delight of the exposition section can be considered a kind of Elgarian arcadia (he was too politically conservative to countenance utopia), then the garden could be Eden, and the malign influence to which it is the unwitting host would be a serpent. It might also be heard, especially given the (perhaps) imperial redolence of the march-like bass, as a musical symbol of the 'age of empire',[60] into whose idyll would enter the 'vampire of Europe's wasted will' – German-sparked annihilation, in the image Elgar would set to music four years later in *Spirit of England*. At any rate, even if no hermeneutics should yet make such bold associations, the metaphor of the serpent will serve well to get across the point that the opening of the development introduces the second thread in the work's lacertine interlace, which I shall call (for reasons which will gradually become clear) the Spirit of Decay.

---

[59] Letter to Alice Stuart-Wortley, 29 January 1911, *Windflower*, p. 75; quoted in Kennedy, *Portrait*, p. 246.

In his original plan for the symphony, this passage was to return between figs. 62 and 64 in the first movement (during the closing section of the recapitulation) as a relentless pounding statement – horns, timpani, side drum, tambourine, cymbals, bass drum, harps, violas, cellos, and double-basses all with the same thumping ♪♪♪ ♪♪♪ ♪♪♪ rhythm, intended to drown out the rest of the orchestra – which, in rehearsal, Elgar compared evocatively to the feeling experienced by 'a man in a high fever . . . That dreadful beating in the brain – it seems to drive out every coherent thought'.[61] But although the sketches held in the Elgar Birthplace Museum make it clear that this climax was originally intended for the first movement, at some stage – probably while scoring the Allegro – Elgar decided to transplant it to a late stage of the third movement.[62]

The precise dates of the sketches for the Second Symphony are unusually well documented. At the time of composition Elgar had just bought a set of date stamps, and he enthusiastically thumped his manuscripts with them as often as possible, sometimes several times on a single page. Unfortunately, no date was stamped on a remarkable continuity sketch Elgar produced for the third movement,[63] but it could only have been produced after the decision was taken to implant there the climax first meant for the Allegro's coda, i.e. some time during or after January 1911.

It is important to understand the general order of events, because when the first-movement development section was first sketched, there was no hint of the cello countermelody which would provide the main melodic weight of both the development section and the (now) much later climax, and the reason for its inclusion in the final version of the symphony could be hermeneutically significant. In its first guise, when sketched at the same time as the work's opening ideas, the opening of the development relied heavily on motive 1 (see Ex. 6.4). Diana McVeagh suggests plausibly that the

---

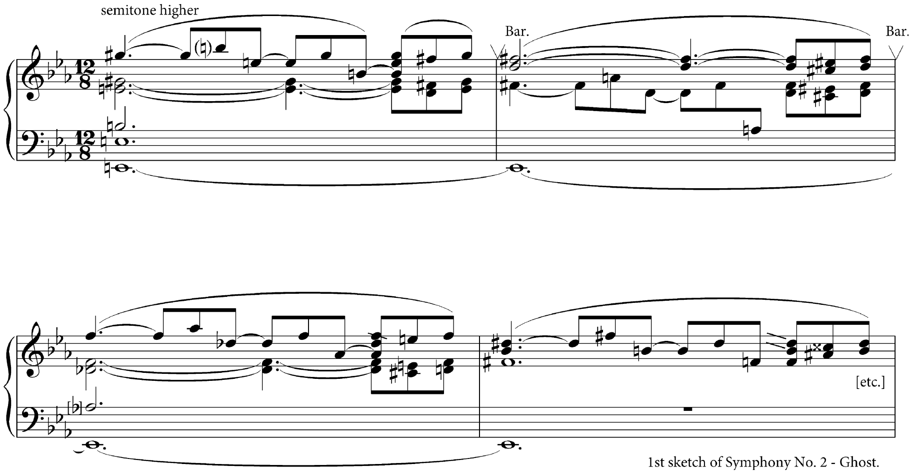
[60] The title of Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1987).

[61] Bernard Shore, *The Orchestra Speaks* (London: Longmans, 1938), p. 135.

[62] See Kent, 'A View of Elgar's Methods of Composition', p. 57, on the original plans for this passage: Elgar also seems at some stage to have considered it for the finale.

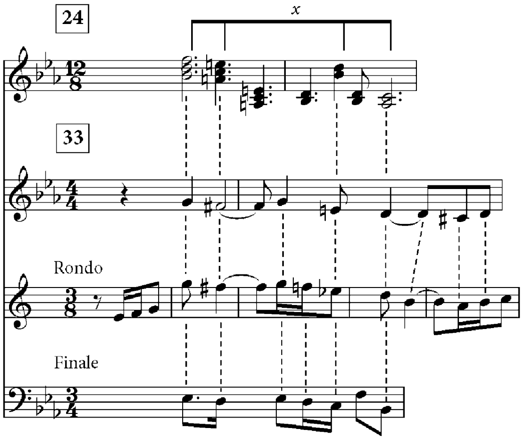
[63] Transcribed by Kent, in 'A View of Elgar's Methods of Composition', p. 53.

Ex. 6.4 Symphony no. 2, opening of first-movement development section, first sketch



1st sketch of Symphony No. 2 - Ghost.

Ex. 6.5 Symphony no. 2, motivic connections with ‘Spirit of Decay’

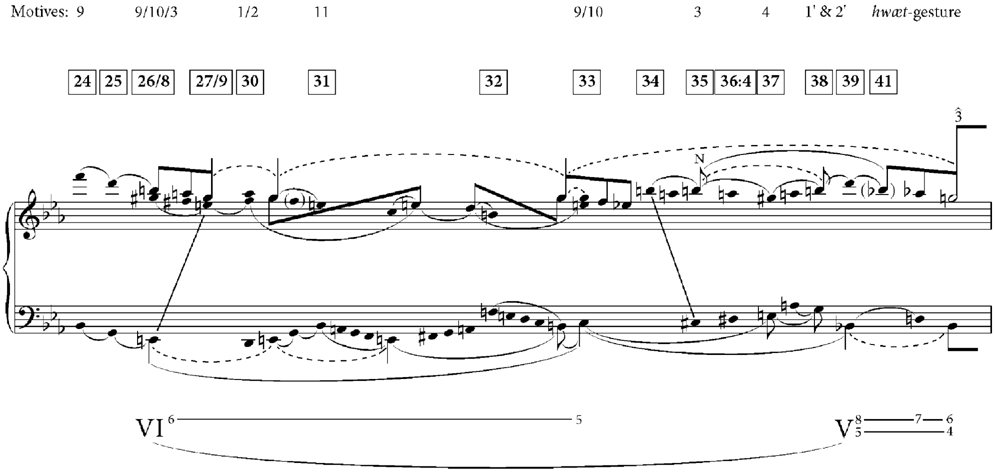


version of the theme eventually presented at fig. 28 was probably derived from the prominent f♯^{2} (the only accidental) in the opening bars: ‘the augmented triad of the first subject made in passing by a purely decorative melodic chromaticism, an F♯ for an instant over B♭ and D, is in the development isolated, seen as a harmonic, not melodic factor, and as such generates a great new tune.’[64] Yet even more striking than this is a neighbour-decorated, descending fourth-progression at the surface of the theme (marked *x* in Ex. 6.5) which both typifies the Spirit of Decay (shown there in the form it takes at figs. 24 and 33) and ties it in with the opening themes of the third

---

[64] McVeagh, *Elgar*, p. 165.

Ex. 6.6 Symphony no. 2, middleground graph of first-movement development



and fourth movements.[65] I suggest that if the F♮ which stands out in the Spirit of Delight is the first seed of the Spirit of Decay, then through the course of the symphony that seed gradually enables a morbid outgrowth to develop (as it were) on the face of the Spirit of Delight, which is still present between figs. 28 and 33, before being banished, significantly, at the point of the arrival of root-position C major at fig. 33. It was a decision of the greatest moment when Elgar added this cello countermelody to the beginning of the development section.

The voice-leading structure of the development section is uncomplicated (see Ex. 6.6). Its opening bars descend by thirds to an early bass plateau on E♮, a semitone distant from the tonic root of the movement. Above this pedal (reached at fig. 26) the Spirit of Decay makes its first appearance (fig. 28). At first E♮ supports an E major chord, but a descending third progression overarching the Spirit of Decay (and recalling the long third-progression of the exposition) pulls the melodic line down to the *Kopfton* g^2 and the harmonies to C major. Elgar often 'puns' on the *Kopfton*, sharing it between two keys in this manner, and demonstrating the evenness of the match between his opposed tonalities. By doing so here he creates a new identifying mark for his two 'threads', a voice-leading one. Both threads have a focus (so far) on a melodic G, but for Delight that is $\hat{3}$/E♭, for Decay $\hat{5}$/C. Throughout the symphony, $\hat{3}$-lines will be associated with Delight, $\hat{5}$-lines with Decay, adding a subtle new constituent to the associative matrix which already involves themes and keys – and timbres too, since so far themes of Delight have been given strong orchestration with heavy brass scoring, while themes of Decay have had softer orchestration and lower dynamic levels.[66]

---

[65] Anderson also notices the important similarity between the Spirit of Decay and the Rondo's opening theme: 'The thirds and octave leaps of the Presto theme recall at once the first movement's "ghost" and its semitones hint at the strange cantilena of the night' (*Elgar*, p. 337).

The new key's root is reached at fig. 33 by means of a rising sixth motion in the bass – its last note decorated by descending motion from F♮ – and the ternary 'episode' based on the new thread, the Spirit of Decay, gives way to the development's second section (fig. 35). Based on the P-materials, this section recalls the melodic b♮^{2} from the opening of the development and, in another gesture towards a process of the exposition, falls to b♭^{2} at fig. 41, the moment that corresponds to the *hwæt*-gesture that opened the symphony. This in turn precipitates another third-descent to the *Kopfton* which, at fig. 42, corresponds exactly with the beginning of the recapitulation of the P-materials. At the same time, the root of C major is (again as in the exposition) interpreted after the event as VI/E♭, and treated as an upper neighbour to the dominant.

