Edward Elgar

Variations on an Original Theme, Opus 36, “Enigma”

EDWARD ELGAR was born at Broadheath, near Worcester, England, on June 2, 1857, and died in Worcester on February 23, 1934. He began the “Enigma” Variations in October 1898 and completed them on February 19, 1899. The score bears the dedication “To my friends pictured within.” The first performance was given in London on June 19, 1899, with Hans Richter conducting.

THE SCORE OF THE “ENIGMA” VARIATIONS calls for two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinetts, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, side drum, triangle, bass drum, cymbals, organ (ad lib.), and strings.

Edward Elgar was in almost every respect an outsider: largely self-taught in a day when only strict academic training, preferably including one of the two universities, was considered absolutely essential; Roman Catholic in a country officially Protestant; a musician of deep feeling and commitment in a culture that viewed music as an insignificant entertainment. But most galling was the fact that he was the son of a shopkeeper in a class-ridden society that could never get over looking down its nose at people “in trade.” And yet, ironically, it is just those facts, the very things that made him feel ever the outsider, that also allowed him to develop his musical talents as a composer of marked originality.

He spent his youth in Worcester, a sleepy cathedral town in western England, living over the family music shop. He spent much time absorbing the scores in stock, pursuing his own original course in music rather than the stodgy academic instruction prevalent at the official schools. Except for violin lessons he had no formal training, but already as a child he showed promise of an original talent. At sixteen he left business forever and supported himself as a freelance musician in Worcester, filling various positions as violinist, conductor, and even bassoonist in a wind quintet, as well as teacher of violin. Five years spent as conductor of an “orchestra” made up of staff members of the county mental asylum in nearby Powick were invaluable. He composed original music and rescored the classics for whatever instruments were available each week, gaining in this way a thorough practical knowledge of how instruments sound in performance. He later used to boast that he had never had to reorchestrate a passage after hearing it in performance because it always sounded exactly as he had imagined it would.

In 1889 he married Caroline Alice Roberts, a woman convinced of his genius. Alice was eight years his senior and far his social superior (this was a time when such things were considered to be very important), but she had the backbone to withstand the relatives who objected to the match. She encouraged Elgar to compose the great works that she knew he had in him. During the thirty years of their marriage, Elgar became England’s first composer of international stature in two centuries—and after her death, which occurred fourteen years before his own, he was never able to complete another large work.

Until he was forty Elgar remained a purely local celebrity. Shortly after the premiere of his cantata Caractacus at the Leeds Festival in October 1898, Elgar sat musing at the piano one day, idly playing a pensive melody that had occurred to him. When his wife asked what it was, he said, “Nothing, but something might be made of it.” He named several of their friends. “Powell would have done this, or Nevinson would have looked at it like this.” Alice commented, “Surely you are doing something that has never been done before?” Thus encouraged, Elgar sketched out an entire set of variations on his original theme. On October 24 he wrote to his friend August Jaeger at Novello’s music publishers to announce that he had sketched a set of orchestral variations. “I’ve labelled ‘em with the nicknames of my particular friends—you are Nimrod. That is to say I’ve written the variations each one to represent the mood of the ‘party’ writing the var[iation] him (or her)self and have written what I think they wd. have written—if they were asses enough to compose.”

On November 1, the Elgars’ young friend Dora Penny was invited to lunch and to hear Elgar’s new piece. The composer played the piano, while Dora turned pages for him. He played the theme and started in on the variations. Then he turned over two pages and I saw No. III, R.B.T., the initials of a connexion of mine. This was amusing! Before he had played many bars I began to laugh, which rather annoyed me. You don’t generally laugh when you hear a piece of music for the first time dedicated to someone you know, but I just couldn’t help it, and when it was over we both roared with laughter! “But you’ve made it like him! How on earth have you done it?”

Dora Penny (herself a “variation” named “Dorabella”) was probably the first person outside the Elgar household to learn the secret of the variations.

