

# Steve ELCOCK

ORCHESTRAL MUSIC, VOLUME FOUR

VIOLA CONCERTO

SYMPHONY NO. 4

HAMMERING

FERMETURE

Paul Silverthorne, viola  
Moravian Philharmonic Orchestra  
Kenneth Woods

# THE SYMPHONIC STRUCTURES OF STEVE ELCOCK

by Richard Whitehouse

Steve Elcock was born in Chesterfield, between Sheffield and Nottingham in north-central England, in 1957 and has lived in central France since 1981. His emergence as one of the leading symphonic composers of his generation has been a recent phenomenon. His first acknowledged works appeared in the early 1990s and were relatively small-scale pieces intended for performance by local musicians. A more ambitious approach is evident in *Haven* (1995), a ‘Fantasia on a theme by J. S. Bach’, his first work for full orchestra and a potent instance of creative reinterpretation which bridges the intervening centuries.<sup>1</sup>

Over a decade later, in March 2009, *Hammering* [1] secured Elcock his first professional hearing, when James MacMillan conducted its premiere with the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra in Manchester. By this time, having written his first two symphonies as well as a violin concerto,<sup>2</sup> Elcock was evidently at home in the orchestral medium, making *Hammering* a showpiece with substance that communicates as readily as it intrigues.

Elcock has described *Hammering* as ‘a study in gradually building up a piece from very few resources.’<sup>3</sup> It evolves from the note E alone, with more and more notes gradually becoming available on either side – thus E flat and F, D and F sharp, etc. – until all twelve notes are brought into play. This process is accentuated through the increasing rapidity of appearance of the new notes (after 32 beats, then 31 and 30 beats, and so on). The music suggests the building of a sizable edifice, until the

<sup>1</sup> Recorded by the Siberian Symphony Orchestra conducted by Dmitry Vasiliev on Toccata Classics TOCC 0445.

<sup>2</sup> The Violin Concerto was recorded by Zoë Beyers, with the English Symphony Orchestra conducted by Kenneth Woods, on Nimbus NI6446.

<sup>3</sup> Steve Elcock’s website: <https://steveelcock.fr/hammering>.

climactic emergence of the complete structure precipitates its collapse – at which point, as Elcock observes, ‘The possibility of a new beginning is suggested.’<sup>4</sup>

Although concertos are less prominent in Elcock’s output than symphonies, a *concertante* element has figured in his music almost from the beginning. It first bore fruit in his Concertino for Clarinet and Strings (2001, rev. 2014),<sup>5</sup> then the Violin Concerto (1993–2003, rev. 2020). In contrast to the outwardly orthodox three-movement format of that work, the Viola Concerto, written largely in the winter of 2017 and spring of 2018, is structured as a single movement in three continuous sections, its soloist very much ‘first among equals’ with the orchestra. Not long before, Elcock had written *Manic Dancing* (2016) for piano and orchestra,<sup>6</sup> in three continuous sections which favour a more unusual approach to the relationship between piano and orchestra.

A characteristic of the Viola Concerto is its use of motifs that remain easily identifiable. It opens [2] with a pensive four-note motto on clarinet (Ex. 1) that is countered by the animated entry of the soloist (Ex. 2), which soon takes over the accompanying triplets; they themselves then become the accompaniment to a limp idea shared between violins and flutes (Ex. 3). The soloist itself takes up this shape, in the company of a significant motif on two muted horns (Ex. 4), and these two ideas are duly elaborated by flute then viola respectively.

#### Ex. 1

Tempo commodo (♩ = 84)

clarinet

flutes

*pp* < *p*

*mp*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Recorded in its version for clarinet sextet on Toccata Classics rocc 0506.

<sup>6</sup> Recorded by Marina Kosterina and the Siberian Symphony Orchestra conducted by Dmitry Vasiliev on Toccata Classics rocc 0616.



against the prevailing  $\frac{4}{4}$  of an increasingly complex texture. The soloist is silenced with an intense build-up that culminates in a powerful orchestral statement, gradually dying down towards what might be called an ‘interrupted cadenza’ that leads into a *Largo*.

