

## Classics 1

September 24 & 25, 2010

### Notes on the Program by Ken Meltzer

**Edward Elgar was born in Broadheath, near Worcester, England, on June 2, 1857, and died in Worcester on February 23, 1934.**

#### ***Cockaigne Overture* (“In London Town”), Opus 40 (1901)**

**The first performance of the *Cockaigne Overture* took place at Queen’s Hall in London, England, on June 20, 1901, with the composer conducting. The *Cockaigne Overture* is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, two cornets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, military drum, orchestra bells, snare drum, organ and strings. Approximate performance time is fifteen minutes.**

Edward Elgar wrote the *Cockaigne Overture* during an especially challenging period in the composer’s life. Following the triumphant premiere of the “Enigma” Variations in June of 1899 (see, below), Elgar accepted an invitation from the Birmingham Festival to compose a sacred choral work. Elgar finally decided upon a setting of Cardinal John Henry Newman’s *The Dream of Gerontius*.

The October 3, 1900 premiere of Elgar’s *The Dream of Gerontius* proved to be an absolute disaster, prompting the composer to confide to his dear friend, August Jaeger: “As far as I’m concerned music in England is dead.” It was at this time that the Philharmonic Society requested Elgar to compose a new orchestral work. Elgar was hardly enthusiastic about the prospect: “What’s the good of it?” he asked Jaeger. “Nobody else will perform the thing.”

Somehow, Elgar managed to gather himself, and in March and April of 1901, he composed the work known as his *Cockaigne Overture*. Elgar dedicated the Overture “to my many friends, the members of the British orchestras.” He wrote to conductor Hans Richter: “Here is nothing deep or melancholy—it is intended to be honest, healthy, humorous and strong, but not vulgar.”

The term “Cockaigne” originally referred to a mythical land of plenty. Later, perhaps because of its similarity to the word “cockney,” “Cockaigne” became associated with the city of London. The *Cockaigne Overture*, a spirited, joyous and loving tribute to the great city, remains one of Elgar’s most popular concert works.

#### **Concerto Cello and Orchestra in E minor, Opus 85 (1919)**

**The first performance of the Cello Concerto took place at the Queen’s Hall in London, England, on October 27, 1919, with Felix Salmond as soloist and the composer conducting the London Symphony Orchestra. In addition to the solo cello, the Concerto is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two**

**bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani and strings.**  
**Approximate performance time is thirty minutes.**

In 1918, while recovering from a long and difficult bout with tonsillitis, Edward Elgar composed the first music he had written in nine months—a beautiful melody in 9/8 time. In the fall of that year, Alice Elgar noted that her husband was at work orchestrating the melody. By the spring of the following year, Elgar was devoting much time and attention to this music, which now took form as his Cello Concerto in E minor.

Assisting Elgar in the composition of the solo part was cellist Felix Salmond, who had also taken part in the premieres of the composer's String Quartet and Piano Quintet. In August, Elgar offered Salmond the opportunity to be the soloist in the Concerto's world premiere. As Alice Elgar noted in her diary: "F. Salmond left after lunch & seemed so happy here—*thrilled* with the thought of playing the Concerto for the 1<sup>st</sup> time & wildly excited about it, did not sleep all night thinking about it..."

The premiere of the Elgar Cello Concerto took place at the Queen's Hall in London on October 26, 1919, with Salmond as soloist, and Elgar on the podium. Due to inadequate rehearsal time, the performance was sub-par.

In time, however, the Elgar Cello Concerto became recognized as one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's finest. Many commentators have recognized the Concerto's "profound wisdom," first cited by the English music critic, Ernest Newman, in his review of the premiere. Elgar composed the Cello Concerto after the devastation of the First World War. Elgar was all too aware of the effect the "War to End All Wars" had upon the world he knew and loved. As the composer wrote in 1917: "Everything good & nice & clean & sweet is far away—never to return."

And perhaps Elgar sensed that his own life—at least as a composer—was reaching its final stages. In his catalogue of works, Elgar wrote the following next to the listing of his Cello Concerto: "FINIS R.I.P." And after his beloved Alice's death in 1920, Elgar was never the same. Although almost fifteen years elapsed from the work's premiere to Edward Elgar's death, the Cello Concerto proved to be his last major work.

The Concerto is in four movements. A slow introduction (*Adagio*) leads to the violas' rapt introduction (*Moderato*) of the melody Elgar originally composed during his recuperative period. The second movement, which follows without pause, features a pizzicato version of the first-movement introduction (*Lento*), followed by the central scherzo (*Allegro molto*). The Concerto's slow third movement (*Adagio*) features a beautiful, wide-ranging melody. The finale (*Allegro; Moderato; Allegro, ma non troppo*), which follows without pause, presents striking juxtapositions of moods, capped by a terse resolution.

### **Variations on an Original Theme, Opus 36, "Enigma" (1899)**

**The first performance of the "Enigma" Variations took place at St. James's Hall in London, England, on June 19, 1899, with Hans Richter conducting. The "Enigma" variations are scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons,**

**contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbal, snare drum, triangle, organ and strings. Approximate performance time is thirty minutes.**

The premiere of Edward Elgar's "Enigma" Variations took place at St. James's Hall in London on June 19, 1899. After the premiere, conductor Hans Richter called Elgar to the stage to acknowledge the audience's enthusiastic reception. On June 23, Elgar's mother proudly wrote to the composer's wife: "What can I say to him, the dear one, I feel that he is some great historic person—I cannot claim a little bit of him now he belongs to the big world."

