



Thomas Lloyd
Professor of Music, Haverford College
Haverford, PA
tlloyd@haverford.edu

Edward Elgar's *The Apostles*

A Major Oratorio Standing Outside Tradition

Thomas Lloyd

Edward Elgar's *The Apostles* (1903) stands apart from the oratorio genre in its presentation of the mission of Christ viewed primarily through the eyes of Mary Magdalene and Judas Iscariot, two relatively minor characters who are given few words of their own in the Bible. The title of the oratorio itself is belied by featuring a woman who was not one of "The Twelve" and a man who was the one apostle to defect from the rest. There may be biographical resonances in Elgar's highly unusual choice to make these two "outsiders" the main subject of an oratorio ostensibly concerned with the life of Christ and his inner circle of disciples. Many biographers have suggested that Elgar perceived his own origins as a working-class Catholic outside the more aristocratic Anglican cultural environment he needed

to impress as a composer. Some of his letters and quoted remarks also suggest that he struggled with his own faith more than it may have seemed from his public persona.¹

Elgar's distinctive use of Wagnerian *leitmotif* technique permeates the expansive form of the work, resulting in an exceptional example of the late Romantic juxtaposition of the cosmic and the personal in a multi-layered texture. Though *The Apostles* has been widely recognized as one of Elgar's most important works, it has rarely been performed in the United States. While its inspired prologue is still sung as an anthem in some churches (a choral setting of Luke 4:18, where Jesus quotes Isaiah to proclaim his mission to the poor) the remainder of the work is seldom heard in American concert halls or churches.²

A Provincial Composer Rises to Prominence

When Edward Elgar (1857-1934) began composing *The Apostles* in 1900 at the age of forty-three, he had recently received his first broad public acclaim for the masterful *Enigma Variations* for orchestra. Until then, this largely self-taught Catholic son of a provincial pianotuner had made his way in the overwhelmingly Anglican, upper-class culture of the London music world as a freelance musician and little-recognized composer. An outwardly shy and self-conscious man, Elgar's mature oratorios soon to follow (*The Dream of Gerontius* and *The Apostles*) reflect some of the internal struggles he faced throughout his life related to class, religious identity, and personal faith.

The Dream of Gerontius was a setting of a poem by the Catholic Cardinal John Henry Newman that had been important to Elgar for many years. It explores the death, final judgement, and entrance into Purgatory (with the promise of heaven) of its faithful subject. (Antonin Dvořák had once conferred with Newman about setting the poem but put it aside.³) While Elgar's *Gerontius* later came to be performed more frequently than *The Apostles* (especially in the United States), its first performance was less than ideal for a number of production reasons unrelated to the music. It was also perceived by critics as representing a distinctly Catholic, emotive piety that seemed foreign to the more restrained ethos of the Protestant majority dominant in Britain at that time.

Elgar and Victorian Views of Music and Musicians

When we look at a photograph of Elgar from this period [see above], we might never guess the sense of social inferiority and artistic insecurity he is said to have felt by those who knew him well. According to Elgar scholar Byron Adams, "To mitigate his feelings of exclusion, Elgar modeled his public persona on the popular image of the "English Gentleman": his bearing was rigid and quasi-military; he strove for emotional reticence in society; his politics were Tory and staunchly Imperialist; his clothing was immaculately tailored; and at times he disavowed any knowledge of, or interest in, his own unfashionable [because it was considered effeminate] musical profession."⁴



Elgar in 1900, the year he started work on *The Apostles*

While some of Elgar's music (such as his *Pomp and Circumstance* marches) reflects this hyper-masculine, emotionally controlled aesthetic, his great oratorios and extended symphonic works reveal a more expressively complex inner world capable of both grand and intimate statements.

The Origins of *The Apostles*

In *The Apostles*, Elgar sought to focus on how the early disciples of Jesus were ordinary men and women like himself—not of high education or social status—who faced serious doubts about their faith, as did he. He long treasured the words of a boyhood teacher in his Catholic school, Mr. Reeve, who said, "The Apostles were poor men, young men, at the time of their calling; perhaps before the descent of the Holy Ghost not cleverer than some of you here." Elgar wrote that he had started collecting texts for his oratorio from that time.⁵

Instead of using preexisting texts such as the pietistic Catholic text he used for his *Dream of Gerontius*, Elgar decided to compile his own text solely from the Bible, with hopes this would be more acceptable to his predominantly Anglican audience. The essential stories from the gospels are represented in the libretto (though often not

in the foreground).

It was so important to Elgar that *The Apostles* be better understood and respected by the Protestant English establishment than was *Gerontius*, that he took the unusual step of publishing separate, detailed analyses of the music and of the libretto in advance of the first performances. He asked his publisher and close personal friend, A. J. Jaeger, to write a detailed thematic musical analysis of the entire work⁶; and he asked C. V. Gorton, the Anglican cleric who helped him compile the biblical texts used, to write an extended programmatic analysis of the libretto.⁷

Judas, Mary Magdalene, and Peter

Following his primary interest in the personal struggle with religious belief, Elgar initially planned to build the oratorio around three central characters who would represent distinct approaches to faith in Christ: one who despairs of faith in pursuit of worldly success (Judas Iscariot, the betrayer of Jesus), the repentant woman of the world who is converted (Mary Magdalene), and the forthright believer and visionary leader (Peter, founder of the church).

