



Edward ELGAR

Variations on an Original Theme (*Enigma Variations*)

Sir Edward William Elgar (2 June 1857 – 23 February 1934) was an English composer, many of whose works have entered the British and international classical concert repertoire. Among his best-known compositions are orchestral works including the *Enigma Variations*, the *Pomp and Circumstance Marches*, concertos for violin and cello, and two symphonies. He also composed choral works, including *The Dream of Gerontius*, chamber music and songs. He was knighted in 1904, and appointed Master of the King's Musick in 1924.

Variations on an Original Theme, Op. 36, popularly known as the *Enigma Variations*, was composed between October 1898 and February 1899. It is an orchestral work comprising fourteen variations on an original theme. A melody he played caught the attention of his wife, and he began to improvise variations on it in styles which reflected the character of some of his friends. These improvisations, expanded and orchestrated, became the *Enigma Variations*. Elgar dedicated the work "to my friends pictured within", each variation being a musical sketch of one of his circles of close acquaintances. Those portrayed include Elgar's wife Alice, his friend and publisher Augustus J. Jaeger and Elgar himself. Elgar considered including variations portraying Arthur Sullivan and Hubert Parry, but was unable to assimilate their musical styles without pastiche, and dropped the idea. In a programme note for a performance in 1911 Elgar wrote: "This work, commenced in a spirit of humour & continued in deep seriousness, contains sketches of the composer's friends. It may be understood that these personages comment or reflect on the original theme & each one attempts a solution of the Enigma, for so the theme is called. The sketches are not 'portraits' but each variation contains a distinct idea founded on some particular personality or perhaps on some incident known only to two people. This is the basis of the composition, but the work may be listened to as a 'piece of music' apart from any extraneous consideration." In naming his theme "Enigma" Elgar posed a challenge which has generated much speculation but has never been conclusively answered. The Enigma is widely believed to involve a hidden melody.

Theme (Enigma: Andante)

In a programme note for a 1912 performance of his setting of Arthur O'Shaughnessy's ode *The Music Makers*, Elgar wrote of this theme (which he quoted in the later work), "it expressed when written (in 1898) my sense of the loneliness of the artist as described in the first six lines of the Ode, and to me, it still embodies that sense." Elgar's personal identification with the theme is evidenced by his use of its opening phrase (which matches the rhythm and inflection of his name) as a signature in letters to friends.

Variation I (L'istesso tempo) "C.A.E."

Caroline Alice Elgar, Elgar's wife. The variation repeats a four-note melodic fragment which Elgar reportedly whistled when arriving home to his wife. After Alice's death, Elgar wrote, "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."

Variation II (Allegro) "H.D.S-P."

Hew David Steuart-Powell. Elgar wrote, "Hew David Steuart-Powell was a well-known amateur pianist and a great player of chamber music. He was associated with B.G.N. (cello) and the composer (violin) for many years in this playing. 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."

Variation III (Allegretto) "R.B.T."

Richard Baxter Townshend, Oxford don and author of the *Tenderfoot* series of books; brother-in-law of the W.M.B. depicted in Variation IV. This variation references R.B.T.'s presentation of an old man in some amateur theatricals – the low voice flying off occasionally into "soprano" timbre.

Variation IV (Allegro di molto) "W.M.B."

William Meath Baker, squire of Hasfield, Gloucestershire and benefactor of several public buildings in Fenton, Stoke-on-Trent, brother-in-law of R.B.T. depicted in Variation III, and (step) uncle of Dora Penny in Variation X. He "expressed himself somewhat energetically". This is the shortest of the variations.

Variation V (Moderato) "R.P.A."

Richard Penrose Arnold, the son of the poet Matthew Arnold, and an amateur pianist. This variation leads into the next without pause.

Variation VI (Andantino) "Ysobel"

Isabel Fitton, a viola pupil of Elgar. Elgar explained, "It may be noticed that the opening bar, a phrase made use of throughout the variation, is an 'exercise' for crossing the strings – a difficulty for beginners; on this is built a pensive and, for a moment, romantic movement."

