

Sir Edward William Elgar



Edward Elgar was born on June 2, 1857, in Broadheath, near Worcester, where his father named William Elgar, was a music shop owner and a piano technician. Elgar was the fourth of six children. He was self-taught in all musical instruments, that were at his disposal in his father's shop, and he studied all the sheet music available in the shop taking piano and violin lessons. In 1889 Elgar married his student, Alice Roberts, daughter of the late General Sir Henry Roberts and they had one child. She married beneath herself in opposition to her relatives.

He rapidly acquired the fundamentals of theory and served as arranger with the Worcester Glee Club, becoming its conductor at the age of 22. At the same time, he also accepted a job at the County of Worcester Lunatic Asylum at Powick, where he was for several years in charge of the institution's concert band. Although he was not a proficient conductor, he went on to conduct the Worcestershire Philharmonic (1898-1904); in 1905 he accepted the position of Peyton Professor of Music at the University of Birmingham, and in 1911-1912 served as conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra.

Elgar composed and arranged 185 works including 43 for orchestra, 11 for band and small ensembles, 19 for solo piano and 1 short opera. His first real success was his Enigma Variations (1899) which he composed at the age of 42. The performance of "The Dream of Gerontius" (1900) at the Rhine Festival in Dusseldorf earned him highest praise from Richard Strauss. His most popular piece by far was The Coronation Ode "Land of Hope and Glory" came from his first "Pomp and Circumstance March" in D major (1901) which is used in almost all graduation ceremonies. Elgar said: "I've got a tune that will knock'em-knock'em flat!... a tune like that comes once in a lifetime..." This piece became extremely popular and was later used in more than 30 films. Elgar's success as a composer is extraordinary considering he had no formal training as a composer.

The infamous punk rock group, the Sex Pistols, recorded a cover of the song "Land of Hope and Glory", which uses music from "Pomp and Circumstance", but legal action prevented the release of the recording in England on Virgin records. In order to avoid the legal restrictions, the recording was released in France on "Virginia" records (with a synthesizer introduction and closure) and the artists were credited as "The Ex Pistols". Copies were then sold in England, since the recording was officially "imported". As well, Rob Dougan's song "Clubbed to Death", which was used in the film The Matrix (1999), takes its string introduction from Elgar's "Andante" from the Enigma Variations (Op. 36).

In July of 1904, Elgar was knighted by King Edward VII, however the death of his wife in 1920 took away much of Elgar's inspiration and will to write music. Elgar died of Cancer on February 23, 1934 at the age of 76 and was laid to rest beside his wife. Elgar is considered one of England's greatest composers.