



BFI'S 100 BBC TV GAMECHANGERS

Monitor: Elgar + Omnibus: Dance of the Seven Veils

Monitor: Elgar

In the late 1950s, Ken Russell's amateur films secured him a position at the BBC, making documentaries for the *Monitor* arts strand run by the benevolently autocratic Huw Wheldon. He quickly established himself as an unusually imaginative and resourceful filmmaker, and when asked to direct *Monitor*'s prestigious 100th edition, he chose to devote nearly an hour to the life and work of the composer Sir Edward Elgar (1857-1934). The result was a major milestone in the history of the television documentary, whose impact was such that it was quickly repeated after its initial broadcast on 11 November 1962, an almost unprecedented honour at the time.

As a happy side-effect, it also significantly raised the public profile of its then-neglected subject, whose popular image as a walrus-moustached knight of the realm who wrote pieces with titles like 'Pomp and Circumstance' (from which 'Land of Hope and Glory' was derived) belied a sensitive, private and somewhat melancholy man, who achieved fame relatively late in life and who was often more celebrated abroad than at home, despite being Britain's first truly world-class composer since Henry Purcell's heyday some two centuries earlier.

Elgar was made under a series of Wheldon-imposed restrictions, notably a ban on dramatisations of the lives of real people. Russell agreed a compromise: although Elgar and his contemporaries would be portrayed by actors, they would never speak and would mostly be filmed in long shot. Russell exploited these limitations brilliantly, the absence of dialogue letting him fill the soundtrack with almost wall-to-wall Elgar, including pieces that had rarely been heard since their composition. Wheldon himself contributed the relatively sparse narration, but the film's true eloquence comes from the fusion of Elgar's music and Russell's images.

Given the film's lowly origins, its visual fluidity is remarkable: this couldn't be further removed from a dry historical lecture. When Russell's camera isn't swooping and gliding over Elgar's beloved Malvern Hills, it's fixating on strangely arresting shots: the sequence covering Lady Elgar's death begins with tendrils of mist snaking through a silver birch wood, continues with a dark room full of mysteriously shrouded furniture and ends with the bereaved Elgar's new and obsessive interest in microscopic natural phenomena. Most television dates rapidly, but *Elgar* is still startlingly fresh and inventive. Even the black-and-white photography looks like a deliberate artistic choice as opposed to a then-universal convention.

Omnibus: Dance of the Seven Veils

If *Song of Summer* (BBC, 1968) reached for the sublime, *Dance of the Seven Veils* (BBC, 1970) aims straight for the ridiculous – and ridicule was Ken Russell's intention, as the programme's subtitle 'A comic strip in 7 episodes on the life of Richard Strauss 1864-1949' makes clear. Comfortably his most

extreme television film, its broadcast was preceded by a warning about its violent content, though it still caused widespread outrage.

Russell's composer biopics were usually labours of love. This was the opposite: he regarded Strauss's music as 'bombastic, sham and hollow', and despised the composer for claiming to be apolitical while cosying up to the Nazi regime. The film depicts Strauss in a variety of grotesquely caricatured situations: attacked by nuns after adopting Nietzsche's philosophy, he fights duels with jealous husbands, literally batters his critics into submission with his music and glorifies the women in his life and fantasies.

Later, his association with Hitler leads to a graphically depicted willingness to turn a blind eye to Nazi excesses, responding to SS thugs carving a Star of David in an elderly Jewish man's chest by urging his orchestra to play louder, drowning out the screams. Unexpectedly, Strauss is credited as co-writer, which was Russell's way of indicating that every word he uttered on screen was sourced directly from real-life statements.

Russell was well aware that he was entering difficult territory. As he told his biographer John Baxter, the film was:

'A good example of the sort of film that could never be made outside the BBC, because the lawyers would be on to it in two seconds. I would have had to submit a script to the Strauss family and his publishers Boosey and Hawkes would have come into it, and it would never have happened. The great thing about the BBC is that the quickness of the hand deceives the eye. Before anyone can complain, the film is out. But the price you pay with a really controversial film is that it's usually only shown once.'