Two critical observations can now be made. First, the main voice-leading structures of the exposition are simply recalled in the development; the only innovation here is a pair of unfoldings, accompanied by a new cadential idea, motive 11, acting to reinforce the I^6–V^6–I cadence into C major. Second, the section grants fifty-one of its seventy-six bars to exposition of new material (and because of the slower tempo of the first part, it accounts for four fifths of the development's temporal span); the twenty-five-bar rump provides only a very perfunctory 'symphonic development' of the P-materials – and even sounds almost like a false recapitulation. In the light of these observations, the development space can be regarded less *as* a development, and more as a second, and thematically contradictory, exposition. Indeed its main tonal focus, C major, receives stronger support than the exposition's E♭: both rise to their dominant, but only C major receives a firm V–I cadence (at fig. 33). For these thematic and voice-leading reasons, the development's C major might be regarded as a tonality with equal claim on the movement's (and, we shall see, the symphony's) hegemony – one 'immured' by an 'immuring' tonality which begins and ends the movement (and the symphony). One need hardly note that it is in the nature of things which are immured to attempt to break free, or that a strong beast caged is not always safe to approach.

Considered together, then, the exposition and development function as parallel sections of exposition: one each for the two main threads of the work, the Spirit of Delight and the Spirit of Decay. Both are associated with themes (motive 2 for Delight, motive 10 for Decay), keys (E♭ for Delight, C for Decay), and timbres (strong Delight, soft Decay). As the symphony progresses, its narrative, insofar as we can grasp it, will be played out on the thematic, tonal, and timbral levels.

---

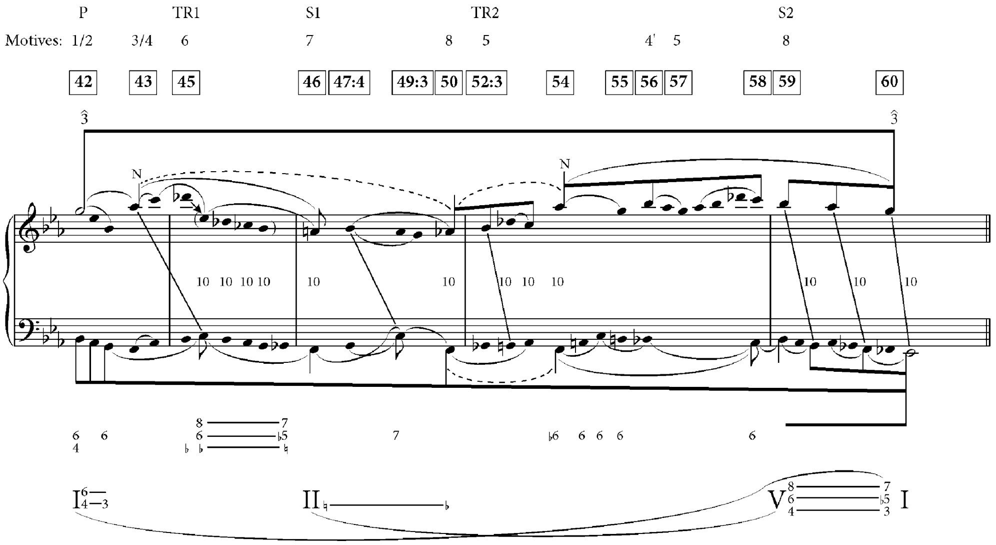
[66] I am grateful to John Pickard for suggesting that timbre could have an associative use in this symphony.

7. The first synthesis

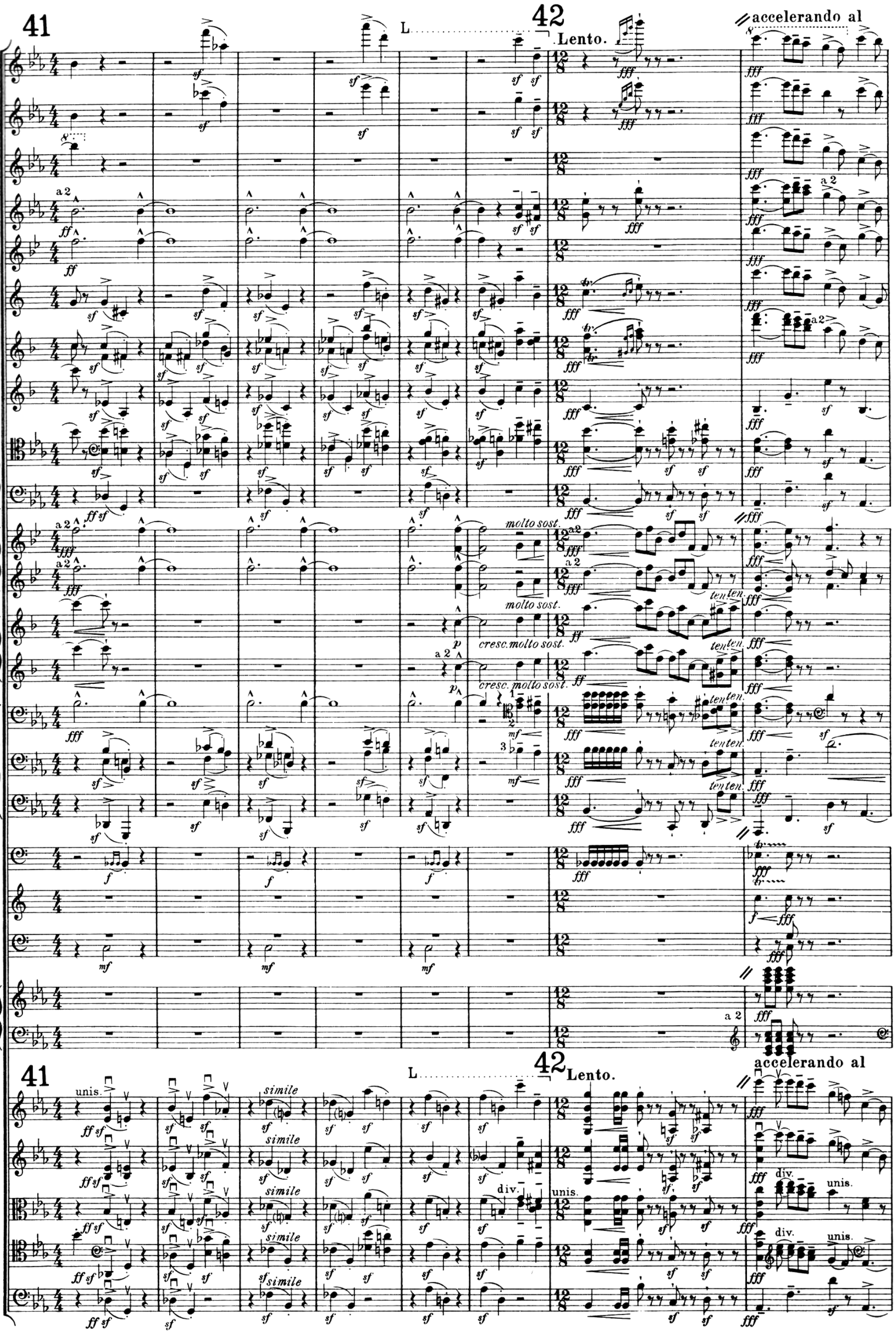
But the first step towards regaining the Delight of the opening, and to picking off and discarding the signs of its decay – that is, towards forging a synthesis from the thesis and antithesis of the preceding formal sections – is not a promising one, because in the first-movement recapitulation Elgar unveils one of his most astonishing sectional structures (see Ex. 6.7).

The first point of interest concerns the *hwæt*-gesture that heralds the recapitulation. This has a radically different character from the one that preceded the exposition: what was at first merely a jabbing three-octave B♭ is now a gigantically orchestrated and greatly extended passage which has become clouded by a melodic B♮ (sometimes spelt C♭) left hanging over from both the profile of motive 9 (which is the overlay to the Spirit of Decay) and an important voice-leading component of the development space (see Ex. 6.8). The moments of this strong conflict between B♭ and B♮ are on the third beat of fig. 41:2 (B♮/C♭ on flute II, clarinet II, bassoon I, trombone II, violin II, and cello, set against B♭s on both oboes, cor anglais,

Ex. 6.7 Symphony no. 2, middleground graph of first-movement recapitulation



Ex. 6.8 Symphony no. 2, *Hwaet*-gesture, opening of recapitulation


41
42
Lento.
accelerando al
Fl. I
Fl. II
Picc.
Ob.
E.ingl.
Cl.
Fag.
C.Fag.
Cor.
Tr.
Trb.
Tb.
Timp.
T. picc.
Piat. & Gr. C.
Arpe.
Vio. I.
Vio. II.
Viole.
Vcl.
C B.
molto sost.
cresc. molto sost.
simile
unis.
div.
ten.
a 2

four horns, and trombone I), on the third beat of fig. 41:5 (a similar distribution of instruments), and again from the first to third beats of fig. 41:6, this time exacerbated by false relations either within parts or across families of instruments (e.g. bassoon I, and the top three string parts). The monochrome, suggestible B♭ of the original version has become rather troubled. And what functions on one level as a simple third-descent to regain the *Kopfton* (see Ex. 6.6) operates on another as an almost baleful warning to the Spirit of Delight, which is about to reignite. The tale will not be the same the second time round.

