

In memory of my mother, Edith Violet Wright (nee Atkins) 1919 - 2002

### **SIR IVOR ATKINS**

by David C F Wright, DMus

Sir Ivor Atkins was born in Llandaff on the 29 November 1869. His father, Frederick Pyke Atkins was the organist at St Johns Church, Cardiff.

Frederick was born in Gloucester in 1830. When he was very young he moved to Llandaff and was very active in music making in Wales and in the Eisteddfod movement. He was responsible for all the music for the re-opening of Llandaff cathedral in 1889. His brother, Reginald Mozart was also a fine organist and his sister, Florence, was a gifted pianist.

Ivor was brought up with music and this coupled with his Welsh nationality and the Welsh's devotion to music gave him a good grounding.

He was educated at Roath and privately. He was not only outstanding in music but in many other subjects as well. He was an authority on Welsh history and other aspects of history as well as the history and the culture of the Saxons particularly fascinated him.

He helped his father and was his official assistant at St Johns from the age of fifteen. At the age of 17 he took up his first organ post at Stonehaven between Montrose and Aberdeen

He was a pupil of G R Sinclair who was born in Croydon in 1863 and studied at the Royal Irish Academy of Music. He was the assistant organist at Gloucester cathedral from 1879 and, later, the organist and choirmaster at Truro cathedral from 1880-9.

In fact Sir Ivor followed George Robertson Sinclair around, becoming his assistant at Truro in 1885 and when Sinclair became organist at Hereford cathedral in 1899, Ivor became his assistant from 1890 onwards.

Ivor met Elgar in 1890 at the premiere of Froissart.

The following year he met some distinguished musicians such as Madame Albani, Edward Lloyd and Plunket Greene. In October of that year he attended the Birmingham Triennial Festival and met Dvorak and the conductor Hans Richter.

In 1893 Ivor became the organist and choirmaster at Ludlow Parish Church. Such was his talent and great administrative skills that he was appointed organist and choirmaster at Worcester cathedral in August 1897. He was 27. It was also the year that his father died.

This appointment was important because of the Three Choirs Festival which involved the three cathedral cities of Gloucester, Hereford and Worcester where these organists took turns in conducting the choirs and orchestra.

On 25 January 1898 he made his debut as a conductor which programme included Elgar's My love dwelt in a foreign land.

In one of his regular organ recitals at Worcester, Atkins included the Elgar Organ Sonata. This was on the 17 November 1898 and Elgar was delighted. Later, he was to ask Atkins's advice on the composition of the Enigma Variations and so began the weekly visits Ivor made on Friday afternoons to Elgar. Thereafter Ivor was asked to proof read everything that Elgar wrote but often the stubborn older man did not pay any heed.

Atkins's conducting debut at the Three Choirs Festival was in 1899 and received some adverse criticism owing to his lack of experience. The fact of the matter was that Elgar had let him down very badly promising him the premiere of the Gordon symphony inspired by General Gordon of Khartoum. Elgar never wrote it. That festival included Elijah and Messiah and Coleridge Taylor conducted his Solemn Prelude op. 40 and Horatio Parker 's splendid Nova Novissima which Elgar called shit!.

For 1900, Atkins invited Coleridge Taylor to conduct his choral work, Hiawatha.

On his second appearance in 1902 Atkins excelled himself with a stunning performance of Richard Strauss's Death and Transfiguration.

But to go back a few years. The year 1899 was the year of Ivor's marriage to the daughter of Rev Edward Butler of Llanged Castle, Breconshire. This took place on 29 April 1899. The bride was Katharine May Dorothea, known as Dora. She was to become the first woman High Sheriff in England and was Mayor of Worcester in 1936-7. In her younger days she had sung in choirs under Elgar and later in life was the Chairman of the Worcester Royal General Infirmary. She died in 1954. Their son, Wulstan, born on 24 November 1904 had Elgar as his godfather. Wulstan was to become the chairman of the trustees of Elgar's birthplace and museum at Broadheath. He had pursued a career in Civil engineering and was awarded the MBE..

His name was chosen under the influence of Elgar and his Catholicism. There was a Roman Catholic Church at Little Malvern called St Wulstans.

