

“I WILL DIE A MAN IF NOT A MUSICIAN”: ELGAR, BRAHMS, AND THE MASCULINE IDEAL

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Abstract

Edward Elgar’s image as the quintessential Victorian gentleman was carefully constructed. Throughout his life, profound anxieties concerning his class, religion, and personality led Elgar to curate an exaggerated self-presentation based on a specific set of masculine values. These values, which involved traits of emotional restraint, reticence, and nobility, were also attributed to Johannes Brahms, who, like Elgar, had often been received in gendered terms. Elgar’s compositional relationship with Brahms’s music—as well as his personal admiration for the German composer—suggests that he looked to Brahms specifically as a model in crafting his own identity as a “gentleman composer.” By following Brahms’s example as a “manly” composer defined by seriousness and traditional masculine values, Elgar was able to bolster his own desired image and position himself within the masculine musical tradition that Brahms represented.

Keywords

Edward Elgar — Johannes Brahms — Masculinity — Victorian England — Symphonic Repertoire

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Introduction

In 1876, Johannes Brahms was invited to England to conduct some of his own music and receive an honorary doctorate from the University of Cambridge. He reportedly replied: “You have my music, why do you want me?”¹ Although he never set foot in the British Isles, Brahms’s reputation there was substantial; after his death in 1897, Hubert Parry wrote the orchestral work *Elegy for Brahms*, and *The Times* and *Daily News* reported that Brahms was more popular in England than anywhere else, including Germany.² Parry was one of his greatest champions in England, along with Charles Villiers Stanford, both of whom were personally acquainted with Brahms.³ Studies of Brahms and England invariably focus on these two, given their significant roles in introducing Brahms’s music to English audiences (Stanford was

¹ Ingrid Fuchs, “Das Brahmsbild des ausgehenden 19. Jahrhunderts im Ausland am Beispiel ausgewählter Nachrufe,” in *Internationaler Brahms-Kongress, Gmunden 1997: Kongreßbericht*, ed. Ingrid Fuchs (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 2001), 164.

² Fuchs, “Das Brahmsbild des ausgehenden 19. Jahrhunderts,” 164.

³ Malcolm MacDonald, *Brahms* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1990), 405.

the one who had invited Brahms to perform in England in the first place).⁴ Yet much less attention has been given to Edward Elgar. Although his music may not be as conspicuously Brahmsian as some of his contemporaries, Elgar nonetheless drew a great deal of inspiration from Brahms, both as a composer and as a man.

Some scholars have noted Elgar's musical indebtedness to the German composer (Hans Keller refers to him as "Elgar's overpowering father figure"), but none have examined the role that Elgar's obsession with masculinity played in his perception of Brahms.⁵ Due to a number of deep-seated anxieties about his own manliness and class, Elgar endeavored throughout his life to present himself as a noble and dignified gentleman. These fixations exhibited themselves in his dress, behavior, and compositional practice. Brahms's reputation as a serious composer and icon of bourgeois masculinity likely resonated with Elgar on multiple levels and provided a model of compositional manliness that he could follow. By emulating the qualities of masculine restraint that he perceived in Brahms and his music, Elgar was able to bolster his own image as a "gentleman composer" and position himself within the manly musical tradition that Brahms represented.

Masculinist Reception of Brahms

As with other aspects of German culture, the German musical ideal of the nineteenth century was heavily gendered. George Mosse has demonstrated that the *Bildung* concept—which was central to German efforts of cultural development—was really a goal of "true manhood," rather than a gender-ambiguous ideal.⁶ Contemporary conceptions of German manhood typically involved strong resolve, self-control, and moderation in all aspects of life, which were upheld as key masculine virtues by both German nationalists and the church establishment alike.⁷ In music, these virtues came to be associated with the life and compositions of Ludwig van Beethoven. Beethoven was a paragon of German cultural and masculine perfection, serving as a manly nationalist model that intimidatingly loomed over composers like Brahms. Beethoven's music was thought to embody masculinity through its grandeur, strength, and "heroic narrative," and after his death large-scale works (especially symphonies) became a means to assert one's position in the masculine German musical heritage.⁸

⁴ See, for example, Edward Luke Anderton Woodhouse, "The Music of Johannes Brahms in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century England and an Assessment of His Reception and Influence on the Chamber and Orchestral Works of Charles Hubert Hastings Parry and Charles Villiers Stanford" (PhD diss., Durham University, 2012); Michael Musgrave, "Brahms and England," in *Brahms 2: Biographical, Documentary and Analytical Studies*, ed. Michael Musgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 1–20; Katy Hamilton, "England," in *Brahms in Context*, ed. Natasha Loges and Katy Hamilton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 316–23; and Robert Pascall, "Frühe Brahms-Rezeption in England," in *Internationaler Brahms-Kongress, Gmunden 1997: Kongressbericht*, ed. Ingrid Fuchs (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 2001), 293–342.

⁵ Hans Keller, "Elgar the Progressive," in *Hans Keller: Essays on Music*, ed. Christopher Wintle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 66.

⁶ George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 8.

⁷ Mosse, *The Image of Man*, 48–53. For more on the connections between German nationalism and masculinity, see George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1985).

⁸ Marcia J. Citron, "Gendered Reception of Brahms: Masculinity, Nationalism and Musical Politics," in *Masculinity and Western Musical Practice*, ed. Ian Biddle and Kirsten Gibson (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2009), 147–48; Sanna Pederson, "Beethoven and Masculinity," in *Beethoven*, ed. Michael Spitzer (New York: Routledge, 2016), 484–86.

