Edward Elgar

Edward Elgar holds sway as the supreme musical representative of the Edwardian era, the late-Imperialist moment of British history named after Edward VII, the king who on July 4, 1904, turned the composer into Sir Edward. The son of an organist in Worcester, Elgar enjoyed a none-too-spectacular career early on, deputizing for his father in church lofts, picking up some instruction on violin, serving as bandmaster at the Worcester County Lunatic Asylum, and, in 1882, acceding to the position of music director of the Worcester Amateur Instrumental Music Society. The following year he got a public performance, in Birmingham, of an orchestral intermezzo he had written, and he very gradually built a reputation from there. By the mid-1890s he was deemed a name to reckon with, and in 1900 his oratorio The Dream of Gerontius established him as Britain’s leading composer, a perfect embodiment of the plushly comfortable, healthily vigorous spirit of the Edwardian moment.

The year before Gerontius, the British public got its first taste of what would become the most performed — and most discussed — of Elgar’s major instrumental compositions, his Variations on an Original Theme (Op. 36), popularly known as the Enigma Variations. On the printed program for its premiere, the title was given as Variations for Full Orchestra. But more mischief was afoot than that perfunctory name might suggest. The program note revealed that Elgar had crafted each of the variations to describe some friend or acquaintance, but he would not reveal their identities. The connection was suggested by initials attached to each section, but it was understood that these might not always be simplistic renderings of the initials of the names of the subjects but rather more arcane encodings — perhaps alluding to a nickname, for example. And the composer suggested that something deeper might be going on:

The enigma I will not explain — its “dark saying” must be left unguessed, and I warn you that the apparent connection between the Variations and the Theme is often of the slightest texture; further, 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 late dramas — e.g. Maeterlinck’s L’Intruse and Les Sept princesses — the chief character is never on the stage.

This made everyone terribly curious, and a flurry of hypothesizing ensued, some of it so imaginative as to verge on the certifiably

In Short

Born: June 2, 1857, at Broadheath, Worcestershire, England
Work composed: October 1898–February 19, 1899; revised by July 12, 1899 (with a lengthened Finale); dedicated to “my friends pictured within”
World premiere: June 19, 1899, at Saint James Hall, London, Hans Richter, conductor; revised version premiered September 13, 1899, at the Three Choirs Festival at Worcester Cathedral, with the composer conducting
New York Philharmonic premiere: March 23, 1906, Fritz Steinbach, conductor
Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: July 24, 2015, at Bravo! Vail, in Colorado, Bramwell Tovey, conductor
Estimated duration: ca. 29 minutes
Who’s Who?

Herewith the identities of the people portrayed in the movements of the Enigma Variations:

I. C.A.E.: Alice Elgar, the composer’s wife. In 1929 Elgar wrote program notes to accompany pianola recordings of all the variations. Of this first one he noted, “The variation is really a prolongation of the theme with what I wished to be romantic and delicate additions; those who knew C.A.E. will understand this reference to one whose life was a romantic and delicate inspiration.”

II. H.D.S-P.: Hew David Steuart-Powell, a pianist with whom Elgar often played chamber music.

III. R.B.T.: Richard Baxter Townshend, a participant in amateur theatricals

IV. W.M.B.: William Meath Baker, a country squire

V. R.P.A.: Richard Penrose Arnold, the music-loving son of the poet Matthew Arnold

VI. Ysobel: Isabel Fitton, an amateur violinist and good friend

VII. Troyte: Arthur Troyte Griffith, an architect, one of Elgar’s closest friends

VIII. W.N.: Winifred Norbury, a gracious arts patron who lived in an 18th-century country house.

IX. Nimrod: named after the Biblical hunter in Genesis and depicting the music publisher and Elgar’s musical confidant August Jaeger — Jaeger being German for “hunter.”

X. Dorabella: Dora Penny, step-niece of William Meath Baker (of Variation IV fame)

XI. G.R.S.: George Robertson Sinclair, organist at Hereford Cathedral

XII. B.G.N.: Basil Nevinson, a cellist friend who played chamber music with Elgar and Steuart-Powell (of Variation II)

XIII. ***: A contested identity, the opinions formerly veering toward Lady Mary Lygon of Madresfield House, just then on her way to Australia (explaining a fleeting quotation of Mendelssohn’s Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage Overture), but now allowing more for the possibility of Helen Weaver, once a girlfriend of Elgar’s.

XIV. E.D.U.: The composer himself; Alice called her husband “Edoo.”
batty. Among the conjectures voiced over the years are that the “dark theme” relates to Bach’s *The Art of Fugue*, Beethoven’s *Pathétique* Sonata, Shakespeare’s Sonnets, Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians, and any of several hymn tunes.

Elgar fanned the flames of speculation by dropping elusive comments such as “the theme is so well known that it is extraordinary that no one has spotted it,” as he remarked to Arthur Troyte Griffith (portrayed in Variation VII) or, to Dora Penny (a.k.a. Mrs. Richard Powell, and the “Dorabella” of Variation X), that he was flabbergasted that “you, of all people,” had not solved the puzzle. At the same time, he resolutely refused to reveal the solution, and whatever he did say tended to toss what may be red herrings into waters that were already muddy. For example, in a program note written for a performance in Italy in 1911, Elgar wrote:

> It may be understood that these person-ages comment or reflect on the original theme & each one attempts a solution of the Enigma, for so the theme is called.

At least part of Elgar’s enigma was solved quickly: the identities of the subjects portrayed by the variations leave not much room for doubt. Many believe that the larger enigma of these variations, the “dark saying” to which Elgar alluded, may be subterfuge: that the enigma cannot be guessed with certainty because no enigma exists. What there can be no doubt about is that in this work Elgar supplied the symphonic repertoire with one of its richest sets of orchestral variations, captivating in their working out, evocative in their instrumentation, elegant in their overall balance.

**Instrumentation:** two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, triangle, bass drum, cymbals, organ, and strings.

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**In the Composer’s Words**

While he was sketching the *Enigma* Variations in October 1898, Elgar sent a scrap of music labeled “Theme” to his friend August Jaeger, an employee at the firm that published Elgar’s music, with the instruction that it was “to be critikised please.” Elgar elaborated:

Since I’ve been back I have sketched a set of Variations (orkestry) on an original theme: the Variations have amused me because I’ve labeled ’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” — I’ve liked to imagine “the party” writing the var. him (or her) self and have written what I think they wd / have written — if they were asses enough to compose — it’s a quaint idea & the result is amusing to those behind the scenes & won’t affect the hearer who “nose nuffin.”