ENIGMA VARIATIONS, OP. 36

By SIR EDWARD ELGAR
Born June 2, 1857, in Broadheath, near Worcester;
died February 23, 1934, in Broadheath

One evening early in 1898, Edward Elgar sat down at the piano in the parlor of his home in Worcester and began to explore the possibilities of a particular theme. "What is that?" asked his wife, her curiosity aroused. "Nothing," he replied, "but something might be made of it." And indeed something soon was. On October 24 of that year, Elgar was able to report to his close friend, the critic and editor August Jaeger, "I have sketched a set of Variations on an original theme. The Variations have amused me because I've labeled 'em with the nicknames of my particular friends. . . . That is to say, I've written the Variations each one to represent the mood of the 'party.' I've tried to imagine the 'party' writing the variations himself or herself, and have written what I think they would have written—if they were asses enough to compose." The composition to which Elgar was jocularly referring was his *Variations on an Original Theme, Op. 36*, a work now known more universally and familiarly as the *Enigma* Variations.

Dedicated by Elgar to "my friends pictured within," the *Enigma* Variations received its premiere on June 19, 1899 under the baton of the celebrated German conductor Hans Richter at St. James Hall in London. At Richter's suggestion, Elgar made some minor changes to the score and conducted the premiere of the revised version himself in Worcester of September 13 of that same year. An unqualified success then, the *Enigma* Variations has gone on to become one of Elgar's most popular scores and one of the relatively few works by any English composer to gain a firm foothold in the standard orchestral repertory.

The nickname "Enigma," which appears on the title page of the published score, alludes to a cryptic remark made by Elgar that there is a "hidden" theme that, although never actually played, runs in "silent counterpoint" to the main theme of the work. Much futile effort was spent by friends, critics, and commentators in trying to discover the identity of this "unheard" theme. Regardless of the guess,

however, Elgar's response was always the same: to smile benignly from behind his walrus-moustache and say, "Ah, that's telling!" Whatever the secret of the "enigma" was—if there ever really was one—it went with the composer to his grave.

Beyond being simply a collection of musical portraits of some close friend, Elgar's *Enigma* Variations is a marvelously wrought set of expert variations on a simple yet expressive theme that brims with possibilities. The score is colored with poignancy, whimsy, nostalgia, humor, and a subtle hint of the sentimentality of a faded Victorian valentine. The fourteen variations that make up the work may be briefly identified and described as follows:

Variation I (C.A.E.): Lady Caroline Alice Elgar, the composer's beloved wife and prime source of encouragement.

Variation II (H.D.S.-P.): H. D. Stuart-Powell, an amateur pianist. Here, Elgar gently pokes fun at the finger exercises that his friend consistently performed prior to playing.

Variation III (R.B.T.): Richard Baxter Townshend, an amateur actor. Elgar musically describes Townshend's ability to switch from his normally deep voice to a realistic falsetto for "old man" roles.

Variation IV (W.M.B.): William M. Baker, a country squire who was "given to vigorous pronouncements." Lady Elgar thought that this music sounded "exactly the way he goes out of a room."

Variation V (R.P.A.): Richard P. Arnold (the son of Matthew Arnold), whose serious conversation was continually broken up by whimsical and witty remarks.

Variation VI (Ysobel): Isabel Fitton, a pupil of Elgar's who was also an amateur violist. Her variation features a prominent solo for that instrument.

Variation VII (Troyte): Arthur Troyte Griffith, an architect who was one of Elgar's more explosive friends. The music depicts his excitable, volatile nature.

Variation VIII (W.N.): Miss Winifred Norbury, a gracious and light-hearted elderly aristocrat who lived near the Elgars.

Variation IX (Nimrod): August J. Jaeger, a critic and publisher who probably was Elgar's closest friend. Since he was a great admirer of Beethoven, the opening bars of his variation recall the slow movement of that composer's *Pathétique* Piano Sonata. (Nimrod is the "great hunter" of the Bible; "Jaeger" is German for "hunter.")

Variation X (Dorabella-Intermezzo): Miss Dora Penny, whose conversation, according to Edgar, "was marked by a pretty hesitation of speech." ("Dorabella" was Elgar's affectionate nickname for her.)

Variation XI (G.R.S.): Dr. George Robinson Sinclair, the organist of Hereford Cathedral and a neighbor of Elgar's. This variation not only depicts Sinclair, but also his bulldog, Dan.

Variation XII (B.G.N.) : Basil G.Nevinson, an amateur cellist who often played chamber music with Elgar and Stuart-Powell. Appropriately, his variation includes a prominent role for solo cello.

Variation XIII (*-Romanza):** Lady Mary Lygon, who was on an ocean voyage to Australia at the time that the music was written. The kettledrums suggest the distant throb of the engines of an ocean liner and the clarinet quotes a theme from Mendlssohn's concert overture "Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage."

Variation XIV (E.D.U.) Elgar himself ("Edu" was the nickname by which he was known only to his wife and a few close friends). In this final variation, a kind of "summing up" of the work, Edgar depicts himself, his struggles, his hopes, and his ideals, and brings the score to a majestic close on a note of triumph.

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