

## THE UNKNOWN WALTON

by Dr David C. F. Wright

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In this centenary year of the birth of Sir William Walton, I have been asked to write about him. So much has been written and yet none of the books or articles about him are entirely satisfactory because they leave out essential details.

When both Michael Kennedy's and Lady Walton's respective books on Walton came out they had errors. To mention two will suffice. The musician Leslie Heward was confused with the actor Leslie Howard and it was said that five normal semiquavers, whether as notes or rests, were the value of one crotchet. Anyone who knows anything about music will baulk at such fundamental and appalling mistakes. I wrote a very gracious letter to Kennedy and his subsequent reply was most unfriendly and he said that I should write something about Walton to correct his mistakes.



I am very much aware that what I write will not please everyone but there is no point in merely reiterating facts. There was a William Walton that few knew. And, perhaps, these surprises should now be revealed. In all my writings I do not gloss over failures nor do I hide the true character of those about whom I write. I am concerned that the truth is known and if the truth offends people and attacks their heroes or favourite composers, I cannot retract the truth to accommodate peoples feelings and misconceptions.

A fascinating study is Walton's relationships with other composers.

He knew Britten. They were rivals. And they were very different men. I found Walton to be very pleasant and congenial. I never knew him make inappropriate direct remarks about a fellow composer. Yes, he flirted and loved all the women which is natural for a normal male. Walton could take criticism. Britten could not. In fact Britten was the nastiest person I have ever met. He was simply foul and much of his music is so sterile. I cannot see it lasting more than an hundred years except perhaps for Peter Grimes.

There are many wonderful stories about Walton and Britten, some of which I cannot put into print. Once Walton went into a music shop which was full of Britten scores and a large photograph of Britten. Walton, without hesitation, took the picture from the shop window in broad daylight and, laid it face down on a chair.

Walton's widow, Susana, tells a story about Walton complaining about yet another performance of a Bach Partita given by Yehudi Menuhin. But, although this may be true as a repetitive story, the original story is not about Bach. It was about a performance of Britten's Simple Symphony. Before it began Walton said out loud, "O God, not that damned awful rubbish!"

The other story is that it was said of Britten that even when farts someone will be there to record it!

Britten was younger than Walton, of course, who hated the way Britten manipulated people, as did every other decent person. Britten deliberately caused trouble for Walton, and very many others as I well know, and instead of being man enough to deal with smear campaigns against other composers himself, he would influence his followers to cause the trouble. As Walton said, "Ben loads the guns and gets others to fire them!"

Another thing that irritated Walton was Britten's exaggerated and unhealthy interest in female pursuits. He enthused about embroidery and tapestry in an excessive way. I was present when Britten said that he loved the music of Schubert not because of its worth but because Schubert was a regular frequenter of brothels but, added Britten, "He never buggered a boy!"

Such remarks distressed Walton. They also made me angry.

There was a time when Britten gave Walton a lift and asked Walton if he was interested in little boys. Walton was never one to be bellicose or start an argument, replied, perhaps injudiciously, "I am interested in little girls." He did

not mean that he had paedophile tendencies but it was a rebuff to Britten since Walton disapproved of Britten's pederasty and homosexuality.

When the Waltons visited Britten in Aldeburgh, Lady Walton asked Britten if Peter Pears lived in the same house. Britten replied in the affirmative and continued to give a guided tour of the house. Lady Susana noticing only one bed, a double bed, asked where Pears slept.

When Britten did not want to serve his country in World War Two, Walton spoke up for Britten. I think Walton was somewhat unwise in this. However, one would think that the younger composer would have appreciated this support but he did not. Only late in life did Walton fully realise that Britten was nothing but a draft-dodger and a coward.

Walton told us, "I do not like Elgar's music but at least he was proud to be British. I can think of one British composer who, with his boyfriend, are a disgrace to this great nation." There is no doubt to whom he was referring.

