

Enigma Variations, op. 36

Edward Elgar (1857-1934)

Variations on an Original Theme ('Enigma') op. 36 by Edward Elgar was composed in 1898-99 and debuted by German conductor, Hans Richter, at the St. James's Hall on June 19, 1899. The functioning title of "*Enigma Variations*" came to be after Elgar commented that there was a hidden melody that accompanies the entire piece, but goes unplayed. Experts have had many guesses as to what that piece could be, but none have made a convincing argument. The most popular theories state that the melody could be "God Save the Queen," "Dies Irae," or "Auld Lang Syne." Although some thought the "enigma" was the bizarre naming system used on each variation, Elgar publicly commented that each title is based on the initials or name of someone dear in his life. His musical portrayals range from his wife and best friend, C. A. E. and Nimrod respectively, to an unknown, perhaps romantic, friend depicted in variation ***. Certain musicologists argue that some of the enigma is hidden within this variation title. It is believed that his wife, C. A. E., and Jaeger, Nimrod, were the only people to know the answer to the secret.

Variation I "C. A. E.": Based on Elgar's wife, Caroline Alice Elgar, this variation opens with a smooth transition from the introductory original theme. This was the desired effect, as Elgar felt the seamless transition was a romantic and delicate inspiration similar to his wife.

Variation II "H. D. S.-P.": Based on a fellow friend and musician Hew David Steuart Powell, the movement begins with a hectic chromatic line, forming a humorous juxtaposition to the diatonic passages that H. D. S.-P. was known for playing.

Variation III "R. B. T.": Based on author Richard Baxtor Townshed, who was famous for his Tenderfoot books, this variation displays Townshed's theatrical caricature of an elderly man by the lower instrumentation and the building grumpiness within the bassoons.

Variation IV "W. M. B.": Based on scholar William Meath Baker, this is the shortest of any variation. This particular section reflects the time when W. M. B. hastily announced the day's plans, quickly fled the music room, and left the door to slam behind him.

Variation V "R. P. A.": Based on a lover of music, Richard Penrose Arnold, who was the son of English poet Matthew Arnold, this variation features some of the most dramatic contrast in the piece. The somber bass melody is constantly being interrupted by a much jollier theme stated by the wind instruments.

Variation VI "Ysobel": Based on amateur violist Isabel Fitton. To depict her skill level, the opening passage is based on an exercise to aid in crossing over strings. This phrase is used throughout the rest of the movement to give a thoughtful and slightly romantic variation.

Variation VII "Troyte": Based on a friend and novice pianist: Arthur Troyte Griffith. His inexperience is portrayed by the rapid hammering rhythm in the timpani and low strings. The last chord represents Troyte slamming his hands on the keys, disgruntled with the outcome of the music he plays.

Variation VIII "W.N.": Based on Winifred Norbury, an elegant woman who was highly involved with the arts and thus knew Elgar. The fluttering melody of the flutes imitates her delightful laughter.

Variation IX "Nimrod": Based on an interaction with his best friend Augustus Johannes Jaeger, who urges Elgar to continue composing despite his bleak uncertainty of his future musical career. This slow and grandiose movement can also be interpreted as Elgar's gratitude for being able to have such a wonderful colleague and best friend.

Variation X "Dorabella": Based on a daughter figure in his life, Dora Penny, this variation is meant to reflect the graceful way that Penny would dance to Elgar's music whenever he played for her. The soft trilling lines of the high strings are meant to capture one of Penny's physically prominent features: her charming stutter.

Variation XI "G.R.S.": Based on the bulldog of one of Elgar's friends, George Robert Sinclair. A fictional story is told of how the dog falls into a river, his descent portrayed by the running lines passed among the string sections. The short eighth notes from the bassoons represent his paws paddling along the stream before he reaches land again, a grand fanfare representing his triumphant 'bark' of recovery.

Variation XII "B.G.N.": Based on friend Basil George Nevinson, who played in the same ensembles as Elgar. He was an incredibly devoted cellist, hence the cello solo at the beginning of this variation.

*Variation XIII "***"*: Being another part of the "enigma," nobody knows who this variation was based on. However, we do have confirmation from Elgar that the subject was out at sea at the time of its composition; hence, the samples of Mendelssohn's "Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage" in the clarinet's part. Music academics believe the subject to be a possible love interest: either Lady Mary Lygon, a high-standing socialite who held multiple musical positions within the arts, or Helen Weaver, Elgar's first fiancée who broke off their engagement due to health issues.

Variation XIV "E.D.U.": Elgar finally comes to write about himself; the acronym derives from his wife's nickname for him – "Edu." Motifs from Caroline and Jaeger's movements can be heard, as they constantly supported Elgar. The amount of confidence exuded by this variation conveys the amount of strength that Elgar received from his friends throughout his life, making this a touching finale to a magnificent piece.

– Max Yarrow '21 & Ivy Sanders '22

Three Dances from "Gayneh" Ballet Aram Khachaturian (1903-1978)

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Russian-born Aram Khachaturian premiered his ballet *Gayane* in 1942. The original ballet plot revolves around the character Gayane, an Armenian woman who works on a collective farm on the Georgian border during the German invasion in 1941. She struggles with her personal feelings about her husband's traitorous actions against the Soviet Union. Not only does her husband, Giko, steal money and burn down the cotton warehouse, he turns out to be an anti-Communist spy. Gayane meets a Soviet guard and secretly plans to foil Giko's evil schemes against the Soviet Union. However, Giko confronts Gayane, stabs her, and then flees. The Soviet guard saves Gayane, and they end up falling in love. The finale of the ballet is the celebration of Gayane's marriage to the guard and the reconstruction of the buildings that Giko destroyed.

Tonight's concert features a three-movement orchestral compilation that Khachaturian arranged himself. Each movement was hand-selected from different acts to showcase the variety of characteristics within the ballet. The first movement, "The Dance of the Young Maidens," is a gentle yet cheerful dance from Act I. In this movement, woodwinds perform an acrobatic theme punctuated by the trumpet. The violins respond with a delicate line reminiscent of ballet class warm-ups.

Movement II, "Lullaby," opens with an extended but melancholy oboe solo that introduces a soothing melody. The flute and violins continue the comforting tune. The second half of this movement is the climax, creating enormous intensity and passion, emphasizing the emotion/strain that Gayane feels toward Giko's betrayal. This is followed by nervous energy, and then concludes peacefully and beautifully, depicting Gayane's acceptance of past tragedies and her willingness to move on.

The last movement, "Sabre Dance," is Khachaturian's best-known selection. It appears in the final act of