Introduction

> 1880 is usually given as the date of the 'modern Renaissance' in English music. For me it began about 20 years later when I first knew Elgar's Enigma Variations. I felt that here was music the like of which had not appeared in this country since Purcell's death. (Gustav Holst)[1]

The title of the work which is my subject corresponds only informally to the title of this handbook. Undoubtedly we shall go on calling Elgar's Op. 36 *'Enigma' Variations*, as does the cover of the *Elgar Complete Edition*.[2] But the autograph title-page reads only 'Variations for Orchestra composed by Edward Elgar Op. 36'.[3] Above the theme itself the word 'Enigma' appears, in the hand of A. J. Jaeger ('Nimrod'), added presumably at Elgar's request when publication was under way at Novello's.[4] This was not only Elgar's first international success, but also his first work to be published in full score; then it was entitled 'Variations on an Original Theme'.

On this reading 'Enigma' is not the title of the composition, but an emblem for the theme – perhaps only for its first few bars; in 1899 Elgar referred to the appearance of 'the principal motive (Enigma)' at a point in the finale, marked *grandioso* (cue 68) where the melody is derived only from bars 1–4.[5] On publication, however, 'Enigma' appears centred beneath VARIATIONS, implying a stronger connection between the word and the whole work.[6] There is no reason why an autograph score should be privileged over a published score acknowledged by the composer. To what, then, does 'Enigma' really apply? In order not to prejudice the matter, I shall refer to the composition as a whole as '*Variations*' or 'Op. 36', and confine the word 'enigma' to discussion of the theme and the enigma itself. Individual variations are designated either by number (Roman numerals, as in the score) or by their heading, usually a set of initials. To clarify these references, table I.1 lists the sections into which

Table I.1. *The movements of the Variations Op. 36*

Variation number	Heading	Interpretation	Cue (first bar of each variation)	Bars	Ends fermata or *attacca*
Theme	Enigma			1–17	bars 18–19 are a link
I	(C.A.E.)	Caroline Alice Elgar, the composer's wife	2	20–40	fermata
II	(H.D.S-P.)	Hew David Steuart-Powell, amateur pianist	5	41–96	fermata
III	(R.B.T.)	Richard Baxter Townshend, scholar, author, eccentric	8	97–131	fermata
IV	(W.M.B.)	William Meath Baker, 'squire' of Hasfield Court	11	132–163	fermata
V	(R.P.A.)	Richard Penrose Arnold, son of Matthew Arnold	15	164–187	*attacca*
VI	(Ysobel)	Isabel Fitton, amateur viola player	19	188–209	fermata
VII	(Troyte)	Arthur Troyte Griffith, artist and architect	23	210–280	fermata
VIII	(W.N.)	Winifred Norbury, secretary, Worcestershire Philharmonic Society	30	281–307	*attacca*
IX	(Nimrod)	August Johannes Jaeger, of Novello's	33	308–350	fermata
X	(Dorabella) Intermezzo	Dora Penny (later Mrs Richard Powell)	38	351–424	fermata
XI	(G.R.S.)	George Robertson Sinclair, organist at Hereford, owner of Dan, a bulldog	47	425–464	fermata
XII	(B.G.N.)	Basil Nevinson, amateur cellist	52	465–492	*attacca*
XIII	(***) Romanza	Lady Mary Lygon (later Trefusis), of Madresfield Court	55	493–543	fermata
XIV	(E.D.U.) Finale	Edu=Elgar himself	61 (to 83)	544–780	fine

Op. 36 is divided, with the rehearsal cues which are in every score, and the bar numbers which are included only in the *Complete Edition*. In discussion, since the *Complete Edition* will not be in many private libraries, I use the rehearsal cues and indicate bars by the form cue: bar after cue (e.g. 55:4 means the fourth bar after cue 55).