It is true that Britten asked Walton to write a work for Aldeburgh and the result was *The Bear*. It is also true that Walton wrote a work, *Improvisations on an Impromptu* of Britten but this was at a time when he had self doubts and Britten was in the ascendancy and, therefore, to compose a work allegedly inspired by a 'popular' composer might enhance Walton's own career. This was a sort of professionalism, an act of mutual respect. Britten's commission came first. Walton felt he had to respond with the *Improvisations*. The relationship between these two men was tricky and it was Britten who was fulsome. What was also despicable was that the royalties for the Walton piece, Britten insisted should go to him and Britten instructed his publishers, Boosey and Hawkes to do this.

Walton was very clear about two works of Britten that he absolutely detested. *Our Hunting Fathers* is a setting of words by another homosexual, W. H. Auden, and is said to relate man's relationship with animals whereas its concealed message is about bestiality. Willie rightly said that some homosexuals proceed to bestiality. But that aside, the music is simply awful and the voice part is unbelievably ugly as Sir Lennox Berkeley, and many others, remarked. It is one of the worse pieces ever written. The other work was the *Spring Symphony* which Walton gloriously lampoons in his *Troilus and Cressida*. Its suggestive part for boys chorus is frankly disgusting. Walton was not being offensive in lampooning this dreadful work. He had a taste for non-malicious mischief although it did not alter Walton's opinion of these and other Britten works.

It was not that Walton was jealous but that he was sickened that Britten was regarded as the god of music. Like Elgar, Britten inflated his reputation grotesquely. It was manufactured by his self aggrandisement. Both Britten and Elgar were deified and yet there were not Divine but very human and both showed the baser and worst qualities of humanity.

It follows on therefore to say that another really hateful man was Elgar whom Walton met after a performance of his own magnificent *Viola Concerto*. They met in the lavatory and Elgar complained that Walton's work mistreated the viola and for that, and other reasons, the work was not worth the paper it was written on. Walton used to tell us the story of Charles Villiers Stanford who wrote to Elgar to say that he was sitting in the smallest room in the house with a copy of the Elgar *Cello Concerto* before him but that it would soon be behind him. Stanford hated that concerto as did Walton and so do I. It literally makes me physically sick. Stanford also said that listening to Elgar was the most effective laxative which worked every time and in a matter of minutes. When asked in the lavatory to comment further on Walton's *Viola Concerto* Elgar was rude and insolent, as was his wont, and demanded to know the racing results.

The one thing that riled Walton was the stupid remark that people made that he was Elgar's successor. The only times I saw Willie angry was when this comment was made to him. "Whoever first made that comment should have been shot five minutes before he made it.....and so should everyone who repeats it or believes it," Walton would snap.

On another occasion, he added, "Who wants to write music that sounds even remotely like Elgar?" In this connection he regretted composing *Orb and Sceptre*. He actually told us so.

Who indeed?

Walton often told us that the greatest composer of the twentieth century was Shostakovich and at the other end of the spectrum was Elgar.

Sir William did not like pompous or arrogant people and this explains his understandable deprecation of both Elgar and Britten. But it may not always have been so. There is a passage in *Scapino* which more than hints at a passage in Elgar's sickly *Introduction and Allegro* and in the woodwind figures towards the end of the slow movement of Walton's

First Symphony there is a similarity between that and the slow movement of Elgar's Symphony no. 1. The opening of Walton's Belshazzars Feast with its theme on the cellos and double basses recalls a main theme from Elgar's Violin Concerto. Even to the early 1960s Walton had some little time for Elgar but this was based on his earlier thoughts about him not his later enlightened and informed views.

Clearly Walton learned the error of his ways and in works since the Symphony no. 1 he has rectified this fault. His later comments show his mature and definite views.

I become quite incensed when people praise Elgar's Dream of Gerontius as a great choral piece and some go further to dismiss Walton's Belshazzar's Feast as inferior. The Elgar is often slow and tedious and the musical content is poor whereas the Walton is riveting music. There is no comparison. Why do people lie?

By contrast there were two or three composers who were lifelong friends of Walton not only because they were great composers but fundamentally good people. When Lionel Tertis turned down the premiere of the Viola Concerto, Edward Clark of the BBC sent the concerto to Paul Hindemith and the two musicians met in Salzburg in 1923. Hindemith said he would gladly play the concerto because he liked it. In fact there are some bars of the Hindemith concerto in the Walton. When the rumblings of war pervaded Germany in 1939 Hindemith was disliked because of his one British connection, the Walton Viola Concerto. But, unlike Britten, Hindemith was loyal, not pusillanimous and dastardly.

