

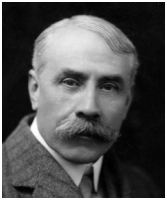
notes

April 28/29

BEYOND THE SCORE: ELGAR'S *ENIGMA VARIATIONS*

By Dr. Richard E. Rodda

30 SECOND NOTES: British music was reborn with the *Enigma Variations*. Though England had nurtured many great performers and orchestras since the death of Henry Purcell in 1695, it had produced no composers who could match the genius or glamour of the visiting Handel, Mendelssohn or Dvořák until Edward Elgar premiered the oratorio *A Dream of Gerontius* and the *Enigma Variations* at the dawn of the 20th century. “When I heard the *Variations*,” wrote George Bernard Shaw while he was working as a music critic during his early days in London, “I sat up and said, ‘Whew!’ I knew we had got it at last.” 🎵



SIR EDWARD ELGAR

Born June 2, 1857 in
Broadheath, England;
died February 23, 1934
in Worcester.

VARIATIONS ON AN ORIGINAL THEME, “ENIGMA,” OP. 36 (1899)

- First performed on June 19, 1899 in London, conducted by Hans Richter.
- First performed by the Des Moines Symphony on March 1 & 2, 1980 with Yuri Krasnapolsky conducting. Two subsequent performances have occurred, most recently on April 16 & 17, 2011 with Joseph Giunta conducting.
(Duration: ca. 30 minutes)

In 1920, George Bernard Shaw, brandishing his steely tipped pen like a curmudgeonly sword, wrote, “The phenomenon of greatness in music had vanished from England with Purcell....

England had waited two hundred years for a great English composer, and waited in vain.... For my part, I expected nothing of any English composer; and when the excitement about *The Dream of Gerontius* began, I said, wearily, ‘Another Wardour-street festival oratorio!’ But when I heard the *Variations* [in 1899] I sat up and said, ‘Whew!’ I knew we had got it at last.” Bernard Shaw, who wrote music criticism in his early days in London, was given to excitement over few musical matters that were not Richard Wagner, but he saw in these two works — the “*Enigma*” *Variations* and the oratorio *The Dream of Gerontius* — the long-desired emergence of a major creative personality in British music. That composer, Edward Elgar, had been writing for over twenty years when he undertook those two pieces in 1898, but they were the first to gain him a solid reputation not only among his countrymen but also abroad.

Elgar’s triumph in London came by a Continental route, through the eminent German

conductor Hans Richter. Richter, who played a major role in the popularization of Wagner's music in Britain, had a close relationship with the English musical community and its audiences, and for his series of concerts there in 1899 he investigated new scores by English composers that might be presented on his programs. His agent in London regularly dispatched manuscripts to Germany, and one such parcel arrived with an especially high recommendation. It contained the score for a new set of "*Variations on an Original Theme*" by Elgar. Richter's enthusiasm grew as he read through the pages, and he determined to present the work not only in London, but also on his provincial concerts. Those performances spread the composer's fame so quickly and successfully that he was knighted for his services to British music only five years later, in 1904.

Throughout his life Elgar had a penchant for dispensing startling or mystifying remarks just to see what response they would elicit. Turning this trait upon his music, he added the sobriquet "*Enigma*" above the theme of the work after it had been completed. He posited not just one puzzle here, however, but three. First, each of the fourteen sections was headed with a set of initials or a nickname that stood for the name of the composer's friend portrayed by that variation. Though the speculation on the identity of the individuals began immediately, Elgar did not confirm any guesses until 1920. The second mystery dealt with the theme itself, the section that specifically bore the legend, "*Enigma*." It is believed that the theme represented Elgar himself (note the similarity of the opening phrase to the speech rhythm of his name — Ed-ward El-gar), thus making the variations upon it portraits of his friends as seen through his eyes. Elgar gave a helpful clue to the solution of this mystery when he used the melody again, in *The Music Makers* of 1912, and said that it stood

there for "the loneliness of the creative artist." The final enigma, the one that neither Elgar offered to explain nor for which others have been able to find a definitive solution, arose from a statement of his: "Furthermore, through and over the whole set another and larger theme 'goes' but is not played.... So the principal theme never appears, even as in some recent dramas — e.g., Maeterlinck's *L'Intruse* and *Les Sept Princesses* — the chief character is never on stage." Conjectures about this unplayed theme that fits each of the variations have ranged from *Auld Lang Syne* (which Elgar vehemently denied) to a phrase from *Parsifal*. One theory was published in 1975 by the Dutch musicologist Theodore van Houten, who speculated that the phrase "never, never, never" from the grand old tune *Rule, Britannia* fits the requirements, and even satisfies some of the baffling clues that Elgar had spread to his friends. ("So the principal theme *never* appears.") We shall never know for sure. Elgar took the solution to his grave.

Variation I (C.A.E.) is a warm and tender depiction of the composer's wife, Caroline Alice, who was not only his loving spouse but also his most trusted professional advisor.

Variation II (H.D. S.-P.) represents the warming-up finger exercises of H.D. Steuart-Powell, a piano-playing friend who was a frequent chamber music partner of Elgar.

Variation III (R.B.T.) utilizes the high and low woodwinds to portray the distinctive voice of Richard Baxter Townsend, an amateur actor with an unusually wide vocal range.

Variation IV (W.M.B.) suggests the considerable energy and firm resolve of William Meath Baker.

Variation V (R.P.A.) reflects the frequently changing moods of Richard Penrose Arnold, son of the poet Matthew Arnold.

Variation VI (Ysobel) gives prominence to the viola, the instrument played by Elgar's pupil,

Miss Isobel Fitton.

Variation VII (Troyte) describes the high spirits and argumentative nature of Arthur Troyte Griffith.

Variation VIII (W.N.) lithely denotes the charm and grace of Miss Winifred Norbury.

Variation IX (Nimrod), named for the great-grandson of the Biblical Noah, who was noted as a hunter, is a moving testimonial to A.J. Jaeger, an avid outdoorsman and Elgar's publisher and close friend. The composer wrote, "This Variation is a record of a long summer evening talk, when my friend grew nobly eloquent (as only he could be) on the grandeur of Beethoven, and especially of his slow movements."

Variation X (Dorabella) describes Miss Dora Penny, a young friend hesitant of conversation and fluttering of manner.

Variation XI (G.R.S.) portrays the organist George R. Sinclair and his bulldog, Dan, out for a walk by the River Wye. The rhythmic exuberance of the music suggests the dog's rushing about the bank and paddling in the water.

Variation XII (B.G.N.) pays homage to the cellist Basil G. Nevinson.

Variation XIII (* *)* was written while Lady Mary Lygon was on a sea journey. The solo clarinet quotes a phrase from Mendelssohn's

Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage Overture and the hollow sound of the timpani played with wooden sticks suggests the distant rumble of ship's engines.

Variation XIV (E.D.U.), Elgar's brilliant self-portrait, recalls the music of earlier variations.

A.J. Jaeger wrote of Elgar in *The Musical Times* following the premiere of the "Enigma" *Variations*, "Here is an English musician who has something to say and knows how to say it in his own individual and beautiful way.... He writes as he feels, there is no affectation or make-believe. Effortless originality combined with thorough *savoir-faire* and, most important of all, beauty of theme, warmth and feeling are his credentials, and they should open to him the hearts of all who have faith in the future of our English art and appreciate beautiful music wherever it is met."

The score calls for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, triangle, organ *ad libitum* and the usual strings consisting of first violins, second violins, violas, violoncellos and double basses.