Moreover, Marcia Citron points to the dichotomy of lyricism vs. musical “struggle” as a proxy for femininity and masculinity in contemporary musical thought. She notes that composers after Beethoven were marked as unmanly if they stressed melody or lyricism too much; those like Frederic Chopin or Franz Schubert were attacked as being feminine, in contrast to the manliness of Beethoven.⁹ There was a pervasive idea that lyricism—like other feminine temptations—was an impulse that had to be restrained through discipline and self-control, and that an overemphasis on melody without sufficient musical conflict (the “heroic narrative” of Beethoven) thus indicated feminine weakness. Sanna Pederson points out that even well into the twentieth century musicologists used Beethoven as a masculine standard against which other composers could be compared, often referring to the generation after Beethoven as “too neurotic, weak, immature, and feminine to write successful symphonies.”¹⁰ In his effort to pick up the mantle left by Beethoven, Brahms felt pressured to embody a certain type of masculine ideal characterized by seriousness and restraint (in both personality and music) in order to validate his authenticity as a German symphonic composer. Citron further speculates that it might not be a coincidence that Brahms wrote all of his symphonies after German unification:

Do [Brahms’s symphonies] represent the “perfected” masculinist trajectory of nationalism and a triumph over the “feminine” symphonies of Romantic predecessors? Perhaps Hanslick’s comment that the First Symphony “is a possession of which the nation may be proud” is meant to show that the work supplants the earlier, feminine attempts at the symphony—by Mendelssohn, Schumann and others—and their potential status as representatives of German-ness.¹¹

Both positive and negative reception of Brahms utilized gendered language: supporters generally described him in masculine-coded terms whereas detractors feminized him and his music. Eduard Hanslick, one of Brahms’s foremost champions, referred to the “manly and noble seriousness” of the First Symphony, described the Second as “at once manly and gentle, animated alternately by pleased good humor and reflective seriousness,” and noted in the Fourth a “manly strength, unbending consistency” and “an earnestness bordering on acerbity.”¹² Both within and outside of the German-speaking world, those who saw Brahms as Beethoven’s direct descendant (Hans von Bülow’s third “B”) frequently attributed masculine qualities to him, particularly in regard to his large-scale works. Writing in 1912, the American critic James Huneker insisted that Brahms “has his feminine side—his songs—but in the main he is a muscular male, not given to over-expansion and not always companionable.”¹³ Nevertheless, however, such masculinist praise was not completely restricted to large-scale works, as Hanslick himself

⁹ Citron, “Gendered Reception of Brahms,” 147–48.

¹⁰ Sanna Pederson, “On the Task of the Music Historian: The Myth of the Symphony after Beethoven,” *Repercussions* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 8.

¹¹ Citron, “Gendered Reception of Brahms,” 150–51. The Eduard Hanslick quote that Citron references is from Eduard Hanslick, *Music Criticisms, 1846-99*, ed. and trans. Henry Pleasants (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1950), 128. Daniel Beller-McKenna also considers the potential significance of German unification on Brahms’s shift towards larger-scale, religious-nationalist works in Daniel Beller-McKenna, *Brahms and the German Spirit* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), 10.

¹² Hanslick, *Music Criticisms, 1846-99*, 127, 158, 244.

¹³ James Huneker, *Mezzotints in Modern Music: Brahms, Tschaiikowsky, Chopin, Richard Strauss, Liszt and Wagner*, 4th ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1912), 21–22. Huneker’s quotation also demonstrates how these types of descriptions persisted (and in some cases even intensified) following Brahms’s death.

also described the Op. 99 Cello Sonata and Op. 100 Violin Sonata as “children of the same manfully strong, healthy spirit that, nicely mixed with intimate, not too tender-hearted feelings, characterizes and distinguishes all of the late works of Brahms.”¹⁴

Comments about Brahms’s “manliness” were in part a defense against the emasculating language of his critics, who cast him as effeminate, weak, and impotent. In his own description of the Fourth Symphony, Hugo Wolf identified a “musical impotence, and in [Brahms’s] vain struggle against it, a trace of human weakness.”¹⁵ The idea of “musical impotence” is further fleshed out in Friedrich Nietzsche’s impression of Brahms:

He affects a certain type of man. His is the melancholy of impotence; he does *not* create out of an abundance, he *languishes* for abundance. If we discount what he imitates . . . what remains as specifically his is *yearning* . . . In particular, he is the musician for a certain type of dissatisfied women.¹⁶

Such comments typically came from staunch Wagnerians. Wagner himself made snide remarks about Brahms’s “chastity,” even jokingly naming him “Holy Johannes.”¹⁷ At the heart of these polemical statements, however, are conflicting ideals of masculinity. As Laurie McManus has noted, references to Brahms’s “chastity” or “impotence” were meant to emasculate him by stripping him of the “virile manliness of the creative genius,” “devaluing abstract, pure music as ‘impotent,’ chaste, and unexpressive.”¹⁸ On the other hand, Brahms’s advocates saw qualities of seriousness and restraint as admirable:

At the same time, supporters praise Brahms for his essential masculine qualities of restraint, his logically developed music, and his resistance to feminine wiles. The degenerate Wagner is thus feminized due to the perceived overtly sexual nature of his music dramas, and Brahms remains the masculine ideal, sublime in his distant austerity.¹⁹

Karen Leistra-Jones proposes that these perceptions of Brahms as sincere and restrained were a result of Brahms’s own intentionally self-cultivated image as what she terms an “authentic” composer and

¹⁴ Citron, “Gendered Reception of Brahms,” 143–144; original in Eduard Hanslick, *Musikalisches und Litterarisches: Kritiken und Schilderungen*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Allgemeiner Verein für deutsche Literatur, 1889), 151.

¹⁵ Hugo Wolf, *The Music Criticism of Hugo Wolf*, ed. and trans. Henry Pleasants (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1978), 186.

¹⁶ All emphases in original, unless otherwise noted. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 187, except for the phrase “melancholy of impotence,” which Kaufmann has as “melancholy of incapacity.” Other translators, including Citron, prefer the term “impotence” as a translation for “*Unvermögen*” in this context, since “it encapsulates Nietzsche’s general characterization of Brahms as cold, sterile and irrelevant.” Citron, “Gendered Reception of Brahms,” 145.

