SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
“HAIL BRITTANIA: WALTON, BRITTEN AND ELGAR”
A Jacobs Masterworks Concert
Bramwell Tovey, conductor

March 7 and 8, 2020

WILLIAM WALTON  
*Crown Imperial* (Coronation March)

BENJAMIN BRITTEN  
Violin Concerto, Op. 15
Moderato con moto
Vivace
Passacaglia: Andante lento (un poco meno mosso)
*Jeff Thayer, violin*

INTERMISSION

EDWARD ELGAR  
*Enigma Variations, Op. 36*

Enigma: Andante
Var.I. "C.A.E." L'istesso tempo
II. "H.D.S.- P." Allegro
III. "R.B.T." Allegretto
IV. "W.M.B." Allegro di molto
V. "R.P.A." Moderato
VI. "Ysobel" Andantino
VII. "Troyte" Presto
VIII. "W.N." Allegretto
IX. "Nimrod" Moderato
X. "Dorabella - Intermezzo" Allegretto
XI. "G.R.S." Allegro di molto
XII. "B.G.N." Andante
XIII. "*** - Romanza" Moderato
XIV. "E.D.U." - Finale
King George V died in January 1936, and for the coronation of his son Edward, the 34-year-old composer William Walton was asked to write a ceremonial march. That request troubled many with conservative tastes in music. Walton had made his reputation as an enfant terrible at the age of 20 with Facade, his setting of poems by Dame Edith Sitwell – one outraged review of that music was titled “Drivel That They Paid to Hear.” The young composer went on to impressive achievements over the next few years: a Viola Concerto premiered by Paul Hindemith in 1929, the oratorio Belshazzar’s Feast (1931) and his First Symphony (1935).

Walton set to work on the coronation march, but in the meantime Edward abdicated “to marry the woman I love,” and Walton’s march was premiered at the coronation of Edward’s brother – now King George VI – in Westminster Abbey on May 12, 1937. Now it was Walton’s admirers’ turn to be alarmed. Instead of writing the sort of pungent, edgy music they had expected, Walton had gone back to the grand manner of Sir Edward Elgar and produced a coronation march full of pomp and circumstance, one that would have ruffled few feathers in Victoria’s day. Whatever the apprehensions surrounding this music, Walton’s Crown Imperial Coronation March was a huge success, both at that coronation and ever since: it was performed at the coronation of George’s daughter Queen Elizabeth II in 1953, and it has been heard at countless other formal occasions since then, both in England and elsewhere.

Walton took the form directly from Elgar’s famous marches: a stirring opening section gives way to a noble march tune, and these alternate before the music comes to a triumphant close. Walton gives Crown Imperial the unusual tempo marking Allegro reale (“royal”), and it gets off to a stirring opening, full of rhythmic energy. The real glory of this music comes with the arrival of the Big Tune, now at a slightly slower pace. Walton introduces it with a series of ringing brass fanfares, and then this glorious march makes its solemn way forward, full of the dignity and grandeur perfectly suited to an English coronation. This noble march grows more powerful the second time it returns, culminating in a truly heroic final statement, and the brass fanfares that had introduced that march now return to bring Crown Imperial to its ringing conclusion.
In 1939 Benjamin Britten gave up on Britain. He had come to feel that his native country offered him no future, either as person or composer, and – as a pacifist – he saw that war in Europe was imminent. Britten felt that he could make a fresh start in America, which was trying to stay free from the darkening situation in Europe, and in June 1939 he and his companion Peter Pears arrived in New York. Life in the New World did at first seem promising: within months of his arrival, the 25-year-old composer heard the New York Philharmonic give the American premiere of his \textit{Variations on a Theme by Frank Bridge}.

When he arrived in this country, Britten brought with him sketches for a violin concerto that he had begun the previous November. Now he pressed on with that work and completed it late in September 1939 while on a visit to Quebec. By then, his worst fears had been realized: war had broken out in Europe at the beginning of that month. To a friend he wrote: “it is at times like these that work is so important – that humans can think of other things than blowing each other up!...I try not to listen to the Radio more than I can help.” It is a measure of Britten’s steady success in America that the premiere of his Violin Concerto was given only six months later by the New York Philharmonic; John Barbirolli conducted, and Spanish violinist Antonio Brosa was the soloist. The reaction of the New York press was positive, and the Violin Concerto has come to be recognized as one of the most important works of Britten’s early career.