This slow section [4] is scored mostly for strings, though on its repeat a clarinet takes over the main theme from the solo viola. The soloist has a pointedly brief cadenza, before the music heads into a quietly expectant passage characterised by vertiginous writing for a muted solo horn. This passage builds in intensity towards a violent outburst that alludes to the opening bars of the work (Ex. 1), followed by a *Moderato* [5], which functions as the transition into a final section [6] that Elcock describes as ‘an uncomplicated folksy thing complete with flattened seventh’.<sup>8</sup>

Before long, the opening of the concerto (Ex. 1) is directly recalled, though at a swifter tempo. The ‘folksy’ idea returns, leading into the coda. As the music accelerates, the original four-note motto quickly insinuates itself across the lower instruments, and results in a powerful fanfare for the brass. Soon afterwards, however, the horns suddenly rear up with that defining leap from the first entry of the soloist (Ex. 2) – a decisive ending to a journey sometimes oblique but always eventful, one which violists should consider adding to their concerto repertoire.

Elcock has written<sup>9</sup> of the impact that encountering the music of Allan Pettersson (specifically the Sixth Symphony of 1963–66) had on his thinking – an impact confirmed when his own Eighth Symphony, substantially reworked from a long-discarded string quartet, received its premiere in 2021 from Kenneth Woods and the English Symphony Orchestra.<sup>10</sup> Although already aged 45 when his First Symphony appeared (reworked from a double concerto for clarinet and bassoon), Elcock has gone on to make this genre the bedrock of his creativity.

The post-Romantic First Symphony, in three movements, is in marked contrast to its successor, in which Elcock took up the challenge of writing a work in the classical four-

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> For example, in his blog article ‘Coming in from the Unknown’ on the Toccata Classics website: <https://toccataclassics.com/coming-in-from-the-unknown/>.

<sup>10</sup> Their recording can be found on Nimbus N16446.

movement mould. Appearing after a four-year genesis, the Third Symphony<sup>11</sup> falls into three movements: a combative opening *Allegro*, then a sardonic *Ostinato* followed by a Passacaglia of a length, formal intricacy and emotional intensity that provide a fitting but equivocal conclusion.

It was against this background that the Fourth Symphony, written between September 2012 and January 2013, emerged. It is one of only two of Elcock's symphonies to bear a subtitle (the other is his Sixth), in this instance: 'A golden rose fallen from the flat sea of time'. Elcock offers no help as to its meaning: 'I will only say that you must make of it what you can.'<sup>12</sup>

The emotional character of the piece is notably more equivocal than that of its predecessors, abetted in this respect by the continuity of thought across its half-hour span, which similarly concludes without overt resolution. It is Elcock's first symphony in a single movement, though one that avoids both the climactic resolve of Sibelius' Seventh – still the conceptual touchstone of single-movement symphonies a century on – and the enfolding resignation of Tippett's Fourth. Its ambivalent nature, together with the stylistic contrast of its primary motifs and the means by which they are elaborated, affords it more stylistic variety than its predecessors and places it among the most intriguing of his works and arguably the most contemporary-sounding among Elcock's eleven symphonies to date – although the very term 'contemporary' no longer means what it did a generation (or even less) ago. Indeed, little more than a year later, Elcock's Fifth Symphony<sup>13</sup> paid tribute to Beethoven's Fifth, without conforming to any classical archetype – and Elcock's subsequent symphonies have all gone their own way to a demonstrable degree.

The Fourth Symphony – Elcock's first to feature a slow introduction – starts [7] by outlining a twelve-note series (Ex. 5) which emerges in full only at bar 58. This first section includes two motifs that will prove important: a chorale-like fragment at bar 9 (Ex. 6),

<sup>11</sup> Recorded by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra under Paul Mann on Toccata Classics TOCC 0400.

<sup>12</sup> <https://steveelcock.fr/symphony%20no%204>.

<sup>13</sup> Recorded by the Siberian Symphony Orchestra and Dmitry Vasiliev on Toccata Classics TOCC 0445.

and then four descending semiquavers on cor anglais (Ex. 7). The ensuing *Allegro* 8 begins with the twelve-note series in unison octaves on strings and timpani (Ex. 8).

