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Rapides Symphony Orchestra

Variations on a Theme

The theme and variations is one of the oldest and most basic forms in music. In its widest sense, a theme – whether original or borrowed – is expanded, contracted, reharmonized, accelerated, modulated, or in another way altered. Is not all thematic development somehow rooted in this process? Examples of the specific theme and variations form go back ages, and composers as diverse as Johann Sebastian Bach, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven, Johannes Brahms, Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, and Benjamin Britten have all applied this form to create masterpieces in the theme and variations genre. Tonight it is the acclaimed *Enigma Variations* by Edward Elgar and the innovative *Variaciones concertantes* by Alberto Ginastera which shall stand as representatives of this age-old genre.

Edward Elgar (1857-1934)
Enigma Variations, Op. 36

It was in 1898, when Edward Elgar was already in his forties, that he would begin work on the piece that would change his fortune as a composer. Elgar's *Variations on an Original Theme* – more often identified as the *Enigma Variations* – were written by a man who had long dreamed of making his career as a composer and had in fact been writing music since his childhood. Yet, when he had moved to London in 1890 to establish himself as a composer, he found little success and was back in England's rural West Country the following year. With the *Enigma Variations*, however, Elgar found immediate success: back in London, the eminent conductor Hans Richter led the premiere on June 19, 1899 at St. James's Hall. Within years, there were performances in Germany, Russia, the United States, and around the world, making the *Enigma Variations* in a sense the first music that Great Britain had exported in two centuries. With successive works like *The Dream of Gerontius*, *Pomp and Circumstance Marches*, his two symphonies, and ultimately his Cello Concerto, Elgar became the first English-born composer of international stature since Henry Purcell some two hundred years earlier.

Elgar seems to have stumbled onto the material for the *Enigma Variations* almost by accident. One evening in October 1898, Elgar came home exhausted from a day of teaching and began improvising at the piano. One theme in particular caught the attention of his wife Alice and, when she asked what it was, Elgar responded "Nothing, but something might be made of it." He began playing through what his friends might have done with his theme, listing "Powell would have done this, or Nevinson would have looked at it like this." Alice soon joined in, "[That] is exactly the way Billy Baker goes out of the room." Over the next few months, Elgar proceeded to turn him and his wife's game that evening into a serious composition – a sort of musical portrait gallery of friends and colleagues. Elgar later commented that what had "commenced in a spirit of humour [had] continued in deep seriousness." In the final published version, Elgar gave only the initials or nicknames of the persons described, leaving audiences to guess who his variations playfully caricature.

Yet, Elgar actually setup two mysteries with this composition. The "friends pictured within" were easily identified, but Elgar also spoke of a certain *enigma* that has yet to be identified even today: "It may be understood that these personages comment or reflect on the original theme and each one attempts a solution of the Enigma, for so the theme is called." Although a musical theme is heard at the very beginning of the work before the variations begin, Elgar suggested that there was something even deeper – an enigma – which linked the variations with their musical theme: "Through and over the whole set, another and larger theme 'goes,' but is not played… So the principal Theme never appears…" Some have suggested that the enigma refers to another piece of music referenced by the heard theme. They have proposed "Auld Lang Syne," "Rule Britannia," or perhaps Mozart's *Prague Symphony*. Others have suggested the enigma was simply a musical problem or puzzle which the variations attempt to solve, as the quote above suggests. Annotator Michael Steinberg wrote that "probably only Alice Elgar and Jaeger knew the secret of the unplayed larger theme – if, indeed, there was a secret."