¹⁷ Richard Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, ed. Wolfgang Golther, vol. 8 (Berlin: Bong & Co., 1914), 394. Wagner’s “Holy Johannes” comment is partially a reference to the *German Requiem*. Michael Musgrave, *Brahms: A German Requiem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 63.

¹⁸ Laurie McManus, “The Rhetoric of Sexuality in the Age of Brahms and Wagner” (PhD diss., Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2011), 87, 18.

¹⁹ McManus, “Sexuality in the Age of Brahms and Wagner,” 87–88.

performer.²⁰ According to her, Brahms's self-presentation allowed him to claim authority and ownership of Germanness and masculinity while distancing himself from accusations of femininity and more general otherness.²¹ Brahms's tendency to downplay his emotionality is evident in various contemporary accounts. Wendelin Weißheimer described one instance at a concert of Wagner's music:

Next to me in the box was Johannes Brahms, whom I got to know at Cornelius's; he remained cool and reserved throughout the concert. When, after the fabulous rendering of the *Faust* Overture, I encouraged him to join in the applause, he said: "Oh, Herr Weißheimer, you are tearing your fancy white gloves."²²

Although Brahms's aloof reaction might be explained by his distaste for Wagner, he was always careful to maintain his composure when in public. Referring to Weißheimer's account, Kerstin Schüssler-Bach states that "such 'feminine,' 'hysterical' behavior in public was not Brahms's thing."²³ Several biographers over the years have noted Brahms's outward seriousness and modesty in spite of his inward sensitivity. In his 1905 Brahms monograph, Gustav Jenner attributed this to a kind of masculine reserve, writing that "his manly-chaste nature [*männlich-keusche Natur*] made it extremely difficult for him to speak of himself."²⁴

The debate about whether Brahms's supposed "manly-chaste nature" was a sign of authentic greatness or a "melancholy of impotence" reverberated in England as well, though overall the fiery divide between Brahms and Wagner was less distinct among British composers and critics.²⁵ Especially after the premieres of his *German Requiem* and First Symphony, Brahms's music gained widespread popularity in Britain; to many, his mastery of the Beethovenian tradition represented exactly the "manly and noble seriousness" that Hanslick described.²⁶ The English composer and musicologist George Alexander Macfarren celebrated the arrival of Brahms's music in England by writing: "It may be permitted to give

²⁰ Karen Leistra-Jones, "Staging Authenticity: Joachim, Brahms, and the Politics of Werktreue Performance," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 397–436.

²¹ For example, due to his close association with liberal Jews, Brahms was at times the target of anti-Semitic attacks or even accusations of being Jewish himself. Citron suggests that Hanslick's evocation of masculinity in relation to Brahms was possibly an attempt to ward off such associations of otherness or lack of patriotism. Citron, "Gendered Reception of Brahms," 148. See also Beller-McKenna, *Brahms and the German Spirit*, 178–82.

²² "Neben mir in der Loge saß Johannes Brahms, den ich bei Cornelius kennen gelernt; er blieb während des ganzen Konzertes kühl und zurückhaltend. Als ich ihn nach der hinreißenden Wiedergabe der Faust-Ouvertüre durch Zeichen zum Mitapplaudieren animierte, sagte er: 'Ach, Herr Weißheimer, Sie zerreißen sich ja Ihre weißen Glacéhandschuhe.'" Quoted in Carl Friedrich Glasenapp, *Das Leben Richard Wagners*, vol. 3 (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1905), 415.

²³ "Ein solches 'weibisches,' 'hysterisches' Verhalten in der Öffentlichkeit war Brahms' Sache nicht." Kerstin Schüssler-Bach, "'Einige Tropfen Tannhäuserblut': Die *Rinaldo*-Kantate von Brahms—Eine Befreiung von Wagner?" *Wagnerspectrum* 9, no. 2 (2013): 70.

²⁴ "Er war sich des Wertes seiner Werke durchaus bewusst, aber seine männlich-keusche Natur machte es ihm unendlich schwer, von sich zu sprechen." Gustav Jenner, *Johannes Brahms als Mensch, Lehrer und Künstler: Studien und Erlebnisse* (Marburg: N. G. Elwert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1905), 29.

²⁵ Francis S. Cowie, "Two Views of Brahms," *New Quarterly Musical Review* 2, no. 7 (November 1894): 117. The Brahms-Wagner divide was less polemical in England likely because of the role that Hans Richter played in introducing Brahms to England (including the inauguration of an annual series of concerts in 1879 that frequently featured Brahms), as he was firmly in both the Brahmsian and Wagnerian camps. Musgrave, "Brahms and England," 14; Hamilton, "England," 319.

²⁶ Pascall, "Frühe Brahms-Rezeption in England," 296; Musgrave, "Brahms and England," 6–7.

utterance here to the heartiest exultation, that the highest and the noblest, the gravest and the most genuine, in a word, the artistic interests of music have a living representative.”²⁷ Brahms’s authentic sincerity—both in his music and his public image—became a model for many composers in England. None, however, worked so hard at cultivating a manly image as Elgar.

Elgar the “Gentleman Composer”

Brahms’s reputation as a reserved and ascetic heir to the German symphonic tradition was certainly noted by Elgar, who was obsessed with maintaining his image as a “gentleman composer.” Contemporary standards of British masculinity centered around similar qualities of seriousness and restraint to those in Germany.²⁸ As Mosse points out, even the power of the British Empire “had to be coupled with self-control and the restraint of reckless impulses. Such self-restraint was a key attribute of the masculine stereotype . . . a true man must know how to master his passions.”²⁹ Like Brahms, Elgar was careful to hide his emotions in public, lest he be perceived as weak or unmanly (though he did have a tendency to cry during performances, among other occasional indications of fragility³⁰). He was also careful to *look* the part. Arnold Bax recalled one meeting with Elgar in 1901: “Hatless, dressed in rough tweeds and riding boots, his appearance was rather that of a retired army officer turned gentleman farmer than an eminent and almost morbidly highly strung artist.”³¹ Elgar measured nearly everything in his life according to masculine norms, especially his fellow musicians and composers—the words “manly” and “gentleman” appear frequently throughout his writings—a tendency that stemmed from his own insecurities.³²