Britten’s Violin Concerto is supremely difficult for its soloist, who must master a number of technical challenges: long passages played in the violin’s highest register, others played entirely in harmonics, still others played at high speed in octaves – only the best violinists should think of taking on this concerto. Yet this is by no means a flashy piece, intent on showing off its performer’s skills – all those technical demands are at the service of the music itself. And this is quite expressive music. Britten wrote it at a moment of complete change in his life and at a moment when the world he had always known was being shattered. We should be careful, of course, not to draw easy connections between the events of an artist’s life and his work, but it is hard not to feel the terrible impress of the world of 1939 on this concerto.

Britten reverses the expected sequence of the movements of a concerto here, choosing instead to frame a central fast movement with slow outer movements. His Violin Concerto has a

\textbf{Violin Concerto, Op. 15}  
BENJAMIN BRITTEN  
Born November 22, 1913, Lowestoft  
Died December 4, 1976, Aldeburgh
striking beginning, played *pianissimo*: all alone, timpani stamps out a five-note figure that will recur throughout the concerto, and over this the solo violin makes its entrance. Something of the character of the entire concerto can be sensed from Britten’s marking for that entrance, *dolcissimo ed espressivo*: “very gentle and expressive.” This falling figure, flowing and melancholy, will also return throughout the concerto. By contrast, the second subject is sharp-edged – Britten marks its appearance *agitato, ma espressivo*. The development treats both themes, but Britten does an unexpected thing in the recapitulation: he ignores the second theme entirely and has the orchestra very gently play the first theme as the soloist accompanies. The movement drifts into silence on the sound of delicate harmonics.

Everything changes with the central movement, a scherzo marked *Vivace*. This is brilliant music, in a hard-driving 3/8 and full of octaves and glissandos. Its central section, set very high for the violin, brings back some of the melancholic wandering of the concerto’s very beginning. Britten offers an extraordinary transition back to the scherzo’s opening, a short passage scored for tuba and two piccolos. This passage, which combines one of the lowest instruments in the orchestra at the bottom of its range and two of its highest at the very top of theirs, dazzles just for the unexpected brilliance of its sound. The scherzo proceeds without pause into the concerto’s cadenza, which binds together the second and third movements. This cadenza, long and very difficult, is built in part on the concerto’s opening five-note drum-taps and the violin’s initial entrance. It comes to a moment of stasis, and the orchestra’s three trombones – silent to this point – sound a powerful progression that will serve as the basis for a long concluding passacaglia. But Britten is original once again: this ground bass does not remain static but itself evolves as the movement proceeds. Nine variations follow (this is the longest movement in the concerto), and these are sharply differentiated: some are virtuosic, some introspective, one is for the orchestra alone, and the ninth forms the movement’s coda. The pace slows, the solo violin has music of a somber intensity, and Britten’s Violin Concerto fades into silence on a long trill that cannot decide whether to settle into D Major or D minor. And so it does neither, ending ambiguously in the middle of nowhere.

It is a perfect ending for a concerto completed during the benumbed first weeks of World War II.
Enigma Variations, Op. 36
SIR EDWARD ELGAR
Born June 2, 1857, Broadheath
Died February 23, 1934, Worcester

One evening in 1898, Edward Elgar was improvising for his wife at the piano and just for fun tried varying a theme to suggest the personality of a different friend in each variation. Suddenly a musical project occurred to him, and what had begun “in a spirit of humour…continued in deep seriousness.” The result was an orchestral theme and 14 variations, each a portrait of a friend or family member, headed in the score by their initials or some other clue to their identity. The score attracted the attention of conductor Hans Richter, who led the first performance in London on June 19, 1899, and the Enigma Variations quickly became Elgar’s most popular work – Gustav Mahler conducted this music (then only a few years old) during his brief tenure as conductor of the New York Philharmonic.

Elgar dedicated the variations “To my friends pictured within,” and the subject of each musical portrait was soon identified, but mystery surrounded the theme itself, a six-bar melody full of the rises and falls that make it an ideal candidate for variation. Elgar himself fed that mystery, naming the theme “Enigma” and obscurely hinting thus: “the ‘Enigma’ I will not explain – its ‘dark saying’ must be left unguessed…further, through and over the whole set another and larger theme ‘goes,’ but it is not played.” Despite many attempts to identify this “larger” theme (including theories that it is “Auld Lang Syne” or “God Save the Queen”), the “enigma” remains just as mysterious now as it did when the music was written over a century ago.

