

Marlow U3A Music Appreciation Group
September 2010



**Variations on an Original Theme
(Enigma)**

***Elgar: Variations on an Original
Theme (Enigma) Op.36***

First performed at St James's Hall,
London, in June 1899, conducted by
Hans Richter. The European premiere
was in Düsseldorf in February 1901.

It remains a hugely popular work, with
numerous performances every year
e.g. in UK, Australia, USA, Canada,
Germany, Hong Kong....

Elgar: *Variations on an Original Theme (Enigma) Op.36*

The work is scored for:

- ♪ 2 flutes (one doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon
- ♪ 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba
- ♪ timpani, side drum, triangle, bass drum, cymbals
- ♪ strings
- ♪ organ.

“DEDICATED TO MY FRIENDS PICTURED WITHIN”

There are several levels of interest:

- ♪ **The friends pictured within**
- ♪ **The Enigma**
- ♪ **The ways in which Elgar uses and varies the theme**
- ♪ **The great music**

Elgar recalled how the work came to be conceived one evening in October 1898:

“After a long day’s fiddle teaching in Malvern, I came home very tired. Dinner being over I sat down at the piano. In a little while, soothed and feeling rested, I began to play, and suddenly my wife interrupted by saying, ‘*Edward, that’s a good tune.*’ I awoke from the dream: ‘*Eh! tune, what tune?*’ and she said, ‘*Play it again, I like that tune.*’ I played and strummed, and played, and then she exclaimed, ‘*That’s the tune.*’ And that tune is the theme of the Variations.”

The Theme, as presented at the start, has three sections:

Part 1
(G minor)



Contrasting Part 2
(major)



Part 1 again, this time with new harmony/ counterpoint

This is the elegiac Part 1:



(Rest)-Short-short-long-long

(Rest)-Long-long-short-short

(Rest)-Short-short-long-long

(Rest)-Long-long-short-short

Part 2 is Long-short-short-long-short-short-long

Here is the theme played on Elgar's
Broadwood piano



🎵 Elgar's Broadwood is in
the Cobbe Collection at
Hatchlands in Surrey



The Enigma

“The Variations should stand simply as a piece of music. I will not explain — its dark saying must be left unguessed — Further, through and over the whole set another larger theme “goes,” but it is not played — So the principal theme never appears, even as in some late dramas — the chief character is never on the stage.”

The Enigma - Among the suggestions:

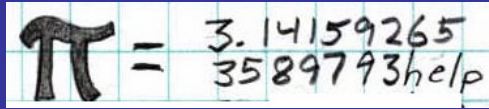
- ♪ a theme from Mozart's *Così fan tutte*
- ♪ *Auld Lang Syne*
- ♪ *God Save the Queen*
- ♪ *Pop Goes the Weasel*
- ♪ *Rule Britannia (never, never, never)*
- ♪ the hymn tune "Now the day is over"

But the work is entitled

“Variations on an **Original Theme**” —
and remember how the theme came about.

The Enigma - Among the suggestions:

How about musical Pi (3-4-1-2)?



A handwritten image showing the mathematical constant pi (π) followed by an equals sign. To the right of the equals sign, the decimal expansion 3.14159265 is written on the top line, and 3589793help is written on the bottom line. The digits 3, 5, 8, 9, 7, 9, 3 are aligned under the decimal point, and the word 'help' is written under the final '3'.

Another theory is that it is related to JS Bach's *The Art of Fugue*, which contains the B-A-C-H motif (in English notation, B-flat A C B-natural) in the 14th fugue.

The Enigma - Among the suggestions:

Ernest Newman suggested that friendship itself may have been the “larger theme,” which of course cannot be “played”.

Or perhaps the “dark meaning” is Death, and Elgar is preserving the memory of his wife and friends in his variations?

Variation I (*L'istesso tempo*) "C.A.E." Caroline Alice Elgar



Elgar wrote, "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 was a romantic and delicate inspiration."

Variation I (*L'istesso tempo*) "C.A.E." Caroline Alice Elgar



Oboes and bassoons repeat a triplet motif which Elgar whistled whenever arriving home to his wife



Variation II (*Allegro*) "H.D.S.-P." Hew David Stuart-Powell

- ♪ Hew David Stuart-Powell was an amateur pianist who frequently played piano trios with Elgar and Basil Nevison (Nevison is the subject of variation 12).
- ♪ He warmed up with “a characteristic diatonic run over the keys before beginning to play.”



Variation II (*Allegro*) "H.D.S.-P."

Elgar described his portrayal of these runs as being “chromatic beyond H.D.S.-P.’s liking.”