If the symphony's metaphorical reciter begins the exposition's tale with a confident 'Right!', then upon his return to the same material at the recapitulation, although the *hwæt*-gesture's illocutionary force is still to direct the attention forward to the 'main material', the fact that the gesture has itself gained locutionary force – narrative import, indeed, from the imposition of Decay-thread material onto the reintroduction of the Delight-thread – means that its perlocutionary force is rather different. The listener still prepares to hear what is to follow, but now with a set of prejudices built in. In short, the listener wants the 'main material' to substantiate its claim to the tonal throne. And the recapitulation finds this a cumbersome responsibility.

After the grand preparation of the dominant leading up to fig. 39, progress towards firm resolution in the newly resumed tonic area is remarkably slow. In the first bar of P-material recapitulation, actually marked *Lento*, motive 1 is supported by a B♭ in the bass which descends to A♭ and G in the second and third bars, as motive 2 drives an *accelerando* to the main tempo. But once G, supporting I^6, has been reached, the bass motion stalls. There is a descent to E♭ in fig. 42:3, but it is heard in context as a local dominant to A♭, and not as the tonic root; and the E♭ on the first beat of fig. 42:7 is heard as the second step on an arpeggiation of a C minor chord. Structurally there is no immediate descent from G.

The arrival of motive 3 at fig. 43 introduces a neighbouring $a\flat^2$ (as the goal of a descending fifth progression) which will be prolonged through the bulk of the recapitulation. At the restatement of motive 4 at fig. 44, the bass begins a rise which will take it to C by fig. 45:4, and thence to F for the start of the first section of secondary materials at fig. 46, at which point the neighbouring $a\flat^2$, transferred down an octave, receives its own chromatic neighbour, $a\natural^1$. The II–V–I motion towards F, begun once the bass descent stalls on G, is repeated during the S1 section so that with the arrival of motive 8 in its gentle form at fig. 50, the second degree scale has been reached firmly.

The tonic root is now only one step away, but we are already well into a recapitulation whose primary materials, originally taking up forty-five bars of exposition, have been squashed into just twenty-four bars. The seventy-two bars of S-material recapitulation almost precisely equal the seventy-five bars of S-material exposition, but since the E♭ root is not reached until the end of the recapitulation, with the same weighty S2-version of motive 8 that had cemented the arrival of the dominant in the exposition, $\hat{2}$ has an unusually long prolongation in the bass. In fact a G–F–E♭ motion which could have been accomplished within the space of two bars (if the pace of descent in the opening bars of the recapitulation were continued) takes ninety-one bars instead. The first strong E♭ root of the recapitulation coincides with the return after its long neighbour-note prolongation of the *Kopfton*, g^2 – and in a sense the recapitulation's achievement is merely to work its way towards a *starting* point. Had the shattering climax based on the Spirit of Decay been given in its original position, between figs. 62 and 64, the movement could not even be said to have accomplished that. As it is, the *Urlinie* does not descend further from this point, and the last melodic note of the movement is a G. Elgar had been composing structures with static *Kopftöne* at least since the Variations, op. 36,[67] and their effect in his symphonic works is, very subtly, to imply a structural (if not a temporal) *attacca*, a conceptual bridge to the next movement. Hermeneutically, the structure seems to imply that, however the burden of the movement is to be understood in the final analysis, for the moment no conclusion can be reached.

8. The threads interweave

The key signatures of the two middle movements suggest a focus on C (minor and major modes respectively), but the deeper structures of each call such hasty judgement into question. Having established joint melodic/motivic, tonal, and timbral associations for the threads signifying Delight and Decay, Elgar explores possibilities of interaction between the keys of E♭ and C and the themes and timbres with which they have so far broadly been conjoined. Astonishing processes evolve.

The funereal Larghetto is in a simple sonata form without development (see Fig. 6.3) – what Charles Rosen identified as 'slow movement sonata form' and James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy call a 'Type 1 sonata'.[68] As in the first movement, the secondary materials are presented in two separate sections, S1 and S2, and taken together they once again effect the principal

---

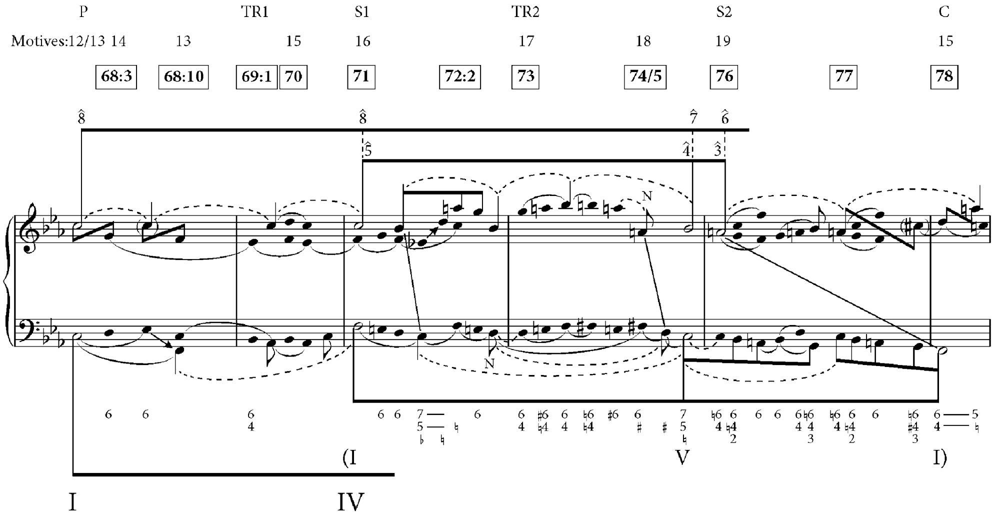
[67] The technique is probably Elgar's own invention. See my *Edward Elgar, Modernist*, Chapters 1 and 2.

[68] See Charles Rosen, *Sonata Forms*, 2nd edn (New York and London: Norton, 1988), pp. 106–12, and Hepokoski, 'Beyond the Sonata Principle'. See also a substantial study by James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types and Deformations in the Late Eighteenth-Century Sonata* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Exposition	Intro	–67:1
	P	67:1–68:12
	TR^1	69:1–70:4
	S^1	71:1–73:6
	TR^2	74:1–75:6
	S^2	76:1–77:8
	C	78:1–7
Recapitulation	P	79:1–80:8
	S^1	81:1–82:12
	TR	83:1–84:6
	S^2	85:1–86:10
	C	87:1–88:2
Coda		88:3–89:5

Fig. 6.3 Symphony no. 2, formal outline of second movement

Ex. 6.9 Symphony no. 2, middleground sketch of second-movement exposition



articulation of the movement's deep structure. The primary materials, motives 13 and 14 (motive 12 performs an introductory function), quite quickly take the music away from the opening C minor. By fig. 68:10 motive 13 has begun tentatively to project F minor as an interior focus of the first formal section (see Ex. 6.9). The first transitional section expands on this promise by arpeggiating up from F to f in the bass, motive 15 providing elegant neighbouring-note decoration of the A♭ en route (figs. 69:3–70:4).

The first section of secondary materials (beginning at fig. 71) introduces a Mahlerian theme of slightly uncertain tonal identity (motive 16) which nevertheless implies F minor quite strongly;[69] and as the second transitional section gradually brings a melodic B♭ (given in two octaves) into focus as a seventh over V/f, the grand new theme at the beginning of S2 (fig. 76) can utilize the slow fifth-descent to the root which had generated the form of the first movement's recapitulation to solidify F (now in the major mode) as the central key of the movement so far. Motive 19 itself can be regarded as a compression of the first three bars of the symphony, a new melodic form of the Spirit of Delight: the prominent rising sixth of its first bar and the strong descending contour of its second bar could be a skeletal reinterpretation of the original form of the theme; the strong brass peals also bring the Delightful timbre into the movement. In voice-leading terms the *Kopfton* which had begun as the putative $\hat{8}$ of an $\hat{8}$-line in C can better be conceptualized as $\hat{5}$/F, and the descent to the consonance of a$\natural^1$ in the melody and F in the bass – although not the perfect consonance of the traditional $\overset{\hat{1}}{\mathrm{I}}$ contrapuntal close – lends further structural gravity to the immured F tonality.

A two-bar transition leads back to C minor and the recapitulation. Despite a considerably elaborated texture, the course of this section quite closely follows that of the exposition, but its divergences are important. Again a quick move is made away from C minor towards an immured tonality; really this movement spends very little time on its ostensible tonic.[70] But before the progress of establishing the second immured tonality is properly begun, this key (E♭) is treated to a lush upper-third decoration with motive 14 supplying a brief, unforgettable moment which some might hear as (misplaced?) confidence, others as a continuation of the unsettling weirdness of the beginning of the recapitulation (fig. 80), before the secondary materials enter at fig. 81. The key is E♭, and it can be regarded on one level as chord III in a bass arpeggiation of the C minor triad (as indicated by the broken extension of its stem in Ex. 6.10), but because of the curiously offhand way the tonic is treated in this movement it makes more sense – and in any case corresponds better with the impression the music makes when heard – to regard it as a tonal focus in its own right. It is, furthermore, the key associated with the Spirit of Delight.