What is not mysterious is the success of this music, with its promising theme, a wonderful idea for a set of variations, and a series of imaginative musical portraits. Part of the charm of this music is that – unlike the orchestral variations of Brahms or Schoenberg, which exist outside time and place – the Enigma Variations are very much in time and space, for they offer a nostalgic vision of a lost age. The music begins, and suddenly we are in late-Victorian England, with its civilized manners, garden parties, friends bicycling over for a visit, and long steamer trips abroad. To summarize each section:

Theme: Enigma Strings alone announce the noble, wistful theme, which Elgar marks molto espressivo and then extends briefly before the music leads directly into:

Var. I: “C.A.E.” This is a gentle portrait of the composer’s wife, Caroline Alice Elgar,
musically similar to the first statement of the theme.

II. “H.D.S.-P.” Hew David Steuart-Powell, a piano-teacher. This variation, marked Allegro, echoes his practicing staccato runs.

III. “R.B.T.” Richard Baxter Townshend, described by Elgar as “an amiable eccentric.”

IV. “W.M.B.” William Meath Baker was a bluff and peremptory country squire; his variation thunders past in barely 30 seconds.

V. “R.P.A.” Richard Penrose Arnold was the son of Matthew Arnold; Elgar described him as a “gentleman of the old school,” and his variation combines a noble violin line with flights of fancy from the woodwinds.

VI. “Ysobel” Isabel Fitton, a viola-player. This gentle variation depicts an exercise in string-crossing for violists.

VII. “Troyte” Arthur Troyte Griffith, an argumentative architect. His Presto variation features brillante runs from the violins and ends with the sound of a slamming door.

VIII. “W.N.” Winnifred Norbury, a dignified older acquaintance of the Elgars. This variation incorporates the sound of her “trilly laugh,” but some believe it actually pictures her family home.

IX. “Nimrod” August Jaeger, one of Elgar’s closest friends and supporters (Jaeger is German for hunter; Nimrod was the mighty hunter in Genesis). This noble slow movement is sometimes performed separately as a memorial. Strings alone announce the theme, which grows to a triumphant climax and subsides to end quietly.

X. “Dorabella” Dora Penny was a friend whose slight stammer is heard in the music, where there is a brief hesitation at the start of each woodwind phrase. Elgar renamed her “Dorabella” for this variation, after the character in Così fan tutte.

XI. “G.R.S.” George Robertson Sinclair, the organist at the Hereford Cathedral. This variation features the sound of his bulldog Dan in the growling lower instruments and the tinkling sound of his bicycle bell in the triangle.

XII. “B.G.N.” Basil Nevinson was a cellist, and noble solos for that instrument open and close this cantabile variation.

XIII. “(* - Romanza” Lady Mary Lygon was on a steamship to Australia when Elgar wrote this music, and he remembered her with a variation in which the sound of the ship’s vibrating engines is heard as side drum sticks softly roll on the timpani. Over this low rumble, Elgar quotes Mendelssohn’s Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage Overture, placing actual quotation
marks around the excerpt in his score.

XIV. “E.D.U.” “Edu” was his wife’s nickname for the composer, and this musical self-portrait – by turns powerful, striving and gentle – was “written at a time when friends were dubious and generally discouraged as to the composer's musical future.” Included along the way is the whistle Elgar used to announce his arrival at home, and he weaves in a reminiscence of his wife’s variation before the music concludes in triumph.

-Program notes by Eric Bromberger

PROGRAM HISTORY by Dr. Melvin G. Goldzband, San Diego Symphony Archivist

A composer of much English scenic and ceremonial music, as well as considerable, prize-winning film music, a symphony and a truly wonderful violin concerto, Sir William Walton wrote ceremonial marches for the coronations of King George V (1937) and Queen Elizabeth II (1953). The first, the Crown Imperial Coronation March, has never before been played here. (However, in 1961, André Previn led the Orchestra in Walton’s more recent march, Orb and Sceptre.)

The Violin Concerto by Benjamin Britten is also being played for the first time by the San Diego Symphony Orchestra. In contrast, Sir Edward Elgar's masterpiece, the Enigma Variations, was initially programmed at these concerts during the 1961-62 season. Earl Bernard Murray conducted. Interestingly, this piece was programmed by Peter Erős eight times over eight years of his tenure as music director here. Maybe even more interesting (or paradoxical?) is the fact that the Orchestra's only British music director, David Atherton, never programmed it during his own tenure. As guest conductor, Sir Neville Marriner was supposed to lead the Enigma Variations’ most recent performance here January 2015 – its tenth outing at these concerts overall – but frail health prevented him from appearing. (He would indeed pass away the following year at age 92.) Stepping in to conduct on that occasion was Edo de Waart, in his very first appearance leading the San Diego Symphony; a few years after this debut, Maestro de Waart would be named the SDSO’s first Principal Guest Conductor.