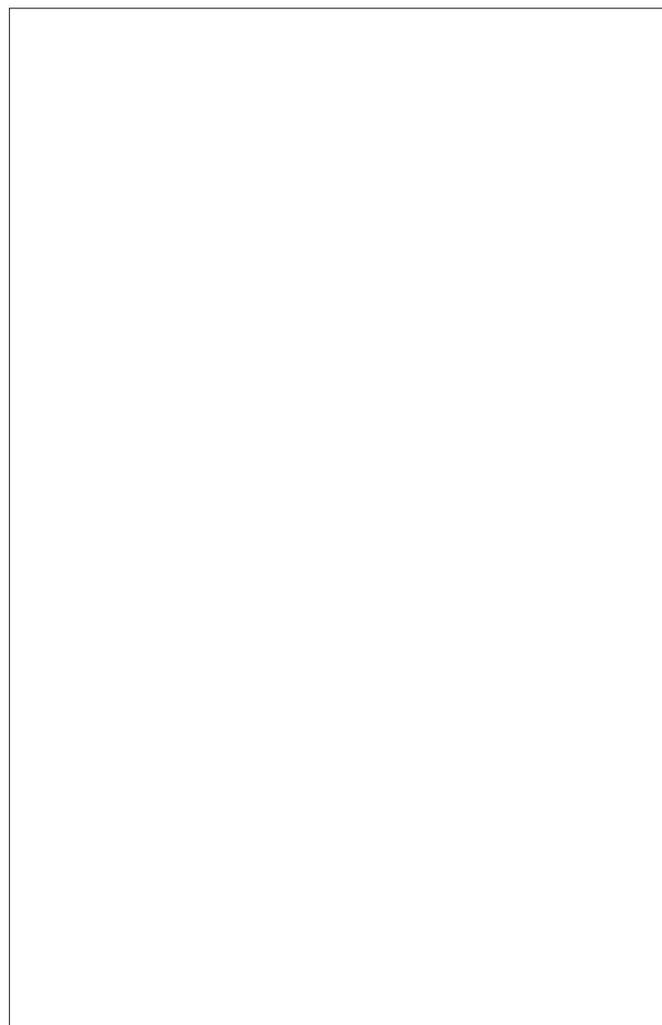
In the end, Elgar narrowed the scope of *The Apostles* to Mary and Judas, leaving Peter for his next oratorio, *The Kingdom*. The entire second half of Part I of *The Apostles* is devoted to a portrayal of Mary Magdalene as a social outcast who moves from doubt to faith in the presence of Jesus. Her prominence in the oratorio is all the more remarkable because she was not considered one of the twelve (all male) Apostles in the Gospel accounts (even though she was named as a biblical witness to the empty tomb).

The first half of Part II is devoted to Judas Iscariot. Elgar was inspired by a theological view of his time that saw Judas as a genuine believer from the start who went astray by becoming possessed by worldly ambition for himself through Jesus. In this view, Judas misunderstood Jesus's mission as one of political ambition in *this* world, in opposition to the Romans, rather than spiritual fulfillment in the next. A letter to the priest C.V. Gorton who had helped him compile the libretto may reveal something of the composer's close identification with the character of Judas, the ultimate "outsider": "To my

mind Judas' crime or sin was despair; not only the betrayal, which was done for a worldly purpose. In these days, when every 'modern' person seems to think 'suicide' is the natural way out of everything (Ibsen, etc., etc.) my plan, if explained, may do some good."⁸

It is also worth noting that while the central events of Christ's passion, crucifixion, and resurrection are represented in *The Apostles*, they are given very short scenes of mostly symbolic importance, serving primarily to provide the necessary bridge from the extended scene of Judas to the climactic chorus of the Ascension. As a result, there is little in the music itself or in Elgar's statements about it to indicate he was looking to the Bach passions or even the nineteenth-century English oratorio for models.

When scholars and critics have made comparisons to other works, they have looked primarily to Wagner (to



whom Elgar himself referred frequently). In particular, comparisons are made to *Parsifal* for the aesthetic of its treatment of religious themes and to the *Ring Cycle* as a model for the cycle of oratorios Elgar originally planned for *The Apostles*, *The Kingdom*, and *The Last Judgment*. Though the third oratorio in this cycle was never completed, Elgar did incorporate a few common leitmotifs across *Gerontius*, *The Apostles*, and *The Kingdom*.⁹

Assigning such extended roles to characters about whom little information is provided in the Bible presented a special challenge for Elgar in meeting his goal of using only biblical texts. What words could he have them sing, since none were assigned them in the scriptures? For this he sought help from his friend Canon Gorton, constructing monologues by piecing together lines from various books of the Hebrew and Greek Testaments, most especially the Psalms and Wisdom literature. (See Table 1 for examples of these monologues, with scriptural attributions.¹⁰)

Table 1.