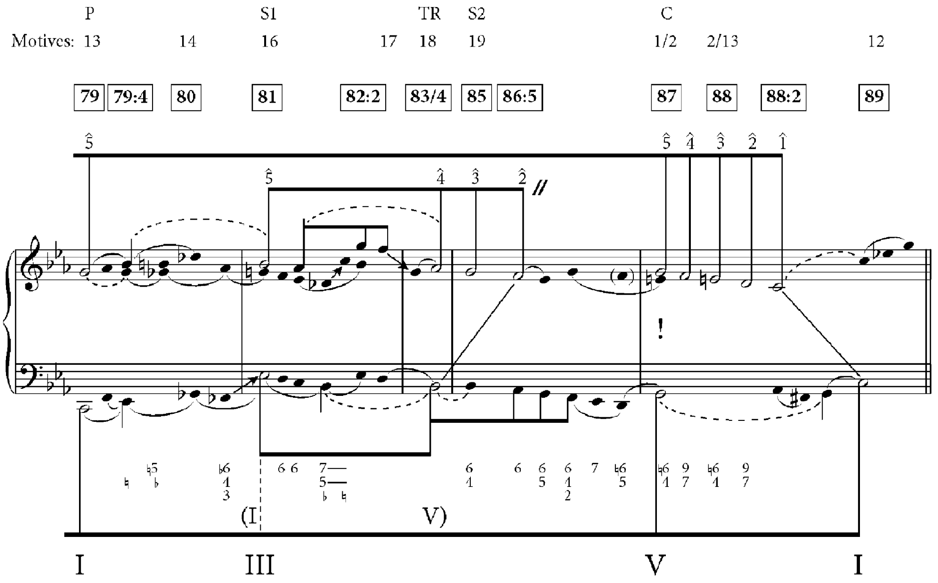
The working of C (major or minor) and E♭ into a duotonal structure is characteristic of some of Elgar's strongest music. In the second part of *The Dream of Gerontius* the pairing is still being used in a traditional late nineteenth-century manner as a more or less stable but complex tonic

---

[69] Tovey says this moves 'in broad lines and with free rhythm, as if Bruckner had become a master of phrasing'. Donald Francis Tovey, 'Elgar: Symphony in E flat, no. 2, op. 63', in *Essays in Musical Analysis*, vol. II (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), pp. 114–21, at p. 118.

[70] In this characteristic at least it is like the first movement of the First Symphony.

Ex. 6.10 Symphony no. 2, middleground graph of second-movement recapitulation



reference point.[71] Soon after the completion of the Second Symphony the structure would be given its most probing examination in *Falstaff*, where C is associated with Falstaff and E♭ with Prince Hal/King Henry V.[72] Within the Second Symphony, the keys are used in a manner not dissimilar to the way A♭ and D are used across the four movements of the First Symphony, which is to say essentially in a combative manner, each vying for position. That they are more closely related than the tritonally divided keys of the earlier symphony allows Elgar's play with them to be more nicely ambiguous.

As in the Larghetto's exposition, motives 16–19 perform the task of building up to a I–V–I cadence into the immured tonic. Because the recapitulation picks up melodically on g^1, and rises to $\hat{5}$/E♭ by fig. 79:4 on its way towards the immured tonic, there is the potential for something singular to happen: full contrapuntal closure in a single key. From fig. 81 to fig. 86 progress is solid, and $\hat{2}$, supported by chord V, is reached during the glorious restatement of the 'new Spirit of Delight', motive 19. But this time the by-now familiar bass slide to the root doesn't reach completion. At the point when melodic resolution to $\hat{1}$ over I/E♭ would have led to an even stronger contrapuntal affirmation of the immured tonality than in the exposition, the expected melodic pitch is modified to $e\natural^{1}$, and the bass rises to G (instead of falling to the expected E♭), which then functions as V/C.

---

[71] See Christopher Orlo Lewis, *Tonal Coherence in Mahler's Ninth Symphony* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1984) and essays in William Kinderman and Harald Krebs (eds.), *The Second Practice of Nineteenth-Century Tonality* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996) for discussions of the way these tonic complexes can be understood.

[72] See my *Edward Elgar, Modernist* for analysis of the significance of this tonal pair in that work.

This moment, highlighted in Ex. 6.10, comes as quite a surprise. The work's firmest closure so far has been prepared for the key of the Spirit of Delight (albeit with the $\hat{5}$-*Kopfton* of Decay) and using a new melodic form of the original theme, but all of this is peremptorily swung into a strong affirmation of the key of the Spirit of Decay, C. And the return of this C major coincides exactly with the thematic recall of motives 1–2 from the beginning of the symphony, which together compose the theme originally associated with the Spirit of Delight – now, for the first time, clothed in the softer timbre of Decay, which gives the Spirit of Delight an entirely new countenance. One might have expected this theme to add dignity and security to the perfect consummation of contrapuntal tension in the key of Delight, and to create a sense of teleological arrival on account of its motivic relation to the main secondary key of the movement; but it is instead shunted away, and full closure in the key of Decay (and with its $\hat{5}$-*Kopfton*) is effected by the Larghetto's principal motive, 13. In the closing gestures the *Kopfton* of the first movement, g^{2}, is restored to prominence as a reminder that the biggest question still facing the symphony is how reliable the Delight it introduced at the outset actually is.

By testing the strength of the connection between the themes and the key of the Spirit of Delight Elgar foreshadows the moment in the Rondo which is, perhaps, the key to the meaning of the symphony. The slow movement's failure to connect tonal resolution with thematic return is of an importance magnified to the monumental in the Rondo. And, as is the case when the threads in *Beowulf* intersect, the precise coincidence of the return of the first theme of the Spirit of Delight and the point when its tonal resolution is refused is narratively critical. An essential part of the symphony – it may be associated with Edward VII, the last connection with the Victorian age – dies here. Its significance will be explored in the final section.

9. The threads fray

The form of the movement Elgar designates 'Rondo' is a cause of concern for Robert Meikle, the writer who has given it most attention, most fundamentally because 'its dimensions as a rondo are far from clear'.[73] He proposes three readings of the form: two of them rondos, the other a scherzo and trio (although he notes that this latter is a formal category 'with which Elgar quite deliberately chose not to label the movement').[74] His second rondo reading is

---

[73] Meikle, 'The True Foundation', p. 53.

[74] Ibid., p. 55.

Scherzo	**A**	–92:12
	B	93:1–97:13
	A	98:1–99:11
	C	100:1–101:16
	A	102:1–105:20
Trio	**D (a)**	106:1–115:12
Scherzo	**A**	116:1–16
	Episode: Decay	117:1–122:2
	B	122:3–125:20
	A	126:1–128:8
	C	129:1–131:16
	A	132:1–135:16

Fig. 6.4 Symphony no. 2, formal outline of third movement

his most persuasive mapping of the movement, and it comes close to my own formal outline, presented in Fig. 6.4, which combines scherzo and rondo elements.[75] Ex. 6.11, a middleground graph of the movement, marks the formal sections on both views.

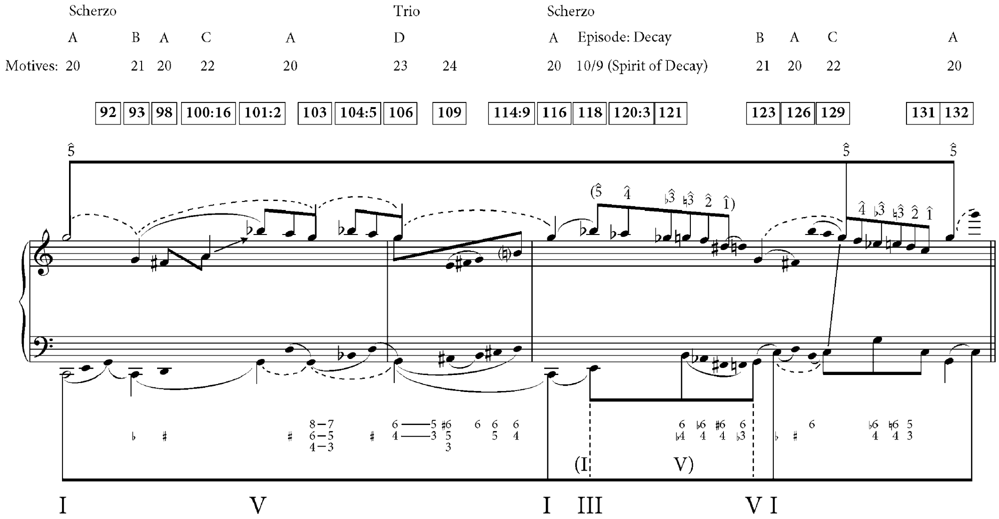
For our reading of the work as a whole, the crucial section is the climax that was originally planned for the coda of the first movement but moved to the Rondo at the full-score stage, and in voice-leading terms it is the first really remarkable passage in the movement. The first theme, motive 20, which is related to the Decay theme (see Ex. 6.5), picks up the *Kopfton* of the preceding movement and begins to establish the major mode of the Decay-key, C. The entry of motive 21 and the first rondo episode at fig. 93 switches to the minor mode, and the combination of the first will-o'-the-wispish return of the A section at fig. 98 and the C section beginning at fig. 100 move the music, via a secondary dominant, to V/C. This is prolonged thereafter until the end of the trio, section D, where it ends on a second inversion that denies the scherzo return at fig. 116 any strong gestural emphasis. Progress is then swift towards the (relatively) long episode which must figure prominently in any reading of the symphony.

Writing before the premiere, Ernest Newman thought that 'altogether this strange and powerful episode, occurring as it does in the middle of a Rondo seemingly given up to the pure joy of motion, will give us something to think

---

[75] Meikle's placing of the beginning of the trio, or the D section of the rondo, at fig. 107 instead of fig. 106 is puzzling (unless motivated by the mere fact of a change of key signature), since the material introduced at fig. 106 (motive 23) is definitely trio/D-section material. But Elgar does create a sense of continuity that cunningly dovetails the sections at fig. 106, and perhaps it is this that leads Meikle to his decision.