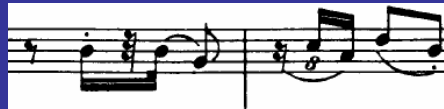
The theme (modified) is in cellos/basses



Variation III (*Allegretto*) "R.B.T."

Richard Baxter Townshend

- Townshend was the author of the "Tenderfoot" series of books
- 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.



Variation IV (*Allegro di molto*) "W.M.B."

William Meath Baker

Baker 'expressed himself somewhat energetically', hence this is mostly very loud (*ff*)



Variation IV (*Allegro di molto*) "W.M.B."

William Meath Baker

This variation refers to a party that Baker had at his estate. He announced the list of guests, ran out of the music room and slammed the door!

It is the shortest of the variations.

Listen for the shrieks of laughter from the piccolo.

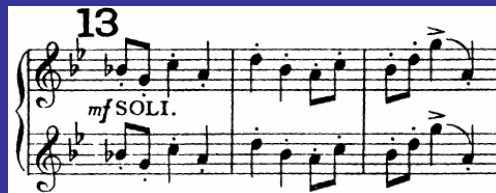


Variation IV (*Allegro di molto*) "W.M.B."

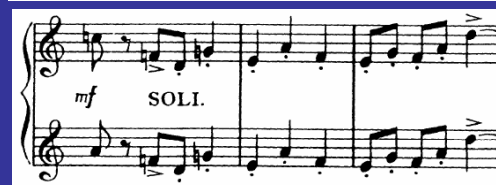
William Meath Baker

The second time the main theme is played, the clarinets and oboes are a crotchet out of phase with each other:

Oboes



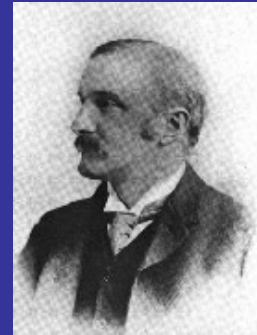
Clarinets



Variation V (*Moderato*) "R.P.A."

Richard P. Arnold

Richard Penrose Arnold, was the son of the poet Matthew Arnold, and was an amateur pianist whose playing had, according to Elgar, a way of 'evading difficulties'



Variation V (*Moderato*) "R.P.A."

Richard P. Arnold

Known for his serious conversation (violins)

Musical score for Violins I and II. The score is in 4/4 time and features a key signature of two flats. The first violin part is marked *sul G.* and *largamente*. The second violin part is marked *mf* and *sul G.* and *largamente*. Both parts play a similar melodic line with a steady eighth-note accompaniment.

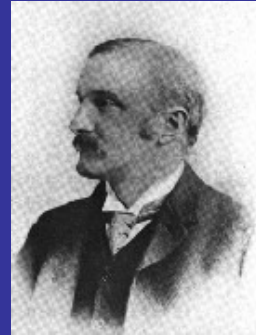
while a modified version of the theme is provided by cellos and double basses

Musical score for Violoncello and Basses. The score is in 4/4 time and features a key signature of two flats. The cello part is marked *mf sostenuto*. The bass part is marked *mf sostenuto*. Both parts play a modified version of the theme, characterized by a slower, more sustained melodic line.

Variation V (*Moderato*) "R.P.A."

Richard P. Arnold

‘But his serious conversation was interspersed with whimsical and witty remarks’ which are portrayed by the woodwind



Variation VI (*Andantino*) "Ysobel"

Isabel Fitton

- ♪ Variations V and VI are a pair, to be played without a break
- ♪ Isabel Fitton was a viola pupil of Elgar. The variation begins with the viola section playing three notes on different strings, as if to imitate Fitton's string crossing etudes



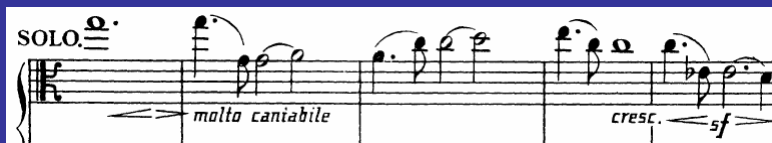
Variation VI (*Andantino*) "Ysobel"

Isabel Fitton

The main theme of this variation is given to the violas



Listen for the melody on a solo viola:



Variation VII (*Presto*) "Troyte"

Arthur Troyte Griffith

- ♪ Griffiths was an architect
- ♪ This one-minute variation good-naturedly mimics his enthusiastic incompetence on the piano



Variation VII (*Presto*) "Troyte"

Arthur Troyte Griffith

- ♪ It also refers to a day on which Griffiths and Elgar were walking and got caught in a thunder-storm. They ran for it, and took refuge in the Norburys' house (to which the next variation refers)
- ♪ There is a triumphant rendition of the main theme from the brass section at the end.

