

These notes are based on the Programme Notes we nearly used for our cancelled concert in the Covid pandemic. I wanted to make them available to the Orchestra to give a background to our rehearsals. I soon found that the more I looked into the Variations the more controversy I found. It became apparent that I would never be happy with them! So I had to draw a line and publish and be damned. Many of you will know much more than I, so I apologise and ask for any contributions to enhance and correct these notes. But I hope these notes may be of some interest and will encourage you to delve further. I give two books for further reading at the end.

Elgar composed the Enigma Variations between 1898 and 1899. The dedication at the head of the score is "To my friends pictured within, Malvern, 1899".

Elgar was working as a violin teacher in Malvern when in 1898 the idea for what was to become the Enigma Variations first came to him. His reputation as a composer was still not widespread although, in the Malvern area, he had already begun to build up a group of admirers. The work was a great success and established Elgar's reputation, launching his international career at the age of 42.

The Theme is stated at the beginning and is in three parts: Firstly, the melody is in a minor key using a falling third interval and then, as the melody rises, the interval become a falling seventh. The central section of the theme is in the major key and ascends smoothly. The return of the minor opening rounds the theme off nicely. Unlike the traditional variations format (where each variation is usually the same length and shape as the Theme), Elgar treats these variations so that they differ in length and mood, as best fits the personalities of his friends.

Each of the 14 variations is a "sketch of the personalities/idiosyncrasies" of a particular member of Elgar's circle: hence the dedication. The initials, or pseudonym, at the head of each variation are a clue to the identity of the person portrayed. This is only part of the enigma, however; Elgar himself said that through his original theme another and larger theme "goes" but is not played. Elgar also mentioned: "the Enigma I will not explain; its 'dark saying' must be left unguessed". It remains unresolved.

Enigma

The Theme. The work originally had the title "Variations for Orchestra". Only these first few bars had the heading *Enigma*. The Programme Notes of the first performance in 1899 were based on information from Elgar himself:

"The Enigma I will not explain – it's 'dark saying' must be left unguessed....And the larger theme 'goes' but is not played .. So the principal Theme never appears... The chief character is never on the stage."

Variation 1 (CAE)



Figure 1 Caroline Alice Elgar

Caroline Alice Elgar, the composer's wife. The music reflects a warm and gracious personality.

After the rather melancholy theme has been presented, the affectionate Variation 1 characterized Elgar's wife, **Caroline A Elgar**.

Variation 2 (HDS-P)



Figure 2 Hew David Stewart-Powell

H.D.S.P. – Hew David Stewart-Powell. A pianist friend who played trios with Elgar and the music gives the suggestion of his finger exercises at the piano.

The nervous bustle of Variation 2 mimicked **Hew David Stewart-Powell's** characteristic warm-up at the piano, while the third variation's light-hearted mood recalled the mimicking talents of Richard Baxter Townshend.

Variation 3 (R B T)

Robert Baxter Townshend

R B.T. – Richard Baxter Townshend was an amateur actor whose voice tended to break when he impersonated an old man. Elgar beguilingly captures the mannerism. The key changes to the major, and the opening notes of the theme are heard, with a delightful change of rhythm, on the oboe.

Variation 4 (WMB)



Figure 3 William Meath Baker

W.M.B.- William Meath Baker was a country squire noted for his musical house parties. Elgar's forceful use of the theme expresses his business-like manner. He was also known for his brusqueness in announcing arrangements before stomping out, slamming the door, and this is depicted in the music.

Variation 5 (RPA)



Figure 4 Richard Penrose Arnold

R.P.A. - Richard Arnold was the son of the poet Matthew Arnold, and was a music lover.

He was a serious-minded man with a delightful sense of humour that lightened his conversation. Elgar adds a warm counter melody above the theme, while the light-hearted moments are largely on the woodwind.

Variation 6 (Ysobel)



Figure 5 Isabel Fitton

Isabel Fitton, an amateur viola player from a musical family living in Malvern.

She was a pupil of Elgar's and her instrument plays an important solo line in this variation, which was written as a string crossing exercise from the fourth to the second string.

Variation 7 (Troyte)



Figure 6 Arthur Troyte Griffith

Arthur Troyte Griffith, was a Malvern architect and close friend of Elgar throughout their lives - the variation focuses on Troyte's limited abilities as a pianist.

He was no musician and the variation portrays his unsatisfactory attempts to play the piano! The famous opening timpani solo creates the mood of the movement, marked Presto. Later the strings rush down and up in great excitement, which is all part of Elgar's joke, for Troyte Griffith was apparently a little pompous.