The texts assigned to Mary Magdalene and Judas Iscariot are drawn from a number of biblical sources:

Mary Magdalene [Part I: rehearsal # 86-94]

‘Ye that kindle a fire,
walk in the flame of your fire,
walk among the brands that ye have kindled.
This shall ye have of Mine hand;
ye shall lie down in sorrow.’ (Is. 50:11)

God of Israel, the soul in anguish,
the troubled spirit, crieth unto Thee.
Hear and have mercy. (Is. 24:8)

The mirth of tabrets ceaseth;
the noise of them that rejoice endeth,
our dance is turned into mourning. (Lam 5:15)

‘This shall ye have of Mine hand;
ye shall lie down in sorrow.’ (Is. 50:11)

Mary Magdalene [Part I: rehearsal # 107-111]

Who stilleth the raging of the seas,
Who maketh the storm a calm? (Ps 107:29)
Thy providence, O Father, governeth it: (Ps. 77:19)
for Thou hast made a way in the sea,
and a safe path in the waves;
shewing that Thou canst save from all danger.

Thy face, Lord, will I seek. (Ps. 27:8)
Thou hast not forsaken them that seek Thee. (Ps. 9:10)
Thy Face, Lord, will I seek.
My soul followeth hard after Thee:
Thy right hand upholdeth me.
Thy Face, Lord, will I seek. (Ps. 63:8)

Judas [Part II: rehearsal # 176-184]

‘Rest from the days of adversity.’
Never man spake like this Man; (John 7:46)
He satisfied the longing soul,
and filled the hungry soul with goodness. (Ps. 107:9)

Our life is short and tedious,
and in the death of a man there is no remedy;
neither was there any man known to have returned
from the grave.
For we are born at all adventure,
and we shall be hereafter as though we had never
been;
for the breath in our nostrils is as smoke,
and a little spark in the moving of our heart,
which being extinguished, our body shall be turned
into ashes
and our spirit shall vanish as the soft air
and our name shall be forgotten in time,
and no man have our work in remembrance;
and our life shall pass away as the trace of a cloud,
and shall be dispersed as a mist,
that is driven away with the beams of the sun,
and overcome with the heat thereof.
(Wisdom of Solomon 2:1-4)

Elgar's View of Jesus and Kramskoi's Painting

While Elgar's choice of Mary and Judas for central roles may be unexpected, it is not surprising that the next most important solo role is assigned to Jesus. In this case, there is a particular painting that we know represents Elgar's sense of Christ's loneliness, the 1872 painting "Christ in the Wilderness" by the Russian painter Ivan Kramskoi. When the composer saw this painting during a visit to his friend C. V. Gorton, Elgar described it as "my ideal picture of the Lonely Christ as I have *tried* (and tried hard) to realise...." Leon Botstein writes of this painting, "Christ is real, but he seems to be an everyman, a real human figure whom we can personally identify as both human and divine. He is real and ideal, modern and timeless, particular and general. The viewer of the painting, like the listener and participant in Elgar's music, is elevated by identification, through art, all consonant with a noble idealistic tradition."¹¹ Elgar's depiction of Jesus is intensely personal but elevated beyond sentimentality by the nobility of his music. Elgar shared postcard copies of this painting with the singers before the first performance.¹²

New Models for the English Oratorio

The formal and harmonic innovations of Richard Wagner took longer to gain favor in England than in France. Victorian sensibilities of late nineteenth-century Anglican England found the rootlessness of his harmonic chromaticism to be unduly sensual, ruminative, and effeminate, preferring instead the more emotionally stable language of traditional diatonic harmony.

However, the poetic, sensitive, and more freely expansive artistic imagination of Elgar was deeply influenced by performances he heard of Wagner's *Parsifal* and *Ring Cycle*. He was inspired to create a distinctively English form of this new language in his mature symphonies and oratorios. In retrospect, it could be said that it was Elgar's very *independence* from the Victorian national style that led to him becoming the first internationally acclaimed "English" composer since Purcell and an important influence on a long line of prominent English composers who followed in his footsteps, including Vaughan Williams, Holst, Howells, and Britten.

The first performance of *The Apostles* was on October



Ivan Kramskoi – *Christ in the Wilderness* (1872)

14, 1903, at the Birmingham Musical Festival, a triennial festival that had also commissioned Elgar to compose *Gerontius*, *The Kingdom*, and *The Music Makers* (the latter for its final season, in 1912). With a much more advantageous rehearsal situation than faced with *Gerontius*, and the advance publication of listening guides by Jaeger and Gorton, the premier under the composer's direction gave a strong representation of the work. This performance received generally positive reviews, along with some qualifications about his unconventional treatment of the subject matter and his use of Wagnerian leitmotif technique.¹³

This early success led to frequent performances in England up to the time of the composer's death in 1934. Between 1934 and its revival in the early 1970s, *The Apostles* was not performed as frequently as *Gerontius*.¹⁴ It is now a staple of the repertoire of British choirs, including four excellent commercial recordings (see discography at end of this article) but has yet to find a place in the repertoire of choirs in the United States.

The Overall Form and Thematic Relationships

The scene titles given in the score are not particularly helpful in discerning the distinct tableaux in the overall form of the oratorio. The outline in Table 2 (with approximate durations of the major scenes) shows several

parallels that can be viewed as forming an overall chiasmic structure, a form viewed as symbolic of the cross in Christian iconography generally and the works of J. S. Bach in particular.¹⁵ Even without explicit evidence of Elgar's intentions in this regard, the weight of the major choral/orchestral sections at the beginning and the end of the oratorio, the balance of the extended Mary Magdalene and Judas scenes in the middle, and the shorter movements separating these larger scenes on both sides seems too obvious to be accidental.