After completing the orchestration, between February 5 and 19, 1899, Elgar sent the score off to Hans Richter, and waited a nervous month before learning that he would program the work. At the premiere, on June 19, a few critics were miffed at not being let in on the identity of the friends whose initials appeared at the head of each movement. But the work itself achieved a sensational success.

All but one of the friends have long since been identified, so that mystery is solved. But another mystery about the
Enigma Variations will probably be argued over forever. It has to do with the title and a statement Elgar made in the program note at the work’s premiere. The manuscript of the score simply bears the title “Variations for orchestra composed by Edward Elgar, Op. 36.” Over the theme, though, someone has written in pencil the word “Enigma.” The handwriting appears not to be Elgar’s. Still, he did not object to the word, and in fact his program note implied the presence of a mystery, a “dark saying” that “must be left unguessed.” He added, “through and over the whole set another larger theme ‘goes’ but is not played.” The mysteries of the “dark saying” and the “larger theme” have exercised the ingenuity of many people since 1899. Whenever a new solution is proposed (Mozart’s Prague Symphony and Beethoven’s Pathétique piano sonata have figured among the possible answers), the arguments inevitably start all over again. In the end, however, it is the quality of the music, and our enjoyment of it, that determine how frequently we wish to hear the piece.

Elgar himself revealed the identity of the “Variations” in a set of notes written in 1913, later published with photographs of each of the individuals. His own remarks will be quoted in the discussion below.

The theme is remarkable in itself. It goes by stops and starts, broken up into little fragments which, at the outset, hardly seem “thematic.” It has been pointed out that the first four notes provide a perfect setting, in rhythm and pitch, of the name “Edward Elgar,” who thus writes his signature, so to speak, on the whole work.

It begins in G minor, has four rising bars in the major, then is restated in the minor with an expressive new counterpoint. It leads directly into:

I. (C.A.E.) Caroline Alice Elgar, the composer’s wife. “The variation is really a prolongation of the theme with what I wished to be romantic and delicate additions; those who know C.A.E. will understand this reference to one whose life was a romantic and delicate inspiration.” Oboe and bassoon have a little triplet figure in the opening measures that had a private resonance for the composer and his wife: it was the signal he used to whistle when he came home (it reappears in the last variation).

II. (H.D.S.-P.) Hew David Steuart-Powell played piano in a trio with Elgar (violin) and Basil Nevinson (Variation XII). “His characteristic diatonic run over the keys before beginning to play is here humorously travestied in the semiquaver passages; these should suggest a Toccata, but chromatic beyond H.D.S.-P’s liking.” The chromatic figures race along in the strings and woodwinds; eventually the theme appears in longer note values softly in the cellos and basses.

III. (R.B.T.) Richard Baxter Townshend was an author of a series of Tenderfoot books (A Tenderfoot in Colorado and A Tenderfoot in New Mexico), as well as a classical scholar and a lovable eccentric. Elgar says that the variation refers to his performance as an old man in some amateur theatricals in which his voice occasionally cracked to “soprano” timbre (the oboe with the main part of the theme, later joined by the flute).

IV. (W.M.B.) William Meath Baker, a country squire with a blustery way about him. He tended to give “orders of the day” to his guests, especially with regard to arrangements for carriages. Elgar depicts his forcible delivery. The middle section of this very fast movement contains “some suggestions of the teasing attitude of the guests.”

V. (R.P.A.) Richard Penrose Arnold, a son of Matthew Arnold, a self-taught pianist. “His serious conversation was continually broken up by whimsical and witty remarks. The theme is given by the basses with solemnity and in the ensuing major portion there is much lighthearted badinage among the wind instruments.”

VI. (Ysobel) Isabel Fitton was an amateur viola player, whom Elgar draws into the music by writing a leading part for her instrument built on a familiar exercise for crossing the strings, “a difficulty for beginners; on this is built a pensive, and for a moment, romantic movement.”

