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Elgar's Third Symphony



Synopsis

Elgar's Third Symphony has long been one of the great unknowns of twentieth-century music. Commissioned in 1932 by the BBC, it appeared fragmentary and disorganized when Elgar died in 1934. A few months before his death, he asked for his sketches to be destroyed, saying that 'No one must tinker with it'. Yet he continued to talk about the Symphony, even writing out passages that seem almost to be instructions for its completion. In 1935 his great friend, W. H. Reed, published many of the sketches in facsimile, allowing a tantalizing glimpse of the composer's final thoughts. After much deliberation Elgar's heirs decided to commission the composer Anthony Payne to make a full-length realization of the work, first performed to great acclaim in February 1998. Payne's account of his long involvement with the Symphony's sketches is totally absorbing. He explains the difficult decisions involved in filling the gaps that Elgar left, and the responsibility that he felt in 'completing' the last work of England's greatest composer.

Book Information

File Size: 14974 KB

Print Length: 128 pages

Publisher: Faber & Faber; Main edition (June 20, 2013)

Publication Date: June 20, 2013

Sold by: Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B00DTEMKQQ

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #2,892,335 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #106

in Books > Humor & Entertainment > Sheet Music & Scores > Composers > Elgar #871

in Books > Humor & Entertainment > Sheet Music & Scores > Forms & Genres > Symphonies

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Customer Reviews

When Edward Elgar died in 1934, he left behind 130 pages of sketches for his uncompleted Third

Symphony. In the 65 years since, musicologists have often disagreed about the musical value of the sketches. Did they show Elgar breaking new ground as a composer, or were they merely a reworking of old themes in ways that showed Elgar in decline? At the request of Elgar's heirs, British composer Anthony Payne has produced an "elaboration" of Elgar's final musical thoughts. This is not a "completion" of the work; only Elgar could have done that. It is a way of presenting Elgar's ideas in full orchestral dress, while also adding some developmental and transitional passages that were missing from the sketches. The resulting work, "Elgar/Payne Symphony No. 3," was a great success when it was premiered in the UK and released on CD early in 1998. The work received its US premiere in Philadelphia in November of 1998 and will be performed during 1999 in New York, Washington and Chicago. More than 60 other performances have been scheduled around the world. In this book, Payne describes how he fell in love with this music and worked with it over a period of years to create a finished work. This is essential reading for Elgarians, but it will also fascinate anyone who has ever wanted to look over a composer's shoulder and see how a symphonic composition is created.

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