Table 2. Chiasmic structure in *The Apostles*

Part I

- [A] Prologue/Calling of the Apostles (27')
- [B] Beatitudes (8')
- [C] Mary Magdalene's scenes (22')
- [D] Concluding chorus (6')

Part II

- [D] Introduction (5')
- [C] Judas' scenes (22')
- [B] Crucifixion/Resurrection (9')
- [A] Ascension/Final chorus (17')

What follows is a description of the flow of the scenes and the major themes that tie them together:

Part I

Prologue

An extended orchestral/choral prelude introduces the underlying theological premise of the work (Christ's calling the Apostles to a mission of mercy and forgiveness) through a series of eight primary melodic themes—the Spirit of the Lord, Christ the Man of Sorrows, The Gospel, Preachers, Christ's Mission, Comfort, The Church, Divine Christ—shown in Figures 1-8.



Figure 1. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*, Part I. Prologue, mm. 2–5. The Spirit of the Lord
Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.



Figure 2. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*, 3 measures before rehearsal 3. Christ, The Man of Sorrows
Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.



Figure 3. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*, 1 measure before rehearsal 3. The Gospel
Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.

A Major Oratorio Standing Outside Tradition



Figure 4. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*, rehearsal 3.
Christ's Mission

Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.



Figure 5. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*,
2 measures before rehearsal 5.
Preachers

Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.



Figure 6. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*, rehearsal 5.
Comfort

Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.



Figure 7. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*, 1 measure after rehearsal 7.
The Church

Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.



Figure 8. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*, rehearsal 9.
Divine Christ

Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.

I. The Calling of the Apostles

The Dawn/Morning Psalm/Calling of the Apostles:

In the Mountain—Night [Christ alone at prayer]:

Of the three gospel passages concerning the calling of the Apostles, Elgar chose the one that describes Jesus as first going off alone to pray all night (Luke 6:12). Though praying on a mountain rather than on the shore, this scene is the first to conjure the image of Christ alone as depicted in the Kramskoi painting. We hear only the orchestra except for brief solo pronouncements from the Angel Gabriel. Two more of Christ's key themes are introduced (Figures 9 and 10) along with extension of the important Comfort theme (seen in Figure 6).

This tableaux begins with a brief section for the sounding of the Shofar at morning worship in the Temple, which serves to situate the calling of the Apostles in the Jewish synagogue. It is followed by unison chanting of Psalm 92 using an "Ancient Hebrew melody" (to be heard again toward the end of Part II) (Figure 11).

The psalm setting transitions to one of the grandest orchestral passages in the oratorio (Rehearsal 32-36), which sets the scene for the calling of the Apostles, announced by the tenor evangelist. The Apostles (represented by the chorus, led by the soloists John, Peter, and Judas) respond with enthusiasm to Jesus's call. The primary themes are The Apostles (Figure 12), Choosing the Weak (Figure 13), The Apostles' Faith (Figure 14), and The Church, seen earlier in Figure 7. The voice of the character of Jesus is dramatically heard for the first time



Figure 9. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*, rehearsal 15.
Prayer of Christ

Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.



Figure 10. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*,
2 measures before rehearsal 20.
Christ's Loneliness

Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.



Figure 11. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*, rehearsal 27.

Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.

A Major Oratorio Standing Outside Tradition

toward the end of the scene (“Behold, I send you forth”).

II. By the Wayside

This is a relatively brief, pastoral section, setting the Beatitudes as a call-and-response recitation between Jesus and the Apostles, here represented by the chorus and a quartet of soloists (Mary, Mother of Jesus, John, Peter, and Judas). For the first time, we begin to see Judas’s perception of Jesus’s mission as distinct from the others.

III. By the Sea of Galilee

These are the longest and most complex scenes of Part I both musically and dramatically, with Mary Mag-

dalene squarely at the center; the music is continuous to the end of Part I.

In the Tower of Magdala/Fantasy [storm scene]:

Observing Jesus in the distance from her tower, Mary Magdalene prays fervently for forgiveness for the sins of her past life. Her themes include Anguished Prayer, Forgiveness, and Sin.

Mary then sees her past life played out in a choral/orchestral “Fantasy” incorporating some of Elgar’s most colorful and virtuosic orchestration. Mary looks on from her tower as Jesus calms the sea in a vividly orchestrated storm scene, paralleling the “storms” of her own past life. In response to these visions from her tower, Mary passionately declares her faith and intention to encounter Jesus (“Thy face, Lord, will I seek”).



Figure 12. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*, rehearsal 39.

The Apostles

Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.



Figure 13. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*, rehearsal 40.

Choosing the Weak

Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.

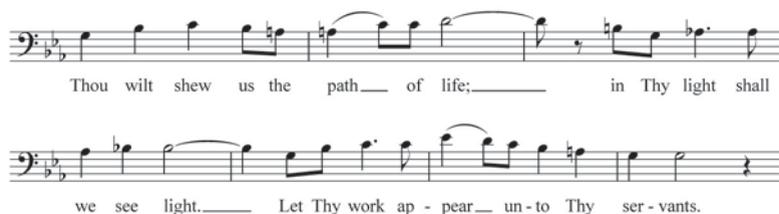


Figure 14. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*, rehearsal 44 (Peter).

The Apostle’s Faith

Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.

In Caesarea Philippi:

The Wayside theme (Figure 15) from the earlier Beatitudes scene brings the listener's perspective down from the tower to Jesus and the Apostles below.