Ex. 5

Largo (♩ = 60)

The musical score for Ex. 5 consists of two systems of two bass staves each. The tempo is marked 'Largo' with a quarter note equal to 60 beats per minute. The first system shows the beginning of the piece with a 'ppp' dynamic marking. The second system includes a 'rit.' marking. The notes are connected by long horizontal lines, indicating sustained sounds or glissandi.

Ex. 6

strings

rit. . . . .

The musical score for Ex. 6 shows a single staff with notes and rests. The dynamic marking is 'pp' and there is a 'rit.' marking. The notes are connected by long horizontal lines, indicating sustained sounds or glissandi.

## Ex. 7

Cor anglais

*pp* *mp* *p* *poco f*

## Ex. 8

Allegro (♩ = 90)

timpani

*f* all strings in octaves

## Ex. 9

bassoon

*pp* *p* *mf molto dolce* *p*

Ex. 8 also makes productive use of a change-ringing technique that Elcock has used extensively elsewhere and which, reduced here to its simplest form, he explains:

Representing the 12 semitones via numbers, the first 12 notes commence from bar 58.

Thus 1–2–3–4–5–6–7–8–9–10–11–12 (representing A, G♯, A♯, etc).

The next iteration (from the fifth semiquaver of bar 59) sees pairs of notes swapped.

Thus 2–1–4–3–6–5–8–7–10–9–12–11.

Next, the outer notes remain where they are and the pairs between them are swapped.

Thus 2–4–1–6–3–8–5–10–7–12–9–11.

Next time around, pairs of notes are swapped according to this established practice.

Thus 4–2–6–1–8–3–10–5–12–7–11–9.

And so it continues – remembering that, halfway through this process, the series will be completely reversed and, by the end of it, the series will have returned to its original order.<sup>14</sup>

Elcock has, moreover, referred to this piece as ‘a recycling plant for dodecaphonic waste’.<sup>15</sup> The practical effect is that the notes unrelated to a G minor triad are gradually filtered out from the semiquaver series and left hanging in the air like so much atmospheric pollution, until only B flat and G remain. This process now begins again, woodwind and brass having the semiquavers while strings sustain the ‘pollution’ until A flat minor is reached via a process that has more in common with serialism than with classical tonality. A new figure, akin to a bird-cry, now emerges on woodwind as the strings continue with the revolving series. Against an increasingly intricate texture, these bird-cries are passed across the orchestra, and a huge climax brings in its wake a restatement of the chorale motif [9]. It is heard on brass against a dotted figure, before a solo string quartet starts the smooth repetition of an eight-note series which the orchestra tries to interrupt with the dotted figure [10].

<sup>14</sup> E-mail of 31 August 2025.

<sup>15</sup> <https://steveelcock.fr/symphony%20no%204>.

The emotional intensity having subsided, an ascending figure begins in the bass based on an inversion of the cor-anglais motif with its four descending notes [11]. At length it builds to a climax, with the cor-anglais motif stated on the horns against a ticking accompaniment from woodblocks, and then subsides into a *Largo* [12], where a new melodic idea starts to grow until it flowers on a solo bassoon (Ex. 9). This elaborate version of what Elcock describes as a ‘half-remembered carol’<sup>16</sup> subsequently dies out against timpani and bass drum, before a further idea emerges on viola (actually an inversion of part of the carol) and leads to an anguished climax on upper cellos and violas.

From here a scherzo-like section [13] rapidly culminates in a wild outburst, after which the orchestra moves gradually into a massive restatement, in unison octaves, of the opening of the symphony [14], thereby launching the ‘finale’. The chorale motif duly returns on brass [15], followed by trombones playing the theme originally given to the cor anglais. This motif builds in a *crescendo* to the return, on strings in unison octaves, of the semiquaver series – now centred on A major and enhanced by partial restatements of the carol from brass [16]. Shards of A major fragment into silence, with the music subsiding into funereal rhythms on percussion [17] and a last reminder of the original series from tubular bells. The cor anglais intones a poignant recall of the opening of the carol, before the entire work evanesces into silence.