All scores of *Variations* are based photographically on the full score published by Novello's in 1900 and reprinted as a miniature score by Novello's, and later as Eulenburg Miniature Score No. 884; this was reissued with a new introduction by Esther Cavett-Dunsby in 1985. The *Complete Edition* produced a full score the following year, in which the text was scrutinised and corrected; this has an important foreword (including a valuable account of the publication history) and critical notes.[7] The only authorised variants are between versions with alternative instrumentation, such as solo piano (by the composer) or two pianos; while they may appear anachronistic in an age of recording, such skilful transcriptions offer great enjoyment.

Elgar's Op. 36 stands at the portal of our perception of English symphonism. Yet this is no symphony, and it was preceded by other orchestral works by British composers, including several distinctive symphonies and programmatic works (by Potter, Pierson, Macfarren, Sullivan, Parry, Stanford, and Wallace, not to mention Elgar himself), as well as other sets of variations (see chapter 2). But as Holst noticed in the 1920s (see epigraph), *Variations* continued, and continues as it enters its second century, to occupy a special place in our perception. It marked the coming to pre-eminence of the forty-one-year-old composer whose first symphony was later proclaimed by the German conductor Hans Richter as 'the greatest symphony of modern times, written by the greatest composer'.[8] It was Richter who brought *Variations* before the public, and launched Elgar onto the series of orchestral works (marches, symphonies, concertos, overtures, and *Falstaff*) which lie at the heart of his achievement.

Composers commonly go out of fashion shortly after their death; Elgar achieved this in his lifetime, F. H. Shera, for instance, referring in 1931 to 'today's lack of admiration'.[9] Despite a resurgence of activity in the later 1920s, when he produced some lesser works and recorded greater ones, Elgar was alienated from the post-war world and manifestations of modernism. In his influential 'study of music in

decline', Constant Lambert made it clear that, even while alive, Elgar was seen as a prelapsarian phenomenon at best, and at worst the singer of outmoded kingdom and empire, an Edwardian in a Georgian age.[10] With his developing European success broken by the First World War, Elgar's reputation, even in other Anglophone nations, has never matched his standing in Britain, which has revived markedly since 1950. His music never lost his grip on the home repertory; there were always performances, his marches entered national consciousness along with 'Nimrod', and the first complete recording of *The Dream of Gerontius* was a war-time project.[11] Yet even now much of his output remains in desuetude, notably the smaller vocal works. Elgar was an inspired miniaturist; and gathering short, self-contained musical characterisations into a coherent whole is the essential principle of *Variations*.

No published study of Elgar pre-dates Op. 36; essays and small books appeared from 1900 until shortly before the composer's death, when Basil Maine published a full-length 'life and works'. There followed memorial tributes by those who knew him (notably books by W. H. Reed and Mrs Richard Powell), while other memories remained in manuscript or emanated from relatives and descendants of his friends. The increase in performances was naturally accompanied by critical and scholarly reassessment. In the 1950s new studies of the life and works appeared from Percy M. Young and Diana McVeagh; Michael Kennedy's *Portrait of Elgar* (1968) deepened our understanding of the composer's psychology; further large-scale biographies, steeped in the music, have appeared from Jerrold Northrop Moore and Robert Anderson (see the bibliography).

More specialised literature has developed alongside such major works of synthesis; naturally it is mostly in English, and by British authors. Material is continually being made public, including letters, studies of sketches and compositional methods, bibliographies, and volumes of collected essays. The *Elgar Society Journal*, besides reviews and information, publishes material of biographical interest, which with Elgar may often have a direct bearing on the music. The *Complete Edition*, suspended at the time of writing, promises a monument worthy of Elgar as a composer of canonical status. Two essay collections edited by Raymond Monk contain more specialised studies, and the periodical literature contains signs that critics are at last venturing on analysis and

critical appraisal of a depth which with some composers we would take for granted. Naturally, a subliterature is devoted to 'Elgar's Enigma'; indeed, a disproportionate amount of energy has been expended on this hardy perennial of a puzzle at the expense of musical values. Chapter 5 offers some analysis of 'solutions' rather than a new one. Elgar cannot have regarded the alleged enigma as an integral part of his communication to the listening public. He presented the initials of 'friends pictured within', not to disguise their identities but to avoid pointlessly revealing them to the huge majority of contemporary (never mind subsequent) audiences to whom they were complete strangers. Information about the friends is considered and assessed for its musical pertinence in chapter 3.