Ex. 6.11 Symphony no. 2, middleground graph of third movement


Scherzo
Trio
Scherzo
A B A C A D A Episode: Decay B A C A
Motives: 20 21 20 22 20 23 24 20 10/9 (Spirit of Decay) 21 20 22 20
92 93 98 100:16 101:2 103 104:5 106 109 114:9 116 118 120:3 121 123 126 129 131 132
5̂ 5̂ 5̂
(5̂ 4̂ ♭3̂ ♮3̂ 2̂ 1̂)
4̂ ♭3̂ ♮3̂ 2̂ 1̂
(I V)
I V I III V I

about when we hear it. We shall probably not understand it all at first.’[76] Among writers on the symphony there is certainly no consensus on the ‘meaning’ of this moment, or even (setting aside the larger hermeneutic questions) on the immediate effect it makes. One problem facing the interpreter is the sense that the episode seems almost spliced into the general scheme of the work – a feeling perhaps reinforced by the knowledge that its placement here was not part of Elgar’s original intention. There is also a strictly formal reason why the interruption seems peculiar, namely that for the rondo design to be (for all practical purposes) symmetrical, section B, and not this new episode, should return at fig. 117. Furthermore, on a rhetorical level, what actually occurs in the episode – a colossal mechanistic hammering and grinding, as close as Elgar comes to a topic of dystopia in his music – seems to have virtually no effect on what immediately follows it. There is no awed holding back of the tempo or augmentation of the intervals beginning the B section (motive 21) which might indicate the form’s sensitivity to its content. With the arrival of the sectional boundary the form trots out the theme of the B section as if all that was at stake in the movement was the chance to create a copybook rondo design.

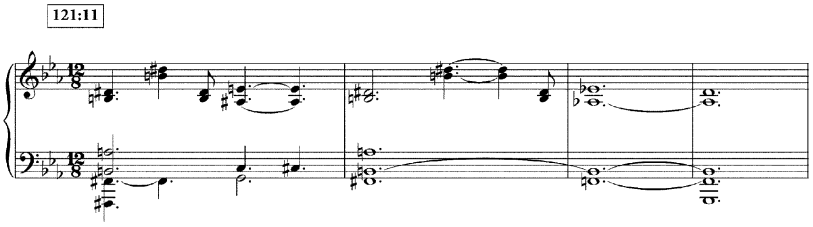
The only signal event at the formal join, easily missed, is an allusion to *Tristan*.[77] As shown in Ex. 6.12, Elgar prepares the C minor in which section

[76] Ernest Newman, ‘Elgar’s Second Symphony’, *MT*, 52 (1911), pp. 295–300, at 299.

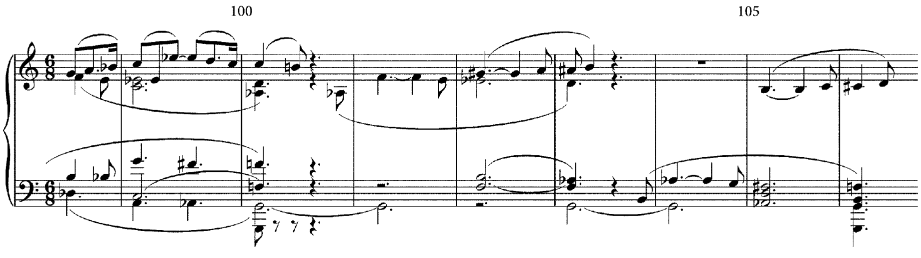
[77] I am grateful to Patrick McCreless for drawing my attention to this. See this volume, pp. 15–16.

Ex. 6.12 Symphony no. 2, allusion to *Tristan*: (a) Elgar Symphony no. 2, third movement; (b) Wagner, *Tristan* Prelude

(a) Elgar, Symphony No. 2, third movement



(b) Wagner, *Tristan* Prelude



B will return by alluding to the closing bars of the *Tristan* prelude, where V^7/c is tonicized in a notably similar fashion. Elgar's treatment of Wagner's pre-cadential motion here may be significant. Elgar gives the *Tristan* chord at fig. 122.1 (with E♭ on top) and resolves it a bar later to the same dominant minor ninth Wagner gives at b.100 and b.103. Wagner finally resolves his lingering A♭ to G to form V^7/c at b.106, but Elgar leaves his A♭ unresolved. Not only is the similarity in the spacing of the chords at the end of Ex. 6.12 (a) and (b) remarkable, but there is not much to differentiate their orchestration: clarinet, bass clarinet, bassoons, timpani, and low strings for Wagner; the same but with horns substituting for clarinets in Elgar. (The retention of the portentous drum roll is perhaps the clinching touch.) It is what follows in each case that marks these moments out. In the context of the opera, the Sailor's song very quickly moves to a strong cadence in E♭. If Elgar had followed Wagner, that would strongly affirm the key of Delight. But instead Elgar makes good on the potential resolution that Wagner decides against, by discharging his V^9/c directly into a return to C minor – the key of Decay. There is an inevitability about this progression and Elgar's rejection of E♭, even within an allusive context which seems to offer a precedent for a confirmation of Delight's associated key, that we could be foolish to disregard.

Critics have viewed this moment in different ways. Meikle baulks at it. 'After the "hammering" music … the momentum of B returns and the movement … inexplicably carries on as if nothing had happened, as if the intervening tumult had changed nothing.'[78] Tovey, by contrast, and with period charm, considers the move back into the B section extremely elegant.

> It is always an interesting problem in aesthetics how, when a lively movement has mounted on to a sublime pedestal, it can come off it again. Elgar's solution of this dangerous problem is Schumannesque and classical. Without any preaching or tub-thumping, the music resumes the first episode . . . quietly, as Schumann's Florestan, or any other nice young undergraduate, might relight his pipe after he had allowed it to go out during an outburst of enthusiasm.[79]

This reading is too tidy, not to say too picturesque. A balanced view lies somewhere between this and Meikle's imputation of amateurishness. The music between figs. 118 and 122:3 is a crisis, ear-splitting and palpitating with fever. Decay has taken on the timbre of Delight, and uses it to assault the listener. If the nice young undergraduate relights his pipe, he does so after airing the kind of view that drowns conversation in stricken silence. The burden of his comment is unclear as yet – as Newman says, we shall have to think about it – but the voice-leading of the crisis gives some indication of what has occurred.

The episode, which recalls the first-movement theme signifying the Spirit of *Decay* (motive 10), is rooted on E♭, the key of *Delight*. Indeed it very nearly composes-out a first-order contrapuntal closure there. While $\hat{5}$/E♭ descends to $\hat{1}$, the bass all but completes a I–V–I supporting motion (albeit with the wrong harmonies: the B♭ at fig. 121:7 supports chord I, not the cadential chord V), with a descending fifth progression cut short by the entry of G at fig. 122:2. So the most powerful structural motion yet in the *Delight*-key is composed-out by the *Decay*-theme. This is the second, and the most definitive, rupture of the association between keys and themes that has been so carefully upheld by the symphony as a whole, and it amounts to a fraying of one of the two principal threads of the work. The strong, and this time complete and properly cadential, first-order close in C, during the repeat of the C episode between figs. 129 and 131, suggests that it is the *Decay*-thread that is holding up better under the strain. Viewed retrospectively, both the instrumental strengthening of the Decay material – it has the most powerful orchestration of the entire symphony, making the work's opening seem limp-wristed by comparison – and Elgar's decision on how to deal structurally with the *Tristan* allusion seem to confirm that impression. (This resolution is, furthermore, an echo of the closing section of the Larghetto, reminding the listener of the strong Decay-key there.)

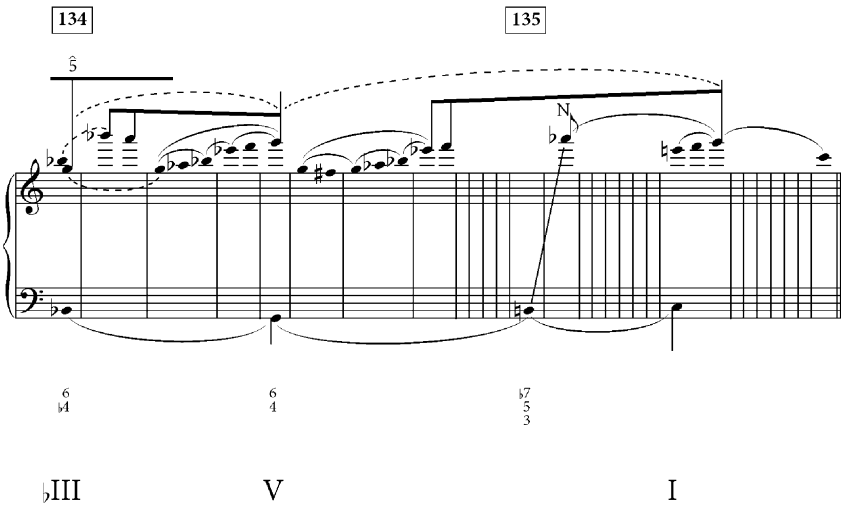
Although the movement ends once again with a static *Kopfton* (see Ex. 6.13) – the g^2 that has lingered since the second bar of the symphony – and a wailing chthonic plunge (fig. 135:2–9), both the key and latest thematic

---

[78] Meikle, 'The True Foundation', p. 54.

[79] Tovey, 'Elgar: Symphony in E flat', p. 119.

Ex. 6.13 Symphony no. 2, foreground sketch, fig. 134 to end of Rondo



indicator of the Spirit of Decay wrap up the penultimate movement with a convincing display of structural unity and coherence. There is no sense yet (if there ever will be) that the Decay-key and -theme(s) are losing sight of their ultimate structural objective, which is a definitive closure of the symphony in C. The friction caused by the interweaving of the work's two threads appears to result in wear and tear only on the Delight-thread, and by the final pages of the rondo, the clear aims, claims, and argumentative processes of the first movement's exposition themes and tonality (i.e. ultimate closure in E♭, and with the Delight-theme) seem to have disintegrated. The confusion – it might be too much to say schizophrenia – wrought in the Spirit of Delight by the closing stages of the slow movement has come to its logical conclusion: raggedly twitching uncertainty. That is not to say that the situation at the end of the Rondo is a hopeless one for the Spirit of Delight, but there are difficult questions to answer, and if conventional closure is to be achieved the finale is required not only to provide a new synthesis of the opposed forces but also to *reconstruct* the Delight-thread.