How many concerts conclude with a genuine ‘end-piece’? Very few, and the paucity of such works is an issue that Elcock addressed in his *Fermeture*:

The conductor Kenneth Woods mentioned some while ago that he quite liked to end a concert with an overture, and it might be a good idea if such a piece were written especially for that purpose. I jokingly said I was working on one and that this would be called ‘Fermeture’ – the French word for closure, as ‘ouverture’ is French for opening. I wasn’t really [composing such a piece], of course, but then I thought ‘what if I did?’<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> E-mail of 31 August 2025.

<sup>17</sup> <https://steveelcock.fr/fermeture>.

Premiered in Great Malvern on 8 December 2023 by Woods and the English Symphony Orchestra (when it followed Sibelius' Fifth Symphony), *Fermeture* [18] does exactly what its title suggests and more besides. It nonetheless unfolds in straightforward ternary form, complete with an English-sounding tune for its central section [19], before returning to its opening material [20] and what Elcock has described as 'a funky, almost techno coda'.<sup>18</sup> He has also pointed out that the piece feels destined for a premature conclusion and the music from that point through to its close is 'my representation of a curtain coming down at the end of the performance'.<sup>19</sup>

*A freelance writer and critic for 25 years, Richard Whitehouse is a frequent contributor to Gramophone and has written widely about music from the past two centuries. He has given papers on composers ranging from Arthur Bliss to Nikos Skalkottas, and compiles the Music Diary for Boosey & Hawkes.*

**Paul Silverthorne**, viola, has combined a prolific solo career with the principal position in two of the most prestigious ensembles in London: the London Symphony Orchestra (from 1990 to 2015) and the London Sinfonietta since 1988. He has been a frequent visitor to the USA for solo performances at Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall and with orchestras across the country. He has also given master-classes at the Juilliard and Manhattan schools and many US universities as well as conservatoires and universities in Europe and Asia.

His solo performances have also taken him to Australia, China, Japan, Russia, Ukraine and Africa as well as closer to home in the UK and Europe. After a performance at the BBC Proms in London, *The Times* described him as 'a virtuoso in sensitivity and technique'. He is particularly renowned for his interpretation of new music, and his commitment to this activity has led to close relationships with some of the leading composers of the day, many of whom have been inspired to write for him. His recordings cover a wide range of repertoire for leading labels and have received widespread acclaim.



<sup>18</sup> E-mail of 31 August 2025.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

He has taught at the Royal Academy of Music in London for nearly three decades and many of his former students, coming from all corners of the globe, now hold prominent positions in orchestras around the world.

[www.paulsilverthorne.com](http://www.paulsilverthorne.com)

Hailed by *Gramophone* as ‘a symphonic conductor of stature’, the American conductor **Kenneth Woods** was appointed Artistic Director and Principal Conductor of the English Symphony Orchestra in 2013, and has quickly built up an impressive and acclaimed body of work with them. He was also recently appointed Artistic Director of both the Colorado MahlerFest – the only US organisation other than the New York Philharmonic to receive the Gold Medal of the International Gustav Mahler Society – and the Elgar Festival in Worcester.



As a guest, he has conducted ensembles including the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C., the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Cincinnati Symphony, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Budapest Festival Orchestra, Royal Northern Sinfonia and the English Chamber Orchestra, and has made numerous broadcasts for BBC Radio 3, National Public Radio and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. He has appeared on the stages of some of the world’s leading music festivals, such as Aspen, Scotia and Lucerne.

Under Kenneth Woods’ leadership, the English Symphony Orchestra has gained widespread recognition as one of the most innovative and influential orchestras in the UK. They received ‘Premiere of the Year’ plaudit from *Classical Music Magazine* for both Donald Fraser’s orchestration of the Elgar Piano Quintet in 2015 and John Joubert’s opera *Jane Eyre* in 2016. *Jane Eyre* also marked the first ESO first foray into opera, and the premiere and subsequent recording on Somm were both received with international acclaim.

The first of Kenneth Woods’ many acclaimed ESO albums was Volume One in the Complete Piano Concertos of Ernst Krenek for Toccata Classics, selected by *The Times* as one of its ‘Best Recordings of 2016’, with Volume 2 chosen by *Forbes Magazine* as one of its ‘Top 11 Classical CDs of 2017’. The ESO recording of Donald Fraser’s Elgar orchestrations for Avie was a Classic FM Disc of the Month, and *An Eventful Morning in East London* (a collection of 21st-century

violin concertos with the soloist Harriet Mackenzie) for Nimbus received a five-star review in *The Times*. Kenneth Woods' recording of his own orchestration of Brahms' Piano Quartet in A major was chosen by The Arts Desk as one of its Top Ten Classical CDs of 2018.

