

Edward Elgar: "Enigma" Variations (1898-1899)

The word "enigma" strikes some deeply felt resonances within the British psyche. Recall Sir Winston Churchill's famous aphorism, delivered in a 1939 radio broadcast, when he pondered the inscrutable intent of the Russians early in the Second World War: "It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma", he authoritatively intoned. Then there was the work of the British mathematician, Alan Turing, who not only did much to lay the foundations of computer science but later in the Second World War cracked the German *Enigma* code used to encrypt enemy military communications. This remarkable breakthrough, arguably, achieved more than any other single act to change the course of the War. However, in the 1950s, instead of being honored as a national hero, Turing came under scrutiny for his homosexuality which eventually led to a loss of his security clearances and criminal prosecution. A year later Turing allegedly took his own life, though this event itself remains enigmatic as there was evidence that his death by cyanide poisoning may have been an accident rather than suicide. Either way, Turing's shameful treatment was finally acknowledged in 2009 by the then Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, who gave an unreserved apology, on behalf of the government.

Finally, in our list of British themed enigmas, we come to Sir Edward Elgar's work, the majestic "Enigma" variations. The composition was his first full scale orchestral work and one that brought him, after many years of struggle and disappointment, almost overnight success. Indeed, on hearing it, the great German composer Richard Strauss is said to have declared "Here for the first time is an English composer who has something to say."

The idea for the work was conceived when one day, while exploring some ideas on the piano, his wife Alice, remarked on a melody he had played. She wanted to hear it again. Encouraged by her enthusiasm he obliged and then began to improvise on the tune, evoking portraits of his friends. Thus was born the idea of a set of variations, 14 in all, that Elgar dedicated to "my friends pictured within". In the score each variation is prefaced with either a nickname or initials, a clue to the identity of the person alluded to. In fact, the variations are not so much personality portraits but rather sketches that refer to some anecdotal feature of his friendships. The "Enigma" of the work arises not from any missing identities - all are known, even the one marked *** - but from an untold source. Elgar said: "The Enigma I will not explain – its 'dark saying' must be left unguessed ... over the whole set, another and larger theme 'goes', but is not played". Cryptic right? Many solutions were proposed to Elgar during his life but he rejected all of them and, amused by his contrivance, he took the secret to his grave.

The work opens with a quiet statement of the main theme which is followed by the first variation (C.A.E.), depicting his wife Alice. It starts intimately with a passage marked triple pianissimo in the violins and builds to an impassioned climax which then recedes into the distance as the strings ascend to the heavens. The mood abruptly changes in variation II (H.D.S.P), which features a friend and amateur pianist, whose penchant for diatonic runs while warming up, Elgar parodied with jagged sequences of chromatic notes. After several more variations, we reach the frenetic variation VII (*Troyte*), which humorously mimics a friend's enthusiastic incompetence on the piano. It also refers to a specific memory, of a day on which Elgar and his friend were walking and got caught in a thunderstorm. The pair ran for it, and took refuge in a graceful 18th century house owned by a friend, *W.N.*. The house and the lady who

owned it are the subject to which the next theme refers. After this in variation IX, we arrive at the famous *Nimrod* variation, a theme that has become a British institution, often played on solemn occasions such as the *Cenotaph* ceremony in London held each year in memory of all those who have died in service to their country. The tune was a hymn of gratitude to Elgar's close friend August Jaeger, a music editor who worked for the London publisher Novello & Co., and someone who had encouraged the composer through dispiriting times not to give up. To keep Elgar motivated, Jaeger had reminded him, how Beethoven had triumphed against adversity and reinforced his point by singing the theme of the second movement of Beethoven's *Pathétique* sonata. To be sure, the opening of *Nimrod* hints at that very same theme. Elgar, who enjoyed crossword puzzles, chose the name, *Nimrod*, which comes from a figure in the Old Testament described as a mighty hunter, because "Jäger" is German for "hunter". The final variation and grand finale, the composer's self-portrait, echoes the themes from *Nimrod* and *C.A.E.*, representing two of the biggest influences in his life, his friend Jaeger and his wife, Alice.

One final clue to the "Enigma" may have come in a letter Elgar wrote in 1912 where he stated that the main theme of the work "expressed my sense of the loneliness of the artist." It has been proposed that in dedicating the variations to his closest companions, perhaps the composer's larger *psychological* theme to which the "Enigma" refers was to be found in the solace he had found with the bond of friendship and love. Okay, we don't know for sure but it makes for a nice story.

Camille Saint-Saëns: Symphony No. 3 in C minor, Op. 78 "Organ Symphony" (1886)

Like Beethoven's magnificent Choral Symphony, the Third Symphony by Saint Saens was commissioned by the Royal Philharmonic Society of England, and it was in London the symphony by Saint-Saëns received its first performance. And therein lies another interesting British *divertissement*. In 1827, a few years after delivering his manuscript for the Choral Symphony, Beethoven wrote to the society informing them he was suffering from a bad case of, to use the modern vernacular, "financial austerity". The society resolved to send him £100 immediately, an act that George Bernard Shaw once referred to as "the only entirely creditable incident in English history." So grateful was Beethoven for the Society's generosity he wrote back thanking them saying he would strive to furnish a new symphony, his tenth. Sadly, he died eight days later. Nevertheless, the Society deserves praise since not only did they provide Beethoven the wherewithal to write his greatest symphony, they did something similar for Saint-Saëns, who remarked about his Third Symphony, "I gave everything to it I was able to give. What I have here accomplished, I will never achieve again".

Coming from a composer with the phenomenal intellect and accomplishment of Saint-Saëns, such a statement should give us pause. To be sure, the work is considered to be one of the few great French symphonies to have appeared since Hector Berlioz's trail blazing *Symphonie Fantastique* of 1830. In composing it, Saint-Saëns acknowledged a considerable debt to his friend and mentor, Franz Liszt, who had praised the Frenchman's piano concertos and had conducted the premier of his opera *Samson and Dalia*. Like Liszt, Saint-Saëns was a

virtuoso performer on piano and organ, both of which feature prominently in this symphony. The symphony's "Organ" moniker, is perhaps a little deceptive as the organ is not heard until its later stages - the original title "Symphony No. 3 *avec orgue*" is more accurate. Nevertheless, while this was not intended to be a concerto for organ, the instrument's sudden arrival in the last movement makes for a truly grand entrance that has, no doubt, shaken the rafters of many an auditorium. It is not a moment you are likely to miss not least for the angelic answering phrases one hears in response to those thunderous chords.

Like works by both Liszt and Berlioz, the symphony builds on a reappearing motif that allows for thematic evolution, transfiguration, and a satisfying sense of interconnectedness. In the last movement, after an unexpected pastoral episode for oboe, flute, english horn, and clarinet, the innovative cyclic structure comes to the fore in a massive climax where the organ, piano four hands, and orchestra, converge upon the final statement of the symphony's opening theme. It's a powerful effect that brings to mind a vision that T.S. Elliot so beautifully captured when he wrote:

*We shall not cease from our exploration
And at the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time*

*Program notes by Julian Brown © 2013
For Silicon Valley Symphony*