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CONCERT 3 PROGRAM NOTES

by Alicia Mastromonaco ★

EDWARD ELGAR (1857-1934)

ENIGMA VARIATIONS, OP. 36 (1898)

Sir Edward Elgar is most famous today for penning (what we now know as) the iconic graduation processional, *Pomp and Circumstance*, but his oeuvre extends far beyond marches. It was the *Enigma Variations* that launched Elgar's compositional career at the age of forty-two.

The *Enigma Variations* are so named because the variation titles contain cyphers for several of the people close to Elgar. In addition to the individual variations representing certain aspects of a person's character, Elgar noted that there is a second enigma within the piece, a "dark saying" that Elgar refused to elaborate on. The explanation of this "dark saying" remains a mystery to this day.

We might very well have Elgar's wife to thank for these fourteen variations. At the end of a long day in 1898, Elgar returned home and began improvising at the piano. One particular melody struck his wife's ear and she inquired what it was. "Nothing," he replied, "but something might be made of it." Quickly the variations took shape. Elgar sent the piece to Hans Richter, a well-respected German conductor living in London, who agreed to premier the work in June of 1899 at St. James Hall in London. The *Variations on an Original Theme*, as they are formally titled, quickly became known as the *Enigma Variations*, and grew so popular that they were soon performed across Europe and the United States.

The title of each variation alludes to a specific person in Elgar's life. The first part of the theme is mysterious, and never quite resolves itself. The melody mimics the cadence of the composer's name: Ed-ward EL-gar, while the second part of the theme is more lyrical and leads back to the original meandering theme.

Variation I, “C.A.E.” refers to Elgar’s wife, Caroline Alice Elgar. The additional triplet melody is the short call Elgar would whistle to Alice when he came home. **Variation II, “H.D.S.-P.”** refers to Hugh David Steuart-Powell, the pianist with whom Elgar would play chamber music. The running passage is toccata-like, perhaps to represent pianistic playing.

Variation III, “R.B.T.” refers to Richard Baxter Townshend, a nearly-deaf classicist at Oxford who would ride around town ringing the bell on his bike incessantly. **Variation IV, “W.M.B.”** refers to William Mead Baker, a “country squire, gentleman, and scholar,” according to Elgar.

Variation V, “R.P.A.” is Richard Penrose Arnold, the son of poet Matthew Arnold, and a lover of music. **Variation VI, “Ysobel,”** is Isabel Fitton, a violinist who switched to viola for Elgar’s neighborhood chamber music gatherings. She was “a woman of grave, statuesque beauty.”

Variation VII, “Troyte,” refers to Arthur Troyte Griffith, a friend and less-than-adept piano pupil of Elgar’s, so the music can possibly suggest trying to bring order to the chaos that was Griffith’s piano playing. **Variation VIII, “W.N.”** Winifred Norberry, who lived in the 18th century Sherridge manor. The woodwind flourishes are meant perhaps to imitate the sounds of ladies’ laughter in a stately home.

Variation IX, “Nimrod,” most famous of the variations, dedicated to Augustus J. Jaeger, one of Elgar’s closest friends. Nimrod was a mighty hunter mentioned in Genesis. **Variation X, “Dorabella,”** is Dora Penny, one of Elgar’s closest female friends. The stuttering woodwinds represent a stammer she had as a child. **Variation XI, “G.R.S.”** is George Robinson Sinclair, the organist of Hereford Cathedral. However, the variation has little to do with the person or the organ at all. Instead, it recalls the story of Dan, Sinclair’s well-known bulldog, who fell into the River Wye and dramatically had to paddle upstream to safety on the bank. Sinclair told Elgar to set that story to music, so he did.

Variation XII, “B.G.N.” is Basil George Nevinston, the cellist in the neighborhood chamber music group. **Variation XIII, “****”** a *Romanza*, refers to Lady Mary Lygon, who was en route to Australia at the time of composition. Elgar wrote, “the asterisks take the place of the name of a lady who was, at the time of composition, on a sea voyage.” The opening clarinet solo quotes from Mendelssohn’s *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*.