Variation 8 (WN)

WN - Winifred Norbury, known to Elgar through her association with the Worcestershire Philharmonic Society - the variation captures both her laugh and the atmosphere of her eighteenth century house.

The theme's opening is played, with varied rhythm, on the clarinets. Winifred Norbury lived with her sister in a charming old house in the Worcestershire countryside, and the variation, a kind of minuet, conjures up its old-world charm and Miss Norbury's characteristic laugh. The music leads directly into ...

Variation 9 (Nimrod)



Figure 7 August Johannes Jaeger

Nimrod - August Johannes Jaeger - Elgar's great friend whose encouragement did much to keep Elgar going during the period when he was struggling to secure a lasting reputation - the variation allegedly captures a discussion between them on Beethoven's slow movements

This movement is joined to the previous variation and develops the falling seventh motif. This richly scored movement is dedicated to Elgar's closest friend and critic. In German, Jaeger means hunter: hence, Nimrod; "the mighty hunter."

Variation 10 (Dorabella – Intermezzo)



Figure 8 Dora Penny

Dora Penny was a close friend of the Elgars.

She was the daughter of the Rector of Wolverhampton. The delicate interplay of strings and woodwind in this movement makes an effective contrast to the majesty of the previous variation. The woodwind suggests the rhythm of the name Dorabella: Dora Penny suffered with an occasional stammer.

Variation 11 (GRS)



Figure 9 George Robertson Sinclair

George Robertson Sinclair was an organist at Hereford Cathedral, although the variation allegedly portrays Sinclair's bulldog Dan paddling in the River Wye after falling in.

Elgar and Sinclair were out walking when bulldog Dan leaping into the river to fetch a stick fell into the river Wye. He swam upstream, shook himself and barked. These fragments form the basis of this variation.

13 Variation 12 (BGN)



Figure 10 Basil G. Nevinson

This “cello variation” is dedicated to Basil George Nevinson (1853 – 1908) who resided in London but found time to visit Malvern regularly and play cello in various musical ensembles. When Elgar visited London, he would often stay at the Nevinson home. This poignant movement features a cello solo in acknowledgment of Elgar’s friendship with Nevinson.

Variation 13 (***)



Figure 11 Lady Mary Trefusis

This variation (Romanza) has caused a lot of controversy. The *** possibly represents Lady Mary Trefusis, née Lygon, a local noblewoman who sailed for Australia at about the time Elgar wrote the variation, which quotes from Mendelssohn's *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*. The use of asterisks rather than initials has also invited speculation that they conceal the identity of Helen Weaver, Elgar's fiancée for eighteen months in 1883/84 before she emigrated to New Zealand. Others say both these ideas are disproved. See Ref¹

Variation 14 (EDU) Finale

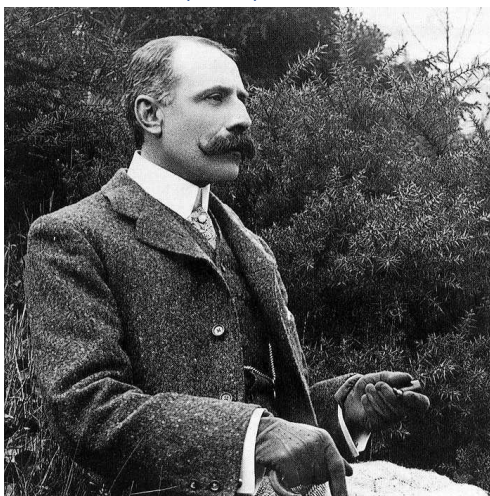


Figure 12 Edward Elgar

This is a portrait of the composer himself, vigorous and confident. Lady Elgar always called him Edouard, or Edu for short, hence the initials E.D.U.

The finale was written, as Elgar stated, "at a time when friends were dubious and generally discouraging as to the composer's musical future." His reply to their doubtfulness is bold and vigorous, and contains quotations from previous portions of the score. It accurately forecasted

¹ <http://enigmathemeunmasked.blogspot.com/2012/09/table-of-contents.html>

Elgar's successful future. At Jaeger's suggestion, Elgar expanded this section one month after the première, making it even more grandiose than it had been previously.

Further Reading:

Elgar's 'Enigma' Variations - Patrick Turner -Thames 1999

Elgar 'Enigma' Variations Julian Rushton Cambridge University Press 1999.