Variation VIII (*Allegretto*) "W.N."

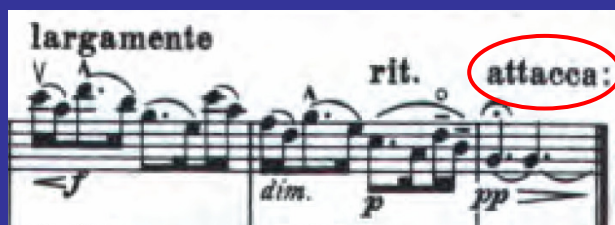
Winifred Norbury



- ♪ Winifred Norbury was an easygoing friend, hence the relatively relaxed atmosphere
- ♪ The theme also refers to the Norbury house and garden, which Elgar was fond of

Variations VIII and IX are a pair

- At the end of this variation, a single note on violins is held over, connecting to Variation IX and a change of key to E flat major



Attacca or *attacco* = 'attack'.

If shown at the end of a movement it indicates that the next movement should start without a pause

Variation IX (*Adagio*) "Nimrod"

August Jaeger

- Jaeger was a close friend and was employed as music editor by Novello & Co.
- Elgar later related on several occasions how Jaeger had encouraged him as an artist and had stimulated him to continue composing, despite setbacks
- The name of the variation punningly refers to Nimrod, an Old Testament patriarch described as "a mighty hunter before the Lord" - the name Jaeger being German for hunter.



Musical Preferences

from 19 examples at our first session

Our Top Ten (enjoyed very much)	Votes
🎵 Elgar: Nimrod from Enigma Variations	13
🎵 Vivaldi: Four Seasons	12
🎵 Mozart: Clarinet Concerto	11
🎵 Beethoven: Symphony 5	11
🎵 Bruch: Violin Concerto	11
🎵 Handel: Zadoc the Priest	10
🎵 Bach: Brandenburg Concertos	10
🎵 Puccini: La Boheme	10
🎵 Bizet: Pearl Fishers	9
🎵 Wagner: Ride of the Valkyries	9

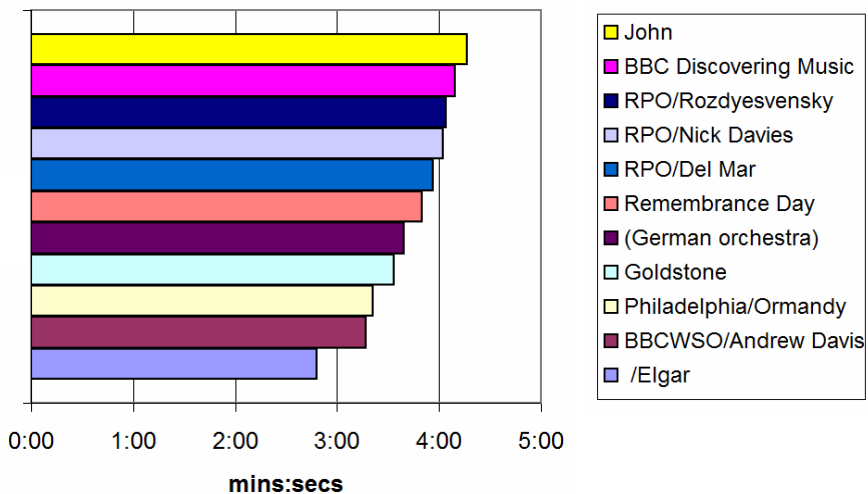
Variation IX (*Adagio*) "Nimrod"

August Jaeger

🎵 This variation is the emotional centre of the whole work, and relates to conversations that Elgar and Jaeger had about the great slow movements of Beethoven



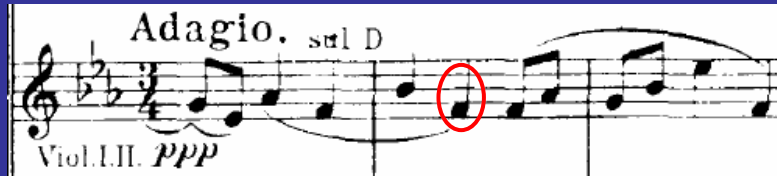
Nimrod: Tempo?



