

## Variations On An Original Theme (Enigma), op 36

A theme (Introduction) and fourteen variations for full orchestra.

<b>Approximate Length:</b>	32 minutes
<b>First Performance:</b>	
<b>Date:</b>	19 June 1899
<b>Venue:</b>	St James's Hall, London
<b>Conductor:</b>	Dr Hans Richter
<b>Dedicated to:</b>	"To my friends pictured within"

The story is told of how Elgar, returning home from giving violin lessons, sat down at the piano and, to unwind, began improvising. Alice commented favourably on the tune that emerged and Elgar responded by suggesting how certain of their friends might play it. Out of that spontaneous exchange grew the idea of the Enigma Variations, the work that finally secured Elgar's reputation as a composer of national, even international, standing. It remains one of the most popular works in the classical repertoire.

In all, fourteen people and a dog are featured in the variations:

First Variation - **C.A.E.:**

Elgar's wife, Alice, lovingly portrayed;

Second Variation - **H.D.S-P.:**

Hew David Steuart-Powell, a pianist with whom Elgar played in chamber ensembles;

Third Variation - **R.B.T.:**

Richard Baxter Townshend, a friend whose caricature of an old man in an amateur theatre production is captured in the variation;

Fourth Variation - **W.M.B.:**

William Meath Baker, 'country squire, gentleman and scholar', informing his guests of the day's arrangements;

Fifth Variation - **R.P.A.:**

Richard Arnold, son of the poet Matthew Arnold;

Sixth Variation - **Ysobel:**

Isabel Fitton, an amateur viola player from a musical family living in Malvern;

Seventh Variation - **Troyte:**

Arthur Troyte Griffith, a Malvern architect and close friend of Elgar throughout their lives - the variation focuses on Troyte's limited abilities as a pianist;

Eighth Variation - **W.N.:**

Winifred Norbury, known to Elgar through her association with the Worcestershire Philharmonic Society - the variation captures both her laugh and the atmosphere of her eighteenth century house;

Ninth Variation - **Nimrod:**

A J Jaeger, Elgar's great friend whose encouragement did much to keep Elgar going during the period when he was struggling to secure a lasting reputation - the variation allegedly captures a discussion between them on Beethoven's slow movements

Tenth Variation - **Dorabella**:

Dora Penney, daughter of the Rector of Wolverhampton and a close friend of the Elgars;

Eleventh Variation - **G.R.S.**:

George Sinclair, organist at Hereford Cathedral, although the variation allegedly portrays Sinclair's bulldog Dan paddling in the River Wye after falling in;

Twelfth Variation - **B.G.N.**:

Basil Nevinson, an amateur cellist who, with Elgar and Hew Stuart-Powell, completed the chamber music trio;

Thirteenth Variation - **\*\*\***:

probably Lady Mary Lygon, a local noblewoman who sailed for Australia at about the time Elgar wrote the variation, which quotes from Mendelssohn's *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*. The use of asterisks rather than initials has however invited speculation that they conceal the identity of Helen Weaver, Elgar's fiancée for eighteen months in 1883/84 before she emigrated to New Zealand;

Fourteenth Variation - **E.D.U.**:

Elgar himself, Edoo being Alice's pet name for him.

There are two enigmas underlying the variations. The first and more readily solved is the identity of each of the 'friends pictured within'. Only the thirteenth variation has given rise to speculation that Elgar's use of asterisks rather than initials or a pet name may hide the true identity of the subject, possibly an old flame of Elgar's who had recently emigrated from Britain.

But Elgar himself hinted at, and encouraged speculation over, a second, musical enigma, a popular tune which does not itself appear in the variations but of which the theme is the counterpoint. It is of course possible that this was one of Elgar's 'japes' and that the tune does not exist. If so, it has become a spectacularly successful jape, taken to great lengths and sparking a feverish debate that continues unabated. *Auld Lang Syne* is the most frequently touted candidate but excerpts from a range of works by composers Elgar admired, notably Mozart, have been found to show strong musical similarities with the theme while a 1975 correspondent to the Elgar Society Journal put together a convincing argument in favour of Rule Britannia as the solution. The speculation is intriguing but the mystery can never be satisfactorily solved, for Elgar revealed the identity of the tune to no-one and took the answer to the grave with him.

Musically, the variations need no introduction. Apart from the first Pomp and Circumstance March which, through Land of Hope and Glory, has attained fame as much outside the concert hall as within it, the variations remain the most widely performed of all Elgar's works while the ninth variation - Nimrod - is arguably the most moving and best loved excerpt in the whole of the classical repertoire.

Those wishing to learn more about the composition of the Variations and the "friends pictured within" may wish to consult Elgar Society member Patrick Turner's recent authoritative book on the subject.