In Victorian England, masculinity and class were interconnected,³³ which presented a problem for someone of a modest background like Elgar, whose father was a piano-tuner and shopkeeper. This crisis of masculinity and class was compounded by his position as a composer, an occupation which hardly fit within the criteria of a “manly” profession. In regard to Brahms’s context, yet equally applicable to Elgar’s, McManus calls attention to the fact that music’s association with women “presents a challenge to the hypothetical composer who may wish to disavow such apparently feminine traits.”³⁴ These associations of music with the “private,” feminine sphere were partially counteracted by the establishment of music as a professional discipline (especially in academia), which created an exclusive “men’s club” for composers in

²⁷ Quoted in Pascall, “Frühe Brahms-Rezeption in England,” 300.

²⁸ John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Essays on Gender, Family and Empire* (Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2005), 193–94.

²⁹ Mosse, *The Image of Man*, 15.

³⁰ Gerald Cumberland, *Set Down in Malice: A Book of Reminiscences* (London: Grant Richards, 1919), 87; Corissa Gould, “Aspiring to Manliness: Edward Elgar and the Pressures of Hegemonic Masculinity,” in *Masculinity and Western Musical Practice*, ed. Ian Biddle and Kirsten Gibson (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2009), 169.

³¹ Arnold Bax, *Farewell, My Youth* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1943), 30.

³² Gould, “Aspiring to Manliness,” 162.

³³ Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 34.

³⁴ McManus, “Sexuality in the Age of Brahms and Wagner,” 88.

which they could enjoy manly company and regular income.³⁵ Even so, however, Elgar only ever held one academic position, as Peyton Professor of Music at the University of Birmingham (1905-1908), and was already an outsider on account of being an autodidact—financial limitations had prevented him from formally studying music.³⁶

Further complicating Elgar's anxieties as a composer was his position as an *English* composer, as he tried to construct a musical nationalism in a land that was supposedly "without music."³⁷ This, too, carries implications for Elgar's manliness. Nationalist anxiety and masculine insecurity were inextricable in the British Empire; John Tosh suggests that nationalist-imperialist support at the end of the nineteenth century "was a symptom of masculine insecurity within Britain," whereby "anxieties which had their root at home could be displaced onto the empire as a site of unqualified masculinity, and both career choices and ideological loyalties were influenced as a result."³⁸ In light of this context, those of Elgar's works which glorify the nation or empire (e.g., *The Crown of India*, *The Spirit of England*, the *Pomp and Circumstance* marches, etc.) could be seen not only as attempts to demonstrate the patriotic potential of English music, or even of Elgar's own patriotism, but as demonstrations of his masculinity, perhaps as a way to counteract (or distract from) the unmanly connotations of his occupation and middle-class background.

Elgar worked hard to eschew any indications of his class background, occupying himself with gentlemanly pursuits whenever possible. During the War, he even volunteered as a special constable in order to give himself a more masculine pastime. After lamenting that he was too old to be a soldier, he wrote to Frank Schuster that "everything is at a standstill & we have nothing left in the world—absolute financial ruin—but we are cheerful & I will die a man if not a musician."³⁹ In line with contemporary English standards of masculinity, Elgar clearly associated manliness with dignity. His superficial obsession with gentility in particular was immediately evident to those who met him. When visiting Elgar in 1922, the writer Siegfried Sassoon noted the artificiality of his image, as well as his preoccupation with maintaining it:

Elgar is, outwardly, a retired army officer of the conventional Victorian type. He prides himself on his conventional appearance. I have often heard him use the phrase "a Great Gentleman." It is his sublimity of encomium—his encomiastic apex. No doubt he sublimates *himself* as a G.G.—the Duc D'Elgar.⁴⁰

Charles Frederick Kenyon had a similar experience when he interviewed Elgar in 1906. Kenyon wrote an "impressionistic sketch" of the composer after their meeting, which, as he later recalled, Elgar

³⁵ Marcia J. Citron, "Professionalism," in *Gender and the Musical Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 80–119; Gould, "Aspiring to Manliness," 171.

³⁶ Meirion Hughes, "'The Duc d'Elgar': Making a Composer Gentleman," in *Music and the Politics of Culture*, ed. Christopher Norris (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1989), 42.

³⁷ Oscar A. H. Schmitz, *Das Land ohne Musik: Englische Gesellschaftsprobleme* (Munich: Georg Müller, 1914). Although Schmitz coined his famous phrase "das Land ohne Musik" in 1914, anxieties surrounding England's place in the European musical realm stretch back well into the nineteenth century.

³⁸ Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 193–94.

³⁹ Edward Elgar, *Edward Elgar: Letters of a Lifetime*, ed. Jerrold Northrop Moore (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 276.

⁴⁰ Siegfried Sassoon, *Siegfried Sassoon, Diaries 1920-1922* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 124.

approved of with great enthusiasm:

Of this impressionistic sketch I remember nothing except that, in describing his general bearing and manner, I used the word “aristocratic.” At this word Elgar rose like a fat trout eager to swallow a floating fly. It confirmed his own hopes. And I who had perceived this quality so speedily, so unerringly, and who had proclaimed it to the world, was worthy of reward.⁴¹

Yet another insecurity that potentially motivated Elgar’s self-positioning was the apparent homoerotic subtext that underlay many of his male friendships. Indeed, male artists and musicians of the time were often suspected of homosexuality, and, while no direct evidence of Elgar’s sexuality exists, Byron Adams presents a convincing case for reevaluating Elgar’s male friendships along sexually-charged lines.⁴² Adams draws attention to the effusively affectionate language that Elgar used with friends such as Augustus Jaeger, Frank Schuster, Ivor Atkins, and W. H. Reed, in contrast to his apparently sexless marriage (following the birth of his daughter) and the platonic language which he used with female friends.⁴³ Some of Elgar’s contemporaries looked with suspicion at his “nervousness” and “abnormality,” which Mosse identifies as code-words for homosexual leanings.⁴⁴ Kenyon, for instance, described him as “abnormally sensitive, abnormally observant, abnormally intuitive,” before going on to describe his propensity to cry during performances.⁴⁵ Regardless of whether or not Elgar truly had romantic feelings for any of his male friends, the suspicion alone likely contributed to his masculine overcompensations.

