

## ELGAR'S LOVES: ENIGMA VARIATIONS

February 23 & 25, 2023 • 7:30 PM

Thursday Classics presented by Quikcard

Featuring:

**Brett Mitchell**, conductor

**Keith Hamm**, viola

*Please hold your applause until the end of each piece.*

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### MENDELSSOHN

*A Midsummer Night's Dream Overture, Op.21* (11')\*

### WALTON

*Concerto for Viola and Orchestra* (27')\*

*I - Andante comodo*

*II - Vivo, con molto preciso*

*III - Allegro moderato*

**INTERMISSION** (20 minutes)

### ELGAR

*Variations on an Original Theme, Op.36 "Enigma"* (32')\*

*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

## ***A Midsummer Night's Dream Overture, Op.21***

**Felix Mendelssohn**

(b. Hamburg, 1809 / d. Leipzig, 1847)

First performed: February 1, 1827, in Stettin

Last ESO performance: October 2012

Felix Mendelssohn wrote his enchanting overture inspired by Shakespeare's fantasy *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when he was only 17, yet he had already composed several masterful works leading up to this. With it, Mendelssohn was simply fulfilling his youthful fascination with the Shakespeare comedy. As it turned out however, this work, and the *Octet* written the year before, announced to the world that a major new talent had arrived. Written originally for piano duet (which Felix played with his gifted sister Fanny), Mendelssohn orchestrated the work and conducted its first orchestral performance.

"The most striking example I know of a very young composer astonishing the world by a musical style at once fascinating, original, and perfectly new, is Mendelssohn's exploit at 17 with the *Midsummer Night's Dream* overture," wrote no less than George Bernard Shaw (in *The World*, June 1, 1892). "One can actually feel the novelty now, after 66 years." Another annotator said of the overture: "After a few evocative chords, it opens with a rippling staccato figure that instantly sets the scene in Fairyland ... no mortal could dance to this ethereal rhythm."

## ***Concerto for Viola and Orchestra***

**William Walton**

(b. Oldham, Lancashire, 1902 / d. Ischia, 1983)

First performed: October 3, 1929, in London

Last ESO performance: March 2000

William Walton's early encounters with music are unlike the many stories we hear of prodigies who either dazzled or confounded their mentors and the established musical world. The son of musicians, Walton's aptitude was good, if not awe-inspiring; it won him a place at the Oxford Choir School, but when he left there in 1920, it was without a degree. Nevertheless, he managed a long career in music that garnered him much success and many honours during his lifetime, managing to infuse his English-ness with continental touches that lent his music an unpredictability and edge.

His *Viola Concerto* was a relatively youthful piece – Walton biographer Hugh Ottaway refers to it as the beginning of his musical maturity – but its genesis was also a bit unconventional. Conductor Thomas Beecham suggested to Walton that he write a work for viola for the outstanding soloist Lionel Tertis – who was always looking to expand the rather slim catalog of viola pieces. Walton took the advice, but Tertis returned the manuscript after a cursory examination.

Hearing about this, acclaimed composer Paul Hindemith, himself a noted viola soloist, stepped in to perform the premiere performance, with Walton conducting. Tertis was in the audience for the London Proms debut and confessed later that he had made a grave error dismissing the work out of hand. He would go on to present the work numerous times over the years.

The work is in three movements; however, the first movement is an Andante, while the second movement serves as an energetic scherzo. The opening is brooding and ruminative, its tonality equally unsettled. Orchestra and soloist each weave around the other, making their own paths, until a brief pizzicato in the strings ushers in a more supportive role as the viola takes the dramatic lead. The viola brings both itself and the orchestra into a driving and energetic middle section. As that comes to an end in a brief orchestral interlude, the mood of the opening is restored as the viola swirls throughout its register to wisps of accompaniment.

The middle movement pulses with rhythm and vitality from the very beginning, set to brilliant orchestral colouring that never overshadows the dark-hued solo voice. The orchestra gives the soloist a brief pause in its whirlwind with its own passage in this brief, dazzling showcase. The final movement begins with a bassoon making way for the viola in a jaunty and lighthearted mood. The longest movement of the concerto, this Allegro moderato spans a wide emotional range as the opening gives way to a purposeful propulsion, which then turns restless and meandering. Orchestra and viola share this changing landscape without one dominating the other. As the movement moves into its last half, however, another extended orchestral section allows for a thrilling fortissimo (and gives the soloist a bit of a respite!), ushering in a final section begun by the viola in a mood reminiscent of the opening movement, allowing the concerto to ebb away in a whisper.

## ***Variations on an Original Theme, Op.36 “Enigma”*** **Edward Elgar**

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

First performed: June 19, 1899, in London

Last ESO performance: November 2019

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 as an overall “meaning,” Elgar never said, and despite decades of speculation as to the enigmatic “theme’s” 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.

# Program Notes

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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