

I believe the slow movement of the “Enigma” Variations, Nimrod, is one of the most beautiful melodies ever written by any composer! It brings tears to my eyes every time I hear or perform it.

CHRISTINE MARTIN, NCS VIOLA

Symphony No. 31 in D Major, K. 300a [297], “Paris”

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

BORN January 27, 1756, in Salzburg; died December 5, 1791, in Vienna

PREMIERE Composed 1778; first performance June 18, 1778, in Paris, Joseph Le Gros conducting

THE STORY

In the spring of 1778, Mozart was chaperoned by his mother to Paris to look for a job suited to his gifts and his ambition. He was introduced to a number of the aristocracy, though his treatment at their hands was something less than he had hoped for — his letters home often complain of being kept waiting in drafty anterooms and of having to perform on wretched harpsichords.

Jean Le Gros, director of the famous Concert Spirituel, asked him to write a symphony for his series, and Mozart was determined to concoct something exactly suited to the Parisian taste. The audience’s response to the new piece when it was premiered was so favorable that Mozart treated himself afterwards to “a large ice at the Palais Royale,” and Le Gros called it “the best symphony” in his repertory. It is one of Mozart’s most festive works and a brilliant musical statement, affirming that the young composer was on the threshold of his artistic maturity.

However, Mozart's stay in Paris grew sad. His mother fell ill in June, just as the "Paris" Symphony was completed; she died the next month. Mozart lingered, sorrowful and alone, in Paris until September 26, when, having failed to obtain the position he sought or the opera commission he longed to fill, he left for home.

LISTENING TIPS

First movement: The musicologist Alfred Einstein said that the Symphony No. 31 "hovers continually between brilliant tumult and graceful seriousness," a quality heard immediately at the beginning with the contrast between the vigorous scalelike patterns and the sweet, falling phrase that follows. Among the wealth of melodies is the structural second theme, a pert little phrase finished by a long, descending scale in gentle parallel harmonies played by the violins. Mozart takes much care to balance the forceful, rising scale pattern of the first measures with the movement's more lithe melodic material.

Second movement: Of the two slow movements he wrote for this symphony, Mozart noted, "Each is right in its own way, for they have different characters." The original one is like a lilting, slow minuet, full of grace and rococo beauty. The later movement, Mozart's preference and the one usually heard in the symphony (including this performance), is more languorous and sylvan.

Third movement: For the finale, Mozart sprang a surprise on his Parisian audience. "I began with the violins alone, playing piano for eight measures, followed at once by a sudden forte," he recounted to his father in a letter. "The audience (as I had anticipated) cried 'Hush!' at the piano, but directly the forte began, and they took to clapping." The contrast and balance provided by the juxtaposition of soft, piano passages and loud,

forte passages generates much of the excitement of this finale, whose other unexpected quality is the contrapuntal, dense texture.

INSTRUMENTATION

Two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, strings

Sea Sketches

GRACE WILLIAMS

BORN February 19, 1906, in Barry, Wales; died February 10, 1977, in Barry

PREMIERE Composed 1944; first performance 1947, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Mansel Thomas conducting

THE STORY

Grace Williams, Wales' first prominent woman composer, was born into the family of two music-loving schoolteachers in Barry, a seaside suburb of Cardiff. Her father, the director of a local boys' choir, gave young Grace her first musical instruction and immersed her in the music and traditions of their native land. As a result, Williams' compositions are often deeply national in feeling (several quote folk melodies). They are also largely indebted to the British pastoral style she learned from Ralph Vaughan Williams, with whom she studied while enrolled as a composition student at the Royal College of Music in London.

Williams composed *Sea Sketches* in London in 1944, near the end of World War II, but it was not performed until she returned to her hometown in Wales three years later. She recalled, "I've lived most of my life within sight of the sea, and I shall never tire of looking at it and listening to its wonderful sounds. It must have influenced my

music — its rhythms and long flowing lines and its colours must have had an effect, not only on my sea music, but on other works not directly associated with the sea.”

