Program Notes for VSO Concert – Ravel, Tchaikovsky, Elgar – October 16, 2026
Ravel – Le Tombeau de Couperin; Tchaikovsky – Violin Concerto; Elgar – Enigma Variations

By Jonathan Berkowitz

MAURICE RAVEL (1875 to 1937)

Note: The following biography first appeared in the 2025-26 season.

Joseph-Maurice Ravel was born in 1875 in the French Basque town of Ciboure to a Swiss father and a Basque mother. The family was artistic and cultivated. In later life, Ravel recalled, "Throughout my childhood I was sensitive to music. My father, much better educated in this art than most amateurs are, knew how to develop my taste and stimulate my enthusiasm at an early age." From his mother he learned a love of Spanish folk rhythms and song.

Soon after Ravel's birth, the family moved to Paris, where his musical talent quickly became evident and he began piano lessons. While not a child prodigy, he had a natural conception of music. At age 14, Ravel entered the Paris Conservatoire, where he studied piano, composition, and counterpoint. He spent nearly 16 years there, but this unusually long time was punctuated by expulsions and reinstatements. Never a brilliant pianist, Ravel wanted to be a composer.

His teachers included Gabriel Fauré, whose refinement and harmonic subtlety deeply influenced him. Ravel's perfectionism and independence sometimes frustrated his professors—but he was already forging a unique artistic voice. There he produced a series of early masterpieces that revealed his meticulous technique and vivid imagination. Among them are *Pavane pour une infante défunte* and *Sonatine,* both for piano, the *String Quartet*, and *Jeux d'eau*. While other composers were exploring stormy emotions, Ravel preferred restraint. He once said, "My ambition is to write music that is perfectly constructed and emotionally sincere." These early works show the astonishing perfection of style and craftsmanship that are the hallmarks of Ravel's entire oeuvre. He is one of the rare composers whose first works seem as mature as those of his later years.

Ravel's time at the Conservatoire ended in controversy. He repeatedly entered the Prix de Rome competition, France's most prestigious composition prize, but never won. The works he submitted were considered too "advanced" by ultraconservative members of the jury. By 1905, after several attempts, the jury's refusal to award him even a finalist position caused a public scandal. The resulting outcry forced the director of the Conservatoire to resign and cemented Ravel's reputation as both victim and hero of artistic integrity. The directorship of the Conservatoire was taken over by Gabriel Fauré. Ravel was not by inclination a teacher but gave lessons to a few young musicians he felt could benefit from them. Like his teacher, Fauré, he was concerned that his pupils should find their own unique voices and not be excessively influenced by established masters.

Ravel's life was largely uneventful. He never married but enjoyed the company of friends. Finding city life fatiguing, Ravel moved to the countryside where he lived for the rest of his life. His personal life remains a mystery. Ravel served as a truck driver in World War I, despite being in his 40s. The experience left him shaken and physically exhausted. The war's aftermath, combined with the death of his mother and many friends, deepened the introspective tone of his later music.

In the 1920s, Ravel toured internationally, including a four-month tour of Canada and the United States in 1928, where he met George Gershwin. Audiences were enthusiastic and the critics complimentary, but Ravel was unmoved by his new international celebrity. He commented that the critics' recent enthusiasm was of no more importance than their earlier negative judgment. However, he was fascinated by the dynamism of American life, its huge cities, skyscrapers, and advanced technology. He was also impressed by its jazz, African American spirituals, and the excellence of American orchestras.

One of his major works from the 1920s was the orchestral arrangement of Mussorgsky's piano suite *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Another was *Boléro*, which became a global sensation, much to Ravel's bemusement. He insisted that it was "one long crescendo, and absolutely nothing else." He commented, "I've written only one masterpiece—*Boléro*. Unfortunately, there's no music in it."

Ravel's final years were cruel, for he gradually began to lose his memory and some of his coordination, a condition he was quite aware of. He began to show symptoms of aphasia, perhaps due to a car accident in 1932. Although no longer able to write music or perform, Ravel remained physically and socially active until his last months. His intellect and hearing remained sharp, as did his ability to hear music in his head. In 1937, surgeons attempted a risky brain operation, but Ravel never regained consciousness and died in Paris in December 1937 at the age of 62. He was buried in the Paris suburb where he had lived.