Much later, Russell was refused permission to feature the composer's music in *Salome's Last Dance* (1989), the same year that his autobiographical *South Bank Show, A British Picture* included clips from *Dance of the Seven Veils*, but accompanied by the copyright-free waltzes of his namesake Johann.

Michael Brooke, BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk

MONITOR: ELGAR

Director: Ken Russell

Production Company: BBC

Producer: Humphrey Burton

Assistant to Director: Anne James

Screenplay: Ken Russell

Commentary Written/Spoken by: Huw Wheldon

Film Cameraman: Ken Higgins

Editor: Allan Tyrer

Sound: Peter Jarvis, John Murphy

Cast

Peter Brett (*Mr Elgar*)

Rowena Gregory (*Mrs Elgar*)

George McGrath (*Sir Edward Elgar*)

Ken Russell (*himself*)*

Music extracts

Wirin: *Serenade For Strings Opus 11 4th Movement - Marcia*

Elgar: *Introduction and Allegro for String Orchestra, The Language of Flowers, Two Part Fugue in D Minor, O Salutaris Hostias, Nellie Polka, L'Hippodrome, Quintet for Wind Instruments, Salut d'amour, Overture Gondoliers, Imperial March, The Dream of Gerontius, Enigma Variations - A Theme, Enigma Variations - B. Troyte, Pomp and Circumstance No.2, Symphony No.2 in E Flat Major, Pomp and Circumstance No.1, Cello Concerto in E Minor, Land of Hope and Glory, Enigma Variations 'Nimrod'*

Haydn: *Trumpet Concerto*

Vivaldi: *Violin Concerto in A Minor*

Sullivan: *Overture Gondoliers*

Bach: *Fantasia and Fugue in G Minor*

BBC1 tx 11.11.1962

55 mins

* Uncredited

OMNIBUS: DANCE OF THE SEVEN VEILS

Director: Ken Russell

Production Company: BBC

Producer: Ken Russell

Assistant to Directors: Alan Benson,

Marjorie Russell, Don Bennetts

Script: Henry Reed, Ken Russell

Scenario: Ken Russell, Henry Reed, Richard Strauss

Photography: Peter Hall

Editor: Dave King

Designer: Derek Dodd

Costumes: Shirley Russell

Make-up: Shirley Boakes

Choreography: Terry Gilbert

Sound: John Murphy

Dubbing: Stanley Morcom

Cast

Christopher Gable (*Richard Strauss*)

Judith Paris (*Pauline Strauss*)

Kenneth Colley (*Hitler*)

Vladek Sheybal (*Goebbels*)

James Mellor (*Goering*)

Sally Bryant (*Life*)

Gala Mitchell (*fallen woman*)

Rita Webb (*Salome*)

Imogen Claire (*Salome – dancer*)

Maggie Maxwell (*Potiphar's wife*)

Otto Diamant (*rabbi*)

Dorothy Grumbar (*Jewish woman*)

Martin Fenwick (*Baron Ochs*)

Anna Sharkey (*Octavian*)

Graham Armitage

BBC1 tx 15.2.1970

55 mins

BFI'S 100 BBC TV GAMECHANGERS**The Eurovision Song Contest 1962 + intro**

Sat 22 Oct 12:00

A Eurovision Extravaganza: The Changing Face of Eurovision

+ panel discussion with clips

Sat 22 Oct 14:45

Monitor: Elgar + Omnibus: Dance of the Seven Veils

Thu 3 Nov 18:15

Play for Today: Licking Hitler + panel + Q&A

with writer David Hare

Sat 12 Nov 15:00

I, Claudius (Episode 4): Poison Is Queen + Q&A with cast members

Sir Derek Jacobi and Dame Siân Phillips

Sun 13 Nov 15:15

Theatre 625: Talking to a Stranger Part 1:**Anytime You're Ready to Sparkle**

Sun 20 Nov 15:30

Goodness Gracious Me + The Real McCoy (2 episodes)

Mon 21 Nov 18:30

The Wednesday Play: In Two Minds + Where the Buffalo Roam

Sun 27 Nov 14:30

The Royle Family (2 episodes) + panel discussion

Sun 27 Nov 18:20

Empire Road (2 episodes) + panel discussion

Wed 30 Nov 18:10

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