

Edward Elgar (1857-1934): *Enigma Variations*, Op. 36 (1899)

When we hear Elgar's music today, we often think of it as a soundtrack for British national identity and a metaphor for the dignity and emotional reserve associated with important occasions. During the reign of George V, he was named "Master of the King's Musick," an honorary title equivalent to poet laureate. And his most famous work, of course, is "Pomp and Circumstance," a tune which rings in the ears of anyone who has ever attended a high school or college graduation. But despite all the "pomp" now associated with him, Elgar came from rather humble beginnings. He didn't always feel quite so British, either. An ardent Catholic, his faith sometimes put him at odds with the Anglican majority (and the faith of the Crown), and his social class, too, hindered his educational opportunities and access to the connections that might have made his rise to fame a bit quicker. Perhaps as the result of these circumstances, he was also a lifelong sufferer of what we might call "imposter syndrome" today, never quite confident he deserved his hard-earned accolades.

Elgar was immersed in music from an early age. His father owned a small village music shop, tuned pianos, and worked as a church organist. Elgar at first aspired to become a professional violinist, but as he matured, he dreamed of studying composition in Germany. Unfortunately, he lacked the musical resources to make it happen. He was mostly self-taught, studying the scores of his European idols, Beethoven, Schumann, and Dvořák, and, on the English side of the channel, the Baroque composer Henry Purcell. It's an irony that in Elgar's youth, Britain was still being referred to by the Germans as "*das Land ohne Musik*" [the land without music]. Many in Britain shared that opinion, encouraging continental composers over their own. Elgar, along with Ralph Vaughan Williams and Gustav Holst were among those responsible for ushering in a new Renaissance in English music in the early 20th century.

Elgar was already in his 40s when he wrote the *Enigma Variations*, which brought him his first real fame. He dedicated the piece "to my friends pictured within," with each of the fourteen variations representing a different person (including Elgar himself). Some of the variations are character sketches, while other allude to a shared experience or association with the person. As for the "Enigma," Elgar said "...I will not explain—its 'dark saying' must be left unguessed, and I warn you that the connexion between the Variations and the Theme is often of the slightest texture; further, through and over the whole set another and larger theme 'goes,' but is not played...So the principal Theme never appears..." Many have attempted to solve the puzzle, but Elgar, unfortunately, took this one to his grave. Some have suggested that the unheard "Theme" is not a real tune at all, but rather a concept that binds the variations together metaphorically: "friendship," for example. But Elgar seemed to suggest later in life that the Enigma Theme was an actual well-known melody against which the theme in the variations could be played as an accompaniment. A variety of tunes have been proposed as a solution—"Rule Britannia," or "Auld Lang Syne"—but Elgar never confirmed any of them. Fortunately, he was more forthcoming in his descriptions of the friendships represented in each variation. Below are his own notes on "the friends within."

I. "C.A.E" [Caroline Alice Elgar, the composer's wife] "There is no break between the theme and this movement. 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 as a romantic and delicate inspiration."

II. H.D.S.-P. "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 [sixteenth-note] passages; these should suggest a Toccata, but chromatic beyond H.D.S.-P.'s liking."

III. R.B.T. "Richard Baxter Townshend, whose Tenderfoot books are now so well-known and appreciated. The Variation has a reference to R.B.T.'s presentation of an old man in some amateur theatricals—the low voice flying off occasionally into 'soprano' timbre. The oboe gives a somewhat pert version of the theme, and the growing grumpiness of the bassoons is important."

IV. W.M.B. "A country squire, gentleman and scholar. In the days of horses and carriages it was more difficult than in these days of petrol to arrange the carriages for the day to suit a large number of guests. This variation was written after the host had, with a slip of paper in his hand, forcibly read out the arrangements for the day and hurriedly left the music-room with an inadvertent bang of the door. In bars 15-24 are some suggestions of the teasing attitude of the guests.

V. R.P.A. "Richard P. Arnold, son of Matthew Arnold. A great lover of music which he played (on the pianoforte) in a self-taught manner, evading difficulties but suggesting in a mysterious way the real feeling. His serious conversation was continually broken up by whimsical and witty remarks. The theme is given by the basses with solemnity and in the ensuing major portion there is much light-hearted badinage among the wind instruments.

VI. Ysobel "A Malvern lady, an amateur viola player. 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."

VII. Troyte "A well-known architect in Malvern. The boisterous mood is mere banter. The uncouth rhythm of the drums and lower strings was really suggested by some maladroit essays to play the pianoforte; later the strong rhythm suggests the attempts of the instructor (E.E.) to make something like order of chaos, and the final despairing 'slam' records that the effort proved to be vain."

VIII. W.N. "Really suggested by an eighteenth-century house. The gracious personalities of the ladies are sedately shown. W.N. was more connected with 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."

IX. Nimrod [A.J. Jaeger] “The variation... is the record of a long summer evening talk, when my friend discoursed eloquently on the slow movements of Beethoven, and said that no one could approach Beethoven as his best in this field, a view with which I cordially concurred. It will be noticed that the opening bars are made to suggest the slow movement of the Eighth Sonata (*Pathétique*). Jaeger was for years the dear friend, the valued adviser and the stern critic of many musicians besides the writer; his place has been occupied but never filled.”

X. Dorabella [Dora Penny] “INTERMEZZO. The pseudonym is adopted from Mozart’s *Così fan tutte*. The movement suggests a dance-like lightness. The inner sustained phrases at first on the viola and later on the flute should be noted.

XI. G.R.S. “George Robertson Sinclair, Mus. D., late organist of Hereford Cathedral...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 up stream to find a landing place (bars 2 and 3); and his rejoicing bark on landing (2nd half of bar 5). G.R.S. said, “Set that to music.” I did; here it is.

XII. B.G.N. “Basil G. Nevinson, an amateur cello player of distinction and the associate with H.D. S.-P. and the writer (violin) in performances of many trios—a serious and devoted friend. The variation is a tribute to a very dear friend whose scientific and artistic attainments, and the whole-hearted way they were put at the disposal of his friends, particularly endeared him to the writer.”

XIII. *** [Lady Mary Lygon] “The asterisks take the place of the name of a lady 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 with the clarinet quotes a phrase from Mendelssohn’s *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*.”

XIV. E.D.U. [Edward Elgar] “FINALE: bold and vigorous in general style. Written at a time when friends were dubious and generally discouraging as the composer’s musical future, this variation is merely to show what E.D.U. (a paraphrase of a fond name) intended to do. References made to Var. I (C.A.E.) and to Var. IX (Nimrod), two great influences to the life and art of the composer, are entirely fitting to the intention of the piece. The whole of the work is summed up in the triumphant broad presentation of the theme in the major.”