Ravel's and Claude Debussy's music is often called "Impressionist," a label Ravel disliked. The term, borrowed from painting, refers to a style that emphasizes atmosphere, colour, and suggestion rather than structure or narrative. Like the brushstrokes of Monet, musical Impressionism relies on shimmering harmonies, ambiguous tonality, and delicate textures to evoke moods rather than tell stories. Ravel shared some of these qualities, but his approach was more structured and precise than Debussy's. Whereas Debussy aimed to dissolve boundaries, Ravel sought balance and proportion. Debussy was the poet of blurred edges, Ravel the craftsman of crystalline design.

The two composers' careers intertwined for decades. They moved in similar circles and were influenced by Symbolist poetry, exoticism, and non-Western music. They admired each other's work but were often set up as rivals by critics and the Parisian press. In truth, their relationship was respectful but cautious, a mixture of mutual admiration, artistic difference, and occasional tension. When asked about their supposed rivalry, Ravel remarked, "If there were no Debussy, there would be no Ravel." It was both an acknowledgment and a gentle deflection.

Ravel's output was not large. Famously meticulous, he destroyed works he found unsatisfactory. But nearly everything he published is considered a gem. His orchestral palette was revolutionary in its clarity and colour. He once said, "The art of orchestration is the art of transparent illusion." He was not a revolutionary musician, yet he adapted the traditional musical idiom into a language unmistakably his own. Igor Stravinsky compared Ravel to "the most perfect of Swiss watchmakers."

Among his works to enter the repertoire are pieces for piano, chamber music, two piano concertos, ballet music, two operas, and eight song cycles; he wrote no symphonies or church music. Many of his works exist in two versions: first a piano score and later an orchestration. Some of his piano music is exceptionally difficult to play, and his complex orchestral works require skillful balance in performance.

Maurice Ravel was a man of paradoxes—precise yet passionate, modern yet classical, French yet cosmopolitan. He once said, "The only love affair I have ever had was with music." His exquisitely crafted music, perfectly balanced between intellect and beauty, remains among the most beloved and enduring creations of the 20th century.

Le Tombeau de Couperin (Suite for Orchestra) – Maurice Ravel (1919)

Orchestration: *2 flutes (2nd = piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, trumpet, harp, and strings*

Le Tombeau de Couperin is a brilliant four-movement orchestral suite that transforms the tragedy of war into a shimmering, neoclassical homage to 18th-century French music.

Many listeners are surprised to learn that this delightful suite, so full of buoyancy and refinement, emerged directly from the devastation of the First World War. Ravel himself explained the apparent contradiction: *"The dead are sad enough, in their eternal silence."* Rather than composing a lament, he chose to celebrate the vitality and humanity of friends who had died in battle. He created music that simultaneously looks backward three centuries and forward into the modern age. Elegance and grief coexist naturally. On the surface, the work sparkles with wit, grace, precision, and unmistakably French charm. Beneath lies a personal statement of remembrance. It is music that smiles through tears.

The title comes from a 17th-century French musical term, *tombeau*, literally meaning "tomb" but historically used to describe a musical memorial. The title does *not* refer specifically to François Couperin. Rather, Ravel intended the work as a tribute to the entire tradition of French Baroque keyboard music represented by composers such as François Couperin, Jean-Philippe Rameau, and their contemporaries. Each movement adopts one of the elegant dance forms familiar from the Baroque suite: Prélude, Fugue, Forlane, Rigaudon, Menuet, and Toccata. This is no exercise in historical imitation. Every page sounds unmistakably like Ravel.

Before the First World War, Ravel enjoyed one of the most successful careers in French music. Then came 1914. Although small in stature and already nearly forty, he was determined to serve France. Initially rejected because of his size and health, he eventually became a truck driver transporting munitions near the front. The experience transformed him. Several close friends died during the war. His beloved mother—perhaps the most important person in his life—also died in 1917. Ravel was devastated. He composed very little during these years.

Originally composed as a six-movement solo piano suite between 1914 and 1917, *Le Tombeau de Couperin* was orchestrated by Ravel in 1919. He omitted the original *Fugue* and *Toccata*, most likely because they depend upon specifically pianistic textures that would not translate naturally into orchestral sound. The suite therefore becomes less a transcription than a complete reimagining. Indeed, many listeners know only the orchestral version. Its transparent scoring has become a model of 20th-century orchestration.

Le Tombeau de Couperin makes a very persuasive case for the description of Ravel as history's greatest orchestrator. He uses a relatively modest orchestral force. Instrumental colours are

carefully balanced, and individual lines remain crystal clear. The orchestra behaves almost like an enlarged chamber ensemble. Every instrument has its moment.

