

at the climax of the piece, both Bernard Shaw and W. H. "Billy" Reed compared the work to Richard Wagner's Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg Prelude, which culminates in the combination of several themes. Shaw, in a long article on Elgar in 1920, wrote:

But if you say that Elgar's Cockaigne overture combines every classic quality of a concert overture with every lyrical and dramatic quality of the overture to Die Meistersinger, you are either uttering a platitude as safe as a compliment to Handel on the majesty of the "Hallelujah" Chorus, or else damning yourself to all critical posterity by uttering a gaffe that will make your grandson blush for you. Personally, I am prepared to take the risk. What do I care for my grandson? Give me Cockaigne.

Reed wrote:

The Cockaigne Overture does not eclipse the Mastersingers prelude, but neither is it outshone by Wagner's most symphonically satisfying introductory composition from which it actually borrows some procedures. Elgar's piece is as splendidly evocative a picture of Edwardian London as Wagner's is of medieval Nuremberg, and there is nothing to choose between the two in humour, mastery of construction and appositeness of scoring.



At the end of an overlong day laden with teaching and other duties, Edward Elgar lit a cigar, sat at his piano and began idling over the keys. To amuse his wife, the composer began to improvise a tune and played it several times, turning each reprise into a caricature of the way one of their friends might have played it or of their personal characteristics. "I believe that you are doing something which has never been done before," exclaimed Mrs. Elgar. Thus was born one of music's great works of original conception, and Elgar's greatest large-scale "hit": the Enigma Variations. The enigma is twofold: each of the 14 variations refers to a friend of Elgar's, who is depicted by the nature of the music, or by sonic imitation of laughs, vocal inflections, or quirks, or by more abstract allusions. The other enigma is the presence of a larger "unheard" theme which is never stated but which according to the composer is very well known. The identity of the phantom tune left the world with the composer, and guesses have ranged from "God Save the King" to a simple major scale.

This apparatus aside, the variations contain some of the most charming and deeply felt music Elgar ever penned, more than

redeeming the work from the status of mere gimmickry. The main theme is hesitating, lean and haunting, and is reprised with the passionate first variation that represents Caroline, the composer's wife, a constant source of encouragement and inspiration.

In its 15 minutes or so the overture gives a lively and colourful musical portrait of Edwardian London. 'Cockaigne' was a term used by moralists at that time as a metaphor for gluttony and drunkenness, while Britain adopted the name humorously for London. The work presents various aspects of turn-of-the-century London and Londoners. It begins with a quiet but bustling theme which leads into an unbroken sequence of snapshots: the cockneys, the church bells, the romantic couples, a slightly ragged brass band (perhaps the Salvation Army) and a contrastingly grand and imperious military band. The broad theme representing Londoners is, Michael Kennedy states, the first occurrence of Elgar's trademark direction, 'nobilmente.'. The work ends in a characteristically Elgarian blaze of orchestral sound, including a full organ.

Mindful, perhaps, of the way Elgar brings his themes together

Elgar Enigma Variations Cockaigne Overture

Sir John Barbirolli Philharmonia Orchestra

1 Enigma Variations, Op.36, Theme (Andante) And Variations

2 Overture Cockaigne (In London Town) Op.40

Engineer – Harold Davidson Producer – Victor Olof
Recorded by EMI on 9th May and 27th August 1962



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