

Elgar and Adams

Friday, November 29 – 7:30 pm

Saturday, November 30 – 8 pm

Alexander Prior, conductor

Samian, rapper

Lisa Dolinsky, soprano

Rachel Majorowicz, soprano

Jennifer McMillan, soprano

Afterthoughts, Friday post-performance Main Lobby with Alexander Prior, Lisa Dolinsky, Rachel Majorowicz, Jennifer McMillan & Samian

Symphony Prelude, 7 pm Upper Circle (Third Level) Lobby with Alexander Prior & D.T. Baker

ADAMS

Grand Pianola Music (31')*

Part Ia

Part Ib: Slow

Part II: On the Dominant Divide

LIZÉE

La terre a des maux (rap lyrics by Samian) (15')*

INTERMISSION (20 minutes)

ELGAR

Variations on an Original Theme, Op.36 "Enigma" (31')*

Theme: Andante

Variation 1 - C.A.E. (L'istesso tempo)

Variation 2 - H.D.S.-P. (Allegro)

Variation 3 - R.B.T. (Allegretto)

Variation 4 - W.M.B. (Allegro di molto)

Variation 5 - R.P.A. (Moderato)

Variation 6 - Ysobel (Andantino)

Variation 7 - Troyte (Presto)

Variation 8 - W.N. (Allegretto)

Variation 9 - Nimrod (Adagio)

Variation 10 - Intermezzo: Dorabella (Allegretto)

Variation 11 - G.R.S. (Allegro di molto)
Variation 12 - B.G.N. (Andante)
Variation 13 - Romanza *** (Moderato)
Variation 14 - Finale: E.D.U. (Allegro - Presto)

program subject to change

*indicates approximate performance duration

Grand Pianola Music

John Adams

(b. Worcester, Massachusetts, 1947)

First performed: February 26, 1982 in San Francisco

This is the ESO premiere of the piece

Program note by the composer:

To this day, *Grand Pianola Music* has remained a weapon of choice among detractors who wish to hold up my work as exemplary of the evils of Postmodernism or—even more drastic—the pernicious influences of American consumerism on high art. In truth I had very much enjoyed composing the piece, doing so in a kind of trance of automatic recall, where almost any and every artifact from my musical subconscious was allowed to float to the surface and encouraged to bloom. The piece could only have been conceived by someone who had grown up surrounded by the detritus of mid-twentieth century recorded music. Beethoven and Rachmaninoff soak in the same warm bath with Liberace, Wagner, the Supremes, Charles Ives, and John Philip Sousa.

Grand Pianola Music genuinely upset people, doubtless due to the bombastic finale, “On the Dominant Divide,” with its flag-waving, gaudy tune rocking back and forth between the pianos amid ever-increasing cascades of B-flat Major arpeggios. I meant it neither as a joke nor a nose-thumbing at the tradition of earnest, serious contemporary music nor as an intended provocation of any kind. It was rather, in its loudest and most hyperventilated moments, a kind of Whitmanesque yawp, an exhilaration of good humor, certainly a parody and therefore ironic. But it was never intended, as has since been intimated, as a “political” statement about the state of “new music.” Nevertheless, I was alarmed by the severity of its reception, and for years I found myself apologizing for it. Now, though, I’m impressed by its boldness.

As with *Harmonielehre*, which began with a dream of a huge oil tanker rising like a Saturn rocket out of the waters of San Francisco Bay, *Grand Pianola Music* also started with a dream image in which, while driving down Interstate Route 5, I was approached from behind by two long, gleaming, black stretch limousines. As the vehicles drew up beside me they transformed into the world’s longest Steinway pianos...twenty, maybe even thirty feet long. Screaming down the highway at 90 m.p.h., they gave off

volleys of B-flat and E-flat Major arpeggios. I was reminded of walking down the hallways of the San Francisco Conservatory, where I used to teach, hearing the sonic blur of twenty or more pianos playing Chopin, the *“Emperor” Concerto*, Hanon, Rachmaninoff, the *Maple Leaf Rag*, and much more.

Despite the image that inspired it, and despite the heft of its instrumentation, *Grand Pianola Music* is, for the most part, a surprisingly delicate piece. The woodwinds putter along in a most unthreatening fashion while waves of rippling piano arpeggios roll in and out like slow tides. Three female voices (the sirens) sing wordless harmony, sometimes floating above the band in long sostenuto triads while at other times imitating the crisp staccato of the winds and brass.

The principle technique of the piano writing was suggested to me by the behaviour of tape and digital delays, where a sound can be repeated electronically in a fraction of a second. The two-piano version of this kind of delay was accomplished by having both pianists play essentially the same material, but with one slightly behind the other, usually a sixteenth or an eighth note apart. This gives the piano writing its unique shimmer.