The opening **Prélude** begins almost weightlessly, with an oboe introducing a graceful melody. Almost immediately the music begins flowing continuously, driven by rapid, chattering motifs and bird-like woodwinds. Ravel presents a modern, meticulously crafted version of Baroque ornamentation. Listen for the exquisite opening oboe solo, delicate woodwind conversations, harp embellishments, transparent strings, and the effortless rhythmic flow. The movement seems almost airborne.

The **Forlane** (*forlana* in English), an energetic Italian courtly dance adopted by French court composers, is transformed by Ravel into something subtly mysterious. Ravel's signature modern harmonies, dissonances, and 6/8 time with asymmetrical, swaying rhythms give it a quirky feel. Listen for the dance rhythms and piquant harmonies, and the important role of the woodwinds. This movement illustrates Ravel's ability to combine irony, nostalgia, and beauty.

The **Menuet** is elegant and traditional. It is a stately Baroque minuet, but the tenderness is tinged with melancholy. Once again, the oboe is prominent, as is the harp. A mournful middle section (trio) contrasts with the dance's otherwise graceful framework. The minuet returns, but the melody is now on different instruments. The music brightens, leading to a conclusion that seems suspended in time. Listen for the magical combination of woodwinds, the expressive oboe phrases, and delicate harp figures. The movement possesses quiet nobility.

The suite concludes with the **Rigaudon**, a lively, rustic French dance characterized by hopping steps that became very popular in the French courts. One can almost picture the hopping! (A rigaudon may get its name from a 17th-century Marseille dancing master named Rigaud.) After the introspection of the previous movement, the exuberant rhythms and energy bring the suite to a bright, triumphant close, refusing to bow to wartime sorrow. The energetic opening is interrupted by a more pastoral middle section featuring the oboe accompanied by pizzicato strings, before returning to the dance. The movement grows increasingly brilliant before ending in sparkling good humour. Listen for crisp rhythms, brilliant orchestral interplay, lively woodwinds, sparkling percussion, and Ravel's astonishing precision. The ending radiates life.

Le Tombeau de Couperin is not just charming orchestral music. It has genuine elegance. It reminds us that remembrance need not always be solemn. The past can be lovingly remembered with a timelessly modern voice.

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840 to 1893)

Note: The following biography appeared in the first Masterworks concert of the 2026-27 season.

"An artist lives a double life: an everyday human life and an artistic life, and the two do not always go hand in hand." — Tchaikovsky

Who are the best-known composers in the history of classical music? Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven are at or near the top of the list, but Tchaikovsky must also be considered for the scope of his musical forms and the breadth of his listening audiences. He is widely considered the most popular Russian composer in history. His ballets, *Swan Lake, The Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Nutcracker*, attract audiences of all ages. *Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor* is among the best-known of all piano concertos, and his *Violin Concerto* is one of the greatest ever composed. Tchaikovsky's symphonies are staples of the orchestral repertoire. The *1812 Overture, Romeo and Juliet Overture*, and opera *Eugene Onegin* are also among the most popular works in classical music.

Few composers have written music that speaks so directly to the heart. His emotional melodies, overwhelming climaxes, enchanting dances, and nostalgic slow movements can leave audiences breathless. Yet behind this seemingly effortless gift lay a life marked by insecurity, contradiction, and an unrelenting search for artistic and personal fulfillment. Tchaikovsky occupies a unique place in music history. He was deeply Russian, yet cosmopolitan. He admired folk music but was equally devoted to Mozart. He was celebrated internationally while often doubting his own abilities. His life and music embody many of the tensions of the late 19th century, and perhaps that is why they continue to resonate so strongly today.

Tchaikovsky was born in 1840 in Votkinsk, a small industrial town in the Ural region of Russia. His father was a mining engineer, and the family enjoyed relative comfort. Music filled the household, but no one imagined that young Pyotr would become one of history's greatest composers. From an early age, however, he displayed extraordinary sensitivity. Family members recalled his emotional responsiveness to music; melodies seemed to affect him physically. He later wrote that music stirred him so deeply that he often found it overwhelming.