Elgar’s most exaggerated overcompensations really began after his marriage to Caroline Alice Roberts in 1889. Alice came from a wealthy Anglican family, as opposed to Elgar’s middle-class Catholic upbringing. (Elgar’s religion also contributed to his overall outsider status, and carried some connotations of unmanliness as well.) Meirion Hughes labels Elgar’s marriage as “*the crucial event*” in his transformation into a self-conscious gentleman and lists several of the ways that he attempted to fit in with his new family:

Contemporary tropes of gentlemanliness were plundered by Elgar, with a bias towards those packaged in the stereotype of the solid squire and empire-builder, with its agenda of cigars, dogs, fishing, and horse-racing, cricket and a dislike of football. He never ceased to aspire to membership of the imperial class to which his wife’s family had belonged.⁴⁶

Both of Alice’s parents were distinguished members of British society; her father was a prominent general in India and her mother was of an aristocratic Gloucestershire family. Although both had died by

⁴¹ Kenyon’s “reward” was being granted a second interview with Elgar. This excerpt is from one of Kenyon’s books of “reminiscences” that he published under the pseudonym “Gerald Cumberland.” Cumberland, *Set Down in Malice*, 80.

⁴² Byron Adams, “The ‘Dark Saying’ of the Enigma: Homoeroticism and the Elgarian Paradox,” *19th-Century Music* 23, no. 3 (Spring 2000): 225.

⁴³ Adams, “Homoeroticism and the Elgarian Paradox,” 228–29. Although passionate language was not uncommon in Victorian letter-writing between men, Elgar’s language, especially with Jaeger, was intimate even by contemporary standards.

⁴⁴ Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality*, 10–11.

⁴⁵ Cumberland, *Set Down in Malice*, 87. Adams also interprets this as euphemistic language: “. . . Cumberland’s innuendo concerning Elgar is brutally clear; sophisticated readers, such as the radical audience for whom the book was presumably written, would have comprehended this instantly.” Adams, “Homoeroticism and the Elgarian Paradox,” 225.

⁴⁶ Hughes, “Making a Composer Gentleman,” 44.

1889, Alice's living relatives did not approve of the marriage, seeing Edward as little more than a gold-digging interloper.⁴⁷ Between his occupation, religion, and class background, Elgar had no shortage of reasons to be intimidated by his wife's family.

Significantly, the year 1889 also marks a major shift in Elgar's compositional practice. It was only after his marriage that he began to compose large-scale works, beginning with the *Froissart Overture* the very next year.⁴⁸ Moreover, he attempted to develop a musical style that exemplified the qualities of honor and nobility that he so valued. Hughes observes that "*nobilmente* (noble, lofty and exalted) became the hallmark of the Elgarian musical style; an *expressive* marking—the technical term is beautifully ambiguous—which he uses repeatedly, even obsessively."⁴⁹ By the beginning of the twentieth century Elgar had become famous for large works like the *Enigma Variations*, *Cockaigne Overture*, and *Pomp and Circumstance No. 1*, all of which used the term *nobilmente* in their scores. He clearly looked to the German musical tradition—with all of its connotations of bourgeois masculinity—as a model. The Elgars had started taking yearly holidays to Germany in the 1890s, at the same time that he was composing large-scale works and developing his "noble" style.⁵⁰ For a composer with as many insecurities as Elgar, aligning himself with the German masters validated his own compositional masculinity. Furthermore, although Wagner's influence must not be underestimated,⁵¹ it is ultimately Brahms's brand of masculinity that appears to have resonated most with Elgar.

Brahms as a Masculine Model

Given the similarities in how they presented themselves, Elgar probably identified with Brahms's "manly-chaste nature" rather than seeing it as a "melancholy of impotence," wishing to emulate the "manly and noble seriousness" described by Hanslick. Elgar praised Brahms's music both privately and publicly in statements that viewed the German master through a decidedly gendered lens. In December 1886, he wrote an article for the *Malvern Advertiser* in which he described Brahms's "inventive power," "commanding ability," "complete mastery," and "predilection for stern and melancholy subjects," summing him up as both "a giant, lofty and unapproachable" and "a personality overpowering, dignified, and grand."⁵² He also warned that "his melody . . . appeals rather to educated musicians than to a mixed public . . . those who are in search of mere prettiness of languid sentimental enjoyment do not find what they require . . . Brahms is above all an intellectual." According to Elgar, these traits of firm masculinity—power, sternness, dignity—mark Brahms "as the true successor of Beethoven—'beginning where Beethoven left off.'"

⁴⁷ Hughes, "Making a Composer Gentleman," 42.

⁴⁸ "Until 1889 . . . Elgar's compositional efforts were confined to songs, short occasional pieces and several unfinished scores. His only published work consisted of a handful of commercial salon pieces and precisely three short choral works." Hughes, "Making a Composer Gentleman," 42.

⁴⁹ Hughes, "Making a Composer Gentleman," 46.

⁵⁰ Hughes, "Making a Composer Gentleman," 43.

⁵¹ For example, Aidan Thomson has explored themes of chivalry in Elgar's work, claiming that *Wagner* was "the German composer of this period most closely associated with 'nobility.'" Aidan Thomson, "Elgar and Chivalry," *19th-Century Music* 28, no. 3 (Spring 2005): 256.