VII. (Troyte) One of Elgar’s closest friends, Arthur Troyte Griffith, an architect in Malvern. Elgar said that the variation represented “some maladroit essays to play the pianoforte; later the strong rhythm suggests the attempts of the instructor (E.E.) to make something like order out of chaos, and the final despairing ‘slam’ records that the effort proved to be in vain.”

VIII. (W.N.) Winifred Norbury is the bearer of the initials, but Elgar commented that the variation was “really suggested by an eighteenth-century house. The gracious personalities of the ladies are sedately shown.” But because W.N. was also involved with music—she was a competent pianist—Elgar makes specific reference to her characteristic laugh.

IX. (Nimrod) August Jaeger (“Jaeger” is German for “hunter,” and Nimrod is the “mighty hunter” of the Old Testament) worked for Elgar’s publisher, Novello, and often provided enthusiasm and moral support for the composer, who rarely in those years found encouragement from anyone but Alice. The variation is a record of a “long summer evening talk, when my friend discoursed eloquently on the slow movements of Beethoven.” According to Mrs. Powell, Jaeger also discoursed eloquently on the hardships Beethoven endured in his life, and he encouraged Elgar not to give up. In any case, the theme is arranged so as to suggest a hint of the slow movement of Beethoven’s Pathétique Sonata, Opus 13. This Adagio is the best-known single excerpt from the Variations, noble, poignant, and deeply felt. In England it has become a traditional piece to commemorate the dead. Elgar,
writing after Jaeger’s own death, said, “Jaeger was for many years my dear friend, the valued adviser and the stern critic of many musicians besides the writer; his place has been occupied but never filled.”

X. (Dorabella) Dora Penny, later Mrs. Richard Powell, who first heard the variations even before Elgar had orchestrated them. The “intermezzo” that comprises this movement is a lighthearted contrast to the seriousness of “Nimrod.” It is also the farthest away from the theme of any of the variations in the set.

XI. (G.R.S.) Dr. George R. Sinclair, organist of Hereford Cathedral, though the variation has more to do with his bulldog Dan, who was a well-known character. As Elgar explained, the opening had to do with Dan “falling down the steep bank into the river Wye; his paddling upstream to find a landing place; and his rejoicing bark on landing. G.R.S. said, ‘Set that to music.’ I did; here it is.”

XII. (B.G.N.) Basil G. Nevinson was a fine amateur cellist who performed with Elgar and Steuart-Powell (Var. II) in a trio. The variation features a melody, marked “molto espressivo,” for cello solo in “tribute to a very dear friend whose scientific and artistic attainments, and the wholehearted way they were put at the disposal of his friends, particularly endeared him to the writer.”

XIII. (*** Another mystery: It has often been asserted that the asterisks represent Lady Mary Lygon, who was supposedly on a sea voyage to Australia at the time of composition (she wasn’t), hence the clarinet quoting Mendelssohn’s **Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage**. Other candidates have been put forward, some of which would seem to have a more intimate relationship with the composer. The variation is highly atmospheric, as the “drums suggest the distant throb of the engines of a liner” under the Mendelssohn quotation.

XIV. (E.D.U.) Elgar himself. When Dora Penny first heard this movement in Elgar’s study, she couldn’t figure out whose initials stood at the head of the page. Only after he dropped a broad hint did she realize that it was Alice’s nickname for Elgar—“Edu”—written as if it were initials. Elgar wrote that the movement was “written at a time when friends were dubious and generally discouraging as to the composer’s musical future.” During the course of the movement he refers especially to C.A.E. and to Nimrod, “two great influences on the life and art of the composer.” As Elgar correctly noted, “The whole of the work is summed up in the triumphant, broad presentation of the theme in the major.”

