

Notes on the Program by DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

Variations on an Original Theme, "Enigma," Op. 36 (1898-1899)

Sir Edward Elgar

(Born June 2, 1857 in Broadheath, England;  
died February 23, 1934 in Worcester)

Throughout his life Edward Elgar had a penchant for dispensing startling or mystifying remarks just to see what response they would elicit. Turning this trait upon his music, he added the sobriquet "Enigma" above the theme of the splendid set of orchestral variations that he composed in 1898-1899. He posited not just one puzzle in the *Enigma Variations*, however, but three. First, each of the fourteen 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. The second mystery dealt with the theme itself, the section that bore the legend "Enigma." 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. 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: "Furthermore, 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 recent dramas — e.g., Maeterlinck's *L'Intruse* and *Les Sept Princesses* — the chief character is never on stage." Conjectures about this unplayed theme that fits each of the variations have ranged from *Auld Lang Syne* (which guess Elgar vehemently denied) to a phrase from Wagner's *Parsifal*. One theory was published in 1975 by the Dutch musicologist Theodore van Houten, who 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 that Elgar had spread to his friends. ("So the principal theme *never* appears.") We shall never know for sure. Elgar took the solution to his grave.

*Variation I (C.A.E.)* is a tender depiction of the composer's wife, Alice. *Variation II (H.D. S.-P.)* represents the warming-up finger exercises of H.D. Steuart-Powell, a piano-playing friend. *Variation III (R.B.T.)* utilizes the high and low woodwinds to portray the distinctive voice of Richard Baxter Townsend, an amateur 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, son of the poet Matthew 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 grace of Miss Winifred Norbury. *Variation IX (Nimrod)* is a moving testimonial to A.J. Jaeger, Elgar's publisher and close friend. *Variation X (Dorabella)*: *Intermezzo* 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 Wye. *Variation XII (B.G.N.)* honors the cellist Basil G. Nevinson. *Variation XIII (\* \* \*)*: *Romanza* was written while Lady Mary Lygon was on a sea journey. 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 ship's engines. *Variation XIV (E.D.U.)*: *Finale*, Elgar's self-portrait, recalls the music of earlier variations.

Symphony No. 3 in D minor (1873; revised 1874, 1876-1877 and 1888-1890)

Anton Bruckner

(Born September 4, 1824 in Ansfelden, Upper Austria;  
died October 11, 1896 in Vienna)

Bruckner worked on his Third Symphony for seventeen years, from its initial conception in 1873 until its final revision in 1890, and much of the story of his life is reflected in its history: the inspiration from and sycophantic fealty to Richard Wagner; the crushing rejection of his

music for so many years; the extensive reworkings of his scores so they might find better favor; and the eventual success — even triumph — of his symphonies in the period before his death.

Bruckner first heard the music of Richard Wagner at a performance of *Tannhäuser* in 1863, and its effect had the force of a religious conversion. It was from that day that Bruckner determined to be a serious composer of large works, and his first symphonic attempt dates from that year. Wagner, a dozen years the elder, assumed the position of a guiding star in Bruckner's life, and Bruckner toiled away with the hope of some day gaining the approval of his idol. That day came in September 1873, when he made the pilgrimage to Bayreuth, where Wagner was overseeing the construction of the Festspielhaus. With the manuscripts of the Second and still-unfinished Third Symphonies in hand, Bruckner approached "the Master" and asked him just to glance at them. If Wagner would give his approval, Bruckner suggested, he would be most grateful to dedicate one of them to him. Bruckner persisted, and he left the scores for Wagner to examine. Wagner was taken with the Third Symphony, especially with the bold opening trumpet theme (Wagner nicknamed Bruckner "the trumpet") and he agreed to allow it to be dedicated to him. Bruckner was given a friendly reception on his return, and he was overjoyed at the news. So much in a tizzy was he that the next morning he could not recall which of the two works Wagner had preferred. "Master," he anxiously wrote, "The Symphony in D minor — the one where the trumpet starts the theme?" "Yes! Yes! Best wishes, Richard Wagner," came back the reply. Bruckner saved that scrap of paper for the rest of his life.