Variation XIV, “E.D.U.” refers to Elgar himself. “Edu” was Alice’s nickname for her husband, and the final variation represents the heroic and courageous side of Elgar. Perhaps the side that Elgar wanted to represent to the outside world, even though the composer was often plagued by doubt and depressive episodes. The variation reincorporates Alice’s theme, as well as Jaeger’s, and ends with a Beethoven-esque bang.

NIKOLAI RIMSKY-KORSAKOV (1844-1908)

SCHEHERAZADE, SYMPHONIC SUITE, OP. 35 (1888)

Scheherazade, a symphonic poem loosely based on the tales from *Arabian Nights*, is one of Russian composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s most famous and beloved works. The Russian composer was part of the “Mighty Handful,” a cohort of Russian composers who eschewed formal Western compositional practices in favor of utilizing Russian folk melodies, modal and exotic scales. This is not to say that these five composers did not know the works of the canonical Western composers, but they aspired to create their own musical language outside of what they considered the restrictive academic rigors of Western compositional practice.

Rimsky-Korsakov met and studied with Balakirev while pursuing a career in the Russian Navy. Eventually the younger composer realized that he was going to need more training to do what he wanted to compositionally, and in 1871, stepped away from the Mighty Handful’s anti-academic stance, and became a professor at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. The new professor considered himself one of the conservatory’s brightest students, staying just far enough ahead of his pupils that he could teach them what they needed

to know. It was during this period of intense study that Rimsky-Korsakov developed his masterful skills of orchestration. His genius for orchestration is exemplified in his 1889 work, *Scheherazade*.

Scheherazade is a programmatic piece derived from stories from *Arabian Nights*. Although the stories reached back to the 1300s, it was not until the 1880s that they were translated across Europe and became immensely popular. Rimsky-Korsakov's music incorporates the musical exoticism that was popular at the time, and is an exoticist ode to the imagined East.

In the story of *Scheherazade*, the Sultan Shahriar becomes convinced, after experiencing infidelity, that women cannot be trusted. Thus he begins the brutal practice of marrying a woman then executing her the next day, ensuring that she never has the chance of being unfaithful. Finally, the Sultan marries Scheherazade, who has a plan. She begins telling him a story on their marriage night, but does not finish. She continues this for one thousand nights, always starting but never finishing stories until the following night. By the final night, when Scheherazade runs out of stories, the Sultan realizes he has fallen in love with the title character, and the two live happily ever after.

The music takes the form of four separate tone poems, loosely based on the story of Scheherazade and other characters from *Arabian Nights*, but Rimsky-Korsakov did not want his audience to read too much into the extra-musical program while listening to the piece. He wrote, “all I wanted was that the hearer, if he liked the piece as *symphonic music*, should carry away the impression that it is undoubtedly an oriental narrative of numerous and varied fairy-tale marvels, and not merely four pieces played one after the other and based on themes common to all four.” Indeed, in this highly evocative and famous work, as the violin slowly lulls us, we cannot help but feel relieved that, after nearly three years, Scheherazade will finally get a good night's sleep. ★



ALICIA MASTROMONACO

Alicia has played with the Monterey Symphony since 2007. She is also a member of the Carmel Bach Festival and Marin Symphony. A San Francisco native, she began her music studies at age seven on the piano, and took up the horn after switching from the trumpet in her middle school band program. She earned Bachelors of Music

degrees in Horn Performance and Musicology from Boston University, and did graduate work at the Universität der Künste Berlin before returning to California to continue her studies. She earned a Masters of Music degree at UCLA in Horn Performance, a Masters of Arts degree in Musicology at UCSB, and is currently working on her PhD at UCSB. Alicia's dissertation is focused on the daily lives of orchestral musicians and the organizations in which they play, and she is using her dissertation to explore the relationships between regional orchestras and their communities. Alicia is also an avid outdoorsperson and animal lover. ★