Elgar and the Watch My Father Gave Me

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There are a few of us here, aficionados of the vinyl world ploughing through the stacks of LPs, tonnes of jazz, rock, classical, a century’s worth of discarded memories. I light upon a row and my fingers flip through history, past recordings that, on another day, would make me pause. But I am seeking a particular title, a collector’s item to some, of inestimable value to me. And there, one of those little gifts of time – the 1932 HMV Elgar Violin Concerto.

Gracing the sleeve is a photograph of a very young Yehudi Menuhin, in a light woollen vest, and the stately Sir Edward Elgar, white-haired and moustachioed, a dark-suited Edwardian gentleman.

It is July 14, 1932. They are in front of the Abbey Road Studios, a converted Georgian townhouse at No. 3 of that London thoroughfare in St John’s Wood. Elgar had conducted the London Symphony Orchestra at the opening of the new studio the previous November. Menuhin is holding the open score; Elgar leans lightly on his cane. They look like father and son, the sixteen-year-old prodigy who would give a body to the abstract longing in the work of the seventy-year-old composer. Menuhin is cooperating with the camera, while Elgar’s pose betrays an air of unease – he is perhaps impatient to go to the races, where the two had gone after skipping the final rehearsal of the Violin Concerto. Like the Cello Concerto, it is a threnody, permeated with longing, and a tragic knowledge
of things passing. Elgar himself remarks that it is ‘awfully emotional but I
love it …’

I like to think it was his farewell to the old world. Mahler composed
his heart-wrenching ninth and tenth symphonies at about the same time.
What was it that led such different artists towards the same sentiment? If
it was the spirit of the age that demanded artistic expression, it was a spirit
of foreboding and resignation, or what Miguel Unamuno diagnosed as
the tragic sense of life – ‘the agony of Christianity’. Their world would be
destroyed, and remade by another era.

The album, in its frayed plastic cover, strikes and holds a minor chord
in me, echoing two pasts: Elgar’s world, the Edwardian era of nostalgia
informed by an intense awareness of things past and passing, and mine, a
Singapore childhood, which seems as remote from Elgar’s era as England was
from its Far Eastern colony.

I first heard the Violin Concerto in the British Council Library in
Singapore and fell in love with its poignant melody. I would listen, rapt, gazing
out the library window at Clifford Pier across the road. On the pavement
below was an Indian moneychanger who parked all day on a wooden stool.
Observing the transactions, I imagined the world’s currencies in his shirt
pockets and dhoti. In rainy December, there was a touch of London to the
place, as umbrellas floated past and the street seemed busy yet lonely and
apparitional, the purposeful hither-and-thither of office workers becoming
abstract and distant through the fogged windows. For months I pestered the
librarian to play the record for me, over and over, until he declared that I
could operate the library turntable behind the counter myself.

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A lot of things changed on my sixteenth birthday. My father, who surfaced
periodically after my mother left him when I was five, wanted to see me.
I approached our meetings with longing and with dread: we met so rarely,
but he would always be in some sort of trouble, usually to do with money.
He surprised me this time because he was smiling and solvent with a wallet
fat with cash. He must have had a good day at the races; or, hope against
hope, he was trying to turn over a new leaf. I had learned long ago not
to analyse his behaviour. He wanted to buy me a watch, which would be
the first thing he had bought me in many years. We arranged to meet at Collyer Quay and from there repaired to Robinson's. It had found temporary quarters next to Rubber House after fire reduced the splendid neo-classical building at Raffles Place to rubble in 1972, killing nine people. The Robinson's Fire – it even got a Royal Commission of Inquiry into its cause – sent shock waves through the nation and, to my mind, was the beginning of the end for Singapore's legacy of colonial architecture. Whole streets, alleys and arcades fell before the wrecker's ball. Grave, grey Edwardian buildings with ornamental portals and porticos went tumbling down. I remember my father brought me to see what was left of Robinson's before the site was cleared; I was too young to comprehend the tragedy and even now get the image confused with newsreels of the Japanese bombings in 1941. The scene spoke to me about the future, betokening a profound sense of loss more palpable now that the entire district – the granite buildings, the cobbled walks, the confluence of alleys and arcades, the comforting sense of scale and proportion that the old buildings imparted – has vanished without a trace, and my father is now debtless and dead.