⁵² Elgar, *Letters of a Lifetime* 19–20. Although Elgar wrote his essay as an article, the *Advertiser* framed it as a letter. As he described to a friend years later: "I wrote an 'article' for the Malvern paper: they made it into a letter by adding 'Yours truly' and prefixing 'Sir'—to avoid paying for it." Elgar, *Letters of a Lifetime*, 17.

Additionally, Elgar gave a lecture on Brahms's Third Symphony at the University of Birmingham in 1905 (one of only two lectures in the six-part series devoted entirely to one piece⁵³) that likewise focused on masculinity: Elgar described the symphony as “very reticent, very broad, very noble,” the orchestration as “noble and restrained,” with the last movement in particular being “elaborated in a masterly manner.”⁵⁴ Notably, these are the same characteristics which Elgar revered elsewhere and tried so hard to embody.

Elgar's evocations of Brahms alongside his cultivation of a restrained, gentlemanly identity appear to be conscious attempts to prime his own reception in the German symphonic tradition. Statements like the ones above implicitly assert authority over Brahms's music, not unlike the “staged authenticity” observed by Leistra-Jones, which Brahms and his circle used to claim ownership of, and authority within, the Beethovenian tradition. When Elgar claims that Brahms's melody only appeals to “educated musicians,” for example, he of course includes himself in this category, as the expert that is educating the public.⁵⁵ With this comment, Elgar also compensates for his own lack of formal music education by pointing to himself as an authority on Brahms. Ironically, however, his thoughts in that article may not have been altogether original: Michael Gassmann notes a remarkable, almost plagiaristic closeness—especially in its emphasis on intellectuality—between the language in the *Advertiser* essay and George Grove's entry on Brahms in his *Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (which Elgar owned).⁵⁶ Like a performer displaying their authentic interpretation onstage, Elgar's article—drawing from the dominant music reference work of the time—displayed his own authoritative knowledge in order to be taken seriously as a composer. The time at which Elgar wrote the article—December 1886—is potentially significant in understanding his need to show off in this way. That fall, Elgar had taken on a new piano student: Alice Roberts, whom he married two and a half years later. As discussed previously, Elgar's relationship with Alice was a turning point in his transformation into a “gentleman composer,” and, although there is no evidence that their acquaintance was directly related to his article in the *Advertiser*, the time leading up to their marriage nonetheless laid the groundwork for the blossoming of his career that would occur in the 1890s.

The 1905 lecture at the University of Birmingham similarly paved the way for Elgar's First Symphony a few years later. Like Brahms, Elgar was deeply intimidated by the idea of writing a symphony, and did not complete his first symphony until well into his career (he was 51 at its premiere in 1908). His lecture thus provided an opportunity to reassert himself as an authority on the tradition that he was soon to follow. This created perhaps unanticipated pressure for Elgar to follow up with his own symphony, however: while praising Brahms's Third, he had jeopardized himself by claiming that absolute music was superior to all other forms of music, despite the fact that he was most popular at the time for programmatic works such as the *Enigma Variations* and *Cockaigne Overture*. Critics immediately pointed this out. Ernest Newman charged Elgar with hypocrisy, writing: “If he really believes now that

⁵³ The other was on Mozart's Symphony No. 40 in G minor. Elgar's language in this lecture was, though generally positive, altogether different than that which he used for Brahms. In fact, Elgar's assessments of the Mozart symphony's limitations drew much criticism from the press. Edward Elgar, “Mozart's G Minor Symphony (November 8, 1906),” in *A Future for English Music and Other Lectures*, ed. Percy M. Young (London: Dobson, 1968), 276–79.

⁵⁴ Edward Elgar, “Brahms's Symphony No. 3 (November 8, 1905),” in *A Future for English Music and Other Lectures*, ed. Percy M. Young (London: Dobson, 1968), 99, 103, 104.

⁵⁵ Elgar's emphasis on expertise and taste is further redolent of Hanslick's assertion that the Fourth Symphony's “charms are not democratic.” Hanslick, *Music Criticisms, 1846-99*, 244.

⁵⁶ Michael Gassmann, *Edward Elgar und die deutsche symphonische Tradition: Studien zu Einfluß und Eigenständigkeit* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2002), 262.

music is at its height only when it concerns itself with nothing but purely formal tonal pattern-weaving, he is condemning all his own best work *en masse*.⁵⁷ It was well-known that Elgar had been working on a symphony for quite some time, yet even so this had to have been a low blow. Newman's accusation not only discredited Elgar's successes but also undercut his authority on the subject. Regardless of whether this criticism was a factor in Elgar finally finishing his symphony, he was certainly careful to stress its lack of a program afterwards.⁵⁸

Between his cultivated appearance of noble restraint and his performative displays of authority, Elgar ensured that his First Symphony would be received in relation to Brahms. Unsurprisingly, it owes much to Brahms's Third Symphony that he had lectured on three years prior, especially in some of its thematic material. In particular, the second theme in the final movement of Elgar's First is widely regarded as being derivative of that in the finale of Brahms's Third (Example 1).⁵⁹ Gassmann outlines four main points of similarity between the two themes: 1) both involve moving triplets against a straight bass; 2) both have a bass line that contrasts stylistically (*pizzicato* in the case of Brahms, and *staccato* in Elgar) with a smooth, lyrical melody; 3) the upbeat gesture and upward arc of each theme's triplet motifs contribute to a similar lively character; and 4) both are technically "third" themes, insofar as an ancillary idea arises between each movement's first and second themes (which in both cases takes on new importance in the coda).⁶⁰ Curiously, Elgar only added his "Brahmsian" theme at the last minute, when the symphony was essentially already finished. It is possible—as Robert Anderson suggests⁶¹—that Elgar's peculiar insertion at such a late stage was a kind of last-ditch effort to express his admiration for the German composer. Perhaps, given his own insecurities as a "gentleman composer," he sought to more directly emulate one of Brahms's themes that he saw as masculine, in order "to authenticate his continuation of the tradition and to ensure something worthy of symphonic music."⁶² The work was further authenticated through its association with Hans Richter, who premiered the symphony, and to whom it was dedicated (as "True Artist and true Friend").⁶³ Richter had premiered both Brahms's Second

⁵⁷ Elgar, "Brahms's Symphony No. 3," 105. Elgar responded to Newman by inviting him to his home to discuss the matter: "I *should* like to talk to you about my—*our*—I mean views as to the future . . . You might come down & stay with us for a day or so—wondrous quiet & *no* games [—] billiards & the like—so you might find it too silly." Elgar, *Edward Elgar: Letters of a Lifetime*, 168–69.