The first performance of Elgar's Enigma Variations was given by Sir Ivor at the organ of Worcester cathedral which event he repeated on later occasions.

In the 1901 Three Choirs Festival, Sir Ivor took part in the now forgotten Piano Trio no. 2 by Benjamin Godard. He also adjudicated at the Feis Ceoil in Dublin that year.

There were endless problems in staging Elgar's Gerontius at the Three Choirs Festival since it included doctrines which were unlawful to the Church of England. Atkins was also a good administrator and diplomat and so the work was performed every year until Elgar's death.

At the 1902 Festival Atkins conducted many items from Bach to Brahms's Symphony no. 3 in F.

About this time Elgar's letters to Sir Ivor was addressed to Firapeel and some of the thing he wrote troubled Atkins. Elgar would write, "Don't hate me, please" and sometimes signed his letters "Love, Edward."

It is known that Elgar was a lecherous man and there are stories that he was also bisexual. This greatly distressed Sir Ivor.

In February 1903 Atkins conducted works by Richard Strauss including Wanderers Sturmlied. Elgar wrote a fan letter to Strauss who replied with a simple comment that he had heard how well Sir Ivor had performed his work. Elgar was not pleased. In December 1904 Strauss conducted several of his works in Birmingham including Don Juan, Death and Transfiguration, the rather odd Violin Concerto and his masterpiece, Ein Heldenleben.

Ivor received his Doctorate of Music by examination at Oxford. He was a brilliant scholar and an expert on many aspects of music and other subjects as well. He established himself as a very fine conductor and the greatest organist of his day. He conducted at the Three Choirs festival in 1899, 1902, 1905, which premiered his Hymn of Faith, 1908, 1911, 1920, 1923, 1926, 1932, 1935 and 1938.

He was awarded the Honorary RAM in 1910. He was awarded the FSA and FRCO. He was president of the Royal College of Organists for 1935-6. He was a Fellow of St Michaels College, Tenbury.

He was the conductor of the Worcester Festival Chorus.

Sir Ivor was a keen cyclist. For example, in 1905 he took his bicycle to Oban for a cycling holiday. He also enjoyed a cigarette.

Atkins was offered two prestigious posts in America, which would have been very lucrative, but he turned them both down. He was not a man for self-aggrandisement as Elgar was!

Elgar was always calling for him. "Only Sir Ivor lifts me out of my many depressions," Sir Edward said..

By 1907 Atkins was considering performing Sgambati's Requiem Mass written in 1896 and reviving Schubert's Lazarus. He presented Stanford's beautiful Stabat Mater and a rarity by Grieg, Recognition of Land.

In 1908 Sir Ivor gave the premiere of Elgar's Wand of Youth suite no 2, Op 16. At the Three Choirs Festival of that year he put on Beethoven's Violin Concerto with Mischa Elman as the soloist much to Elgar's annoyance. Parry, Bantock and Stanford conducted works of their own.

A holiday in Scotland was immediately followed by Sir Ivor conducting a concert in Tewkesbury Abbey.

Atkins was a very fussy conductor and somewhat autocratic but he certainly knew what he was doing. He was tall and very thin and used a long baton such as the type used by Sir Adrian Boult. He knew the scores inside out and in minute detail. He would employ only top soloists.

My friend, Frank Downes, who was principal horn in the CBSO in their glory days under Weldon, days that have not been seen since with that orchestra, tells a story of how he was to take part in a concert in Worcester during the Second World War and had to 'cadge' a lift on what was known as a Queen Mary lorry which carried RAF parts. Frank and his friends arrived a half hour late and Sir Ivor was cross. The late arrivals returned the compliment and Atkins calmed down.

Frank Downes vividly remembers Sir Ivor conducting a stupendous performance of Elgar's The Kingdom and in which he took part.

Elgar was a very unpleasant man and, yet, Ivor fully supported him. 'Elgar had no academic qualifications of any kind whereas Sir Ivor had three major qualification in music alone acheived by years of study and examinations. It is true that Elgar had four honorary doctor of music degrees as gifts, whereas Sir Ivor worked for his. Atkins received his BMus Oxford in 1892 by examination and his D Mus at Oxford also by examination. His examiners for his doctorate were Ralph Vaughan Williams, Percy Buck and Hugh Allen. Elgar tampered with Ivor's projects altering the libretto to Atkins's Hymn of Faith for soloists, chorus and orchestra and making a few "unnecessary suggestions to Sir Ivor's edition of the Bach Passion so that he could put his name alongside that of Bach and inflate his already disturbing pride.