Grand Pianola Music is in two parts, the first being in fact two movements joined together without pause. Of these the second is a slow serene pasture with grazing tuba. The finale, *“On the Dominant Divide,”* was an experiment in applying my Minimalist techniques to the barest of all possible chord progressions, I-V-I. I had noticed that most “classical” Minimalist pieces always progressed by motion of thirds in the bass and that in all cases they strictly avoided tonic-dominant relations, relations which are too fraught with a pressing need for resolution. What resulted was a swaying, rocking oscillation of phrases that gave birth to a melody. This tune, in the hero key of E-flat Major, is repeated a number of times, and with each iteration it gains in gaudiness and Lisztian panache until it finally goes over the top to emerge in the gurgling C Major of the lowest registers of the pianos. From here it is a gradually accelerating race to the finish, with the tonalities flipping back and forth from major to minor, urging those gleaming black vehicles on to their final ecstasy.

La terre a des maux

Nicole Lizée

(b. Gravelbourg, Québec, 1973)

First performed: 2018 in Montréal

This is the ESO premiere of the piece

Program note by the composer:

The musical core of this piece reflects three inspirations. Certain sections reinterpret Samian’s 2012 text *Plan Nord* as purely musical content - the rhythmic implications, pacing, contour of line rendered into melodies, and the tension/release exclusively within the text. The environment - its brittle, unpredictable state and what will remain for future generations - formed a large part of our conversations leading up to the creation of this work.

Samian and I also share an appreciation of a wide spectrum of music genres. One of the genres we both feel a strong link to is turntablism. Turntablism - along with malfunctioning and obsolete machines - has been at the heart of my aesthetic for much of my life. Turntablism is founded entirely on the misuse of technology - but is also responsible for its rejuvenation. It carries with it an ever expanding philosophy that addresses themes of dialogue, synchronization, tension, push and pull, symmetry, harmony, corruption, extinction, de/reconstruction, ghosts, unquantization, and regeneration. The orchestra forms an expression of the turntable and these traits, and Samian's text and performance give it further life.

The orchestral emulation of electronics and glitch is represented in a number of ways. Sine waves, hiss, and static are simulated by the orchestra whistling and 'shhing' in tandem with their parts. The orchestra frequently vocalizes along with their parts much like background vocals on a cassette or LP; sometimes using glissandi to simulate warping on worn vinyl or cassettes.

At points the orchestra is divided into "metaphoric turntables," each forming locked grooves, superimposed over one another. At one section in the work the orchestra is divided into two "turntables" playing at different speeds. The orchestra simulates a turntable technique known as record juggling where the turntablist juggles two identical excerpts. On one of these "turntables," the pitch is raised or lowered by a tone or semitone, which also simultaneously slows down the tempo.

The analogue devices that I emulate and use in my work - that were once the height of progress - are now in landfills and dumpsters, replaced by digital, even though they were built to last and are repairable. This again references the environment: the broken and malfunctioning.

Variations on an Original Theme, Op.36 "Enigma"

Edward Elgar

(b. Broadheath, Worcestershire, 1857 / d. Worcester, 1934)

First performed: June 19, 1899 in London

Last ESO performance: May 2016.

After a tiring day spent teaching, Edward Elgar returned home, and daydreamingly sat at the piano, making up a tune. That's nice, his wife Alice said, play it again. So, he did, only making up variations on the tune as he did so, in little musical portraits of their friends. This was the genesis of the "*Enigma*" *Variations*, the work which would eventually establish Elgar as a major new composer. He ultimately wrote 14 variations, orchestrating them over the course of 1898-99. So what is the Enigma?

Not the tune – that's presented at the outset, prior to the set of variations. Not the identities of all the friends – we have the names behind the initials and affectionate nicknames. Rather, Elgar has said, there is another theme, but one which is "never played." Whether he meant a theme as a musical idea, or an overall "meaning," Elgar never said, and despite decades of speculation as to the identity, Elgar took the answer with him to the grave.

Following the G minor theme, variation one is for Elgar's wife. Variation two is named for H.D. Steuart-Powell, a pianist friend of Elgar's. The Allegretto third variation in G Major is for R.B. Townsend, an amateur actor whose vocal gifts for sudden changes in pitch is gently parodied. Variation four is W. Heath Baker. The fifth is named for R.P. Arnold, son of the famous poet, who was noted for his sense of humour. "Ysobel" was the nickname for violist Isabel Fitton, so her instrument is given prominence in variation six. Arthur Troyte Griffiths was a more willing pianist than an able one, and his enthusiasm colours the seventh variation. Elgar said that, while the eighth variation is named for Winifred Norbury, the music itself is meant to depict an eighteenth-century house.

The most famous variation, often excerpted as a stand-alone moment, is the serene "Nimrod" ninth variation, named in tribute to Elgar's friend A.E. Jaeger. Variation ten teases Dora Penny ("Dorabella") and her tendency to speak hesitatingly. Organist G.R. Sinclair is depicted throwing a stick into a river for his bulldog to retrieve – listen for the bark – in the eleventh variation. The cello spotlight in number twelve is for cellist Basil Nevinson. No initials are given for variation 13, though the reference to Mendelssohn's *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage* was a nod to Lady Mary Trefusis, who was on a sea excursion at the time. Elgar gave himself the last word with the final variation – "Edu" was a nickname for himself.

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