⁵⁸ Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Edward Elgar: A Creative Life* (London: Oxford University Press, 1984), 540.

⁵⁹ Gassmann, *Edward Elgar und die deutsche symphonische Tradition*, 210; Robert Anderson, "Elgar in Manuscript," in *Elgar: An Anniversary Portrait* (London: Continuum, 2007), 76; MacDonald, *Brahms*, 406.

⁶⁰ Gassmann, *Edward Elgar und die deutsche symphonische Tradition*, 265.

⁶¹ Robert Anderson, *Elgar in Manuscript* (London: British Library, 1990), 101–3.

⁶² "Aufgrund der Ähnlichkeiten bestimmter Themenbildungen in der ersten Symphonie zu Brahms'schen Themen erscheint die Annahme berechtigt, daß Elgar möglicherweise, als er sich daran machte, die Brahms'sche Tradition der absoluten Symphonie vorzusetzen, absichtlich Inspiration bei den zum Geschmack des breiten Publikums querstehenden 'stern and melancholy subjects' des bewunderten Vorbilds suchte, zum einen, um die Fortsetzung dieser Tradition zu beglaubigen, zum anderen, um gewissermaßen einen der Gattung Symphonie würdigen Tonfall sicherzustellen." Gassmann, *Edward Elgar und die deutsche symphonische Tradition*, 263.

⁶³ W. H. Reed, *Elgar* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1939), 97. Elgar had attended the English premiere of Brahms's Third Symphony back in 1884, which Richter conducted, and the two became close friends after Richter premiered the *Enigma Variations* in 1899. On account of his close association with Brahms (and Wagner), Elgar likely looked up to Richter as a mentor. In 1912 he even signed a letter to Richter "Your affectionate son." Christopher Fifield, *True Artist and True Friend: A Biography of Hans Richter* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 309; Moore, *Edward Elgar: A Creative Life*, 104–5.

and Third Symphonies and had played a major role in introducing his music to English audiences. Elgar thus received the ultimate validation when, at a rehearsal for the London premiere of his First Symphony, Richter declared: “Gentlemen, let us now rehearse the greatest symphony of modern times, written by the greatest modern composer, and not only in this country.”⁶⁴

Example 1.1. Brahms, Symphony No. 3, mvt. 4, second theme

Example 1.2. Elgar, Symphony No. 1, mvt. 4, second theme

In his First Symphony, Elgar evidently attempted to emulate some of the “reticent,” “broad,” and “noble” qualities that he had observed in Brahms’s Third, yet his treatment of musical “nobility” in some ways mirrors his own personal conflict and anxiety surrounding masculinity. Naturally, the symphony opens with Elgar’s characteristic *nobilmente* marking, introducing a stately theme which he referred to as an “ideal call.”⁶⁵ According to James Hepokoski, the first movement’s “ideal call” in Ab suggests “something like initial wholeness or identity,” and

is made first to encounter (or to initiate) an elaborate chromatic process that swirls negatively around a tonality representing complete otherness, D minor. Then, by degrees through the four movements, Ab major tries to step “from outside” into that otherness to subdue it and ultimately to absorb it back into itself [Example 2].⁶⁶

This *nobilmente* “ideal call” is trounced throughout the symphony, repeatedly overtaken and pushed about by other themes and tonal areas. It wins over in the end, but, as Hepokoski observes, the finale is “tinged with Elgarian doubt. The sheer stress and trembling of the Ab ‘resolution’ can leave us

⁶⁴ Quoted in Gassmann, *Edward Elgar und die deutsche symphonische Tradition*, 206.

⁶⁵ Moore, *Edward Elgar: A Creative Life*, 520.

⁶⁶ James Hepokoski, “Elgar,” in *The Nineteenth-Century Symphony*, ed. D. Kern Holoman (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), 329.

with lingering questions about how affirmative this symphony actually is.”⁶⁷ Indeed, if the “ideal call” is taken to be representative of Elgar’s ideal masculine aesthetic, its general precarity in context seems to expose a profound crisis of masculine identity.⁶⁸

Example 2.1. Elgar, Symphony No. 1, mvt. 1, mm. 3-11, “ideal call.”

Elgar’s efforts to align himself with Brahms and the German tradition worked. His debut symphony and many of his subsequent compositions were seen at large as continuations of Brahms’s oeuvre. William Henry Reed proclaimed that the First Symphony’s premiere in December of 1908 demonstrated to the public “that Elgar had reached the height of his powers, that he had written the greatest symphony ever written by an Englishman, a symphony worthy to be ranked with the great classical symphonies of Brahms and his predecessors.”⁶⁹ After its premiere in Leipzig the following year, the esteemed conductor Arthur Nikisch—whose own performance of Brahms’s Fourth Symphony had been praised by Brahms himself—promptly announced his plans to conduct it with the Berlin Philharmonic:

I consider Elgar’s symphony a masterpiece of the first order, one that will soon be ranked on the same basis with the great symphonic models—Beethoven and Brahms . . . When Brahms

⁶⁷ Hepokoski, “Elgar,” 336.

⁶⁸ In an interesting parallelism, Brahms’s Third could also be interpreted, as Susan McClary does, as a narrative involving a male protagonist’s struggle with masculine identity. See Susan McClary, “Narrative Agendas in ‘Absolute’ Music: Identity and Difference in Brahms’s Third Symphony,” in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 326–44.