If Elgar had put this crisis into the place he originally intended, between figs. 62 and 64 at the end of the first movement, none of this would be an issue: the symphony would have three more movements in which Delight could transcend Decay. But he deliberately moved it to the closing pages of the penultimate movement, and so greatly expanded its reach. Although the Second Symphony's third movement ends in a very different way from that of the First Symphony, the position going into the finale is remarkably similar. The 'immured' tonality, ostensibly structurally inferior, finds its strength waxing while that of the 'immuring' tonality wanes. New themes and strong middleground hints towards ultimate closure confirm its ascent, and if Delight is to triumph, the finale has the work of an entire symphony to perform.

10. The plot sewn up

Commentators have generally remarked that the finale of the Second Symphony is one of Elgar's most straightforward and satisfying sonata-form designs,[80] and in many ways it is (see Fig. 6.5). The P-materials, motives 25 and 26, open the movement in E♭. The main theme is given first by bass instruments, and an initial ascent to the *Kopfton* begins only once the theme is transferred to higher strings at fig. 138 (see Ex. 6.14; the preceding rising third from g^1 is a covering progression formed by the chirruping violin and woodwind accompaniment to the bass theme). The two sets of secondary materials – here, unusually for Elgar, not separated by transitional material – lead the music on conventionally via chord IV (fig. 139, motive 27 – the so-called 'Hans himself' theme, which James Hepokoski considers the work's *telos*; see above) to chord V (fig. 142, motives 28 and 29).[81]

The main theme has motivic links with the Spirit of Decay (see Ex. 6.5), but few ears will spot this and the effect of the new tune is quite different. If the signal of Decay is being repeated here, it is in an unthreatening way. Nothing disturbs the late-summer, Sunday-afternoon tranquillity of the P-section, and while the S-materials are, viewed in terms of their voice-leading, probably more insistent than strong (both stick tenaciously to their principal melodic pitches: respectively a♭^{1} and f^1), the structure of the first formal section is satisfyingly conventional. The *Kopfton* $\hat{3}$ that has been in evidence in every movement of the symphony is in the lower octave as g^1, and for the first time since the first-movement exposition, it descends in orthodox manner to $\hat{2}$ for the interruption to the *Ursatz*. All seems well. The development section projects a local incident onto the middleground by

---

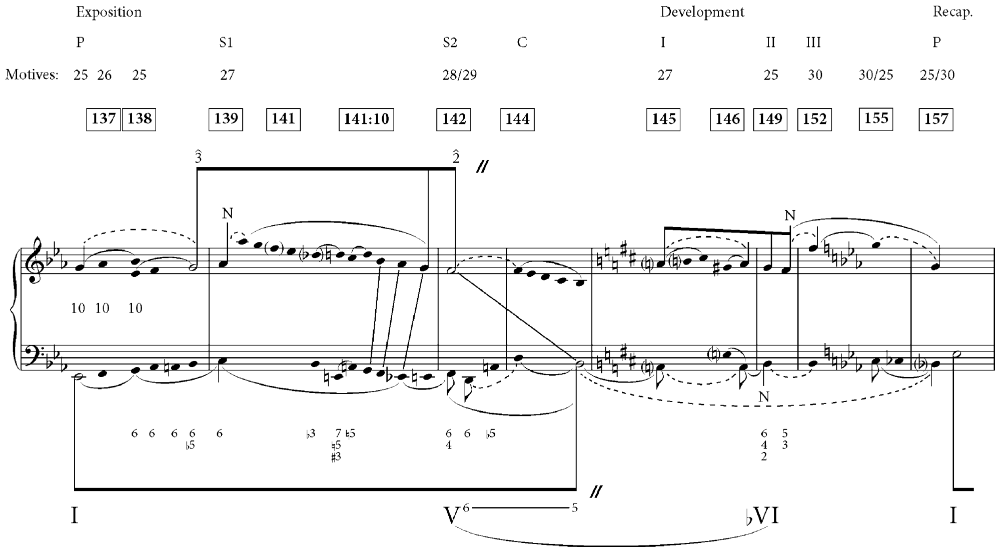
[80] See, for example, Christopher Mark, 'The Later Orchestral Music (1910–34), in *Companion*, pp. 154–70, at pp. 159–60; McVeagh, *Elgar*, p. 166; and Meikle, 'The True Foundation', pp. 55–6.

[81] The P- and S-materials break down into three subsections apiece. A small ternary design sandwiching motive 26 between two statements of motive 25 fills out the P-section (with the second and third subsections beginning at figs. 137 and 138 respectively). Section S1 has three smaller modules – 139:1–12; 140:1–9; and 140:10–141:11 – which compose a little I–V–I progression within the movement's subdominant, A♭. The subdivisions of S2 are 142:1–12, 143:1–6, and 143:7–14. The proportions are varied in the recapitulation, notably in the third part of S1, which increases the sense of anticipation leading up to the structurally crucial S2 there. In the recapitulation the materials are distributed in the following manner: P^1 (157:1–8), P^2 (158:1–10), P^3 (159:1–9); $S^{1.1}$ (160:1–11), $S^{1.2}$ (160:12–161:6), $S^{1.3}$ (161:7–162:10); and $S^{2.1}$ (163:1–8), $S^{2.2}$ (164:5–165:7), $S^{2.3}$ (165:8–166:4).

Exposition	P	–138:8
	S1	139:1–141:11
	S2	142:1–143:14
	C	144:1–8
Development	I	145:1–148:5
	II	149:1–151:8
	III	152:1–156:11
Recapitulation	P	157:1–159:9
	S1	160:1–162:10
	S2	163:1–166:4
	C	166:5–167:7
Coda	I	168:1–170:6
	II	170:7–171:10

Fig. 6.5 Symphony no. 2, formal outline of finale

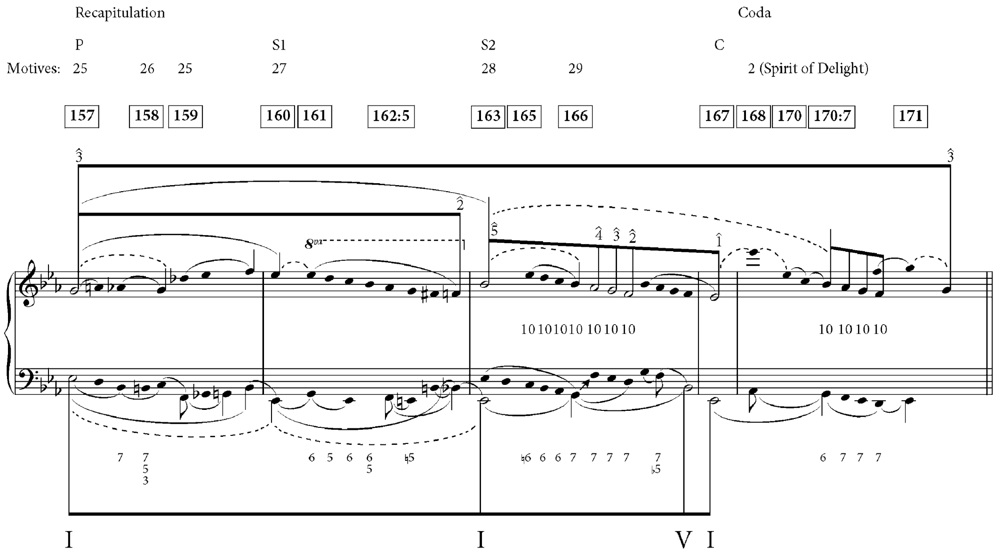
Ex. 6.14 Symphony no. 2, middleground graph of finale, to point of recapitulation


Exposition
Development
Recap.
P
S1
S2
C
I
II
III
P
Motives: 25 26 25
27
28/29
27
25
30
30/25
25/30
137
138
139
141
141:10
142
144
145
146
149
152
155
157
$\hat{3}$
$\hat{2}$
N
N
N
10 10 10
6 6 6 6 ♭5 6
♭3 7 ♮5 ♮5 ♯3
6 4 6 6 ♭5
6 4 2 5 3
I
V6—5
♭VI
I

making a structural feature of the five bars of B major which had added a gleam to S2 at fig. 142:8–12. Transferred to the minor mode, and with its own theme (motive 30, given in the third part of the development, at fig. 152), this ♭VI functions unproblematically as a chromatic neighbour to the dominant.

The recapitulation opens with more confidence than was shown at the equivalent point in the first movement. Because the main component of the P-material is a bass theme strongly affirming the pitch E♭, the symphony's

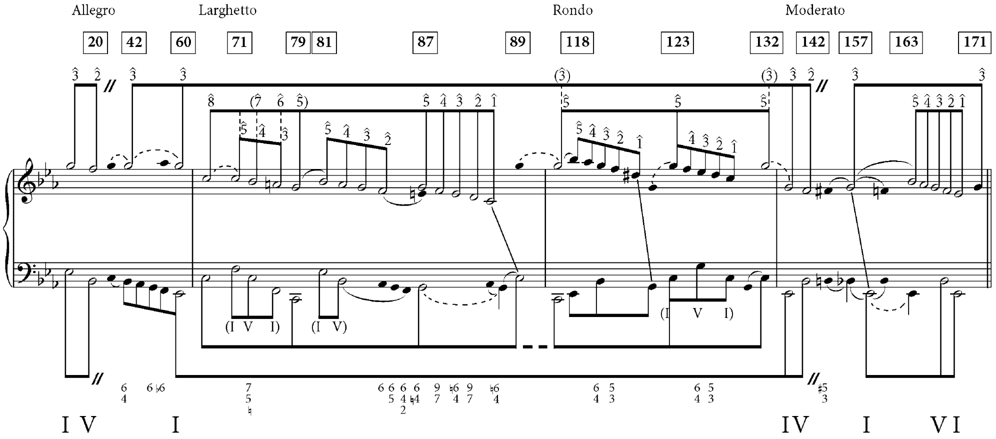
Ex. 6.15 Symphony no. 2, middleground graph of finale, recapitulation and coda



last recapitulation can begin with the tonic in root position, after only one bar of the dominant (Ex. 6.15). But the absence of any strong preparatory rhetoric in the bars preceding this assured point of recapitulation (compare the ulcerous eruption within the recapitulatory *hwæt*-gesture in the first movement) gives a sense – which confirms a feeling that has grown through the movement so far – that however secure all this music may be, it is not very vital or energetic. And given the symphony's conduct so far in interweaving its two threads, perhaps this material, this orthodox form, this potential conclusive composing-out of an orthodox descent from an orthodox $\hat{3}$-*Kopfton*, could never ultimately ring true, because it would be too simplistic an outcome, too hidebound to a tradition that at the time of composition had lost the historical justification for its ubiquity.