Unlike Mozart or Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky was not groomed from childhood for a musical career. His parents wanted him to work in the civil service. Accordingly, he entered the Imperial School of Jurisprudence in Saint Petersburg at the age of 10. Nine years later, Tchaikovsky honoured his parents by taking a clerkship with the Ministry of Justice, where he stayed for four years. One of the defining events of his childhood was the death of his beloved mother from cholera when he was fourteen. The loss devastated him and left emotional scars that never fully healed. Many biographers hear echoes of this grief throughout his music, particularly in works where tenderness and melancholy coexist.

Then, in his early twenties, he made a remarkable decision. Inspired by the establishment of the new Saint Petersburg Conservatory, he abandoned a secure government career to restart music lessons and became one of the school's first composition students. This was a risky choice. At the time, Russia had little tradition of professional conservatory training. Many prominent Russian

composers viewed it with suspicion. Tchaikovsky became something unusual: a Russian composer with rigorous Western training.

This position made him both admired and criticized. The nationalist composers known as "The Mighty Handful" or "The Five" sought a distinctly Russian musical language rooted in folk traditions. Tchaikovsky admired their goals but was equally drawn to Mozart, Schumann, and the broader European tradition. Uncertainty about national identity—the music he heard in childhood—marked his career. As a result, Tchaikovsky's music occupies a fascinating middle ground: Russian in colour and emotional character; European in structure and craftsmanship. This synthesis helped make his music internationally accessible.

After graduation in 1865, he joined the Moscow Conservatory as a professor of harmony, where he combined teaching, music criticism, and composition. This gave him the chance to travel abroad and hear a wide range of contemporary music. He resigned his post in 1878 to focus entirely on composing.

Despite his many popular successes, Tchaikovsky's life was punctuated by personal crises and depression. In addition to the early loss of his mother, he also had a disastrous marriage with a former student who had become infatuated with him. Rather than providing social stability and helping him conform to societal expectations, it led to a severe emotional collapse and acute writer's block. The couple separated almost immediately and never truly reconciled. The episode reinforced his lifelong sense of personal isolation.

He was saved by a relationship with the wealthy widow Nadezhda von Meck, who became his patron, providing financial support that allowed him to compose full time. Their relationship remains one of music history's curiosities. For fourteen years they exchanged hundreds of letters but never met face-to-face, by mutual agreement. Her support enabled the creation of many of his greatest works and permitted him to travel incessantly throughout Europe and rural Russia while avoiding social contact whenever possible.

Tchaikovsky's foreign reputation grew and, partly due to novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky's call for "universal unity," a positive reassessment of his music also took place in Russia. He began to shed his unsociability and restlessness, and with increasing celebrity and a sense of duty, he began promoting Russian music, often as a conductor. Appearances throughout Europe and Russia boosted his self-assurance and cured his intense stage fright. In 1891, he conducted his *Festival Coronation March* at the inaugural concert of New York's Carnegie Hall. In 1892, Tchaikovsky became only the second Russian subject voted into France's Académie des Beaux-Arts. The following year, Cambridge honoured him with an honorary Doctor of Music degree.

No composer in the 19th century has received more attention for his personal life, especially his sexuality, than Tchaikovsky. The official cause of his death in 1893, at age 53, was cholera, reportedly contracted from contaminated water. However, speculation has persisted for more than a century. Various alternative theories have been proposed, but history has not provided an answer to this mystery, which continues to fascinate biographers.

Tchaikovsky's six numbered symphonies chart an extraordinary emotional journey. The Fourth Symphony explores the idea of fate as an inescapable force. The Fifth Symphony revisits that

struggle, transforming a dark motto theme into a triumphant conclusion. The Sixth Symphony, the Pathétique Symphony, remains one of the most astonishing works in the repertoire. Instead of ending with victory, it concludes with a slow movement that fades into silence. No major symphony before it had ended this way. Nine days after its premiere, Tchaikovsky died.

Before Tchaikovsky, ballet music was often considered decorative background. Tchaikovsky transformed it into art. His three great ballets—*Swan Lake, The Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Nutcracker*—contain some of the most beloved and frequently performed ballet music ever written. It is hard to believe that *Swan Lake* and *The Nutcracker* were both considered failures at their premieres.

Tchaikovsky's music continues to be cherished and performed worldwide, solidifying his legacy as one of the greatest composers of all time. His prolific body of work comprises 169 pieces, including symphonies, operas, ballets, concertos, cantatas, and songs.