Jesus establishes Peter as the "rock" on which he will build his church (Figure 16), leading to a grand, climac-

tic response from the chorus incorporating the Christ's Prayer, Gospel, and Apostles themes (page 100 in the vocal score). Jesus then grants the Apostles the "keys of the kingdom of heaven": the power to forgive sin.

This section leads without pause to the entrance of Mary Magdalene, again singing, "Thy face, Lord, will I seek." First, however, she encounters Mary, Mother of Jesus, who comforts her with one of the most poignant ariosos of the entire oratorio ("Hearken, O daughter") (Figure 17).

When Mary then approaches Jesus, the women of the chorus rebuke him for allowing such a sinner to draw near. Mary nevertheless pleads for forgiveness ("Hide not thy face far from me") and is forgiven by Jesus, who sings the words "Go in Peace" over the emblematic three chords of the "Christ the Man of Sorrows" theme (Figure 18).

Concluding Chorus

An expansive final chorus brings Part I to a close ("Turn you to the stronghold, ye prisoners of hope"). In contrast to the

Figure 15. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*, rehearsal 111.
Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.

Figure 16. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*, rehearsal 113.
Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.

Figure 17. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*, rehearsal 120.
Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.

Figure 18. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*,
1 measure before rehearsal 127.
Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.

A Major Oratorio Standing Outside Tradition

highly dramatic music coming earlier in this scene, the final chorus is reflective, lyrical, and subdued, rising above *piano* only once, for the phrase “Blessed is he who is not fallen from his hope in the Lord.” This last line possibly reflects the composer’s own struggles with faith alluded to above. Judas is noticeably absent from the solo quartet of the two Marys, John, and Peter.

Part II

Introduction

Paralleling the Prologue to Part I, this time involving only the orchestra, Judas’s torment and Jesus’s passion are foretold with a dramatically dark opening statement of a new Passion theme (Figure 19). We then hear previously introduced themes of Christ’s Loneliness, Christ’s Prayer, the Church, Christ the Son of God, and Christ the Man of Sorrows.

IV. The Betrayal

This is the extended Judas scene in four continuous sections, matching the extended Mary Magdalene scene at the end of Part I in both length and complexity.

The Betrayal:

The evangelist (solo tenor) foretells Jesus’s impending

suffering and death. Singing the “Choosing the Weak” theme from Part I (Figure 13), the Apostles vow to stand by Jesus. The men’s chorus then alternates between the roles of the narrator and the Apostles, acting out Judas’s betrayal and the march of the authorities to arrest Jesus.

In Gethsemane:

Jesus is confronted by the authorities. The Apostles forsake him and flee as he is led away. Peter is confronted by servants in the palace of the High Priest (SATB chorus) and denies Jesus three times (Figure 20). In one of the most remarkable passages in the work, the unaccompanied sopranos and altos are assigned the portrayal of Peter’s recognition and remorse (“And the Lord turned and look’d upon Peter, and he went out and wept bitterly.”) The extended betrayal scene concludes with two scenes of Judas’s torment: one public (“[within] The Temple”) and one private (“Without the Temple”).



Figure 19. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*, Part II. Introduction, mm. 1–4. Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.



Figure 20. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*, 4 measures before rehearsal 163. Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.

[Within] the Temple:

At this point, Elgar notably switches the voice of the evangelist from the tenor to the contralto (the same soloist for the role of Mary Magdalene in Part I). After her introduction, there is a riveting scene where Judas sings freely of his belated realization of guilt (“My punishment is greater than I can bear”) over the chorus’ ritualistic singing of a hymn-like song of judgment (“O Lord God, to Whom vengeance belongeth”).

Without the Temple:

Judas then leaves the Temple for an extended soliloquy. As he philosophically contemplates his mortality and his misguided actions and condemnation, he is interrupted by cries of “Crucify him!” in the distance. The full orchestra intones the three-chord Judas theme (see Figure 21, almost an inversion of the Christ the Man of Sorrows theme). Jaeger’s commentary suggests this is the moment of Judas’s suicide. Back in the Temple, the chorus concludes their hymn with the words “He shall bring upon them their own iniquity.”

The final three scenes of Part II are continuous, briefly representing the crucifixion of Christ and the empty tomb, followed by an expansive chorus for the Ascension.



Figure 21. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*, 3 measures before rehearsal 192.

Judas

Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.



Figure 22. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*, rehearsal 236.

Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.

V. Golgotha

The orchestra alone intones the last words of Christ on the cross (“Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” as indicated in the score) to which the chorus responds, “Truly this was the Son of God.” This leads to a surprising and revelatory cadence on F^b-major. Mary, Mother of Jesus, and John (the Beloved Disciple) then share a ruminative conversation on the meaning of Christ’s suffering.

VI. At the Sepulchre

With the soloist who sang Mary Magdalene in Part I again heard as the narrator, the disciples (now silent) approach the empty tomb, where they hear the men of the chorus chant the “Ancient Hebrew melody” (see Figure 11) from the opening scene of Part I as they again greet the Dawn. In response, a female chorus of Angels is heard, recalling the angelic chorus commiserating with Peter at his denial. They sing their first of many “Alleluia” and announce, “He is not here, but is risen.”