So it is that as the recapitulation unfolds, although E♭ is confirmed by strong middleground preparations for its rhetorical restatement at structural points (I–III–V–I closing into S1 at fig. 160; I–IV–V–I closing into S2 at fig. 163), Elgar introduces a mild but hermeneutically eloquent structural side-step. The melodically insistent materials of S2 arrive heftily in E♭ – the tonic of the movement and the symphony, the key of Delight, and with its original brassy timbre – but now their mighty insistence prolongs a new *Kopfton*, b♭^{1}, the starting point within E♭-Delight for a $\hat{5}$-line *Urlinie* of Decay. The symphony will compose-out an *Ursatz* at last, but not in unambiguous terms. A classic heroic resolution to $\frac{\hat{1}}{\mathrm{I}}$, with the *Urlinie*'s stepwise descent from the *Kopfton* given contrapuntal support by a I–V–I bass arpeggiation, is forgone, and an option that has presented itself twice in the course of the

Ex. 6.16 Symphony no. 2, middleground graph



symphony so far will serve as denouement in its stead: a $\hat{5}-\hat{1}$ descent in E♭ throughout section S2 (beginning fig. 163). Is what is stated thrice, as the Snark-hunting Bellman asserts, to be taken as true?[82] And what does it mean if it is?

The descent from B♭, which now appears for the third time at a crucial point in the symphony, has never had a function that can be assigned to its movement's broader goals, if those are defined in terms of Schenkerian *Ursätze*. Ex. 6.16 summarizes the middleground processes of the entire symphony, which few if any listeners could be expected to hear, but which demonstrate the complexity and originality of Elgar's handling of the symphonic tonal form, and clarify the workings of the interlace structure.[83]

Of the two partial closures of the *Ursatz* in the Larghetto, the first in F major has the secondary function of steering the *Urlinie* down from the movement's opening $\hat{8}$ to the $\hat{5}$ which will provide the starting point for the close at its end. But the $\hat{5}-\hat{1}$ descent in E♭ after fig. 81 serves no such broader structural purpose. Its initial B♭ is reached by a consonant skip from the newly established $\hat{5}$, and the miniature *Ursatz* follows its own counsel, weaving the middleground syntax of Decay into Delight. In strikingly similar fashion to the Rondo, while the first-order descent in C after fig. 123 is a direct prolongation of the movement's *Kopfton*, the first descent in E♭ is reached by another consonant skip and operates on a different structural plane from the rest of the movement.

---

[82] The reference is to Lewis Carroll's poem, *The Hunting of the Snark*.

[83] Bar lines show the breaks between movements, and the rehearsal figures that follow indicate the first important structural moment *after* each movement's opening. The conceptual continuity between the two middle-movement *Ursätze* is symbolized by the broken beam in the bass and the dotted slur between *Urlinien*.

This latter incident coincides with the definitive breaking of the connection between the themes, key, and *Urlinie* signifying Delight. It is the symphony's moment of truth – its *Augenblick*, indeed, to revert to Heidegger's terminology (as adapted for musical application). In hindsight one can see that that moment brings into focus the authentic future of the symphony, and its ownmost form, which it can choose to bring about. The symphony runs ahead to its own 'death', i.e. conclusion, and assesses in the light of that knowledge the options open to it. Just as I know that in the years left to me, and given my current situation, my becoming an internationally renowned cosmologist is not within the realm of practical politics, so also it becomes clear at this moment in the symphony's progress that the orthodox closure which the symphonic tradition seems to be urging in one ear is not actually possible. The climb from here is too steep. But what also becomes clear is that a *different* conclusion can be reached, and if not one so magisterial and awesome that it could reconcile the two threads and tonalities of the work, then at least one that is in its more modest way at least sturdy, believable – and above all, authentic. The symphony can, and in composing-out an authentic structural closure does, enact a $\hat{5}-\hat{1}$ *Urlinie* descent, terminating in a powerful, but not omnipotent, closure into E♭ at the end of the work.

This middleground motion is thoroughly implicated in the rupture of the link between keys and themes in the Delight-thread, and some will consider the qualified nature of the resolution it brings, and the reminder of the 'falseness' of the close provided by the *Kopfton* on which the work ends as it had begun, to be characteristic of the musically modern conception of closure. The fact that the closure in the Decay-key in the Larghetto was much stronger (because it more strictly conforms to traditional tonal unfolding, and composes out a complete $\hat{8}$-line) could diminish the accomplishments of the finale's affirmation of Delight still further. But to demand full Beethovenian satisfaction from a modernist work might seem naive, and on the other hand to imagine that one that diverges from the straight path is somehow effecting an easily pigeonholed critique of the tradition might seem too glib.[84] But to all reflective listeners, the symphony's decision to close in this manner, after the surprising option had been identified in its own situation (i.e. both within the tradition and as an evolving entity on its own), will demand assessment.

The urgent question for the hermeneuticist is whether the alternative ending compellingly resolves the tensions of the work. Is it significant that the secondary material of the finale wraps up the plot, and that the Spirit of Delight re-enters only within the structural and formal coda (fig. 168), once closure has been accomplished? Once back in the musical present it can't even reiterate the recent closure from $b\flat^{1}$: it stalls at $\hat{2}$ and ends ambiguously with a strong recall of the *Kopfton* G in harp, brass, and woodwind, but with unequivocal E♭s on strings. It is in some ways a difficult conclusion to assimilate. And the answer to the question of meaning in the work can only be answered by a consideration of the interweaving of two threads which led to this perplexing final situation.

---

[84] Daniel M. Grimley reflects sensitively on this issue in another work that ends in E♭ in 'Modernism and Closure: Nielsen's Fifth Symphony', *The Musical Quarterly*, 86 (2002), pp. 149–73, and Arnold Whittall's cautioning against unambiguous readings of modern-classical closure in Sibelius is also pertinent. See Whittall, 'The Later Symphonies', in Daniel M. Grimley (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Sibelius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 49–65.

11. Falling and hermeneutics: our *Beowulf*-poet of music

In the final third of *Beowulf*, the hero kills the dragon but in so doing is mortally wounded. The closing lines tell of the funeral for the 'lord far-famed and beloved', the construction of his memorial barrow, and the lament of his people, the Geats, at his passing. 'They said that of all the kings upon the earth / he was the man most gracious and fair-minded, / kindest to his people and keenest to win fame.'[85] But woven into this, a solitary figure standing by the funeral pyre has a baleful vision.

> A Geat woman too sang out in grief;
> with hair bound up, she unburdened herself
> of her worst fears, a wild litany
> of nightmare and lament: her nation invaded,
> enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles,
> slavery and abasement. Heaven swallowed the smoke.[86]

Beowulf's death offers more to his people than the opportunity to reflect on the great achievements of his life – among which the establishing of political security ranks high. The end of an age, symbolized by the death of a king, is jointly a cause of regret at its passing and fear for the future.

Elgar's Second Symphony is dedicated to the memory of a king who had ruled over the end of a period in which England had never seemed more comfortable, powerful, or secure. Whatever its private associations for Elgar, the most public meaning of the Larghetto's funereal overtones is grief at the passing of an age-defining monarch – and by extension this also means the long-reigning queen to whose rule Edward VII's was but the guinea stamp.[87] Twinned with political revolution in England (the expansion of the franchise, even to women, and the subordination of the House of Lords to the democratically elected House of Commons), it is natural that in this historical moment a conservatively minded composer should look back fondly on a recent past he had loved, and regard both the politically convulsive present and the coming future with vague but consuming unease. The gentle nostalgia of the bulk of the finale and the sunset glory of its Delight-infused coda have always suggested this most obvious of readings to listeners and commentators. However much they are nuanced, interpretations must boil down somehow to this general theme, or risk seeming irrelevant to experience of the music. Yet the symphony is more satisfying than that simple outline suggests, and that must be because there are deeper issues at work in it.

---

[85] *Beowulf*, trans. Seamus Heaney (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), ll. 3142 and 3180–2.

[86] *Beowulf*, trans. Heaney, ll. 3149–55.

[87] I have already noted that the fracturing of the join between Delight's theme and key comes as that king, the last link with the Victorian age, is laid to rest.

One of these is the nostalgic dimension. And to the extent that Elgar's understanding of it was wrapped up with regret at the loss of his youth and an ill-defined sense of the glittering splendour of that time of his life, the question of nostalgia brings with it Elgar's idiomatic imperialism. Altogether, the mid-nineteenth century he remembered, however rosily, was to his mind animated by a Spirit of Delight; and that allows for an immediate negative, and Beowulfian, reading of the valedictory closing pages.