Tchaikovsky's greatness lies not merely in melody, though few composers have equaled him in that regard. He possessed an extraordinary ability to transform private emotion into public art. His music feels personal without becoming self-indulgent, dramatic without becoming bombastic. He also expanded the expressive possibilities of orchestral music. His mastery of orchestration allows melodies to glow, shimmer, explode, or dissolve with remarkable naturalness. And few composers understood better that joy and sorrow are often neighbours. Most importantly, his music communicates immediately while rewarding repeated listening. A first-time listener can be moved by the emotional sweep; a seasoned musician can marvel at the craftsmanship beneath it. That is why Tchaikovsky matters.

Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 35 – Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1878)

Orchestration: *2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, strings, and solo violin*

Few compositions have travelled a more remarkable journey from rejection to universal admiration than Tchaikovsky's *Violin Concerto*. Today it stands in a group of the five most treasured and enjoyed violin concertos of all time, alongside those of Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Brahms, and Sibelius. Beethoven established the violin concerto as a symphonic masterpiece. Brahms deepened its intellectual substance. Tchaikovsky gave it perhaps its greatest gift: irresistible emotional immediacy.

The Concerto has been performed by virtually every major violinist and is beloved by audiences throughout the world. Yet when it was completed in 1878, one of Europe's leading violinists declared it unplayable, one influential critic denounced it in spectacularly offensive language, and its premiere was delayed for more than three years. Once again, history has not been kind to the critics. The Concerto has become one of the supreme achievements of the Romantic repertoire, admired not merely for its dazzling virtuosity and heart-pounding technical acrobatics, but for its lyricism, emotional sweep, and partnership between soloist and orchestra.

The Concerto emerged from one of the darkest—and most productive—periods of Tchaikovsky's life. The collapse of a brief and disastrous marriage left him emotionally devastated and unable to compose. His recovery began in large part thanks to violinist Joseph Kotek, a former student and close friend and the financial support of his extraordinary patron Nadezhda von Meck, which allowed him to focus entirely on composition. In the spring of 1878, Tchaikovsky retreated to Clarens on the shores of Lake Geneva in Switzerland. There, his creativity returned with astonishing magnitude. After completing the Piano Sonata and revising the Fourth Symphony, he turned to a violin concerto, inspired by Édouard Lalo's *Symphonie espagnole*. The entire work was completed in little more than a month. Few masterpieces have emerged so quickly from such emotional devastation.

Tchaikovsky was not a violinist, so he relied on close collaboration with Joseph Kotek throughout the Concerto's composition. Kotek's influence resembles Joseph Joachim's role in Brahms' Violin Concerto. However, Tchaikovsky never dedicated the Concerto to him. The reason remains uncertain. Instead, he dedicated it to the celebrated violin virtuoso Leopold Auer. Ironically, Auer declined to perform it, considering parts of it awkward and impractical. Tchaikovsky was deeply hurt and withdrew the dedication. In one of music's greatest ironies, Auer later changed his mind and taught the Concerto to generations of students, including Jascha Heifetz, Nathan Milstein, and Mischa Elman, helping to make it one of the most famous violin concertos ever written.

The delayed premiere finally took place in Vienna in 1881, performed by Adolf Brodsky. The audience responded warmly. One critic did not. The influential critic, Eduard Hanslick, published perhaps the most infamous review in violin literature. It has become legendary as one of music criticism's most spectacular misjudgments. Sadly, Tchaikovsky felt the hurt of it for the rest of his life.

Tchaikovsky's Concerto occupies a unique position. It combines the emotional warmth of Mendelssohn, the virtuosity of Paganini, and the symphonic breadth of Brahms while remaining unmistakably Russian. Few concertos have achieved comparable popularity without sacrificing artistic depth.

The first movement—***Allegro moderato***—opens quietly with a brief orchestral theme in the violins. This melody never returns, a trick reminiscent of how Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto begins. The music darkens slightly, preparing the way for the violin's cadenza-like entrance. It leads to the rich, singing principal theme that the soloist transforms into one continuous song.

The melodies never stop coming. Tchaikovsky does not use the rigorous development of the German tradition; his genius lies in melodic invention, with one glorious melody following another. After virtuoso violin passages featuring rapid scales and triads, it introduces a calm second theme. Intensity builds to a majestic climax with the full orchestra playing the main theme. It has been called one of the most satisfying "arrivals" in orchestral repertoire.

The development runs through a series of changes in key, ending when the violinist plays a delicate variation of the main theme. Once again, the full orchestra thrills with the main theme, building up to Tchaikovsky's technically demanding cadenza in an unusual place, before the recapitulation; listen especially for some of the highest notes a violin can reach. This enormous solo passage

grows naturally from the development rather than interrupting it. Virtuosity becomes dramatic necessity.

