

EDWARD ELGAR
(1857-1934)

Sea Pictures, Op. 37

Sea Slumber Song (Roden Noel, 1834-94)
In Haven (CA Elgar, 1848-1920)
Sabbath Morning at Sea (EB Browning, 1806-61)
Where Corals Lie (Richard Garnett, 1835-1906)
The Swimmer (Adam Lindsay Gordon, 1833-70)

With the exception of *In Haven*, these songs were composed in July 1899 while Elgar was at his beloved Herefordshire cottage Birchwood, which he rented so that he could work in the peaceful isolation of the countryside. In the previous month he had achieved his first major triumph in London, when Hans Richter had conducted the first performance of the *Enigma Variations*. Though contentment was not a mood with which Elgar was over-familiar, he must have been near to it at this time. *Sea Pictures* had been commissioned for a performance at the Norwich Festival and was first performed there on 5 October 1899, with Clara Butt as soloist and Elgar conducting. A new suite (*The Seasons*) by Edward German was performed at the same concert in addition to two works by Frederic Cowen and pieces by Meyerbeer and Wagner. Clara Butt was 27 and on the threshold of her remarkable career. 'She sang really well', Elgar wrote to AJ Jaeger, and he told Troyte Griffiths that she had appropriately 'dressed like a mermaid'. A description of Elgar conducting this concert is to be treasured - 'a hawk dreaming poetry in captivity'. The song-cycle was repeated in London two days later, and two of the songs (with piano accompaniment) were sung to Queen Victoria at Balmoral within a fortnight. Their popularity was thus assured, and the cycle was one of the few works on which Elgar considered he received a satisfactory financial return in those years. It has been associated with most of the leading British contraltos or mezzo-sopranos - Muriel Foster, Muriel Brunskill, Astra Desmond, Gladys Ripley, Kathleen Ferrier, Janet Baker, and Sarah Connolly.

Elgar, with his wide knowledge of literature, took immense care in choosing the texts for *Sea Pictures*. Whether they are great poetry is immaterial: one cannot now imagine them apart from the music. Roden Noel, son of the Earl of Gainsborough, published several books of verse and a life of Byron. Richard Garnett was for nearly 50 years on the staff of the British Museum, becoming Keeper of Printed Books. Adam Lindsay Gordon was born in the Azores but settled in Australia. He shot himself when disappointed over an unsuccessful claim to a family estate in Scotland. Mrs Browning and Alice Elgar scarcely need any introduction. Elgar was stimulated by the five poems in much the same way as he was by O'Shaughnessy's *The Music Makers*. Embedded in the orchestral texture are several deliberate allusions to some of his other works, and the enchanting theme of *Where Corals Lie* derives from a quadrille written for his asylum band at Powick twenty years earlier.

Sea Pictures has for too long been regarded as inferior Elgar. It is no accident that it stands between the *Variations* and *The Dream of Gerontius* in his list of works: listeners will recognise the delicacy of 'Dorabella' in *Where Corals Lie* and there is something of the 'I'll show 'em' defiance of 'E.D.U.' in the climax of the last song. Flexibility in setting what at first may seem intractable words is as skilled as it was to be in *The Dream of Gerontius*. Mahler, one of the few other contemporary composers of orchestral song-cycles, conducted *Sea Pictures* (excluding No. 5) in New York in 1910. We may be sure he recognised a twin soul when he encountered the imaginative beauty of the orchestration.

In *Sea Slumber Song* (*andantino*), the impression of a nocturnal seascape with the tide lapping over pebbles is poetically evoked by divided strings, harp glissandi and entrancing woodwind solos. *In Haven*, to Alice Elgar's words, is a lightly scored *allegretto*. It was the first of the songs to be composed - as 'Love Alone Shall Stay (Lute Song)' for voice and piano in 1897 (published in 1898). The 'Capri' of the subtitle is subtly suggested by the siciliano-like rhythm. Mrs Browning's religious ecstasy aboard ship brings a solemn mood: the singer's recitative-like opening turning into impassioned melody is a strong pointer to Gerontius's music. At the start of the fourth verse, the first song is quoted on the lower strings. The 'Nimrod'-like grandeur of *Sabbath Morning at Sea* is followed, as in the *Enigma Variations*, by lightness and grace. *Where Corals Lie* (*allegretto ma non troppo*) is to a deliciously lilting accompaniment. It has become the best-loved song of the five, perhaps because it gave Elgar scope to express passionate yearning for the unattainable. With half an eye on *The Flying Dutchman*, Elgar's *Swimmer*, (*allegro di molto*) plunges into a stormy sea and comes up with a splendid rolling theme as he breasts the waves. In the more relaxed central section, when the singer recalls 'heights and hollows of fern and feather', a quotation from *Where Corals Lie* is gently murmured by the oboe. Thereafter the music gathers force for the impressive peroration.

© Michael Kennedy 2006