

Preview

Heights Chamber Orchestra conductor's notes: Tertis's viola version of Elgar's *Cello Concerto*

by Anthony Addison
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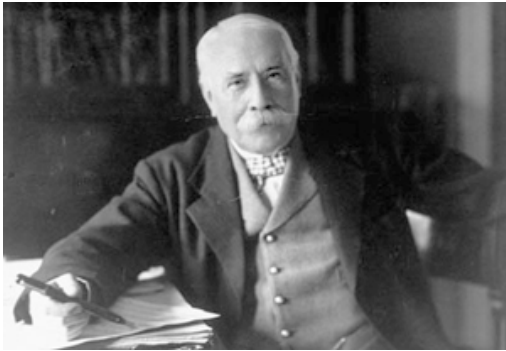
An old adage suggested that violists were merely violinists-in-decline. That was before Lionel Tertis! He was born in 1876 of musical parents who had come to England from Poland and Russia and, at three years old, he started playing the piano. At six he performed in public, but had to be locked in a room to make him practice, a procedure that has actually fostered many an international virtuoso. At thirteen, with the agreement of his parents, he left home to earn his living in

music playing in pickup groups at summer resorts, accompanying a violinist, and acting as music attendant at a lunatic asylum.

When finances permitted, he studied at Trinity College of Music, taking violin as his "second study," but concentrating on the piano and playing concertos with the school orchestra. As sometime happens, his violin teacher showed little interest in a second study pupil, and even told his father that he was "better fitted for the grocery trade." With such encouragement, Tertis decided he had to teach himself. Fate intervened when fellow students wanted to form a string quartet. Tertis volunteered to play viola, borrowed an instrument, loved the rich quality of its lowest string and thereafter turned the old adage upside down: a not very obviously gifted violinist becoming a world class violist.

But, until the viola attained respectability in Tertis's hands, composers were reluctant to write for the instrument. So while still a student Tertis played violin concertos on his viola, taking himself into regions rarely explored, and shocking the more conservative musicians of the day: "Violas were not expected to go much above 1st position!" To make a career, he played and arranged violin and cello music for viola, touring the many musical clubs in Great Britain, and switching to piano as an accompanist when required. As his fame as violist spread, it inspired composers like Arnold Bax, York Bowen, Gustav Holst, Gordon Jacob and Vaughan Williams to write for him. Ironically, when offered what was to be one of the finest viola concertos, Tertis turned it down saying that it did not appeal to him. So the premiere of William Walton's concerto was handed to the nearly twenty years younger composer and highly respected violist, Paul Hindemith.

One composer of the period who did *not* write a major piece for viola was Edward Elgar. In 1905 he had completed his monumental *Violin Concerto op. 61*, enlisting the help of W.H.Reed, long time concertmaster of the London Symphony Orchestra, in developing the solo part. Ultimately the concerto was dedicated to Fritz Kreisler, who premiered the work, but never recorded it. In 1932 the 16 year old Yehudi Menuhin, with Elgar conducting, recorded a performance that is still one of the best available.



The *Cello Concerto op. 85*, written in 1919, is one of Elgar's crowning post-WW I compositions, together with the *Violin Sonata op. 82*, the *String Quartet op. 83*, and the *Piano Quintet op. 84*. Very little is known about the development of the concerto, but the birth of its opening theme is well recorded. In March 1918, Elgar's persistent throat trouble resulted in his having his tonsils removed. He was in great pain for some time, but as he improved he asked for writing materials and sketched a wandering tune in E minor. Nothing

more was heard of it until it appeared in the first few measures of the *Cello Concerto* two years later.

As with the earlier concerto, Elgar enlisted the help of a great performer, Felix Salmond, in the matter of cello technique. Salmond premiered the work in 1919, but under truly miserable circumstances: Elgar and Albert Coates were to share the conducting of the program, but Coates, with typical arrogance, overran by more than an hour. Elgar was left with very limited rehearsal time, so the musicians were practically sight-reading at the performance, which suffered accordingly. When a recording was planned, Salmond was not available, so the honor went to Beatrice Harrison. The later recording by Jacqueline Du Pré, the young British cellist who died at 28 of multiple sclerosis, ranks highest in my books.

We do not know if Tertis ever asked Elgar for a viola concerto, but a friend gave Elgar a nudge when he wrote of a performance "I never heard anyone to approach him... His name is Lionel Tertis. It would be splendid if you wrote something for him to play." Elgar did not take up the challenge, but about ten years later Tertis, in some trepidation, started working on his arrangement of the *Cello Concerto*. In 1929 he approached Elgar and asked him to hear his version with piano accompaniment. Elgar was delighted and wrote his publisher: "it is admirably done and is fully effective on his instrument." He backed up his opinion by conducting the first public performance with Tertis on 21st March 1930 in London's Queen's Hall.

One might suppose that, when replacing the cello with a viola, the only adjustment in the solo part would be required when the melody went below the viola's range. But the viola is not a baby cello. Its string length from nut to bridge is rather less than it should be to achieve the equivalent intensity. To compensate, viola strings are relatively thicker and slower to respond, giving the C string characteristic warmth, but leaving the G and D strings no match for the intensity of the cello at the same pitches. So, not only when the melody goes out of range, but also when more intensity is required, Tertis shifts the viola up an octave. This puts the melody on the much more strident A string and takes the

player into the violin range which, because of the viola's size and its being held under the chin, puts a great strain on the player. At minimum a long arm is required to reach these stratospheric notes.

In trying to remedy the matter some modern luthiers have modified the shape of the instrument, and Jeffrey Irvine, who will solo in the work with Heights Chamber Orchestra on Sunday, February 17, plays such an instrument, made by Hiroshi Iizuka. Concerning the lower end of the spectrum, in the heartrending third movement of the concerto all but one note can be played at the original pitch, To accommodate that note (low B flat) Tertis himself used to tune his C string down to B flat for the whole movement, but his published arrangement allows for a less drastic choice: i.e. raising the whole phrase containing the low B flat to the higher octave. Finally, the ringing pizzicato chords of the cello being less effective on the viola, Tertis replaces them with bowed arpeggios.

Was Tertis' trepidation justified, was Elgar's approval rashly given? If the concerto were one that emphasized brilliance and virtuosity, a viola arrangement would be hard to imagine. But, with the contemplative nature of the work, the delicacy of the accompaniment and Tertis' art, we gladly welcome this sublime concerto to the repertoire of the viola.



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