To many friends not depicted within I offer sincere thanks for their support. Most especially I am indebted to Michael Kennedy, who surveyed the typescript with a sharp eye for detail, historical and editorial, and Brian Trowell, who shared many enigmatic thoughts. Christopher Polyblank and Jeremy Dibble also read sections of the script and loaned unpublished material. My thanks also to Chris Banks of the British Library; Geoffrey Poole; Edward Rushton; Professor Roy Holland who tried vainly to convince me of the virtues of 'Pop goes the weasel' as a 'solution'; (****); Mark Marrington who prepared the music examples; and Penny Souster at Cambridge University Press, without whose friendly encouragement I might never have ventured to write on something which the world may yet say is 'not my subject'. The portrait on the cover is the property of the Elgar Birthplace Museum and is reproduced by kind permission. All music examples drawn from the score of Elgar's *Variations* are reproduced by kind permission of Novello and Co., Ltd.

1

Composition

Elgar before *Variations*

Elgar's output prior to Op. 36 was already varied in conception, scale, and purpose. The choral masterpieces that followed *Variations* – *The Dream of Gerontius*, *The Apostles*, *The Kingdom*, and *The Music Makers* – still tend to overshadow earlier choral works; yet by 1898, at forty-one, Elgar could boast considerable artistic (if not commercial) success, with *The Black Knight* (1892), *Scenes from the Bavarian Highlands* (1895), *The Light of Life* (1896), and *King Olaf* (1896). There were already voices suggesting that this was the best English music since Purcell, and Parry, himself the most firmly established composer in the field, called Elgar (with only a little hindsight) 'a new light of exceptional brilliancy' (other senior composers, Stanford, Mackenzie, and Cowen, were also early admirers).[1] Elgar had written no orchestral music of comparable sophistication. The precursors of *Variations* were light orchestral pieces of inimitable charm, like the string serenade; exquisite salon music, like *Salut d'amour* or *Chanson de nuit*; and minor excursions into exoticism, like *Sérénade Mauresque*. Many ideas of orchestral potential, lying unused in notebooks, happily resurfaced in later compositions, even in Op. 36 itself. The exception is the concert overture of 1890, a broadly conceived and thematically prolific sonata form which takes its mood, rather than any programme, from Froissart's *Chronicles*. *Froissart* matches, or excels, the finest British orchestral output of its time; yet by comparison with Elgar's later symphonic work it seems structurally loose. Despite *The Black Knight*, a fascinating choral symphony on a very different model from precursors like Beethoven's Ninth or Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette*, Elgar attained his finest symphonic manner only in the finale of Op. 36. The actual variations belong to another world, showing an Elgar by no means exclusively Germanic in orientation, but equally

indebted to French composers such as Delibes and Massenet. The discipline of variation form enabled him to harness this gift 'for composing light, witty, and melodious vignettes, which reached an apotheosis in the *Enigma Variations*'.[2]

In 1897 we catch a tantalising glimpse of a conception which may have merged with that of Op. 36. On 19 September Elgar wrote to Nicholas Kilburn:

> Can you tell me where I can find the lines 'Merrily sung the monks of Ely when Knut king rowed by &c.' *as originally written*. They are quoted in Green's History (Short Histy of the English people) & I am writing (perhaps a series) of illustrative movements for orchestra with 'mottoes' – whereof this is one – the simple words have always charmed me & I have done most of the music.[3]

The mottoes were literary and do not imply a theme with variations; but the concept of a series of pieces illustrative of persons is suggestive. Most tantalising are the words 'I have done most of the music'. What became of it? There is no evidence that it was used in Op. 36.[4] Elgar's immediate interest in English history emerged with greater specificity in his next choral project, *Caractacus*, produced at the Leeds Festival on Wednesday 5 October 1898.