Walton wrote Variations on a theme of Hindemith which was premiered under the composer in 1963. He received a very kind and gracious from Hindemith who loved the piece. Sadly Hindemith died later that year. I remember Willie saying that Hindemith was one of the greatest and most versatile composers of all time. That is true.

Another friend was Hans Werner Henze, a colourful and fascinating character whom Walton first met in 1953. He had heard Walton's Symphony no. 1 and was profoundly moved. That is not surprising for, historically, it was the only British symphony, prior to World War Two, that made any impression. It is amazing to think that Henze enlisted in the Nazi army when he was only sixteen. Walton invited Henze to the premiere of Troilus and Cressida but the authorities would not let this political threat into the country! The Waltons had gone to the premiere of Henze's Elegy for Young Lovers in 1961 (a splendid opera) where Willie lost his rag when a German official refused to serve them having recognising the English accent! Hans introduced Willie to German beer and Walton introduced his friend to certain wines.

It is a dreadful oversight or a deliberate unpleasant ploy that all the books on Walton omit one of the most vital facts of his musical career. He was self-taught it is always said. He did not study at a music college or with a famous teacher as these books will tell you. But that simply is not true. From 1945 until he went to live on the island of Ischia he studied on a regular basis with Humphrey Searle.

Humphrey being the painfully modest man that he was never spoke of this. But it was well known. Many artists would meet in The George in Great Portland Street and talk. This pub was affectionately known as The Gluepot. Such people as Thomas Empson, Louis MacNeice, Dylan Thomas, Elisabeth Lutyens, Constant Lambert, Alan Rawsthorne would be there as would Humphrey and, sometimes, Walton. Willie was also a member of the IMA, the International Musicians Association, a club in South Audsley Street. My friend the composer, John Veale, recalls an occasion when in The Gluepot, Searle's first wife, Lesley, said that she and her husband had to leave as Humphrey was expecting a pupil. John asked who and Lesley replied quietly and discreetly that it was Walton. Denis ApIvor also confirmed this and, in later life, Walton did as well. I have a letter from him that says so.

Why does Michael Kennedy omit these essential facts from his book on Walton?

With Searle, Walton corrected the faults in his earlier music for his current and future scores. Whatever else one thinks of the Symphony no. 1 it is overwhelming powerful and somewhat exhausting. It is sometimes thick and turgid as are Elgar's symphonies, although Walton's orchestration is vastly better, but in Walton's greatly superior Symphony no. 2 there is a clarity and spacious texture that can only be admired. This can also be said of the Johansberg Festival Overture. In fact his works since the last war are of a far better texture and now has a technical assurance. The recklessness has gone as are the hints at Elgar's nauseating style. Now his work had a maturity and real quality, the music of a professional

Willie told us that he owed more to Humphrey than any one else in the musical realm. He wrote to me as follows:  
'Humphrey was the focal point of music in London. All important musical events seemed to involve him and yet

he was never in the limelight. He did a million times more for others than he ever did for himself. He understood music to a degree unequalled among composers and musicians alike. He was not only a walking encyclopedia but his judgements were always right. I could have studied with anyone but only Humphrey would do. He was a brilliant teacher. You could never ask him a question to which he did not know the answer. If I had gone to anyone else they would have broadcast it far and wide to suit their own advancement. Not so, Humphrey. He said that it was not in my interests to say that I was having music lessons. I tried in my Violin Sonata to write serial music to emulate his genius but it did not work.'

This was a great accolade from Walton, particularly since he was very cagey when commenting about other composers. He did once say that he liked Rawsthorne's music but had reservations about the music of Rubbra. It is interesting to note that Rawsthorne once told the Irish composer, Gerard Victory, to rewrite a piece as parts of it sounded so bad since it sounded like Elgar!

