

Elgar's 'enigma' and its solution

Edward Elgar (1857-1934) was a patriot, as speaks from many of his works, such as The Banner of Saint George (op. 33, 1897), Caractacus (op. 35, 1898), Land of Hope and Glory (1901/'02), Cockaigne in London Town (1902), the Coronation Ode (1902), The Crown of India (1912), and his WW I music. The composer's career paralleled with the three decades of Britain's imperialistic climax.

Caractacus is a cantata in praise of the first century King of the Britons, fighting Roman rule. It was dedicated to Queen Victoria and first performed on 5 October 1898. In February 1899 Elgar composed a part song for Victoria, setting a poem by the famous early psycho-analyst W.F.M. Myers. It was first performed on Queen Victoria's 80th birthday, 24 May 1899:

To Her Beneath Whose Steadfast Star.

*To her beneath whose steadfast star
From pole to pole in lusty play
Her English wander, forcing far
Their world-ingathering way; -
Outsoar the Caesar's eagle flight,
Outrun the Macedonian reign,
Flash from the flamy Northern night
Speech to the Austral main: -*

*To her whose patient eyes have seen
Man's knowledge wax thro' ebb and flow,
Till some have felt those bars between
Wind of the Spirit blow; -
Tho' some, heart-worn with doubt and strife,
Would bid the doomful thunder fall,
Bind as with bands the cosmic Life,
And dream the end of all: -*

*Beyond, beyond their wisdom's bound,
Thro' fairer realms the Queen shall roam,
Till soul with soul the Wife hath found
Her mystic-wedded home: -
While her long-rumoured glories stir
The blue tide's earth-engirdling wave,
With love, with life, her Prince and her
The All-Father shield and save!*

Let the Queen live for ever!

A week after this Windsor premiere, involving 250 singers conducted by Elgar, a larger work was presented to the world, the Variations on an Original Theme, op. 36. The composer began working on it on October 28, 1898, after a long day of music teaching, only three weeks after the premiere of Caractacus.

Elgar selected friends and acquaintances and their idiosyncrasies and sketched them in a set of fourteen orchestral variations. The principal idea was not unlike Schumann's *Carnival* or Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The score was dedicated 'to my friends pictured within'. He headed the variations with initials and nicknames and later published some information about them, when the Aeolian Company produced piano player rolls of the piece.

However, the *whole* score was dedicated to Elgar's *friends pictured within*. The original theme was called *Enigma*. Who could be 'pictured within'? Many tried to 'crack' Elgar's puzzle, overlooking the actual enigma. 'Solutions' were published from such an outlandish nature as Beethoven's *Sonata pathétique*, *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*, *Auld Lang Syne*, and *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*. Because, there had to be a tune. Or not?

This is what Elgar actually revealed himself:

It is true that I have sketched for their amusement and mine, the idiosyncrasies of fourteen of my friends, not necessarily musicians; but this is a personal matter, and need not have been mentioned publicly. The Variations should stand simply as a 'piece' of music. The Enigma I will not explain – it's 'dark saying' must be left unguessed, and I warn you that the connexion between the Variations and the Theme is often of the slightest texture; further, through and over the whole set another and larger theme 'goes', but is not played... So the principal Theme never appears, even as in some later dramas – e.g., Maeterlinck's *L'Intruse* and *Les sept Princesses* – the chief character is never on the stage.

Herewith Elgar caused an enormous confusion. Should there be a non-played counterpoint melody? Which composer would create a non-played tune? This whole idea has been misinterpreted since the variations' premiere. The counterpoint-theory is nonsensical. Any clever musician (let us say Dmitry Shostakovich, Bernard Drukker or Hugo van Neck) can produce any counterpoint to any tune, at any time. A matter of musicianship, not of enigmas. But in Elgar's notes the word 'never' turned out important.

So what is the enigma about? The idea occurred to create a ballet around the 'variationees' and Elgar stated that 'a veiled dancer' should represent the original theme. This implies there is someone in the enigma. Moreover, probably a woman. This suggests the 'veiled dancer' and the 'female' orchestration of the theme.

Troyte Griffith asked Elgar if 'God save the Queen/King' was the solution. He said: 'Of course not, but it is so well known...'

Nobody guessed it. The truth is this. Elgar liked 'japes', puzzles, enigmas, crosswords, anything like that. In his 'enigma' he pictured Britannia 'sitting by desolate streams... for ever it seems' (enigma theme quoted in *The Music Makers*, 1908).

The 'larger theme' that 'goes' but is not played is a sentiment: patriotism. The falling thirds, a motif on the words 'never never never' in the chorus of *Rule Britannia!* inspired the 'enigma theme'. And there is the full story.

Dorabella (Dora Penny), a 'variationee' asked what the enigma was. Elgar said: 'You of all people' should have guessed. Look at a Victorian penny coin. There is Britannia, ruling the waves. Another symbol for England, John Bull – with bulldog an' all – is pictured within the

XIth variation. Elgar described the 'variationee' as 'organist of Hereford Cathedral'. In the 16th century that church had a – very famous – organist: John Bull.

End of story!