The word "Enigma" is found in the score above the introduction of the principal theme. In correspondence to Charles Barry, program annotator for the "Enigma's" premiere concert, Elgar admitted:

*It is true that I have sketched for their amusement and mine, the idiosyncrasies of fourteen of my friends, not necessarily musicians; but this is a personal matter and need not have been mentioned publicly.*

*The Enigma I will not explain—its "dark saying" must be left unguessed, and I warn you that the apparent connection 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, even as in some late dramas...the chief character is never on the stage.*

These comments have inspired musical sleuths over the past century to try to uncover Elgar's mystery "principal Theme." In a 1911 commentary, Elgar suggested that the "enigma" revolves not around some hidden melody, but the manipulation and development of the theme that *is* clearly presented at the opening of the piece: "This work, commenced in a spirit of humour and continued in deep seriousness, contains sketches of the composer's friends. It may be understood that these personages comment or reflect upon the original theme and each one attempts a solution of the Enigma, for so the theme is called."

All of this intrigue and conjecture have never obscured the fact that the "Enigma" Variations is a brilliantly crafted and often moving work, a testament to Elgar's considerable gifts at the service of the beloved friends who inspired him.

*Andante*—In the seventeen-bar introduction, the strings, followed by the winds, present the various elements of the haunting principal theme.

I. (*C.A.E.*) *L'istesso tempo*—The composer's loving tribute to his wife, Caroline Alice Elgar. The oboes and bassoons play a four-note motif Elgar always whistled upon returning home.

II. (*H.D.S-P.*) *Allegro*—Hew David Steuart-Powell was an amateur pianist who, according to Elgar, would begin each session with "a characteristic diatonic run over the keys."

III. (*R.B.T.*) *Allegretto*—Richard Baxter Townshend was an author and amateur actor who regaled audiences with his ability to instantly shift his vocal range from the deepest *basso profundo* to the highest soprano.

IV. (*W.M.B.*) *Allegro di molto*—The shortest of the Variations depicts William Meath Baker, lord of Hatsfield Court and R.B.T.'s brother-in-law, informing his guests of arrangements he made for their transportation and then quickly leaving the room, "with a bang on the door."

V. (*R.P.A.*) *Moderato*—Richard Penrose Arnold was the son of poet Matthew Arnold. Elgar delighted in the fact that Arnold's "serious conversation was continually broken up by whimsical and witty remarks."

VI. (*Ysobel*) *Andantino*—Isabel Fitton studied viola with Elgar. That instrument is prominently featured in this variation.

VII. (*Troyte*) *Presto*—Arthur Troyte Griffith was an architect and amateur painter. It seems that this stormy variation, with its thundering timpani, represents only one aspect of his character.

VIII. (*W.N.*) *Allegretto*—Winifred Norbury served with Elgar as joint secretary of the Worcestershire Philharmonic Society. Elgar claimed that this genial variation was a portrait of Winifred's country home, but the playful wind interjections offer "a little suggestion of a characteristic laugh."

IX. (*Nimrod*) *Adagio*—"Nimrod" is Elgar's depiction of his friend, August Jaeger ("jaeger" in German means "hunter," thus the reference to Nimrod, the biblical hunter). This glorious *Adagio* is the composer's fond recollection of "a long summer evening talk, when my friend grew nobly eloquent (as only he could) on the grandeur of Beethoven, and especially his slow movements."

X. (*Dorabella*) *Intermezzo. Allegretto*—Dora Penny was W.M.B.'s step-niece whom Elgar nicknamed "Dorabella," after a character in Mozart's opera, *Così fan tutte*. Both Dora Penny's love of dance and her slight stammer are depicted in this fetching *Intermezzo*.

XI. (*G.R.S.*) *Allegro di molto*—George Robertson Sinclair was the organist at Hereford Cathedral. According to Elgar, this section is a portrait not of Sinclair. Rather, the music depicts Sinclair's bulldog, Dan, falling into the river, vigorously swimming to shore and finally landing with a "rejoicing bark."

XII. (*B.G.N.*) *Andante*—Basil G. Nevinson was an amateur cellist who often played chamber music with Elgar. The Variation begins and ends with a plaintive cello solo.

XIII. (\*\*\*) *Romanza. Moderato*—The penultimate Variation is inspired by Lady Mary Lygon. During composition of the "Enigma" Variations, Elgar learned his friend would soon embark upon a voyage to Australia. Over undulating strings, a solo clarinet plays a descending phrase—a quote from Mendelssohn's *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage* Overture.

XIV. (*E.D.U.*) *Finale. Allegro*—Finally, the composer himself appears ("E.D.U." is derived from "Edoo," Lady Elgar's nickname for her husband). Elgar recalled he created this section, "at a time when friends were dubious and generally discouraging about the

composer's musical future." However, there is no lack of self-confidence in the swagger of this *Finale*. Echoes of previous variations return—notably “C.A.E.” and “Nimrod”—leading to the grand final measures.