VII. The Ascension

Elgar does not skimp on the closing chorus of his visionary oratorio. As with the concluding chorus of Part I, the finale begins ruminatively. But this time, instead of remaining subdued, Elgar employs a complex layering of texture to create the most extended and climactic section in the work. The sopranos and altos of the chorus represent the Angels in Heaven, the tenors and bases represent the Apostles on Earth, with the soloists Mary, Mary Magdalene, Peter, and John mediating between the two. The resulting texture involves multiple central themes being sung and played, often simultaneously (see Figures 27 and 28). This section surely ranks among the most glorious culminating passages in Late Romantic literature. Elgar allows the scene to slowly recede before introducing one last theme—the “Christ’s Peace” theme from *Gerontius* (Figure 22) concluding with the words, “In His love and in His pity He redeemed them.”

Elgar's Distinctive Use of the "Leitmotif"

A primary aspect of Wagner's formal innovations was the emblematic use of melodic themes or chord progressions to provide symbolic signposts in the midst of the greatly expanded dramatic arch of his operas. An earlier use of such a device that might have also influenced Elgar can be found in Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, though Wagner would not acknowledge the Jewish-born composer's influence on himself. Elgar would have heard *Elijah* frequently as one of the three most regularly performed oratorios in England (alongside Handel's *Messiah* and Haydn's *The Creation*).

There are obvious parallels between Mendelssohn's central placement of the psychological/spiritual torment of the character of Elijah and Elgar's development of the characters of Judas and Mary Magdalene. But Elgar goes further than either of his predecessors in the

use of this method. His representational melodies are often longer and are frequently used in combination with other themes. Elgar's *leitmotifs* fully permeate *The Apostles*, with no fewer than sixty-two distinct motives labeled in Jaeger's monograph.¹⁶

While most themes appear only a few times in one or two scenes, there are a number that appear at significant points throughout the work. The themes vary quite widely in length, expressive affect, and in their differing melodic/rhythmic/harmonic contours, as can be seen from the examples displayed in this article. For the purpose of introduction, we will look more closely at two of the most important themes and examine how Elgar uses the *leitmotif* technique to create a cohesive overall form made up of interwoven strands of psychological narrative.

Thematic Example 1:

“Christ, The Man of Sorrows”

One of the central themes of *The Apostles* is a progression of three chords heard in the orchestra in twelve different passages.¹⁷ These comprise a striking set of “color” chords with an easily identifiable, if fleeting, harmonic profile (see Figure 2). Supporting the rising whole-tone melody in the upper voice, the first and third chords are a simple G^b major triad in first inversion and a B^b7 chord. But the second chord, unnamable as a functional harmony, contains a B^b that forms a dissonant diminished octave equidistant from both the bottom B^b and the upper A^b. This unstable passing harmony in the middle of two otherwise stable chords has an unmistakable identity to the ear.

The clarity of this musical icon, created by Elgar with the label “Christ, The Man of Sorrows” (attributed by

his publisher and close friend Jaeger) can be observed by comparing some of the twelve passages where this central harmonic theme appears.¹⁸ Elgar weaves the theme into the fabric of various scenes in quite different ways:

- as an important symbol of Christ’s identity introduced at the culmination of other themes: in the orchestral introductions for Christ alone “In the Mountain – Night” early in Part I (Figure 23) and the Garden of Gethsemane scene at the beginning of Part II (Figure 24);
- to highlight moments when an individual Apostle expresses faith in Christ: Mary Magdalene in response to the Beatitudes (page 61 in the vocal score), when she first sees Jesus walking on the waters to calm the storm (page 87 in the vocal score), and for Peter’s declaration of faith (see Figure 16);



A Major Oratorio Standing Outside Tradition

- as a sharp reminder when an Apostle denies faith in Christ: Peter's denial (Figure 20) and Judas's suicide (page 165 in the vocal score);

- at pivotal moments in Jesus's life and mission: his calling of the Apostles (Figure 25), his absolution of Mary Magdalene near the end of Part I (see Figure 18), his ascension near the end of Part II (page 181 in the vocal score) and the final declaration from Heaven of the completion of his mission (pages 194-196 in the vocal score).

Figure 23 shows rehearsal 14 of Edward Elgar's *The Apostles*. The score is in 3/4 time and features a 'Pastoral theme' for Oboe 1 and Oboe 2. The piano accompaniment includes strings and woodwinds (Horns and Woodwinds). The tempo is marked 'E. H.' (Moderato).

Figure 23. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*, rehearsal 14.
Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.

Thematic Example 2: "The Prayer of Christ"

In contrast to the brevity of the "Christ, The Man of Sorrows" theme, "The Prayer of Christ" theme (Figure 9) is more typical of the kind of extended leitmotif found throughout *The Apostles*. These longer melodic phrases are often sequenced together with themselves or with other themes to provide the underpinning for grand, climactic

Figure 24 shows rehearsal 143 of Edward Elgar's *The Apostles*. The score is in 3/4 time and features the 'Christ, The Son of God theme'. The tempo markings are 'Piu lento' and 'molto rit.'. The piano accompaniment includes strings, tuba, and woodwinds. The dynamics are marked 'ppp'.

Figure 24. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*, rehearsal 143.
Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.

Figure 25 shows 6 measures before rehearsal 56 of Edward Elgar's *The Apostles*. The score is in 3/4 time and features a vocal line for Jesus. The tempo is marked '♩ = 60'. The piano accompaniment includes horns and timpani. The dynamics are marked 'ppp'. The lyrics are: "He that re - ceiv - eth you, re - ceiv - eth Me,".