Walton was very discerning. He had a gift as a talent spotter. Sir Hugh Allen, who was tragically killed on a wet night in Oxford in 1946, being run down by a motor cyclist, sent a score of John Veale to Walton while he was living with Lady Alice Wimborne at Ashby St Ledgers near Rugby. Walton took a great interest in this and invited John to visit him. John was in the Army but on his next leave, sometime during 1943, visited Walton who was very kind and helpful. In fact Walton used his influence to mount a read through of John's proposed Symphony no. 1 with the BBC Symphony Orchestra under the legendary Sir Adrian Boult in 1947. A work by Geoffrey Bush had a similar run through at the same time. Boult liked Veale's piece.

John met Walton several times after that at the IMA.

Walton was also kind to performers even to those who played his work badly. He felt that to have it played was better than have it ignored. A concert programme or a recital advertising one of his pieces to be played was just that.... advertising and publicity. He was not the best of conductors of his own work and he was never a man who wanted to dress for the occasion. I can see him now at a rehearsal conducting and his trousers going up and down on his braces and the tops of his underpants coming into view. He was very gentle, almost embarrassingly modest. He was always gracious. He would thank the orchestra and the soloist and he was sincere.

Peter Katin made one of the first recordings of the Sinfonia Concertante, and it was with with Walton conducting, and Peter told me what a splendid man he was to work with. The piano part is not a concerto part but an obbligato one. Walton, like Elgar, could not write for the piano at all. I do know that Peter made some helpful suggestions and Walton, never an arrogant man, accepted them willingly and in good grace. This recording is still the best available.

One could always tell if Willie approved of a performance. If he did, he would wait about ten seconds to savour the moment and then applaud and smile. I have picked up this habit from him. He adored Katin's performance.

I think it was for his 80th birthday that Kyung-Wha Chung played his Violin Concerto in London. Willie had heard good performances of this piece many times before. He thrilled at Ida Haendel's playing of it. But, on this occasion in the Royal Festival Hall the tears flowed quietly from his eyes. The performance ended, he sat quietly and then embraced this magnificent soloist. Afterwards he said that he had never had such a marvellous birthday present. He was transported to another world, a better world and he did not expect to hear it played again so well.

The other performer he admired was the cellist, Gregor Piatigorsky who was the dedicatee and first performer of his Cello Concerto of 1957. All the hype about the Elgar Concerto has only served to overshadow Walton's work which is a far better work. I will admit that it loses its way a little in the finale but all the weaknesses of the Elgar are missing from the Walton. The later concerto is better scored, Humphrey's influence is seen here, it has more rhythmic contrast, its lines are clearer, there is no turgid orchestration or sudden bangs and surges of nauseating pomposity.

In the interests of fairness, I should say that there is a difference between incompetence in orchestration and badly-conceived orchestration. In Elgar's case it may not be true for me to say that he was incompetent and it would be true to say that his orchestration is aesthetically poor and badly conceived. A parallel concept is that an author could write a very good novel but in bad English or vice versa. The effects Elgar makes are what he wants and he knows how to achieve them but they can be very ugly, pompous and turgid and, therefore, unnatural, artificial, insincere and contrived.

Piatigorsky loved the Walton piece. Janos Starker told Ngoc and I it was the best British cello concerto although he did add that the Finzi was also a good piece. It never ceases to amaze me that people prefer the Elgar to the Walton when musically and craftsmanship-wise, the Walton is vastly better. It is the top of the premiership whereas, to the most

discerning musicians, the Elgar languishes in the relegation zone of the third division from which it will not escape.

But the same comparison can be made of their respective violin concertos. Willie loved the second subject in the first movement of the Elgar. "It was the only piece of Elgar that could bring a tear to my eye," he said. The finale of the Elgar, albeit it marked *allegro*, is predominantly a dreary slow movement. The Walton has a better structure and is clearly better written for the instrument and the orchestra. It is a very attractive, sunny work. It has substance and logic and, as someone said, "It shines." I know many concert violinists who have said that they would rather play the Walton than the Elgar.