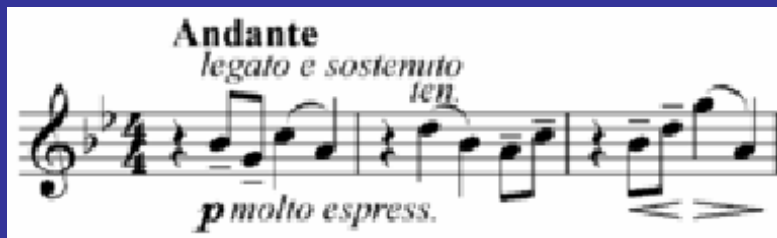
Even Elgar varied in his tempo!

- ♪ The autograph score and first printing showed *Moderato* 66, but in a letter to Jaeger in September 1903 Elgar remarked: “*I always take ‘Nimrod’ slower than MM in Score. Cowen says it should be altered. What do you think?*” Jaeger agreed
- ♪ Elgar not only changed the tempo to crotchet = 52, but also replaced *Moderato* with *Adagio*
- ♪ However, in his 1920s recordings we hear Elgar starting at 46 - 48.

- Nimrod: E flat major, 3/4 time, no rests



- Original Theme: G minor, 4/4 time, rests



Variation X (*Intermezzo: Allegretto*) "Dorabella" - **Dora Penny**

- Dora was the step-daughter of the sister of William Meath Baker (Variation IV), and sister-in-law of Richard Baxter Townsend (Variation III)



- This variation is a portrait of a graceful lady

Variation X (*Intermezzo: Allegretto*) "Dorabella" - Dora Penny

♪ Dorabella's name and stutter are depicted by the woodwinds



♪ The four notes are all shown as semi-quavers, but with different markings

How should this be played?



percussive accents (1-4)				pressure accent (5)
<i>staccato</i>	<i>staccatissimo</i>	strong accent <i>martelato</i>	normal accent <i>marcato</i>	legato accent <i>tenuto</i> <i>portamento</i>
light accents		strong accent	medium accents	

accent name	description
staccato accent	short and separated from the following note
staccatissimo accent	an exaggerated short duration of the note
strong accent	generally meant for attacks at loud dynamic levels of forte or louder
normal accent	moderately sharp attack that can be used at any dynamic level from pianissimo to fortissimo
legato accent	this can be used at any dynamic level and is a slight stress without a noticeable attack and held to the full duration of the note

Variation X (*Intermezzo: Allegretto*)
"Dorabella" - **Dora Penny**

- ♪ Dora described the 'Friends Pictured Within' and 'The Enigma' in her book Edward Elgar, 'Memories of a Variation'
- ♪ At the end, the four notes even out – the stutter disappears



Variation XI (*Allegro di molto*) "G.R.S."
George Robertson Sinclair

GRS was organist of Hereford Cathedral



but this episode is at least partly about Dan, Sinclair's bulldog

Variation XI (*Allegro di molto*) "G.R.S."

- ♪ Elgar said *"The first few bars were suggested by his great bulldog Dan (a well-known character) falling down the steep bank in the River Wye; his paddling upstream to find a landing place; and his rejoicing bark on landing. GRS said 'Set that to music!' I did; here it is."*

Dan falls (or scampers?) down the riverbank

The image displays a musical score for Variation XI, *Allegro di molto*. It features four staves: Violin I (Viol. I.), Violin II (Viol. II.), Viola (Viole.), and Cello (Vel.). The score is in 4/7 time and begins with a *pp* (pianissimo) dynamic marking. The music is characterized by a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes, with a prominent eighth-note triplet in the first measure of each staff. The notation includes various note values, rests, and dynamic markings.

This happens on several occasions –
so is the dog repeatedly retrieving a
stick from the river?

Doggie paddle!



This is a variation on the Main Theme: similar notes/intervals, but constant rhythm – no contrasts between short and long, and no rests!

Dog emerges from river?



What's happening here? Is the dog shaking the water off? Or is he asking for the stick to be thrown in again?

Can you hear Dan barking?

- The main theme appears *ff* (*fortissimo*) in the brass section – with its original rhythms and initial rests



- In the rests, the other instruments interject *sf* (*sforzando* - loudly and strongly accented)
- Is this Dan barking triumphantly?

A snippet of a musical score for string instruments. The score is divided into three systems, each with three staves. The first system is labeled 'unio. Violins', the second 'Violas', and the third 'Cellos'. The notation shows a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes with accents, characteristic of a 'barking' theme. The score is presented on three staves.

**This Variation is also about
GRS, the Organist**

- ♪ What I have called the “doggie-paddle” theme could also be an organist peddling away at some tricky passage-work
- ♪ And when Elgar puts the “scampering” and “doggie-paddle” themes together half way through the variation, it now has more to do with Bach, GRS and organ playing than a dog and a river

Variation XII (*Andante*) "B.G.N."

