

After the less-than-promising 1877 debut of *Swan Lake*, marred by a largely amateur production, over a decade lapsed before the composer was commissioned by the Director of the Imperial Theatres in St. Petersburg to supply music for a ballet on the Perrault fairy tale, *The Sleeping Beauty*. Tchaikovsky threw himself arms-deep into the project. Not only was the composer again on happy turf, he was currently in a state of delight by the occasional presence of the three-year old daughter of a friend's servant; despite his celebrated melancholy, children seemed to tap a joyful vein in Tchaikovsky, the feeling reciprocated in his capacity to be mischievous or silly at their level. The little girl's proximity fed a spirit of fantasy which transmitted to this most lighthearted of the composer's scores. Most musicologists and historians concede that *Sleeping Beauty* is the most perfectly wrought of Tchaikovsky's three ballet scores, classic in its restraint, especially when compared with the hyper-Romanticism of its predecessor *Swan Lake* or the seasonal whimsy of *The Nutcracker*, yet possessing the right amount of color and panache to render it pure Tchaikovsky; its waltz remains a Pops favorite.

The well-known story of the ballet opens with Princess Aurora's christening at the royal court. Rejoicing quickly fades with the uninvited appearance of the evil fairy Carabosse, who places a curse on the princess, preordaining that at 16 Aurora will prick her finger on a spindle and fall into an enchanted sleep. This comes to pass but the spell is at long last broken by Prince Charming, who forges through barriers of enchantment to kiss and awaken Aurora. The enlarged final act is a wedding celebration at which many other celebrated fairy tale characters are present. This act alone is often performed as Aurora's Wedding.

*Sleeping Beauty* was premiered to great acclaim and success, with choreography by the great Marius Petipa at the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg on January 1, 1890. In 1921, Diaghilev remounted the work for a notable London production.

# Elgar

## Enigma Variations

### Tchaikovsky

#### *Sleeping Beauty* excerpts

**PIERRE MONTEUX / LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA**



Enigma Variations, byname of Variations on an Original Theme (“Enigma”), Op. 36 , Elgar, Edward: Nimrod variationseries of 14 short musical portraits by Edward Elgar that premiered in London on June 19, 1899. The subjects of these portraits were several of the composer’s friends and family.

Elgar, Sir Edward The work’s origins were described by Elgar in a letter to his friend August Jaeger at the music publishing firm Novello & Company. “I have sketched a set of Variations (orkestry) on an original theme,” the composer wrote.

The Variations have amused me because I’ve labelled ’em with the nicknames of my particular friends—you [Jaeger] are Nimrod. That is to say I’ve written the variations each one to represent the mood of the ‘party’...it’s a quaint idee & the result is amusing to those behind the scenes & won’t affect the hearer who ‘nose nuffin.’

Indeed, unfamiliarity with the originals sketched by Elgar does not detract from the hearer’s enjoyment of Elgar’s music, though deeper knowledge of the composer’s intentions adds a measure of humour that the casual listener might miss. The lovely first variation, for example, is an appreciation of the composer’s wife, Alice. The penultimate variation, devoted to a female friend whom Elgar believed was at the time on route to Australia, quotes Felix Mendelssohn’s overture Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage. Variation No. 11, though named for the organist George Sinclair, is really a portrait of Sinclair’s boisterous bulldog, Dan.

The best known of the variations is the serene Variation No. 9, identified by the composer as “Nimrod.” The name is a play on words, as the biblical Nimrod was a great hunter, and the German word meaning “hunter” is Jaeger. This lyrical movement portrays a warm conversation between the composer and his friend Jaeger, who by Elgar’s account, offered valuable artistic guidance throughout a long partnership. The final variation portrays the composer himself, though it includes music from the first variation as well as the theme from “Nimrod” to indicate the significance of his two strongest influences.

The structure of the Enigma Variations is as follows:

C.A.E. (Elgar’s wife, Caroline Alice Elgar)

H.D.S.–P. (Hew David Steuart–Powell, a pianist and fellow chamber musician)

R.B.T. (Richard Baxter Townshend)

W.M.B. (William Meath Baker)

R.P.A. (Richard Penrose Arnold, son of English poet Matthew Arnold)

Ysobel (Isabel Fitton, an amateur viola player)

Troyte (A. Troyte Griffith, an architect and would-be pianist)

W.N. (Winifred Norbury, a matron of the arts with a distinctive laugh)

Nimrod (A.J. Jaeger [see above])

Dorabella (Dora Penny, daughter of the rector of Wolverhampton)

G.R.S. (George Robertson Sinclair, organist at Hereford Cathedral, and his dog)

B.G.N. (Basil G. Nevinson, amateur cellist and fellow chamber musician)

\*\*\* (a female friend thought to be traveling)

E.D.U. (Elgar’s wife’s nickname for him)

Because the original score indicates the persons portrayed only by initials, one might surmise that their identities are the enigma of the title. Yet Elgar freely named each person and indicated what he had hoped to portray about them. According to Elgar, the true mystery was the piece’s theme. He noted that “through and over the whole set another and larger theme ‘goes’ but is not played.” This theme has been variously guessed to be “Rule Britannia,” “God Save the Queen,” the “Dies Irae,” “Auld Lang Syne,” or even “Pop Goes the Weasel.” But Elgar died without identifying his theme, and the enigma remains.

While ballet enjoyed a golden age in the mid–nineteenth century, it is generally acknowledged that the music accompanying that medium did not flourish in tandem with the other components. Even in so celebrated a work as Giselle, only a balletomane would not be hard pressed to hum one of its tunes. This is by no means a criticism, for the music specified for a production was to be functional. It can be argued that Tchaikovsky is the first composer of great ballet scores, infusing them with his trademark tunefulness, emotion, and drama. Long an admirer of dance, the composer placed the same amount of effort into his three great dance scores as he would into his symphonic and operatic works. For the first time, suites from the ballets could be performed sans staging and choreography for a purely musical experience.

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### Sleeping Beauty excerpts

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Tchaikovsky: The Sleeping Beauty, Op.66

- 16. Prologue - Introduction 2:12
- 17. Marche (Entrance of King and Court) 2:40
- 18. Pas de six: Intrada - Adagio (Allegro vivo) 4:11
- 19. Pas de six: Variation IV (Song-bird Fairy) :33
- 20. Pas de six: Variation V (Violente) :59
- 21. Act 1 - 6. Valse 4:35

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

- 1. Theme (Andante) 1:16
- 2. C.A.E. (L'istesso tempo) 1:57
- 3. H.D.S.-P. (Allegro) :47
- 4. R.B.T. (Allegretto) 1:21
- 5. W.M.B. (Allegro di molto) :27
- 6. R.P.A. (Moderato) 1:55
- 7. Ysobel (Andantino) 1:19
- 8. Troyte (Presto) :56
- 9. W.N. (Allegretto)1:54
- 10. Nimrod (Adagio)3:50
- 11. Intermezzo: Dorabella (Allegretto)2:39
- 12. G.R.S. (Allegro di molto):55
- 13. B.G.N. (Andante)2:25
- 14. Romanza (Moderato) 2:38
- 15. Finale: E.D.U. (Allegro - Presto)4:58

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