Atkins had to later correct Elgar's additions because they were either wrong or inappropriate!

After the premiere of Elgar's Symphony no. 1 on 3 December 1908, Sir Ivor introduced it to Worcester in November 1909 along with Sir Alexander Mackenzie's Dream of Jubal. Elgar was absolutely delighted with the performance of the symphony but miserable that a dream he considered inferior to

his should be presented.

Jubal had upstaged Gerontius!

Jaegar, the Nimrod of the Enigma variations, died in 1909. Elgar was inconsolable. Sir Ivor was touched by his grief but wondered why it was so excessive. It was said that Elgar and Jaegar had a sexual relationship and having seen the original letters Elgar wrote to my great uncle that certainly appears to be so.

Atkins's loyalty to the troublesome and arrogant Elgar is commendable ( he did not desert him as almost everyone else did; his son Edward Wulstan Ivor remained true as well)) as is equally commendable the fact that Sir Ivor was the organist at Worcester cathedral for 53 years. It tells us a great deal about the fundamental goodness of his character.

Elgar was always interfering. He knew best every time. As already intimated, he told Sir Ivor Atkins that he could not and must not include Beethoven's Violin Concerto in the 1908 Festival as it was too secular. The truth is that he was contemplating composing a violin concerto and felt that the inclusion of the Beethoven would hinder a performance of his when it was written.

In 1910 Sir Ivor and Lady Atkins toured Southern Germany and Austria with the two Miss Martleys. They attended the Oberammergau Passion Play but Atkins was preoccupied with putting on Beethoven's Choral Symphony at the Three Choirs Festival in Worcester that year. Again, Elgar, the great interferer, was against this. He was completing his Violin Concerto and that was to be given priority performance, not Beethoven.

Sir Ivor worked industriously at Bach's St Matthew Passion. Elgar was not that interested. He was now working on his Symphony no. 2. His contribution to the Bach editing was so slight as not to be worthy of his name being included. When meetings were arranged concerning the Bach, Elgar would respond to Atkins's gracious letters by saying that could not possibly come. The work on the Passion was Atkins own.

Elgar who had objected to the Beethoven Violin Concerto being performed at the Three Choirs Festival because it was too secular, now demanded that his Violin Concerto be performed there along with his Symphony no. 2.

Among all the scathing remarks Elgar made about everyone the inclusion of Granville Bantock's Overture to a Greek tragedy in 1911 engendered Elgar's famous remark about burning all heretics, a particularly unpleasant reference to Bantock. The Atkins's edition of the St Matthew Passion was included and with Elgar's name stated as a co-editor.

Atkins did not compose much and that is a pity. He did write The Virgin's Lullaby which he sent to Elgar at Christmas 1912 which Elgar admired but Sir Ivor was now hooked on Elgar and spent all his spare time devoted to his cause. He gave the premiere of Elgar's Go, Song of Mine, Op. 57 in 1911.

He spent hours correcting mistakes in Elgar's The Music Makers.

Sir Ivor was successful in securing the visit of Saint Saens to the 1913 Festival where he conducted the first performance of his new oratorio, The Promised Land.

Elgar was downright abusive about this and, indeed, about all new works except his own. He lampooned Florent Schmitt's setting of Psalm 47, a glorious work, which Atkins wanted to conduct at the 1914 festival. The truth was that Elgar had a setting of Psalm 48 and did not want it to be rivalled or upstaged. Eight years later, Elgar was vitriolic about Scriabin's Poem of Ecstasy given at the 1922

Festival and his abuse of Walton and his Viola Concerto is well known.

The Great War revealed another side of Elgar which was utterly distasteful and this concerned his navy blue knickers fetish. For those who do not know, Elgar insisted that any woman who played either of his concertos or sang in any of his choral works or played in the orchestra playing any work of his must wear navy blue underwear. There is a diplomatic and playing down of this fact in Beatrice Harrison's biography. It has also been said, and by very many people in the know, that Elgar actually and personally inspected this requirement on every possible occasion. It does fit in with his lecherous character.