Sir William's remarks were usually sparse and very guarded. He would say kind things when, in his heart, he would have preferred to say something else. It was reported in *The Gramophone* that Walton

liked Bernard Haitink's performance of his *Symphony no 1*. Willie was being polite. He was glad that such a distinguished figure had recorded it and that was uppermost in his mind. But he hated the performance and, quite frankly, it is awful. About eight minutes are added to this account and the spirit of the music is completely misunderstood. The performance by Simon Rattle is also a travesty. He caricatures all the *sforzandos* painfully and there are so many faults and flaws that it would take many paragraphs to list them.

Composers are at the mercy of performers and conductors but Willie was reserved and circumspect.

His judgement in his early career was often suspect, however. His strange friendship with Britten was to maintain a stability in the musical world but in his early music he made some errors of judgement. The *Viola Concerto* is considered by some to be his masterpiece. I tend to that view. It is now almost always played in the revised version where the orchestral forces are reduced. In the original the woodwind is triple but in the revision it is double and there is no tuba. The revision calls for a harp which is out of place in this work. I can understand Walton's ideas. The viola is not an instrument with the strongest sound and can easily be swamped but the revised version loses something of the original

In a BBC 2 series *Masterworks* which dealt with *Belshazzar's Feast*, the composer Michael Berkeley, for whom I have a lot of genuine respect as I did for his father, said that as Walton came from the north he knew all about brass bands and includes two brass bands in *Belshazzar's Feast*.

A brass band usually consisted of cornets, flugelhorns, saxhorns, euphoniums and bombardons (as well as other instruments) but none of these are in the Walton piece. The brass 'section' of an orchestra is horns, trumpets, trombones and tuba but that is not a brass band!

In the score Walton does mention two brass bands in the sense that a band is a collection of instruments but this is very misleading. The orchestra has trumpets horns, trombones and a tuba and on each side of the stage there are the two brass bands each of three trumpets, two tenor trombones, one bass trombone and a tuba. But they are not brass bands!

Was this Walton being mischievous? For that was certainly was in character.

He was once asked a question to which his reply was, "I don't think Bernstein's *Mass* is as bad as everyone says it is. It's almost as good as Britten's *War Requiem*...." To those who did not know Walton that statement suggests that both works are good but that the Britten is better. Not at all. It was Walton saying that both works were poor and they were, therefore, as good as each other. I do know that he did not like either piece and although I think he is unfair about the Bernstein piece his distaste for the Britten is understandable.

In an article in *The Guardian* of 25 January 2002, Edward Greenfield talks about Walton's devotion to Elgar. As already said, in his early days Walton had some respect for Elgar but after about 1960 his opinion changed and he, without the inexperience of youth, found Elgar's works very tedious and poorly constructed. Greenfield also says that Walton was jealous of Britten. That remark is also unfair. He disliked the insincerity in Britten and the fact that Britten used other composers' material, and sometimes extensively, and passed it off as his own. His *Violin Concerto* is a case in point.... the best bits are by Prokofiev, Shostakovich and Constant Lambert. Walton borrows other composers' ideas from time to time but, unlike Britten, he openly said so. And for Greenfield to say that Walton was gently malicious is grossly unfair. It was merely mischief. Nothing more.

There is a book out about Elgar's friendship with my great uncle, Sir Ivor Atkins, but they were not friends. The correspondence in the book leaves out some of the most revealing exchanges. Sir Ivor found Elgar to be an arrogant snob, a conceited and thoroughly unpleasant man and whose music was stodgy and showing evidence that he had had

no real musical training. And that is true. Walton came to realise that.

But Walton did not find composing easy. He often struggled to get the first idea hence his use of other material and the repetition of some of his own. The last movement of the Viola Concerto is similar thematically with the finale of the Symphony no.1 The first movement of the Symphony no. 2 is very closely linked with the Partita and the String Quartet has a similar theme as in the Viola Concerto There is a striking resemblance between the respective second movements of the Viola Concerto and the Symphony no. 1. In the symphony what Walton does is psychologically revealing. Here it is coarse and angry whereas in the Viola Concerto it is subtle.

Walton's music will last longer than both the music of Britten and Elgar. In the last analysis it is incontrovertibly far better. And it has an essential quality...class!

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