In 2016, he and the ESO launched their '21st Century Symphony Project', an ambitious multi-year effort to commission, premiere and record nine new symphonies by leading composers, with Philip Sawyers' Third Symphony, a work described by ClassicalSource as 'a masterpiece' following its triumphant premiere in St John's Smith Square in 2017. In 2018 *The Spectator* selected the premiere of the second work in the 21CSP, David Matthews' Ninth Symphony, as one of the top-ten classical concerts of 2018. In 2019, the ESO premiered Matthew Taylor's Fifth Symphony at Cadogan Hall, a work welcomed by Robert Matthew-Walker, editor of *Musical Opinion*, as 'a masterwork of genuine symphonic thinking'.

As Artistic Director of the Colorado MahlerFest, Kenneth Woods has overseen an expansion of the artistic programme, introducing a new chamber-orchestra concert alongside an acclaimed final concert. Following the March 2020 Covid-19 lockdown, he led the English Symphony Orchestra to one of the earliest and most acclaimed returns to work of any orchestra. Through their 'Music from Wyastone' series of virtual concerts, the ESO presented dozens of world premieres of new works and new arrangements, all recorded in hi-res audio and video. Highlights included a chamber version of Mahler's Ninth Symphony, Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle*, composer-portrait concerts showcasing the music of Steven Gerber and Adrian Williams and a series of new storytelling works for children narrated by Hugh Bonneville, Davood Ghadami, Henry Goodman and Gemma Whelan.

Kenneth Woods is also a widely read writer and frequent broadcaster. His blog, 'A View from the Podium', is one of the 25 most popular classical blogs in the world. He has spoken on Mahler on *All Things Considered* on National Public Radio and is a frequent speaker on BBC radio programmes. He has been an Honorary Patron of the Hans Gál Society since 2014.

The **Moravian Philharmonic Orchestra**, based in Olomouc, the historic capital of Moravia, is one of the leading, and oldest, symphony orchestras in the Czech Republic. Throughout its existence, it has been an irreplaceable centre of musical activities in the region.

The Moravian Philharmonic was founded immediately after the end of the Second World War, on 26 May 1945. During its development many important musicians, Czech and otherwise, played a role in its artistic formation, among them the conductors Otto Klemperer and Václav Neumann, the violinists Josef Suk and Gidon Kremer and the cellist Pierre Fournier. Over the

course of its existence, the Moravian Philharmonic Orchestra has developed an extremely extensive and varied repertoire, focused mainly on the great composers of world music of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, although it also promotes contemporary Czech and international music, as evidenced by the performance of more than 250 new compositions. The orchestra is further known for its authentic interpretations of the classics of Czech music culture: Dvořák, Smetana, Janáček and Martinů.

The Moravian Philharmonic has a rich discography and performs at major international music festivals at home and abroad. Above all, it is a cultural institution that contributes substantially to the organisation of artistic and concert life in Olomouc and its region. It organises the Dvořák Olomouc festival and the International Organ Festival Olomouc. Its activities also include a range of educational activities for children and young people.



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# STEVE ELCOCK *Orchestral Music, Volume Four*

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1 *Hammering, Op. 15* (2005) 5:52

**Viola Concerto, Op. 29** (2017–18) 22:35

2 *Tempo commodo* – 4:04

3 *Doppio movimento* – 4:33

4 *Largo* – 7:48

5 *Moderato* – 0:24

6 *Subito allegro molto* – *Un poco meno mosso* – *Allegro molto* – *Più allegro* 5:46

**Symphony No. 4, A golden rose fallen from the flat sea of time, Op. 19** (2012–13, rev. 2017) 36:38

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11 *Allegro* – 1:27

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13 *Allegro* – 5:37

14 *Pesante* – 1:18

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TT 71:50

FIRST RECORDINGS

Paul Silverthorne, viola 2–6  
Moravian Philharmonic Orchestra  
Kenneth Woods, conductor