LISTENING TIPS

Sea Sketches comprises five brief evocations of life on and near the water, something of a pastoral British counterpart to Debussy’s more dramatic *La Mer*. The first movement, “High Wind,” depicts gusts and currents. “Sailing Song” suggests a smooth passage on gently undulating swells. The “sirens” of Greek mythology were the sea nymphs who lured sailors onto the rocks with their irresistible song; “Channel Sirens” recalls the sea nymph’s mysterious voices and the softly murmuring menace they represent as they await passing ships. The foamy crash of waves upon the shore inspired “Breakers.” “Calm Sea in Summer” is like a miniature tone poem and is sweetly reflective.

INSTRUMENTATION

Strings

Variations on an Original Theme, Op. 36, “Enigma”

EDWARD ELGAR

BORN June 2, 1857, in Broadheath, England; died February 23, 1934, in Worcester

PREMIERE Composed 1898-1899; first performance June 19, 1899, in London, Hans Richter conducting

THE STORY

Elgar’s “Enigma” Variations posits not just one puzzle, but three. First, each of the 14 sections was headed with a set of initials or a nickname that stood for the name of the

composer's friend portrayed by that variation. Though the speculation on the identity of the individuals began immediately, Elgar did not confirm any guesses until 1920.

The second mystery dealt with the theme itself. It is believed that the theme represented Elgar himself (note the similarity of the opening phrase to the speech rhythm of his name — Ed-ward EL-gar), thus making the variations upon it portraits of his friends as seen through his eyes. Elgar gave a helpful clue to the solution of this mystery when he used the melody again, in *The Music Makers*, and said that it stood there for “the loneliness of the creative artist.”

The final enigma, the one that neither Elgar offered to explain nor for which others have been able to find a definitive solution, arose from a statement of his: “Through the whole set, another and larger theme ‘goes’ but is not played ... So the principal theme never appears.” Conjectures about this secret, hidden theme within the work have ranged from *Auld Lang Syne* (which Elgar vehemently denied) to a phrase from Wagner's *Parsifal*. The Dutch musicologist Theodore van Houten speculated that the phrase “never, never, never” from the grand old tune *Rule, Britannia* fits the requirements, and even satisfies some of the baffling clues Elgar spread among his friends. (“So the principal theme never appears.”) We shall never know for sure; Elgar took the solution to his grave.

LISTENING TIPS

Variation I (C.A.E.) depicts Elgar's tenderness toward his wife, Alice.

Variation II (H.D. S.-P.) represents the warming-up finger exercises of a piano-playing friend, H.D. Steuart-Powell.

Variation III (R.B.T.) utilizes the high and low woodwinds to portray the distinctive voice of Richard Baxter Townsend, an actor with an unusually wide vocal range.

Variation IV (W.M.B.) suggests the considerable energy of William Meath Baker.

Variation V (R.P.A.) reflects the frequently changing moods of Richard Penrose Arnold.

Variation VI (Ysobel) gives prominence to the viola, the instrument played by Elgar's pupil Isobel Fitton.

Variation VII (Troyte) describes the high spirits of Arthur Troyte Griffith.

Variation VIII (W.N.) denotes the charm and grace of Miss Winifred Norbury.

Variation IX (Nimrod), the work's most famous variation, is a heartfelt testimonial to A.J. Jaeger, Elgar's publisher and close friend.

Variation X (Dorabella) describes Dora Penny, a friend of hesitant conversation and fluttering manner.

Variation XI (G.R.S.) portrays the organist George R. Sinclair and his bulldog, Dan, out for a walk by the river; the rhythmic exuberance of the music suggests the dog rushing about the bank and paddling in the water.

Variation XII (B.G.N.) honors the cellist Basil G. Nevinson.

Variation XIII (*)** was written for Lady Mary Lygon, who was on a sea journey at the time; the solo clarinet quotes a phrase from Mendelssohn's *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage Overture*, and the hollow sound of the timpani played with wooden sticks suggests the distant rumble of the ship's engines.

Variation XIV (E.D.U.) is Elgar's self-portrait, recalling the music of earlier variations.

INSTRUMENTATION

Two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, organ, strings