

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
March 18, 2018
Beyond the Score
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One of our more popular features over the past few seasons have been presentations in the Beyond the Score series developed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. These innovative programs combine live actors, multimedia, and the orchestra to present deep and entertaining background on a featured work—followed by performance of the full work. In the past three seasons the Madison Symphony Orchestra has presented Beyond the Score programs on Dvorák’s “New World” symphony and Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Scheherazade*. Here we turn to most beloved of Edward Elgar’s works, the *Enigma Variations*. Actors James Ridge, Colleen Madden, and Brian Mani from American Players Theatre, and Wisconsin Public Radio host Norman Gilliland join the MSO to present this program.

In the *Enigma Variations* Elgar created fond musical portraits of the family and friends that surrounded him. He was hardly the first composer to create this kind of musical “photo album,” but this work is very much a piece of its time. Today, when we can access digital images in many different ways—online, on our phones and computers, by email, and on social media—it’s all too easy to forget just what a powerful thing the photo album used to be. In an age before home movies and video, photo albums were a means of organizing memories: events, sights, and beloved friends and family. The first photo albums appeared in the 1850s, shortly after the advent of photography itself. But by the turn of the 20th century, when Elgar wrote his *Enigma Variations*, amateur photography made snapshot albums a fixture in middle class homes, and Elgar’s own photos attest to a large group of good friends. In his *Enigma Variations*, Elgar created an album of musical snapshots, affectionately dedicated to “the friends pictured within.”

Edward Elgar (1857-1934)

Variations on an Original Theme (“Enigma”), Op. 36

Elgar composed this work in 1898-1899. It was first performed in London, of June 19, 1899. We have performed the work on four earlier concerts: in 1968, 1979, 1989, and 2007. Duration 29:00.

Writing to his friend August Jaeger in 1899, Elgar described a recently-completed composition: a set of variations that depicted thirteen of his musical and non-musical friends. Elgar incorporates several “enigmas” into this work. The first is

the theme itself, which he labels “enigma.” Each variation is titled according to the person represented, but their identities are hidden by his use of initials and nicknames. (Elgar himself soon gave away the secret identities, however.) He also states that there is another larger theme, which is never actually played, that nevertheless runs “through and over” the entire work. Elgar’s biographers have expended reams of paper in pursuit of this mystery. Possible candidates proposed for the “larger theme” include: *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, *God Save the Queen*, *Rule Britannia*, *Auld Lang Syne*, a theme from Mozart’s *Così fan tutte*, and the major scale. It has also been suggested that this unplayed theme might be a non-musical concept such as friendship. The usually articulate Elgar was notably vague on this point. There is even the possibility that Elgar, whose sense of humor was well known to his friends and associates, was being deliberately obscure as a joke! The *Enigma Variations* was the first of Elgar’s works to be widely heard, and it remains his most popular work today. It consists of a brief theme and fourteen variations (Elgar adds a self-portrait to the depictions of his friends.).

Theme. Elgar’s theme, only 17 measures long, is deceptively complex and contains a huge amount of melodic and harmonic raw material to be used in the succeeding variations. It begins with strings alone, in minor, and then shifts to contrasting material in Major, returning to minor in the last phrase. Supposedly, Elgar improvised the theme at the piano for his wife Alice, and the later orchestral piece was born from the two of them amusing themselves by imagining how various friends of theirs might play it.

Variation 1 (“C. A. E.”), L’istesso tempo. Caroline Alice Elgar was married to the composer in 1889, and according to Elgar, her life “...was a romantic and delicate inspiration.” This section stays close to the harmonic and melodic outlines of the theme, but fleshes it out with ornamentation and lush orchestration.

Variation 2 (“H. D. S.-P.”), Allegro. Hew David Stuart-Powell was a gifted amateur pianist who often played trios with Elgar (a violinist) and the cellist Basil Nevinson (the “B. G. N.” of Variation 12). The toccata-style figuration probably refers to Stuart-Powell’s habitual warm-up routine, although the highly chromatic melody is probably intended a joke—this pianist was notoriously conservative in his musical tastes.