In 1897 a group of energetic amateurs founded the Worcestershire Philharmonic Society, an orchestral and choral society designed for Elgar to conduct, which he did with mixed success; the first concert was on 7 May 1898. Elgar had originally offered Leeds an orchestral work, and was depressed when neither they nor Novello's were interested; hence when late in October 1898, after the premiere of *Caractacus*, Elgar conceived a symphony in honour of General Gordon of Khartoum, who had died the death of an Imperial hero thirteen years before, he offered it to the Worcestershire Philharmonic for 1899. When this idea was abandoned, some of its thematic material went into *Gerontius*, but the concept, probably, lingered in his mind another ten years to emerge as Symphony No. 2.[5] In the meantime, however, he had finished *Variations*.

Friends pictured within

The friends who became variations are neither a complete nor a balanced selection from the Elgars' circle at that period. They did not necessarily

figure strongly in the composer's past or future and, contrary to what is suggested in Frederick Ashton's ballet, they never took tea together.[6] The composer and his wife can hardly be included in 'friends pictured within', reducing them to twelve. Some were particularly associated with the Elgars' home circle; only a few were musicians with whom the composer was professionally associated.

Among the men, one stands out for the intimacy of his relationship to Elgar the musician. This was A. J. Jaeger, dubbed 'Nimrod' after the biblical 'mighty hunter', whose employment as publishing manager at Novello's brought him into continual contact with the composer.[7] Jaeger dealt with practical issues of publication; he was the principal recipient of letters in which Elgar revealed his cyclical depression, and declared that he would be done with music. Besides making many small suggestions, Jaeger twice insisted on major revisions which markedly enhanced the climaxes of the compositions concerned, *Variations* and *The Dream of Gerontius*. His sensitivity to the composer's moods and his conviction of Elgar's genius probably mattered, over a decade, nearly as much as the support of Alice Elgar herself. The other men, at first glance, are a miscellaneous bunch: minor gentry, professional men who were amateur musicians, an architect, and a cathedral organist, all of whom owe their immortality mainly to Elgar.

The attention of biographers of a heterosexual male turns naturally to the women.[8] Two close friends of the Elgars in the late 1890s wrote memoirs. Dora Penny ('Dorabella'), later Mrs Richard Powell, was an intimate of the household, quite possibly (which she does not claim) because Elgar found her attractive.[9] But Dora was also a friend of Alice, and her relationship to the far older couple seems more filial than amorous. Elgar's acquaintance with Isabel Fitton ('Ysobel') and Winifred Norbury (W.N.) was contingent on the social and musical life of the area; it appears from the sketches that they presented themselves as suitable for variations rather late in the compositional process. The last female portrait is variation XIII, '(***)'. An early list of variations among the sketches (see p. 14) gives the incipit of XIII and marks it as finished; it is given the initial L. Other sketches refer to 'LML', making clear that the dedicatee is Lady Mary Lygon, of Madresfield Court, whom Elgar knew well through her musical activities (including committee work for the Worcestershire Philharmonic). She is, however, the only aristocrat on the list; Elgar was acutely conscious of class, and his

father, as piano tuner, used the tradesmen's entrance at Madresfield. Modern scholars, wondering not unreasonably why L.M.L. did not appear in the published score, have questioned whether Lady Mary is really intended; XIII may covertly refer to someone quite different (see chapters 3 and 5).