Variation VII (Presto) "Troyte"

Arthur Troyte Griffith, a Malvern architect and one of Elgar's firmest friends. The variation, with a time signature of 1/1, good-naturedly mimics his enthusiastic incompetence on the piano. It may also refer to an occasion when Griffith and Elgar were out walking and got caught in a thunderstorm. The pair took refuge in the house of Winifred and Florence Norbury (Sherridge, Leigh Sinton, near Malvern), to which the next variation refers.

Variation VIII (Allegretto) "W.N."

Winifred Norbury, one of the secretaries of the Worcester Philharmonic Society. "Really suggested by an eighteenth-century house. The gracious personalities of the ladies are sedately shown. W.N. was more connected with the music than others of the family, and her initials head the movement; to justify this position a little suggestion of a characteristic laugh is given." This variation is linked to the next by a single note held by the first violins.

Variation IX (Adagio) "Nimrod"

The name of the variation refers to Augustus J. Jaeger, who was employed as music editor by the London publisher Novello & Co. He was a close friend of Elgar's, giving him useful advice but also severe criticism, something Elgar greatly appreciated. Elgar later related how Jaeger had encouraged him as an artist and had stimulated him to continue composing despite setbacks. Nimrod is described in the Old Testament as "a mighty hunter before the Lord", Jäger being German for hunter.

This variation has become popular in its own right and is sometimes used at British funerals, memorial services, and other solemn occasions. It is always played at the Cenotaph, Whitehall in London at the National Service of Remembrance. A version was also played during the Hong Kong handover ceremony in 1997 and at the opening ceremony of the London 2012 Olympic Games. An adaptation of the piece appears at the ending of the 2017 film Dunkirk as part of the score.

Variation X (Intermezzo: Allegretto) "Dorabella"

Dora Penny, a friend whose stutter is gently parodied by the woodwinds. Dora, later Mrs. Richard Powell, was the daughter of the Revd (later Canon) Alfred Penny. Her stepmother was the sister of William Meath Baker, the subject of Variation IV. She was the recipient of another of Elgar's enigmas, the so-called Dorabella Cipher. She described the "Friends Pictured Within" and "The Enigma" in two chapters of her book Edward Elgar, Memories of a Variation. This variation features a melody for solo viola.

Variation XI (Allegro di molto) "G.R.S."

George Robertson Sinclair, the energetic organist of Hereford Cathedral. In the words of Elgar: "The variation, however, has nothing to do with organs or cathedrals, or, except remotely, with G.R.S. The first few bars were suggested by his great bulldog, Dan (a well-known character) falling down the steep bank into the River Wye (bar 1); his paddling upstream to find a landing place (bars 2 and 3); and his rejoicing bark on landing (second half of bar 5). G.R.S. said, 'Set that to music'. I did; here it is."

Variation XII (Andante) "B.G.N."

Basil George Nevinson, an accomplished amateur cellist who played chamber music with Elgar. The variation is introduced and concluded by a solo cello. This variation leads into the next without pause.

Variation XIII (Romanza: Moderato) " * * * "

Possibly, Lady Mary Lygon of Madresfield Court near Malvern, a sponsor of a local music festival. "The asterisks take the place of the name of a lady[c] who was, at the time of the composition, on a sea voyage. The drums suggest the distant throb of the engines of a liner, over which the clarinet quotes a phrase from Mendelssohn's Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage."

If it is Lady Mary, Elgar may have withheld her initials because of superstition surrounding the number 13, or he may have felt uneasy about publicly associating the name of a prominent local figure with music that had taken on a powerful emotional intensity. There is credible evidence to support the view that the variation's atmosphere of brooding melancholy and its subtitle "Romanza" are tokens of a covert tribute to another woman, the name most frequently mentioned in this connection being that of Helen Weaver, who had broken off her engagement to Elgar in 1884 before sailing out of his life forever aboard a ship bound for New Zealand.

Variation XIV (Finale: Allegro) "E.D.U."

Elgar himself, nicknamed Edu by his wife, from the German Eduard. The themes from two variations are echoed: "Nimrod" and "C.A.E.", referring to Jaeger and Elgar's wife Alice, "two great influences on the life and art of the composer", as Elgar wrote in 1927. Elgar called these references "entirely fitting to the intention of the piece".