Variation 3 (“R. T. B.”), Allegretto. Richard Baxter Townsend was an author with a passion for amateur theater. According to his friends, Townsend had an extremely high voice, but loved to play old men in comic roles: growling his lines as low as he could, and suddenly breaking into a high falsetto. There is accordingly

a humorous contrast between low and high textures in this variation.

Variation 4 (“W. M. B.”), Allegro di molto. In this variation, Elgar pokes gentle fun at a somewhat pompous country gentleman and scholar, William M. Baker. During one of Elgar’s visits to his home, Baker officiously read an itinerary of the day’s activities and left the music room with an inadvertent slam of the door. The tittering of his guests is heard in the middle of this variation.

Variation 5 (“R. P. A.”), Moderato. Richard P. Arnold, son of the poet Matthew Arnold, is characterized in this section. He is alternately solemn and lighthearted. This variation continues without pause into Variation 6.

Variation 6 (“Ysobel”), Andantino. The viola’s prominent role in this variation refers to Isobel Woods, an amateur violist. The figure given to the violas throughout this section is taken from a beginner’s exercise in crossing strings.

Variation 7 (“Troyte”), Presto. The architect Arthur Troyte Griffith was a boisterous friend and sometime piano student of Elgar’s, although he was apparently not a star pupil. Elgar notes that he tried “...to make something like order out of the chaos,” but that “...the final despairing ‘slam’ records that the effort proved to be in vain.”

Variation 8 (“W. N.”), Allegretto. Elgar was associated with Winifred Norbury, an elderly devotee of music, through his connections with the Worcestershire Philharmonic Society. The music depicts both her stately 18th-century home and her characteristic laugh. This variation continues directly into the next.

Variation 9 (“Nimrod”), Adagio. The title is a labored pun on the name of August Jaeger, one of Elgar’s closest friends: “Jaeger” in German means “hunter,” and Nimrod was the “mighty hunter” of the Book of Genesis. This movement is not a portrait of Jaeger’s forceful character, but rather depicts a long conversation between Elgar and Jaeger on the grandeur of Beethoven’s music. Elgar has provided some reminiscences of the slow movement of Beethoven’s “Pathetique” sonata in the opening bars.

Variation 10 (“Dorabella - Intermezzo”), Allegretto. According to at least one Elgar biographer, the fluttering nature of this section refers to the voice of Miss Dora Penny, an acquaintance of the composer. Elgar himself referred to this as “...a dance of fairy-like lightness.” This section serves as a bridge between the serious Variation 9 and the more rowdy Variation 11.

Variation 11 ("G. R. S."), Allegro di molto. George Robertson Sinclair was organist of Hereford Cathedral, but this music also refers to his bulldog Dan. One day, during a picnic, Dan slipped down a muddy bank into the River Wye, and had to swim for a time, looking for a place to climb out. In the opening bars, you can hear Dan sliding down the slippery slope, paddling in the water, and barking with joy when he finds a landing-place. The more majestic tones of the brass depict Dan's master.

Variation 12 ("B. G. N."), Andante. Basil G. Nevinson, an amateur cellist, was a longtime friend of Elgar's. In this section the theme is expressively developed by the cellos. Variation 13 follows immediately.

*Variation 13 ("*** - Romanza"), Moderato.* Being intentionally enigmatic, Elgar let the asterisks "...stand for the name of a lady who was, at the time of the composition, on a sea voyage." (In all probability, it was his friend Lady Mary Lygon.) According to Elgar, we hear "...the distant throb of the engines of a liner." He also quotes a melody from Mendelssohn's *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*.

Variation 14 ("E. D. U. - Finale"), Allegro. The stirring finale is about Elgar himself: the initials refer to his nickname, "Edoo." This brilliant finale certainly presents the composer in an optimistic light. The quotations from Variations 1 and 9 are programmatic: Elgar saw his wife Alice and August Jaeger as the two greatest influences on his life and his music.