⁶⁹ Reed, *Elgar*, 97.

produced his first symphony it was called “Beethoven’s tenth” . . . I will therefore call Elgar’s symphony “the fifth of Brahms.”⁷⁰

Example 2.2. Elgar, Symphony No. 1, mvt. 1, mm. 51-58, representing “complete otherness.”

The musical score is for the first movement of Elgar's Symphony No. 1, measures 51-58. It is in 4/4 time, marked 'Allegro' with a tempo of quarter note = 104, and 'appassionato'. The score is written for piano and includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings. The dynamics start at piano (p), then crescendo to forte (f), and finally mezzo-forte (mf). The score is written for piano and includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

In another statement that surely flattered Elgar’s gentlemanly inclinations, Fritz Kreisler, who commissioned and premiered the Violin Concerto (1910), said to the press:

If you want to know whom I consider to be the greatest living composer, I say without hesitation, Elgar . . . Elgar will overshadow everybody. He is on a different level. I place him on an equal footing with my idols, Beethoven and Brahms. He is of the same aristocratic family. His invention, his orchestration, his harmony, his grandeur, it is wonderful.⁷¹

In the end, Elgar received much of the same gendered criticism that Brahms had, especially by those who meant to draw direct comparisons between the two. His supporters used exactly the kind of language and validation he had always hoped for. Discussing the Violin Sonata, *The Arts Gazette* drew the following comparison in 1919: “. . . Like Brahms in the later part of his career, Sir Edward aims at ever-increasing directness, terseness and simplicity of expression.”⁷² Hugo Conrat, who had been a friend of Brahms, commented that Elgar’s orchestra, “using the most powerful means, always has a noble, deep

⁷⁰ Quoted in Moore, *Edward Elgar: A Creative Life*, 548. Gassmann cheekily quips that “if Brahms’s First can be called ‘Beethoven’s Tenth’ and Elgar’s First ‘Brahms’s Fifth’—Elgar’s First is also entitled to the title ‘Beethoven’s Fourteenth’ [*wenn Brahms’ Erste ‘Beethovens Zehnte’ und Elgars Erste ‘Brahms’ Fünfte’ genannt werden kann—Elgars Erste auch Anspruch auf den Titel ‘Beethovens Vierzehnte’ habe*].” Though Gassmann is being somewhat humorous, many contemporaries drew a direct line from Beethoven to Elgar, through Brahms. Gassmann, *Edward Elgar und die deutsche symphonische Tradition*, 205.

⁷¹ Quoted in Moore, *Edward Elgar: A Creative Life*, 468–69.

⁷² Quoted in Moore, *Edward Elgar: A Creative Life*, 73.

colour, and at no moment is garish or noisy. A noble proportion, a noble restraint characterizes his creations and for that reason perhaps one is not out of place in calling him a classical modern.”⁷³ In addition to his masculinist language, Conrat’s reference to Elgar as a “classical modern” also places him alongside Brahms—who in England was seen as the epitome of modern music.⁷⁴ As with Brahms, however, Elgar’s detractors emasculated him and his music by citing his over-sensitivity or emotionality. His persona was seen as forced and inauthentic by some, criticism that became ever more common following the War, as the image of the “Victorian gentleman” fell out of fashion. Kenyon, for instance, observed “a daintiness that was irritating, a refinement that was distressingly self-conscious” in Elgar’s mind, alongside “an innate and exaggerated delicacy, an almost feminine shrinking” in his music.⁷⁵ Cecil Gray, writing in 1924, found Elgar’s gentlemanliness to be outdated and distasteful: “He never gets entirely away from . . . the unconsciously hypocritical, self-righteous, complacent, Pharisaical gentlemanliness which is so characteristic of British art in the last century.”⁷⁶ Much like in Brahms’s reception, Elgar’s outward character and music, which was seen by some as honorable, was seen by others as inauthentic, potentially concealing an inner weakness.

Conclusion

For a composer who evaluated his entire life on criteria of gender and class, it is unsurprising that Elgar would look to Brahms as a model in order to craft his own identity as a “gentleman composer.” Brahms had come to represent exactly the kind of serious composer that Elgar hoped to be; his “manly and noble seriousness” epitomized Elgar’s desired persona and *nobilmente* aesthetic. This aesthetic continued to be developed beyond his large-scale and “absolute” works as well, in the various concertos, songs, suites, and other compositions that he continued to write until his death in 1934. By taking cues of masculine musical values from Brahms, Elgar sought to allay his insecurities as a man and a composer and establish himself as a member of the exclusive musical aristocracy to which the German masters belonged. In many ways, his efforts to align himself with Brahms and the German tradition were successful, and he was touted as Brahms’s heir. Yet his exaggerated displays of class and masculinity were also a liability. Elgar tried very hard to present himself in a certain way, and it showed. For some, the self-consciousness that underlay his masculine image came at the expense of his perceived authenticity. Put by Cecil Gray: “He might have been a great composer if he had not been such a perfect gentleman.”⁷⁷

⁷³ “Mit den stärksten Mitteln arbeitend, hat doch stets eine edle gesättigte Farbe, ist keinen Augenblick grell, lärmend. Ein edles Maß, eine vornehme Beschränkung charakterisiert sein Schaffen und darum geht man vielleicht nicht fehl, wenn man ihn einen klassischen Modernen nennt.” Quoted in Thomson, “Elgar and Chivalry,” 255.

⁷⁴ Musgrave, “Brahms and England,” 1.

⁷⁵ Cumberland, *Set Down in Malice*, 85, 79. Kenyon does not elaborate on these comments, nor does he specify which works of Elgar’s he is referring to. As previously discussed, adjectives like “feminine” or “nervous” in reference to male Victorian composers were often thinly-veiled accusations of homosexuality, and it is possible (or even likely) that that is what Kenyon is insinuating here. Adams, “Homoeroticism and the Elgarian Paradox,” 225.

⁷⁶ Cecil Gray, *A Survey of Contemporary Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924), 92–93.

⁷⁷ Gray, *A Survey of Contemporary Music*, 93.

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