Basil G. Nevinson

- ♪ Basil G. Nevinson was a well-known cellist, so a cello solo version of the theme is prominent from the start
- ♪ Later, Nevinson inspired Elgar to write his famous Cello Concerto



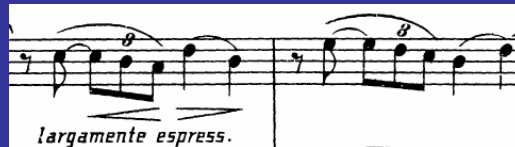
Variation XII (*Andante*) "B.G.N."

Basil G. Nevinson

- Not surprising then that a cello solo version of the main theme opens the variation



- and the cellos also have the other main melody (also derived from the main theme)



Variation XIII (*Romanza: Moderato*) "☆☆☆"

Lady Mary Lygon?

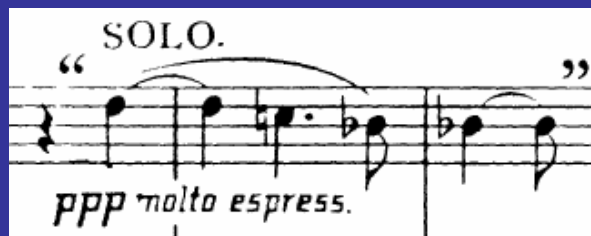
- "Dorabella" identifies this person as Lady Mary Lygon, a personal friend of Elgar and his wife
- In 1899, Elgar wrote to Lady Mary Lygon to ask permission to use her initials, but as she and her brother were on the point of leaving for Australia (he had been appointed Governor of NSW) and there was not time for a reply Elgar used "☆☆☆" instead



Variation XIII (*Romanza: Moderato*) "☆☆☆"

Lady Mary Lygon?

Appropriately, Elgar included a quotation from Mendelssohn's *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*. This is played wistfully by a solo clarinet, and is shown within quotation marks in the score.



Variation XIII (*Romanza: Moderato*) "☆☆☆"

Lady Mary Lygon?

- ♪ At intervals the timpani create a sound reminiscent of a ship's engines while the *Calm Sea* theme is played
- ♪ Charles Henderson was the timpanist in Richter's orchestra at the time. Henderson had first played the passage with side drum sticks, but Elgar was not pleased with the effect.

Variation XIII (*Romanza: Moderato*) "★★★"

Lady Mary Lygon?

- ♪ Henderson then used two pennies, at which Elgar said: *'Good! How is it done?'*
- ♪ Henderson replied: *'Sir, if you will give me two gold coins, I will show you!'*

Variation XIII (*Romanza: Moderato*) "★★★"

Lady Mary Lygon?

Here is the quoted theme as it appears at the end of Mendelssohn's overture *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*



Variation XIII (*Romanza: Moderato*) "★★★"

Lady Mary Lygon?

- ♪ The debate continues: some sources claim that this variation relates to Helen Weaver, to whom Elgar had been engaged, or Alice Stuart-Wortley, a daughter of the painter Sir John Everett Millais.

Variation XIV (*Allegro Presto*) "E.D.U."

Elgar himself

- ♪ The longest variation by far – showing off?
- ♪ No! Firstly, Elgar's original version was 100 bars shorter than the one we know today – Jaeger thought it was too short – here's the original ending...



Elgar initially resisted lengthening it

♪ “Now look here [—] the movement was designed to be concise — here’s the difficulty of lengthening it — the key G is exhausted — the principal motive (Enigma) comes in *grandioso* in the tonic and it won’t do to bring it in again: had I intended to make an extended movement, this would have been in some related Key reserving the tonic for the final smash.”

But he eventually relented. So effectively we have the EDU variation plus a Coda.

Secondly, two major parts of the Finale are actually about the support Elgar had from:

- ♪ Jaeger (Variation IX is prominent early on)
- ♪ His wife (Variation I enters reassuringly when the confidence of the music momentarily evaporates)

Variation XIV (*Allegro Presto*) "E.D.U."

♪ Another thing that is rarely heard is the flute part at the initial climax of this variation – but you can hear it clearly in this German concert recording



Variation XIV (*Allegro Presto*) "E.D.U."

In the closing bars the clarinets give us a hint of the opening bars of Elgar's First Symphony



Variation XIV (*Allegro Presto*) "E.D.U."

♪ Finally, another thing that you are unlikely to hear on 3rd October...

Variation XIV (*Allegro Presto*) "E.D.U."

Coda arranged for organ