The cadenza's concluding trill signals the re-entry of the orchestra for the recapitulation, beginning again with the main theme. After the second theme is reprised, the orchestra and soloist race to the end in a fast-paced coda; the score calls for four accelerations of tempo. Listeners should consult a thesaurus to find appropriate synonyms for "majestic" and "thrilling" to describe the ending and their reactions to it.

The second movement—***Canzonetta: Andante—***was written shortly before publication to replace the original slow movement. (The original was later published as part of *Souvenir d'un lieu cher*.) It was an inspired decision. As the marking indicates, this "little song" is sweet and melancholy. Tchaikovsky poured out all his longing to return home in this movement.

After a woodwind chorale, the solo violin enters almost like an operatic singer. The melodies possess unmistakable Russian character. Two quiet themes are accompanied by the strings and horns, followed by the woodwinds reprising the opening melody. The movement plays out like an aria before leading without pause into the final movement.

The marking of the third movement—***Finale: Allegro vivacissimo***—should prepare the listener for this extremely fast, high-energy explosion, full of acrobatics. Drawing upon Russian folk rhythms and the energy of a Cossack dance, Trepak, Tchaikovsky creates one of the most exhilarating conclusions in the repertoire. After the orchestral introduction, the violin presents the main theme. The slightly calmer second theme hints at a peasant melody with the drone of bagpipes or a hurdy-gurdy. A third theme uses the same rhythms. But the main theme seems almost unstoppable. Episodes provide lyrical contrast before fresh waves of energy sweep everything forward. The solo violin races the orchestra through frantic, folk-inspired themes to reach a thrilling, breathless finish.

The movement is technically ferocious—scales, double stops, and daring leaps all done with blazing speed—but it never sounds merely athletic. Joy dominates and melody wins us over. The effect is stunning. As with the first movement, the listeners are encouraged to find their own words to describe their experience of this irresistible composition.

The Concerto demonstrates Tchaikovsky's remarkable orchestral imagination. He surrounds the solo violin with transparent orchestration. Woodwinds frequently answer the soloist. Strings provide warmth without heaviness. Brass contribute brilliance at climactic moments but rarely overpower the violin. The balance remains remarkably natural despite the Concerto's enormous emotional range.

The piece succeeds because it reconciles qualities often thought incompatible. It is simultaneously: lyrical and virtuosic, emotionally direct yet structurally secure, symphonic yet brilliantly idiomatic for the violin, technically formidable yet irresistibly natural. The violin never appears to struggle against the orchestra.

First-time listeners are encouraged to look beyond the breathtaking technical demands. Instead, notice how Tchaikovsky allows melodies to unfold almost vocally, how orchestral colours

constantly refresh the violin's sound, and the different emotions of each movement: the expansive lyricism of the first, the intimate reflection of the Canzonetta, and the exuberant folk-inspired celebration of the finale.

The Concerto's enduring popularity is no accident. It speaks directly to audiences while continually rewarding performers with fresh interpretive challenges. More than almost any other Romantic concerto, it demands flawless technique in addition to generosity of spirit. When performed at the highest level, it becomes far more than a virtuoso showpiece. It is a celebration of melody, resilience, and emotional renewal—the work of a composer who emerged from personal despair to create one of the violin's greatest expressions of joy.

EDWARD ELGAR (1857 to 1934)

Note: The following biography first appeared in the 2024-25 season.

Why did 19th-century England not develop as strong and individualistic a school of composers as Germany, France, or Russia did? Elizabethan England had many skilled composers. But Handel's arrival in England in 1712 had both cataclysmic and catastrophic effects, which seemed to stifle his successors. Mendelssohn was the next strong force in British music. A friend of Queen Victoria's, he was, like her, cautious, conventional, and conservative. The Queen wanted all music to sound like Mendelssohn's. Not a single major musical figure was produced in England between Handel's death in 1759 and Edward Elgar in the 1890s.

Elgar was different. His music, noble and dashing, had the confidence of Edwardian England. It reflected his love for a country at the peak of its imperial power. Elgar was born in 1857 in the picturesque village of Broadheath and, like many great composers, his humble beginnings gave no clue to the towering musical legacy he would later create.