Figure 25. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*, 6 measures before rehearsal 56.
Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.

passages. The characteristic chromatic harmonic progression that is part of the theme's identity allows Elgar to shift tonal centers for dramatic effect.¹⁹

The importance of "The Prayer of Christ" theme is underscored by the two rising whole steps that begin its melody, the same pattern that defines the top voice of the "Man of Sorrows" theme. Its chromatically shifting harmonic progression also parallels that of the shorter theme. The ascending pattern of these central two themes, along with the ascending thirds at the end of the "Spirit of the Lord" theme (introduced in the opening measures of the whole work) point to the importance given by Elgar to the Ascension as the subject of the expansive choral finale at the end of the oratorio.

Looking at the six occurrences of the "Prayer of Christ" theme²⁰ it is remarkable that Elgar uses this theme not only in moments of the most intimate contemplation (such as Figure 26 from "In the Mountain—Night") but as a central theme in much more extroverted, expansive phrases toward the end of each Part. In these passages, the full solo, choral, and orchestral forces are brought to bear and other themes are layered in counterpoint to the Prayer theme.

One passage near the beginning of the Ascension chorus marked *pianissimo* from beginning to end for the full orchestra and chorus (Figure 27) combines both of these "public" and "private" sides of Elgar's palette and personality. A semi-chorus of angels in heaven sings the

words of Jesus's farewell prayer using the Prayer theme ("Holy Father, keep those whom Thou hast given me...") while the soloists sing the "Apostles' Faith" theme to proclaim the evangelical mission of the Apostles ("All the ends of the worlds shall remember and turn unto the Lord...").

The Perspective of the Outsider

A consideration of Elgar's sense of being an "outsider" as a composer with a working-class Catholic background in a musical world dominated by upper class Anglicans may lead us to better understand why he made the unusual choice of placing two biblical outsiders as the central characters in an oratorio about a group of establishment insiders into whose circle they did not quite fit.

Even later in life, when his international status was beyond question, Elgar expressed intense grievance at his perceived lack of acceptance due to his working-class, self-educated Catholic roots. In 1922, when asked to contribute money toward the gift of a dollhouse for Queen Mary, he protested to his friend Sassoon, "I started with nothing, and I've made a position for myself! We all know that the King and Queen are incapable of appreciating anything artistic; they've never asked for the full score of my Second Symphony [dedicated to the father of the reigning king, Edward VII] to be added to

Figure 26. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*, rehearsal 15.

Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.

A Major Oratorio Standing Outside Tradition

the Library at Windsor. But as the crown of my career I'm asked to contribute to—a DOLL'S HOUSE for the QUEEN!! I've been a monkey-on-a-stick for you people long enough. *Now I'm getting off the stick.*"²¹

From what we know about the likely intensity of Elgar's private inner life and faith, his mastery and remolding of the Wagnerian *leitmotif* techniques provided an ideal vehicle to bring the vivid life of his spiritual imagination to the concert stage. Elgar's pervasive use of symbolically weighted melodic material enabled him not only to hold together an otherwise broadly expansive form but to bring the "private" spiritual ruminations of his central characters to the foreground against the background of a few selected narrative events that are presented on the "public" stage outside of the characters' internal imaginations.

Elgar was known both for composing some of the best-known public works in the repertoire (such as the

Pomp and Circumstance March No. 1) and being closely identified with a work with an explicitly "private" meaning (his *Enigma Variations*²²). A major oratorio with characters and text such as *The Apostles* provides a rare opportunity to experience those opposing dimensions interwoven in the same work. That Elgar's *The Apostles* is so rarely performed in the United States is the true enigma. 

Complete Recordings of Edward Elgar's *The Apostles*

Adrian Boult conducting the London Philharmonic Orchestra and Choir with soloists Helen Watts, Sheila Armstrong, Robert Tear, Benjamin Luxon, Clifford Grant, John C. Case; Connoisseur Society, 1976; His Master's Voice, 1974.

221
IN HEAVEN: Semi-chorus (SAA) – Prayer of Christ Theme
pp mistico

S
"Ho - ly Fa - ther, keep through Thine own name those whom

A1
pp mistico
A2
"Ho - ly Fa - ther keep those whom Thou hast

ON EARTH: Unison Solo Quartet – Apostle' Faith Theme
[Mary, Mary-Magdalene, John and Peter]
pp molto legato

Solo Quartet
All the ends of the world shall re - mem - - - ber and turn un - to the Lord:_____

S
Thou hast giv - en Me,_____ that they may be one, as We are."

A1
A2
given Me, that they may be one, as We are."

Solo Quartet
— And_ all the Kin - dreds of the na - tions shall wor - ship be - fore Thee.

Figure 27. Edward Elgar, *The Apostles*, rehearsal 221.

Public Domain, London: Novello & Co., 1903.

Richard Hickox conducting the London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus with soloists Alison Hargan, Alfreda Hodgson, David Rendall, Bryn Terfel, Stephen Roberts, Robert Lloyd; Colchester, Essex, England: Chandos, 1990.

Richard Cooke conducting the Philharmonia Orchestra and Canterbury Choral Society with soloists Anna Leese, Louise Poole, Andrew Staples, Colin Campbell, Robert Rice, Roderick Williams; England: Independent Music & Media Alliance, 2005.

Mark Elder conducting the Hallé Orchestra and Choir with soloists Rebecca Evans, Alice Coote, Paul Groves, Jacques Imbrailo, David Kempster; England: Hallé, 2012.