Elgar's late-flowering imperialism was a romantic and mythic imperialism of heroes like St George – a character who features prominently, indeed crucially, in almost all his texted imperialist works.[88] If, for the purpose of argument, one stretches his almost certainly superficial interest in empire to the very limits of plausibility, one could say that Elgar might have felt that the imperial British, like the Geats in *Beowulf*, saw it as their mission to establish peace and a bourgeois material comfort on as broad a global scale as human beings could manage. In this case, the passing of a king, and the slow decay of the age he and his mother had represented, would not merely augur the end of a time of relative (but by no means untroubled) material happiness, but could actually signify the end of the idealistic dreams of imperial Europe, and perhaps even of the noblest hopes of humanity. But as we have seen, it is extremely unlikely, given the nature of his understanding of empire, that Elgar ever subscribed to those hopes in the first place.

Although war was felt to be inevitable, not everyone in 1911 could have foreseen that, broadly speaking, the attempted annihilation of a large part of the human race was to become the principal project of the twentieth century. Yet Elgar could not fail to see the utopianism of the leftist revolution sparking all round him, and that that could bring problems of its own. There is always a sense in political ideologies directed towards utopia that the struggle to bring material comfort and political security (in this case, to the workers) *guarantees* a bad outcome, for the simple reason that it deals in absolute goods which can never be achieved, and must end either in failure or – worse, and this would become a twentieth-century speciality – the bloody desperation of rulers who feel history slipping from their fingers and slaughter millions in an attempt to save face and delay the inevitable. Small things point this way, such as the scene in *Beowulf* when the hero readies himself for battle with the dragon (the ultimate threat to security and happiness). Even as he prepares to end the anguish of his people and for a moment bring on their finest hour, he knows that the victory will be Pyrrhic, his own end and the end of his back-broken people likewise assured. Tolkien is eloquent on this moment. 'Disaster is foreboded. Defeat is the theme. Triumph over the foes of man's precarious fortress is over, and we approach slowly and reluctantly the inevitable victory of death.'[89]

---

[88] *Caractacus* is the exception, but of course it has its own mythic hero.

Like the *Beowulf*-poet, in his Second Symphony Elgar recounts the glories of the (Victorian) age which had been laid waste by 'enemies on the rampage'[90] and mourns the rulers who had brought and to a certain extent sustained it. In a god-making tribute, Alice Stuart-Wortley said Elgar was 'our Shakespeare of music';[91] but in this context it is perhaps even more suggestive to say that he was our *Beowulf*-poet of music. Like the end of the first great poem in English, the closing pages of the Second Symphony and to an extent the whole last movement, are deeply pained, however much that pain is hidden behind a smile. But what causes this pain – the mere passing of the time of his youth and the romantic past of the Oriental Room at Severn House? Not quite. There is the meaning of the Rondo crisis to consider.

Derridians would call that moment an 'aporia', a perplexing hermeneutic problem the resolution of which is postponed till later. Adapting Heidegger, I call it the symphony's *Augenblick*, the (as it were existential) moment when its available options come into focus with immaculate clarity. We have observed that structurally its effect is to light up an alternative means of closing the form, but in hermeneutic terms it has something of the character of the Geat woman's wailing. To pride, nostalgia, and gracious farewell it adds the final Beowulfian element: sharp, searing terror. Elgar's narrative is told just as vividly through its interlace structure as *Beowulf*'s is; 'unravel the threads and the whole fabric falls apart'.[92] It might disambiguate an interpretation to forget that the ultimate closure in E♭ is fundamentally related to the Decay-thread, but to make that analytical choice means taking the risk of misconstruing the meaning of the symphony.

---

[89] Tolkien, '*Beowulf*: the Monsters and the Critics', p. 30.

[90] *Beowulf*, trans. Heaney, l. 3154.

[91] In a letter to Carice just after Elgar's death. *Windflower*, p. 339.

[92] Leyerle, 'The Interlace Structure of *Beowulf*', p. 145.

The finale denies the ambiguous outcome, an equal poise of hope and fear, which the ruminations of the first three movements seem to postulate as the only 'true' one – that is, a tentative compromise between the keys of Delight and Decay – and in the end we might not have been given enough information to be able to decide whether Elgar's Beowulf has killed the dragon. In Heidegger's hermeneutic terms we can say that the finale seems to simplify things down to what is comfortable, down to what 'they' consider right and proper. The material of the music proposes a form which the closing argument refuses to allow to come into being, and that is, potentially, its tragedy. But on closer inspection it becomes clear that Elgar does not actually give 'them' what 'they' want. Partly this is because there are two 'theys'.

First, the 'beautiful they' of the *belle époque*, the decadent bourgeoisie. To suggest that the (rose-tinted) Victorian element of the age would endure (passively) despite the powerful destructive urges at the heart of Western capitalism – of which Marconi-style financial irregularities and the tensions fomented by the antagonism between the 'Triple Entente' and 'Triple Alliance' were just two of the most prominent[93] – is one thing. To suggest that the defining feature of the age, its self-destructive energy, could be nullified (actively) by the 'beautiful' parts of the epoch is another, and more demanding claim. In musical terms this suppression of the inner enemy would result in a finale that functionally accommodates C, signifying Decay, into a firm closure in E♭, signifying the youthful, Victorian Spirit of Delight. But that would be an inauthentic conclusion to a symphony which has so far followed unorthodox structural processes, and Elgar rejects it while simultaneously appearing to bow under pressure from the other 'they' – the 'they' of social revolution and (because this was part of the age's Decay too) of war. This second 'they' would require firm closure in C and the concomitant rejection of beautiful, Victorian E♭.[94]

In mediating between these conflicting 'theys', Elgar provides a unique solution: an E♭ resolution without the subordination of C, and then only by employing a voice-leading structure that disobeys traditional rules and follows its own authentic course. Yet by seeming to give what the 'beautiful they' require of him, and at the same time demonstrating why it would be artistically unacceptable to follow it through, he takes apart and analyses – for short (but not in a strict Derridian sense), 'deconstructs' – the meaning of the demand.

In Elgar's deconstruction of it, the *belle époque* is seen as a period when existentially inauthentic gossipy statements (or the centralized form of these, i.e. propaganda) are taken to be reasoned argument; when prejudice and convention are elevated over engaged thought and change; and above all, an epoch that dreamt that no matter how hard the foundations were shaken, the *status* would always remain *quo ante*. It could have seemed that way until Archduke Franz Ferdinand was shot, three years after the Second Symphony's premiere, and the world ended for ever; but the end was almost certain long before then, as Eric Hobsbawm writes:

---

[93] See Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*, Chapter 13.

[94] The heroic associations of that key in works by Beethoven and Strauss, for instance, not to mention in Elgar's own *In the South*, might have weighed on the choice of key for Delight.

> What is peculiar about the long nineteenth century is that the titanic and revolutionary forces of this period which changed the world out of recognition were transported on a specific, and historically peculiar and fragile vehicle . . . [As the *belle époque* drew on] it became clear that the society and civilization created by and for the western bourgeoisie represented not the permanent form of the modern industrial world, but only one phase of its early development.[95]

The end approached with relentless steps, and Elgar's play with form does not muffle its tread. Indeed it is in his handling of form that Elgar reveals himself unequivocally in this symphony as a modernist.

Adorno regarded the use of sonata form in modernist music as a totalitarianizing tendency which straitjackets the individual impulse of a musical work.[96] Switching from socio-political to Heideggerian existential critique, one can say that the acceptance of closure – either bringing C within an E♭ ambit, or closing in C – is tantamount to 'falling' into the comforting inauthenticity of obedience to 'the they'. It entails giving in to accepted wisdom, whether conservative or revolutionary.

On one level, 'falling' into 'idle talk', into an uncritical closeness to the immediate concerns of the environment in which we find ourselves, is not necessarily bad. We are bound up to a point to accept that the general state of our world and its history are as 'they' (the media, the academy, the mouthpieces of government) tell us they are. We have to take many things on trust – for instance that King Edward VII actually existed – without digging up every old bone to reassure ourselves on every point. But on occasion, one hopes, the essay-writer or symphonic composer will emerge from his or her ivory tower and engage with the world, even just one small part of that world, and may on occasion even be brave enough resolutely to say something uncomfortable about it.

The problem with the state of 'fallenness' is that no such resolutely pursued discomfiture is a natural consequence of the mood. It is far more convenient and natural to 'flee in the face of death', as Heidegger puts it, or in this case to ignore the complex and unsettling outcome proposed by the first three movements of the Second Symphony. And to retreat from 'authentic' disclosure of the reality of, say, an intricate network of interrelationships such as the *belle époque*, into a comfortable but 'inauthentic' *Gerede* or (propaganda-fuelled) chatter about it, reinforces Dasein's tendency, in fallenness, to accept (for instance) the view of the zealots like Kipling as truth rather than (what it really is) mere assertion, and to assent to an argument without attempting to understand it. Elgar does not 'fall', but on the other hand the symphony's most revolutionary possibility is not chosen. The work ends authentically with a close in E♭ that is appropriate to its own materials, but not with an alternative authentic closure in C which would unambiguously kill Delight. Perhaps Elgar did not choose to end with Decay because to promote the destruction of the way of life he had pulled himself up to would have been a kind of suicide.

---

[95] Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*, p. 11.

[96] See, for instance, his dialectical reflections on sonata form as the 'totality that sanctions for its own glory the destruction of the individual' in Mahler's Sixth Symphony, in Adorno, *Mahler*, p. 97.

The Second Symphony's concluding movement could be read in at least two diametrically opposed ways. Its calm assurance will palliate those who are succoured by the past or the comfortable predictability of the status quo; but it will clang like the Geat woman's lament at Beowulf's funeral for those who are anxious in the face of the future and free society's fate in it. Tovey said that 'the symphony ends in solemn calm',[97] but failed to mention that one can be as calmly certain of a bad as of a good end. These calmly solemn closing pages could either be a reaffirmation of a promise whispered by the spirit of an age, or the dying puff of a dream that's banished by the cold, raised finger of the dawn.

---

[97] Tovey, 'Elgar: Symphony in E flat', p. 121.