I remember he didn't like anything he saw in Robinson's – no doubt the watches I liked were too extravagant for someone so used to living near the bread line – and he led me into Change Alley, coasting along its length, as we had done years earlier, when my father sat me on his shoulders and we floated through the dappled sunlight, savouring the bazaar atmosphere – electronic gadgets, silks and sarongs and cheongsams, batik, tailors offering to whip up a suit at a bargain price, leather goods and luggage, pirated cassette tapes, toys and the laughing jack-in-the-boxes that always struck me as nothing short of sinister. I relished the press of loiterers, tourists, shoppers, bargain-hunters; so many different faces and races, so many languages, drifting along. It was popular with sailors and merchant seamen, and American soldiers in the late 1960s and early 1970s on R&R from the war up north. It was my first whiff of the foreign and I was seduced by their strange words and accents. My father knew one of the Indian money-changers and they would converse in a mix of English and Malay. I loved the rhythm of the old-world talk, unhurried, courteous, intimate.

As if following some invisible current, we drifted into the Alkaff Arcade, a parallel, prettier tributary to Change Alley. Saluting the jaga at the entrance
my father seemed to know all the Sikh watchmen, most of whom sidelined as money-lenders – we ambled into the cool neon interior.

It had a beautiful tiled floor of Moorish influence and a warren of shops, including one or two capacious emporiums with inviting porticos. Entranced, I would slow to a crawl, trawling its length over and over, looking for a secret door that would open into the bazaars of Samarkand or Istanbul. At a hole-in-the-wall watch-shop, we leaned on the glass counter and my father settled on a Titoni with Roman numerals and date. He insisted that I wear it immediately; I could feel it ticking in synchronicity with my pulse as we walked through the arcade, subconsciously exaggerating the swing of my left arm. Nestled in a corner of the arcade was a music store, and I pulled my father inside. The LPs were dusty, a forgotten look about them. Everything was on sale because of the imminent demolition, and everything was pre-disco, so I focused on the classical, browsing the Beethovens and Brahms and soon reached the only Elgar and it was the Elgar and Menuhin. My father, liking the look of the album and maybe impressed to have such a son who knew about western classical music, bought it for me.

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We were both feeling very pleased with ourselves and agreed it was time to eat. We found among the hawkers’ stalls by the river the one who was famous for his beef kway tiao and as we ate we watched the barges and the bait-hunters trawling the silt below for grubby worms. At the next stall, a long-haired man with tattoos creeping out of his singlet served up brimming glasses of sugar cane juice with great gusto, grinding the cane and milking the crush for the last drop. The late afternoon light was aligned with the river’s flow, a distilled light without glare. I think that was the last happy day I had with my father.

A week or a month later – it was too soon anyway – my father came to the house. He said he needed the watch back, just for a while, just for a few days. He brought me to the nearest pawnshop which, with its grilled counter, always reminded me of the entrapment of the poor and unredeemed. All its clients seemed tragic or helpless, like the desperate characters in Dickens and Dostoevsky. He promised he would get the watch back. I don’t know now if I believed him. I think I wanted to. I wonder where the watch ended up. More precious to me was the Elgar, which I played until our cheap second-hand turntable broke down. Over time, Elgar and Menuhin got lost in one of our many house moves.

Now the violin is drawing to the close of the cadenza. How will Elgar end it? What note will Menuhin hold out? The watch my father gave me and then took back ticks only in my memory, where my father also lives. Elgar’s timeless piece goes on, retracing, measuring, anticipating our steps, resonant of lost years and vanished places. Menuhin seems to be deferring the last note; but there is no going back, the music says. I am in a new country, a lifetime away from my lost country, my lost father.

The bow knows the score – having done its plaintive work of remembrance, the violin returns to the orchestra’s embrace – and I am again holding my father’s hand as we emerge into the light.

The 1932 performance is available on remastered CD from EMI Classics in its Great Recordings of the Century series – Elgar: Violin Concerto, ‘Enigma’ Variations/Elgar, Menuhin (ASIN: B00000I0BP).