The Enigma Variations remains, justifiably, Elgar’s best-known work. In its invention, its range of expression, its play of light and dark between movements and keys, the craftsmanship of its links between movements, its exploiting of the various possibilities of the orchestra, its melodic fertility—in all of these things, the work is quite simply a masterpiece. If we remember that it appeared unannounced in a country that had not produced a serious composer of major stature since Purcell (who died in 1691), we can appreciate the tone of Arthur Johnstone’s remarks in the Manchester Guardian after a performance of the Variations in 1900: “The audience seemed rather astonished that a work by a British composer should have other than a petrifying effect upon them.”

Steven Ledbetter

THE FIRST AMERICAN PERFORMANCE OF THE “ENIGMA” VARIATIONS was given by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in that city’s Auditorium Theatre on January 3, 1902, with Theodore Thomas conducting.

THE FIRST BOSTON SYMPHONY PERFORMANCES of the “ENIGMA” VARIATIONS were given by Wilhelm Gericke on December 24 and 26, 1903. Since then, the orchestra has played it under the direction of Max Fiedler, Serge Koussevitzky, Sir Henry J. Wood, Sir Adrian Boult, Charles Munch, Jean Morel, Pierre Monteux, Eugene Ormandy, Erich Leinsdorf, Erich Kunzel, Colin Davis, André Previn, Seiji Ozawa, Charles Dutoit, Grant Llewellyn, Simon Rattle, Yuri Temirkhanov, Jeffrey Tate, Andrew Davis, Sir Neville Marriner, Mark Elder, Donald Runnicles, Leonard Slatkin (August 2014), and Bramwell Tovey (January 2017).

To Read and Hear More...

A short monograph on Mark-Anthony Turnage by Andrew Clement gives an overview of the composer’s formative and early mature years; however, being now more than ten years out of date, it falls short of being comprehensive (Faber & Faber paperback). Also useful but similarly outdated (from 2001) is the article by Jonathan Cross for the New Grove II. Turnage’s publisher Boosey & Hawkes is an excellent source for information on pieces written after 2003, and also includes up-to-date biographical details and multimedia elements (boosey.com), such as a short promotional video for his opera Anna Nicole. Turnage’s music before 2003 was published by Schott.

A recording of Turnage’s Remembering: In Memoriam Evan Scofield from the world premiere performances was issued as a downloadable/streaming release by the London Symphony Orchestra led by Sir Simon Rattle (LSO Live). The album “Scorched,” the composer’s project with guitarist John Scofield (Evan’s father and a longtime Turnage collaborator), features as Scofield’s improvising partners drummer Peter Erskine and bassist John Patitucci, with the Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra and Bigband led by Hugh Wolff (Deutsche Grammophon). The London Symphony Orchestra under Daniel Harding recorded the orchestral work Speranza and the trumpet concerto From the Wreckage, the latter with soloist Håkan Hardenberger; these were released on the orchestra’s own label, LSO Live. (The BSO gave the American premieres of both works.) Hardenberger also recorded From
the Wreckage with the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra and conductor Peter Eötvös soon after its 2005 premiere (Deutsche Grammophon, with trumpet concertos by Eötvös and Gruber). A good place to start for Turnage’s earlier music is the two-CD set in the “British Music Collection” series, featuring the complete Blood on the Floor; the two-trumpet concerto Dispelling the Fears; the saxophone concerto Your Rockaby, and other works, with various ensembles (Decca). The London Philharmonic—with which Turnage was composer-in-residence—has released three discs’ worth of varied Turnage works on its own label (Lpo). The composer’s opera The Silver Tassie was released on CD by English National Opera on its ENO Live label. The earlier opera Greek, long out of the catalog on CD (the now defunct Argo label), can now be found as a download on iTunes and on a DVD of the television production (Arthaus). A DVD of Turnage’s Royal Opera-commissioned 2011 Anna Nicole, with Eva-Maria Westbroek in the title role and led by Antonio Pappano, was released in August 2011 (Opus Arte).

Robert Kirzinger