The musical theme which opens the *Enigma Variations* is in a simple three-part layout; more complexly, the theme straddles the keys of G minor and G major. The first variation is labeled *C. A. E.*, easily identified as the initials of the composer's wife Caroline Alice Elgar. Her husband wrote, "The variation is really a prolongation of the theme," and called Alice "a romantic and delicate inspiration." The second variation, labeled *H. D. S. P.*, depicts Hew David Steuart-Powell; he was a pianist with whom Elgar, a violinist, would often play chamber music. The third variation *R. B. T.* is for Richard Baxter Townshend, a friend who was a classicist at Oxford. Elgar recreates an impersonation Townshend had given "of an old man in some amateur theatricals – the low voice flying off occasionally into 'soprano' timbre." Like its model, Elgar's melody often

jumps into a higher range in this variation. The fourth variation *W. M. B.* is for William Meath Baker, the same Billy Baker who Alice had joked about. The frustrated variation depicts one occasion when a panicked Baker, who was responsible for preparing horse carriages for guests, had "with a slip of paper in his hand, forcibly read out the arrangements for the day and hurriedly left the music-room with an inadvertent bang of the door."

The fifth variation *R. P. A.* depicts Richard Penrose Allen who in his playing had a knack for revealing the true feeling behind the music. The sixth variation *Ysobel* is for Isabel Fitton, a friend of Elgar who played viola. The seventh variation *Troyte* describes Elgar's lifelong friend Arthur Troyte Griffith. An architect by profession, Troyte once tried his hand at the piano which Elgar translated into "the uncouth rhythm of drums and lower strings" heard in this variation. The eighth variation *W. N.* is named for Winifred Norbury, but is more of a depiction of the beautiful eighteenth-century house where she and her sister Florence lived.

The ninth variation is called *Nimrod* and depicts Elgar's friend and music editor August Johannes Jaeger. In the Book of Genesis, Nimrod is the "mighty hunter." Likewise, the name Jaeger means "hunter" in German. Besides Alice, Jaeger was Elgar's closest friend and advocate. *Nimrod* is a long, slow movement, and Elgar explained that "the variation… is the record of a long summer evening talk, when my friend discoursed eloquently on the slow movements of Beethoven, and said that no one could approach Beethoven at his best in this field, a view with which I cordially concurred." *Nimrod* has gained a following of its own, and is often heard separately from the other movements of the *Enigma Variations*.

The tenth variation called *Dorabella – Intermezzo* is named after Dora Penny, the step-niece of Billy Baker, who was apparently cheerful and music-loving. The eleventh variation *G. R. S.* takes the initials of George Robertson Sinclair, the organist at Hereford Cathedral, but actually depicts Sinclair's dog. Elgar recounted "The first few bars were suggested by [the] great bulldog Dan (a well-known character) falling down the steep bank into the River Wye; his paddling up stream to find a landing place; and his rejoicing bark on landing. G. R. S. said 'set that to music.' I did; here it is." Variation twelve *B. G. N.* is Elgar's tribute to his friend Basil Nevinson, an amateur cellist who would often join Powell and Elgar in playing chamber music. The thirteenth variation *** *Romanza* does not include reference to a dedicatee's name. The dedicatee is likely Lady Mary Lygon who was in spring 1899 sailing to Australia as suggested in the brief quotation from Mendelssohn's *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage* as first heard in the clarinet towards the middle of the variation. The fourteenth and final variation is titled *E. D. U.* and depicts Elgar himself, "Edoo" being Alice's pet name for him. The melodies depicting Alice and Jaeger return and, with their assistance, the finale shows the bold and confident side of Elgar's personality.

Alberto Ginastera (1916-1983)
Variaciones concertantes, Op. 23

The year 2016 marks the centenary of Alberto Ginastera, the leading Argentine composer of the twentieth century who became a major voice for modern music around the world. Ginastera was born in Buenos Aires in 1916. His father's family had emigrated from the Catalonian region of Spain and, therefore, Ginastera preferred his name to be pronounced with a soft "g," as in the English name "George," as opposed to the typical Spanish pronunciation. He took piano lessons as a child and later studied at the National Conservatory of Music in Buenos Aires. His first published score was the ballet *Panambí* (1937) which has clear traces of Debussy, Bartók, and Falla as well as Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. Yet, there is also much in *Panambí* drawn from Ginastera's native Argentina, particularly the nocturnal and magical elements remnant from the deceased Incan Empire. When the American composer Aaron Copland toured Argentina a few years later in 1941, he praised Ginastera, writing "there is a young composer here who is generally looked upon as the 'white hope' of Argentine music… Alberto Ginastera will, no doubt, someday be an outstanding figure in Argentine music." Copland befriended Ginastera and made arrangements for him to come to the United States and study at Tanglewood in 1946.