As a young boy, Elgar showed early signs of talent and a deep love for music. He had almost no formal musical training and was largely self-taught. His musical father encouraged him to experiment with composing. Elgar studied violin and piano and worked for a while in a law office. He then decided to concentrate on music but struggled in obscurity for many years. The *Froissart Overture,* written in 1889, was his first significant work and showed his ability to write for a large orchestra. It wasn't until the success of the *Enigma Variations* in 1899 that he became a national figure and England's most famous composer. He was knighted in 1904. Even then, money was scarce, and he suffered from self-doubt and writer's block—or perhaps composer's block.

Elgar didn't tackle composing a symphony for many years because of the giant shadow cast by Beethoven. He completed his First Symphony at the age of 51, although he had tried to write one ten years earlier. At a time when Germanic influences dominated the classical world, Elgar emerged as a staunch advocate for English musical traditions. The First Symphony premiered in 1908 and was a resounding success. It was important for Britain, which the Germans had disparagingly called "das Land ohne Musik" ("the land without music"). The Symphony was performed nearly 100 times around the world within the first year of its publication.

The success of his First Symphony emboldened Elgar to continue exploring the form with a series of groundbreaking works. His Second Symphony, composed in the aftermath of the First World War, captures the tumultuous emotions of a nation scarred by war yet yearning for hope and renewal. Some of Elgar's other symphonic works were left unfinished at the time of his death. Beyond his symphonies, Elgar's contributions to the world of music were vast and varied. His iconic *Pomp and Circumstance* marches, including the rousing *Land of Hope and Glory*, have become synonymous with British ceremony. His heartfelt *Nimrod* from the *Enigma Variations* is a timeless tribute to friendship, loyalty, and the power of music to transcend language and culture.

His final large-scale work was the Cello Concerto (1918–19), which ranks as highly as Dvořák's as one of the greatest of the genre. The Concerto displays a troubled, stormy soul hidden behind a calm exterior. After this, and for the final 15 years of his life, his creativity ceased. He composed a few more pieces, which are rarely performed. After the loss of his wife in 1920, he largely withdrew from musical contact. In 1924, Elgar was appointed Master of the King's Musick, a prestigious honour that solidified his status as a British musical icon. Only 40 years later, the new British musical idols—the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and the rest of the "British Invasion"—arrived on the scene. Elgar also recorded much of his music and was an early adopter of the gramophone to preserve his interpretive ideas for posterity.

Throughout his life, Elgar remained a tireless champion of British music, fiercely protective of his artistic vision and uncompromising in his dedication to excellence. Elgar's individuality makes it difficult to describe his music, but Harold Schonberg captured it well when he wrote, "An Elgar melody, with its curious tension, its wide intervals and exuberant leaps, its confident, strong British feeling, immediately stands out, recognizable as the work of but one composer and no other in the history of music."

Variations on an Original Theme ("Enigma"), aka Enigma Variations, Op. 36 – Edward Elgar (1898–99)

Orchestration: *2 flutes (2nd = piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, triangle), organ, and strings*

Elgar's *Enigma Variations* became famous because of its melodies, its inventiveness, and its mysteries. It transformed an obscure 41-year-old provincial English composer into an international celebrity almost overnight. It contains some of the most memorable orchestral music ever written, including the universally beloved Nimrod. And more than 125 years after its premiere, its central mystery—the famous "Enigma"—remains unsolved.

The work is far more than a musical puzzle. It is a brilliant and affectionate musical portrait gallery of the composer's inner social circle—14 vivid character sketches of Elgar's closest friends, painted not by depicting their appearances but by capturing their personalities, mannerisms, humour, and humanity. Elgar's dedication reads, *"To my friends pictured within."* Few compositions reveal so much about both a composer and the people he loved.

In 1898, Edward Elgar was approaching middle age with little reason to expect greatness. He had spent years earning a modest living teaching violin, conducting amateur ensembles, and composing occasional works for local festivals. He had received no formal conservatory education, attended no university, and lacked the aristocratic connections that influenced musical careers. He was largely self-taught, learning orchestration by studying scores and absorbing the music of Beethoven, Schumann, Wagner, Brahms, and Dvořák.

Only his wife, Alice, consistently believed he possessed truly exceptional gifts. Elgar described sitting at the piano one evening, after a tiring day of teaching, playing a melody that captivated Alice, and improvising on it. When she asked what the melody was, Elgar replied, "Nothing. But something might be made of it." Something indeed. That improvisation became the famous Enigma theme and variations. The work quickly grew into one of the greatest orchestral compositions ever written. Its premiere in London in 1899 was an overwhelming success, transforming Elgar's career overnight.

