

***Concerto for Violin and Orchestra***

**William Walton (1902–1983)**

Written: 1938–39

Movements: Three

Style: Contemporary

Duration: 31 minutes

In 1939, William Walton was just beginning to hit his stride as a composer. His *Viola Concerto*, the oratorio *Belshazzar's Feast*, and his *First Symphony* were gaining international attention. Nevertheless, Walton was somewhat skeptical about his stature. In an interview with the *New York Times*, he remarked, "To-day's white hope is tomorrow's black sheep. These days it is very sad for a composer to grow old—unless, that is, he grows old enough to witness a revival of his work. I seriously advise all sensitive composers to die at the age of 37. I know: I've gone through the first halcyon periods, and am just about ripe for my critical damnation."

The *Times* was interviewing Walton because he was in America working with Jascha Heifetz on his new *Violin Concerto*. Heifetz commissioned the work from Walton at just about the same time the British Council asked him to write a new concerto for the 1939 New York World's Fair. Walton cleverly maneuvered the situation so that he could "kill two birds with one stone." As he started work on the concerto, he faced a difficult choice. He received a commission to write the music for the movie "Pygmalion." He turned down the offer but, as he explained to his friend Hubert Foss, "It takes too long to describe the temptations brought in front of me . . . but I persisted in saying no"—even though he would have made considerably more money than with this concerto.

He had doubts about the concerto. What if Heifetz didn't like it? The work itself was troubling him. "It seems to be developing in an extremely intimate way," he wrote, "not much

show, bravura, and I begin to have doubts (fatal for the work, of course) of this still small voice getting over at all in a vast hall holding ten thousand people.” In the end, the real issue was “whether I am to become a film composer or a real composer.” He chose the latter.

He wrote most of his *Violin Concerto* while living in Italy with Alice Wimborne, a wealthy and much older married woman who “was very good at making me work and would get very cross if I mucked about.” When the two travelled to the United States to show it to Heifetz, the great violinist didn’t even play it through. He was more concerned with working in the garden. In the end, Heifetz never performed the concerto at the World’s Fair in New York—the British Council had waited too long to book Heifetz for the event. Then World War II broke out. When Heifetz eventually premiered the concerto with the Cleveland Orchestra in December, 1939, Walton couldn’t attend because he was driving an ambulance in London and awaiting orders to go to France.

The first movement of Walton’s *Violin Concerto* is lyrical in character with a few passionate outbursts, perhaps reflecting his pleasant time on the Italian coast, and most certainly reflective of his love for Alice Wimborne. The second movement is a lively dance, full of technical demands for the soloist: “quite gaga . . . and of doubtful propriety after the first movement!” The final movement contrasts a spritely march-like theme with a more expressive one. The ending brings back ideas from the first two movements before the slam-bang finish.

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## ***Variations on an Original Theme (Enigma)***

**Edward Elgar (1857–1934)**

Written: 1898–99

Movements: Theme and Fourteen Variations

Style: Romantic

Duration: 29 minutes

Edward Elgar was the first English composer to gain international prominence after Henry Purcell (1659–1695). After such a long drought, one would think the English would be quick to embrace a composer of stature. Not so! Elgar's fame did not come quickly or easily. The son of a shopkeeper, he was sensitive about his humble upbringing. He turned down an invitation to a formal luncheon celebrating Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee saying "You would not wish your board to be disgraced by the presence of a piano-tuner's son and his wife." It was only after his fortieth birthday, and the success of his *Enigma Variations*, that he was fully recognized in England.

There are two puzzles in Elgar's *Enigma Variations*. The first is "what is the theme?" Elgar simply labelled it "Enigma." Then he labeled all of the variations with cryptic initials or names. Those are easy to solve, but Elgar's "Enigma" is still unsolved. "The enigma I will not explain," Elgar wrote. "Its 'dark saying' must be left unguessed . . . further, through and over the whole set another and larger theme 'goes,' but is not played." So, there are two enigmas: the actual melody of the theme, and the larger unplayed theme of the work.

C.A.E. is Elgar's wife, Alice. Hew David Steuart-Powell (H.D. S-P.), was an amateur pianist who played trios with Elgar. Richard Baxter Townshend (R.B.T. ) was an explorer. He prospected for gold, taught classics, translated Tacitus, and wrote many books.

William Meath Baker, Lord of Hasfield Court, was the brother-in-law to R.B.T. His mercurial temperament is heard in his variation, including the inadvertent slamming of a door.

Richard Penrose Arnold was the son of the poet Matthew Arnold. He continually broke up serious conversations with whimsical and witty remarks.

Ysobel is the old English spelling of Isabel—Isabel Fitton. Elgar taught her viola. A phrase in her variation is an exercise for crossing the strings. Arthur Troyte Griffith was an architect, watercolorist, and trusted friend. He also indulged in "maladroit essays on how to play the pianoforte." Winifred Norbury was a very sedate and calm woman like a kind governess. Elgar suggested that this variation was really a musical depiction of her eighteenth century house at Sherridge.

Nimrod is A.J. Jaeger, a friend and music editor at Elgar's publisher, Novello. Elgar claimed that the variation was a "record of a long summer evening talk, when my friend discoursed eloquently on the slow movements of Beethoven." Dorabella was Dora Penny. The dance-like lightness of this variation suggests Dora's delight in devising dances to Elgar's piano playing.

George Robertson Sinclair was organist of Hereford Cathedral, but this variation is about his bulldog, Dan. The music describes him falling into the river Wye, paddling upstream to find a landing place, and barking and rejoicing at succeeding.

Basil G. Nevison, a serious and devoted friend, was at Oxford with H.D. S-P. \*\*\* was Lady Mary Lygon of Madresfield House. She had left for Australia when Elgar wrote her variation. It represents the throbbing of a ship's engine. It also includes a quotation from Mendelssohn's *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*. E.D.U. is a self-portrait (Alice called him Edo). It presents a composer confident of his stature. It was also prophetic. The first performance was an instant success.