When I researching my first book in the early 1960s, I received twenty letters from various women who had performed Elgar with the composer present, or conducting, and every one of them confirmed the story of the navy blue underwear and how Elgar had so humiliated these women...

Sir Ivor put on a performance of Messiah in 1914 to raise monies for Belgian refugees. Elgar said that this gesture was demeaning but then set about writing Polonia ostensibly to raise funds for Polish refugees. He had to go one better than Sir Ivor but he did not care about misplaced persons, only himself.

In 1916 Atkins repeated his act of humanitarian care by performing Handel's Samson.

The period of the First World War had many casualties and some not through war itself. In February 1917 Sinclair died suddenly in a Birmingham hotel.

It was solely due to Sir Ivor that the Three Choirs Festival resumed after the Great War. This was in 1920, and the management, in recognition of his sterling work as an administrator, prevailed upon him to revive his Hymn of Faith which he did.

For that festival in Worcester between September 5 and 10 Sir Ivor conducted the following works:

Elijah	Mendlessohn
Hymn of Faith	Atkins
Music Makers	Elgar
Hymn of Praise (Symphony no. 2)	Mendlessohn
Dream of Gerontius	Elgar
There is an old belief	Parry
Fantasy on Dante's Divine Comedy	Walford Davies
Symphony in D minor	Cesar Franck
St Matthew Passion	Bach
Four Hymns for tenor and strings	Vaughan Williams
For the fallen	Elgar
Requiem	Verdi
Messiah	Handel
Worcestershire Rhapsody	A E Brent Smith

That is quite an undertaking for anyone!

He was knighted in 1921 for his services to music. During that year he toured Belgium and Holland giving organ recitals.

In 1922 he joined the Athenaeum Club in Pall Mall London because Elgar said it was the right thing to do. Sir Ivor worked on an edition of Bach's Mass in B minor.

Among his works is a splendid Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis for chorus and orchestra. He wrote

many anthems, some of which are still in use today.

He wrote a pamphlet on the Organists of Worcester cathedral and a preface to early Worcester Harmony. In 1928 he wrote a treatise entitled An Investigation of two Anglo-Saxon calendars.

The 1928 Festival included the visits of two composers conducting their own works. Ethel Smyth conducted her Mass in D and proved to everyone how strange she was, and Kodaly conducted one of his many masterpieces the Psalmus Hungaricus with Steuart Wilson as the tenor soloist.

To Elgar's disgust, Sir Ivor included the Walton Viola Concerto and conducted Szymanowski's glorious Stabat Mater at the 1932 festival

When Elgar died in 1934 Atkins made all the arrangements for a memorial service at Worcester cathedral.

The festival that year was at Gloucester and included Elgar's The Kingdom, conducted by Herbert Sumsion (always known as John), the dreadful Symphony no. 2 voted in 2007 as the most disliked symphony of all time, conducted by Percy Buck, and Sir Ivor conducted The Dream of Gerontius. The Dean and Anglican officials would not allow these concerts to be recorded. What is on record is the universal opinion that Atkins's Gerontius was the best ever performance. I received scores of letters from people saying this, and others who said that Elgar was a poor conductor not only of his music but everyone else's.

The years of the Second World War as to the Atkins household are not well documented. Lady Atkins worked industriously as a hospital administration and her noble work should not be overlooked. Sir Ivor continued as organist and in raising monies for worthwhile causes.

Without Elgar, Sir Ivor now allowed that fundamental goodness of his character to blossom. He was caring, if a little aloof, and profoundly humanitarian.

He retired from his cathedral post in Easter 1950. Sadly I have to say that all the information I have received indicates that his successor was anxious to remove him and was very unkind to him since this successor was also in the Elgarian mould of self-importance! It is also commonly reported that his successor was also very unpleasant to George Weldon and Ruth Gipps and this is commented on in my biography of the late Dr Gipps.

Sir Ivor Atkins, died in Worcester on 26 November 1953, three days short of his 84th birthday.

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This article should be read in conjunction with Dr Wright's article [Elgar Unmasked](#).