The euphoria early connected with this "Wagner Symphony," however, turned to bleak disappointment when the work was first played. Bruckner, with a plodding patience fueled by a stubborn belief in his own abilities, finally convinced the conductor Johann Herbeck to schedule the work for a Vienna Philharmonic concert in December 1877, though the score had already been rejected three times by that organization. Unfortunately, just six weeks before the performance Herbeck suddenly died, and it appeared that Bruckner would once again be frustrated in bringing his music to the public. However, August Göllerich, a member of the Austrian parliament, father of one of Bruckner's students and an eventual biographer of the composer, used his influence to see that the concert proceeded as planned. No conductor could be found to replace Herbeck, however, so Bruckner had to take up the baton for himself. He had almost no experience as an orchestral conductor, and the players were openly hostile to both his lack of technique and his music. His rehearsals were not helped when the directors of the Conservatory, who dropped in to observe this curious composer flailing away at his strange music, broke out in derisive laughter as they stood in the wings. As an added liability, Viennese opinion, led by the redoubtable Eduard Hanslick, was strongly against Wagner, and because of Bruckner's close association with Wagner — and especially since Wagner's name appeared on the title page of this Third Symphony — a cold reception was almost guaranteed. The performance was a disaster. The audience fled *en masse* during the finale, and when Bruckner finished there were barely two dozen people left in the hall. As he turned around to accept the smattering of applause from those who had stayed, the orchestra sheepishly stole off the stage. Standing on the podium in his baggy peasant clothes, dazed, tears streaming down his cheeks, Bruckner was numb to the comfort offered by the faithful few who remained. One was the seventeen-year-old Gustav Mahler, who was to help in making the piano duet arrangement of the Symphony. Another was the music publisher Theodor Rättig. He had been following the progress of the work, and he came up to tell Bruckner that he would publish the score at his own expense, which was done the following year. Bruckner was not to be consoled on this disastrous evening, however, and, in his thick country dialect, he mumbled, "Lasst mi aus, die Leut woll'n nix von mir wissen" — "Let me go. The people don't want to know anything about me."

Bruckner composed almost nothing for the next two years. The first glimmer of public recognition came with Hans Richter's performance of the Fourth Symphony in 1881, and Bruckner was again encouraged to take up the pen. The heartache of the Third Symphony did not leave him, though, and, urged on by some friends led by the brothers Joseph and Franz Schalk, he returned to the work in 1888. With the well-meaning but heavy-handed interference of the Schalk brothers (and against the advice of Mahler) he made changes in both the orchestration and the form of the work. (A previous revision before the premiere had expunged the quotations from *Die Meistersinger*, *Tristan* and *Die Walküre* that were in the earliest version of the score, the one that Wagner had seen.) By the time these were done and the Third Symphony published for a second time, in 1890, Bruckner had become a revered figure in Viennese music and the premiere of the revised version on December 12th was such a

resounding success that he took twelve curtain calls at its conclusion. The year 1891 saw at least two public celebrations in his honor, both with the support and participation of the venerable Emperor Franz Joseph — then in the 43rd year of his reign, with another 25 years remaining. Bruckner had at last reached the fame and love that seemed to have been squelched forever when the Third Symphony was new.

The Symphony's opening seems to rise from the very earth itself. Over a quivering string background, the trumpet intones a stark theme outlining the most fundamental tones of the harmonic spectrum — the fifth and the octave. This opening summons builds to a massive unison outburst from the full orchestra answered by a subdued response in the strings. The cycle — trumpet call, outburst, response — is repeated as a transition to the second theme group, a lyrical strain in the “Bruckner rhythm” of three-plus-two. Amid a series of growing climaxes, a chorale theme from Bruckner's *Mass in D minor* is introduced before the pace slows and quiets to usher in the development. Initiated by a series of hushed, hymn-like chords and the return of the tremulous string motive, it is devoted largely to an exploration of the trumpet call in both its original and inverted configurations. The recapitulation follows the progress of the exposition, and is capped with a ringing coda hurled forth by the full ensemble.

The *Adagio* forms a poignant contrast to the granitic splendor of the preceding movement. Its intense, devotional quality reflects the simple Catholic faith that Bruckner unswervingly observed all of his life. The movement is in three-part form: the outer sections majestic and stirring; the central portion more flowing. Bruckner's tendency to arrange these magnificent slow movements around waves of sound, each with greater dynamic impact and elaborate figuration than the preceding one, drives the movement forward. The scherzo and trio also shows these awesome “waves” of sound. (One of music's most glorious moments is the instant after such a movement ends and the hall seems to continue vibrating out of pure sympathetic joy.) The trio, lighter in mood and sound, has much of the aura of a country dance.

The finale begins with an expectant motive in the strings and builds quickly to a full-throated pronouncement by the brass. The second theme is a combination of two ideas — a lilting refrain in the strings and a hymn-like phrase for horns and trombones. About the use of these apparently contrasting themes Bruckner is reported to have said, “Thus is life. The polka signifies the humor and gaiety of the world; the chorale, its pain and sadness.” Following the development and recapitulation, the great cycle of the Symphony is completed by the reintroduction of the first movement's trumpet theme in the coda. In broad, striding measures, the key turns to D major for a grand, heroic closing affirmation of Bruckner's faith in the power of music and of his God.