The work presents a double layer of mystery that has fascinated listeners for well over a century. The external enigma—the identities behind the cryptic initials or pseudonyms heading each variation—was easily solved by Elgar's friends. The internal enigma is a deeper, still-unsolved musical puzzle. Elgar claimed a famous, unplayed theme runs through and over the entire set as a silent counterpoint, like a shadow musical character. Despite numerous theories ranging from *Auld Lang Syne* to *Rule, Britannia!*, or suggestions that the "missing theme" was philosophical rather than musical, Elgar took the true answer to his grave. He loved to tease, so perhaps there never was an answer, and preserving the mystery was part of the joke. Regardless, the music loses nothing if the puzzle remains unsolved.

The main theme enters with a haunting, hesitant quality. It features Elgar's signature wide melodic leaps—the interval of a seventh—and oscillates restlessly between a melancholic minor key and a hopeful major key. Elgar later said that the theme symbolized "the loneliness of the artist."

A set of variations is a balance between repeating the theme in a way that keeps the listener aware of it and changing it enough to surprise or distract. Elgar's opening theme is not easy to recognize and has remarkable flexibility. His variations are not just decorations of the theme; in fact, they are so ingenious that the listener may forget all about the theme, though it remains present under the surface. Is that another enigma?

The theme leads directly into Variation I without a pause. It is about Elgar's deeply cherished wife and is a tender, romantic extension of the theme, incorporating a four-note whistle motif that Elgar used when arriving home.

Variations II through VIII feature rapid, staccato violin runs that mimic piano warm-ups; alternating high woodwinds and low string growls parody eccentric voice shifts; heavy timpani and brass outbursts mimic fiery, door-slamming energy; serious strings with light woodwinds represent a nervous laugh; melancholic violas highlight cross-string study; chaotic and fast-paced timpani and lower strings reflect a tempestuous personality; and elegance and warmth, like a noble, gracious laugh, move right into the next and most famous variation, known as Nimrod.

Variation IX portrays Elgar's publisher and closest confidant, August Jaeger. "Nimrod" is a bilingual pun: *Jaeger* means "hunter" in German, and Nimrod was a biblical "mighty hunter." This deeply emotional and awe-inspiring elegy portrays a long night walk during which Jaeger encouraged a depressed Elgar by invoking the slow movements of Beethoven. Today, Nimrod is played at funerals and memorial services; its emotional power remains undiminished.

Variations X through XIII feature delicate, fluttering woodwinds that parody a slight speech stutter; rapid strings and low brass portray a bulldog—not its owner—splashing in a river and barking happily; a soulful cello solo pays homage to a cellist friend; and a solo clarinet and rolling timpani represent a rocking ocean voyage and the sound of a ship's engine. Elgar quotes Mendelssohn's *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage* overture.

The final Variation XIV is a triumphant, grand self-portrait of Elgar himself. It reprises the variations on his wife and his confidant, as though to confirm that his genius depended entirely on their love and support. A fast coda concludes the work.

The *Enigma Variations* established Elgar as one of history's finest orchestrators. His orchestra is large but never excessive. Woodwinds provide individual character. Brass supply grandeur without heaviness. Strings sing with remarkable warmth. Each variation possesses its own orchestral personality. The scoring is simultaneously brilliant and transparent.

The work succeeds on every level. It is a masterly variation set, a sequence of psychological portraits, orchestral showpiece, affectionate autobiography, and meditation on friendship itself. Unlike many programmatic works, no prior knowledge is required. The personalities emerge naturally through the music. Learning their stories only deepens appreciation.

More than a century after these friends gathered around Elgar, they continue to live, not as names in a history book, but as living musical personalities whose conversations, laughter, kindness, and companionship still resonate every time the orchestra plays.

Many first-time listeners become preoccupied with solving the famous mystery. That is understandable, but unnecessary. The true enigma may be the mysterious ability of music to reveal character more profoundly than words ever can.

Steven Ledbetter, writing for the Boston Symphony Orchestra, summed the work up eloquently, "The *Enigma* Variations remains, justifiably, Elgar's best-known work. In its invention, its range of expression, its play of light and dark between movements and keys, the craftsmanship of its links between movements, its exploiting of the various possibilities of the orchestra, its melodic fertility—in all of these things, the work is quite simply a masterpiece."