Although Ginastera would shortly return to Argentina, his music would retain many important advocates in the United States, and there would be several major U. S. premieres of his compositions in the 1950s and 1960s. Meanwhile, Argentina would often prove more hostile toward him. During the Perón regime of the early 1950s, Ginastera was forced to write film scores having lost his academic post. Later, following the successful U. S. premiere of his opera *Bomarzo* in 1967, the President of Argentina declared the opera to be "obsessed with sex and violence" and it was banned from performance in Argentina for several years. In 1969, Ginastera and his wife separated, and for months he was unable to compose. He found new inspiration when in 1971 he married the cellist Aurora Nátola. Putting his personal and political problems behind them, Ginastera and his new wife resettled to Geneva, Switzerland. For the next twelve years until his death in 1983, Ginastera wrote some of his most brilliant music

with Aurora as his constant advocate and – in the case of his Second Cello Concerto – his interpreter.

Over the course of his career, Ginastera successfully combined the musical folk heritage of his native Argentina with the Western concert hall tradition; from the 1950s onwards, this would also include the avant-garde elements his European and American contemporaries were exploring. Although he would incorporate modern elements as radical as serialism and indeterminacy into his later works, Ginastera resolvedly dismissed his contemporaries' fascination with purely intellectual compositions. He once wrote "a work which speaks only to the intelligence of man will never reach his heart… without sensibility the work of art is only a cold mathematical study, and without intelligence or technique it is only chaos." While Ginastera did not ignore modern developments in music, he was more interested in producing works of art which could speak to listeners on multiple levels. He was also self-critical as a composer and – determined to attain perfection within every work – Ginastera composed only fifty-five pieces to which he felt justified in assigning opus numbers. Comparing the responsibility of a composer to that of an architect, he postulated that: "To compose, in my opinion, is to create an architecture… when the work has unfolded, a sense of inner perfection survives in the spirit. Only then can one say that the composer has succeeded in creating that architecture." Ginastera's music is as enjoyable for audiences and performers as it is worthwhile for composers and historians to study – a balance achieved by few twentieth-century composers.

Variaciones concertantes was written in 1953 and premiered on June 2 of that year in Buenos Aires by the *Asociacion de la Musica* Orchestra with Igor Markevitch conducting. It is scored for a large chamber orchestra of strings, winds, brass, harp, and timpani. Throughout the piece's twelve sections, most of these instruments have their chance to act as soloists. The cello and harp state the work's theme in the first section. Whereas the second section is an interlude for strings, variations for flute; clarinet; viola; oboe and bassoon; trumpet and trombone; violin; and horn follow. These variations each have different moods and characters – while the flute variation is marked as cheerful, the viola is asked to be dramatic; the clarinet is given a variation in the form of a scherzo while the oboe and bassoon sound in canon. A second interlude follows these variations as the tenth section; this time the winds dominate. In the eleventh section, the double bass repeats the theme in place of the cello who had originally stated it. The final variation is for full orchestra. In the form of a rondo, this variation takes on the character of a *malambo* – an energetic Argentine dance form in which *gauchos* (ranchers) compete with one another.

Ginastera wrote about *Variaciones concertantes*, "These variations have a subjective Argentine character. Instead of using folkloristic material, I try to achieve an Argentine atmosphere through the employment of my own thematic and rhythmic elements." Belonging to his second compositional phase – *subjective nationalism* as he termed it – the Argentine material is no longer as omnipresent as it had been in earlier works like *Panambí*. Nevertheless, there are still more implicit Argentine characteristics, like the reflection of the *malambo* found in the finale and also in the construction of the theme itself from the notes which occur on the open strings of the *gaucho* guitar (E-A-D-G-B-E'). Besides performances in concert settings, *Variaciones concertantes* has also been choreographed and used as a ballet. The first ballet staging was on May 25, 1960 at the *Teatro Colón* under the direction of Horatio Butler.