NOTES

¹ See Byron Adams, “The ‘Dark Saying’ of the Enigma: Homoeroticism and the Elgarian Paradox,” *19th-Century Music*, XXIII/3 for references to more recent discussions about Elgar’s sense of social and religious identity.

² This article is a result of the author’s experience conducting a performance of *The Apostles* on April 10, 2016, at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, Doylestown, PA, with the Bucks County Choral Society, the Riverside Symphonia, and soloists Sally Wolf, Suzanne DuPlantis, Timothy Bentch, Jason Switzer, Daniel Teadt, and Kevin Deas. This may have been the first full performance in the Philadelphia region. There is no record of a performance of this work in the archives of the Philadelphia Orchestra. An online study guide created for the audience can be found at <<http://www.buckschoral.org/news-and-archives/resources/edward-elgar-the-apostles-a-study-guide/intro/>>. During the preparation of this article, the work received a rare New York performance by Leon Botstein and the American Symphony Orchestra at Carnegie Hall: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/14/arts/music/review-elgars-the-apostles-american-symphony-orchestra-leon-botstein.html?_r=0.

³ Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Edward Elgar: A Creative Life*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1984), 291.

⁴ Byron Adams, 223. Adams quotes friends and acquaintances

of Elgar such as Siegfried Sassoon recalling that “Elgar led me to the music-room and played the piano for nearly an hour It was splendid to see him glowing with delight in the music, and made me forget (and makes me regret now) the ‘other Elgar’ who is just a type of ‘club bore.’ At lunch, regaling us with longwinded anecdotes (about himself), he was a different man. The real Elgar was left in the music-room” (*Siegfried Sassoon, Diaries: 1923-1925*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London, 1985)151-152).

⁵ Robert J. Buckley, *Sir Edward Elgar* (London: The Bodley Head, 1905), 8, 74; as quoted in the forward to Edward Elgar, *The Apostles—An Oratorio*, Elgar Complete Edition (London: Novello, 1983).

⁶ A. J. Jaeger, *The Apostles by Edward Elgar, Op. 49, Book of Words with analytical and descriptive notes* by A. J. Jaeger (London: Novello, 1903).

⁷ C. V. Gorton, *The Apostles: A Sacred Oratorio by Edward Elgar: An Interpretation of the Libretto by C.V.Gorton, M.A., Rector of Morecambe, Hon. Canon of Manchester*; (London: Novello, 1903).

⁸ Manuscript letter of July 17, 1903, cited by Jerrold Northrop Moore in *Edward Elgar – A Creative Life* (London: OUP, 1984) 295.

⁹ See Figure 8 for an example of a theme common to *The Apostles* and *Gerontius*. For an extended discussion of the relationship of Elgar’s oratorios to preceding models, see Charles Edward McGuire, *Elgar’s Oratorios—The Creation of an Epic Narrative* (England: Ashgate, 2002) 34-38.

¹⁰ For complete attributions of scriptural texts to the libretto of *The Apostles*, see <<http://www.buckschoral.org/news-and-archives/resources/edward-elgar-the-apostles-a-study-guide/intro/>>. I owe thanks to Ruth Geiger (a singer in the Bucks County Choral Society) for help in looking up these attributions; I was unable to find a libretto with attributions in any of the published sources.

¹¹ Leon Botstein, “Transcending the Enigmas of Biography,” in *Edward Elgar and his World*, ed. Bryon Adams (Princeton: Princeton University Press; 2007): 398.

¹² Charles Edward McGuire, “Measure of a Man: Catechizing Elgar’s Catholic Avatars,” in *Edward Elgar and his World*, 21.

¹³ For a thorough discussion and reprinting of early reviews of *The Apostles*, see Aidan J. Thomson, “Early Reviews of *The Apostles* in British Periodicals” in *Edward Elgar and his World*, 127-172.

- ¹⁴ *Elgar's Oratorios*, 34.
- ¹⁵ See Melvin P. Unger's "Chiastic reflection in the B-minor Mass: lament's paradoxical mirror," Chapter 7 in *Exploring Bach's B-Minor Mass*, edited by Yo Tomita, Robin A. Leaver, and Jan Smaczny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
- ¹⁶ Jaeger, *The Apostles*.
- ¹⁷ One could speculate if this number of passages is related to the number of Apostles, but there is little evidence Elgar applied numerology to composition.
- ¹⁸ For a complete listing of examples of the "Man of Sorrows" theme, with orchestral cues and rehearsal numbers, go to [acda.org/files/ManOfSorrowsTheme.pdf].
- ¹⁹ See especially the movement from Gb to C# in Figure 23 from Part I, and from Ab to Eb in Figure 26 from the end of Part II.
- ²⁰ For a complete listing of examples of the "Prayer of Christ" theme, with orchestral cues and rehearsal numbers, go to [acda.org/files/PrayerOfChristTheme.pdf].
- ²¹ Sassoon, *Diaries*, 169, quoted by Bryon Adams in "Elgar and the Persistence of Memory," in *Edward Elgar and his World*, 74.
- ²² Some have even conjectured that the secret meaning of the *Enigma Variations* has to do with the inner conflict growing from the intensity of his relationship with his lifelong friend August Jaeger; see the Byron Adams article "The 'Dark Saying'" cited above.