

EDWARD ELGAR

Variations on an Original Theme, Op. 36, "Enigma"

BORN: Lower Broadheath, near Worcester, England, June 2, 1857

DIED: Worcester, February 23, 1934

WORK COMPOSED: 1898–99

WORLD PREMIERE: June 19, 1899, in London, conducted by Hans Richter

The "enigma" theme begins and ends with halting phrases built from brief fragments of melody in the key of G minor. Between them is a more lyrical and continuous section in G major. The theme, then, reveals a clear A–B–A form, and this in turn shapes each of the variations.

The famous "*Nimrod*" variation begins as a quiet hymn played by the strings. It then swells through the addition of other instruments, finally reaching a stirring climax before subsiding to a quiet conclusion.

Elgar recalls music from "*Nimrod*," and also from his wife's variation, in the final variation, his own.

"I have sketched a set of Variations (orkestra) on an original theme: the Variations have amused me because 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" ... [I]t's a quaint idea & the result is amusing to those behind the scenes & won't affect the hearer who 'nose nuffin'."

So reads the first recorded reference to Edward Elgar's "Enigma" Variations, contained in a letter of October 24, 1898, written by the composer in humorous shorthand to his friend August Jaeger. No doubt Elgar thought the premise of this piece "quaint" and "amusing," and probably innocent enough. But with this work the composer created one of the most tantalizing mysteries in music. For although he freely identified the friends pictured in each of the 14 variations, he designated the original theme that sets the entire piece in motion as simply "Enigma."

Elgar's comments, provided in a program note for the work's first performance, only deepened the mystery: "The enigma I will not explain — its 'dark saying' must be left unguessed ... ; 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 ... the chief character is never on the stage."

Thus Elgar posed not one but two riddles: the "dark saying" represented in the single word "enigma," and the identity of the "larger theme" that "goes" through the set. Elgar hinted that the latter was a well-known melody to which his original theme is a variant or counter-melody. His friends tried to hit upon what this familiar tune might be, offering up "God Save the King" and "Auld Lang Syne." But the composer dismissed these and other guesses, and its identity remains a secret.

The message of this theme — its "dark saying," as Elgar alluded to it — has proved equally puzzling. Did it represent Elgar himself? This seems unlikely, for he paints his own portrait in the final variation, "*E.D.U.*" (a paraphrase of "Edoo," his wife's nickname for him). More general themes have been proposed, among them friendship, religious devotion (Elgar was a practicing Catholic) and the trials and joys of musical creation. Elgar never revealed the meaning of the "enigma," and this, too, remains unknown.

Fortunately, this in no way diminishes the attractiveness of the Variations as music. The mysterious “enigma” theme opens the set. Each of the ensuing variations has its own character and its own special charm. Elgar gives pride of place to his wife, Caroline Alice Elgar, in the first variation. The crowning piece of the set is the ninth variation, “*Nimrod*,” portraying August Jaeger. As editor at a London music publishing house, Jaeger encouraged Elgar and championed his works long before they were fashionable. The deep friendship that grew between the two men finds reflection in the moving strains of this *Adagio*.

Scored for 2 flutes (the 2nd doubling piccolo); 2 oboes; 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons and contrabassoon; 4 horns; 3 trumpets; 3 trombones; tuba; timpani and percussion; organ (ad lib); strings.

© 2017 Paul Schiavo