William Walton

Cello Concerto

WILLIAM TURNER WALTON, who was knighted by King George VI in 1951, was born in Oldham, Lancashire, England, on March 29, 1902, and died on the island of Ischia, in the Bay of Naples, Italy, on March 8, 1983. He composed his Cello Concerto between February and October 1956 for Gregor Piatigorsky, who gave the first performances on January 25 and 26, 1957, with Charles Munch and the Boston Symphony Orchestra at Symphony Hall. Piatigorsky also gave the European premiere, on February 13, 1957, in London, with Sir Malcolm Sargent and the BBC Symphony Orchestra.

IN ADDITION TO THE SOLO CELLO, the score of Walton’s Cello Concerto calls for an orchestra of two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes (second doubling English horn), two clarinets (second doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, vibraphone, suspended cymbal, bass drum, xylophone, snare drum, tambourine, celesta, harp, and strings.

Walton composed three concertos for stringed instruments—each for a great master of his instrument—at wide intervals: the Viola Concerto for Lionel Tertis in 1929, the Violin Concerto for Jascha Heifetz in 1939, and the Cello Concerto for Gregor Piatigorsky in 1956. When the Viola Concerto was written, its composer was still generally regarded as an enfant terrible. By contrast, when he came to write the Cello Concerto, there were not a few who regarded Walton as essentially written out and living in the Elgarian past.

Walton became quite notorious for a single early piece, Façade, an unlikely offspring of Schoenberg’s Pierrot lunaire. At the time of its composition, in 1923, Walton was one of the young Turks of British music—he was just twenty-one—and had become connected with the outrageous Sitwells, who were the motivating force for the creation of this early and unique masterpiece. Though Walton was of essentially a conservative temperament in his music (a fact that became much clearer in later years), he was surely influenced by the chamber ensemble used in Pierrot lunaire and by Schoenberg’s treatment of the voice, particularly the rhythmicized character of Sprechstimme, when he undertook to set the poems of Edith Sitwell for a special “entertainment” devised by the Sitwell family. Polka, Ländler, tango, country dance, waltz, foxtrot, tarantella—all these and other styles cropped up in Walton’s ebullient score, which is now welcomed for its inventiveness and wit. At the time of the premiere, though, the very parochial critics of the British press regarded the work as scandalous. Headlines read, “Drivel they paid to hear” and “Surely it is time this sort of thing were stopped”!

At any event, Walton did stop. As noted above, his was essentially a conservative temperament artistically; by the late ’20s this began to be apparent, and it continued increasingly in the years to come. He began working under the strong influence of French style (one critic referred to him as “the seventh member of Les Six”), but more and more his affection for Elgar appeared in his works, the two symphonies and the three concertos among them. He had never been a fast worker, but when he could afford to take his time, he especially enjoyed doing so, the more so because, following a happy late marriage, he settled on the island of Ischia, turning London’s gloom and fog into Mediterranean sunshine.
When Piatigorsky requested a cello concerto from him, Walton had composed relatively little music of consequence for some time—it was, in fact, his first large-scale concert work in eighteen years. He threw himself into the concerto, shaping it rather after the pattern of the two earlier string concertos. The opening movement is flowing, not too fast, and serious in its material. The middle movement is a scherzo, and the finale contains quiet, retrospective episodes. The overall plan is very similar to that of Prokofiev’s Violin Concerto No. 1, which might have actually been an influence on Walton for the viola concerto, and it was followed considerably in each of the later string concertos.

When he finished the concerto, after eighteen months of work, Walton was clearly pleased. He wrote to Piatigorsky: “It is to my mind the best of my, now three, concertos. But don’t say so to Jascha.” Walton’s expression in all of his concertos is subdued. He despised empty virtuosity and went out of his way to avoid writing a cadenza. The Cello Concerto begins with a long, complex melody that sounds very “minory” as it provides a virtual mine of materials for development. The scherzo races along with rapid sixteenth-notes, like the Elgar concerto, transparently scored and challenging to the player. The finale bears the unusual title (in Italian) “Theme with improvisations”; for Walton, this is a variation form based on a broad slow melody. Each variation is a new type of “improvisation,” altering greatly in mood and expression until the orchestra closes affairs with an epilogue that draws together elements from the opening and closing movements.

Steven Ledbetter

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SINCE THE BSO’S WORLD PREMIERE PERFORMANCES OF WALTON’S CELLO CONCERTO with soloist Gregor Piatigorsky and conductor Charles Munch on January 25 and 26, 1957, the orchestra has played it on three occasions, always in subscription concerts: in April 1973 with cellist Zara Nelsova, Bernard Haitink conducting; in October/November 1982 with cellist Ralph Kirshbaum, André Previn conducting; and in November 1997 with cellist Lynn Harrell, James DePreist conducting.