Friends not pictured within

It was never Elgar's intention to picture his social world with any completeness or collective significance. He was part of a large family, with whom he was on good terms, but his own relations are excluded. His circle of friends and acquaintances was already wide, including groups in the Worcester and Hereford region, in London, and elsewhere. It appears that other friends were at one time intended for inclusion; still more were never considered. Even within the locality, from which the majority is drawn, the selection of friends is patchy.[10] He did not include his boyhood friend Hubert Leicester, flute player and later mayor of Worcester, with whom he remained on good terms for a lifetime and who with Troyte Griffith saw him into his grave at Malvern. The librettist H. A. Acworth is not included although he lived in Malvern and was in Elgar's thoughts in the aftermath of *Caractacus*.[11] Among professional musicians, only the cathedral organist of Hereford (G. R. Sinclair) was represented. A variation was intended for his former assistant Ivor Atkins, since 1897 organist of Worcester, with whom Elgar's musical friendship was closer. Sinclair may have owed his advantage to his bulldog Dan (see chapter 3). The march *Pomp and Circumstance* No. 3 was later dedicated to Atkins.[12]

The reminiscences of Rosa Burley are more revealing than Mrs Powell's amiable *Memories*. Burley was close to the Elgars for many years, initially as headmistress of the Mount School where Elgar taught violin; her memoirs hardly disguise the implication that Elgar was sexually attracted to her. When asked whether she was a variation, she replied 'I am the theme', a joke which may have had a sting.[13] Burley among others demonstrated friendship in a practical way, shortly before the inception of *Variations*, by travelling north for *Caractacus*. Also present were Ivor Atkins, Miss Hyde (fellow-secretary with W.N. of the Worcestershire Philharmonic Society), B.G.N., H.D.S-P., G.R.S., and Lady Mary Lygon. Burley observed that Elgar 'rushed back to Malvern with the air

of one who has fought – and is inclined to think he has lost – a heavy engagement'; in fact, however, the Elgars remained in Leeds until the weekend and returned to Malvern via London only on 19 October.[14]

Beyond the Worcester–Hereford region, there is no variation for Elgar's close friend and correspondent Dr Charles Buck of Giggleswick.[15] Perhaps another cellist alongside B.G.N. might have been difficult to accommodate; but Buck was also, and perhaps awkwardly, his confidant in the matter of his broken engagement with Helen Weaver (see chapter 5). Buck and Leicester were perhaps excluded because they were friends of Elgar long before his marriage, of which Op. 36 is partly a celebration; B.G.N. and H.D.S-P. were at Oxford with R.P.A. and Parry, and knew Alice Roberts before she married Elgar in 1889. Mrs Fitton, mother of 'Ysobel', was also close to Alice.[16] For that reason, perhaps, as well as for disguise, Elgar wrote E.D.U. on the finale, rather than his semi-public monogram E.E.; Edu was Alice's pet name for him. Another friend in the North of England, a musician and one of Elgar's principal musical confidants over many years, was Nicholas Kilburn. His variation was planned and conceivably jettisoned out of pique following a letter, a month after the conception of *Variations*, in which Kilburn expressed reservations about *Caractacus*.[17] Kilburn was forgiven and compensated by the dedication of *The Music Makers*, in which Op. 36 is extensively quoted.

Besides Atkins and Kilburn, Sullivan and Parry, eminent composers who had shown kindness to Elgar, were allegedly intended for inclusion. No trace of them exists in the sketches; mercifully, Elgar resisted the temptation of musical parody.[18] Otherwise the selection may result quite simply from the nature of the material; Elgar knew many fine musicians and had other loyal friends, but if we believe the tales attached to the variations, we may wonder whether their personalities lacked musically suggestive quirks. This, at least, may be inferred from 'Dorabella' when, in 1946, she wrote a supplement to her *Memories*: 'The friends were chosen, not because he had any particularly great regard for each one, but because the thought of them gave him ideas which could be described in music.'[19]

Genesis

The story of Op. 36, as often told, is based on Elgar's own accounts, published in his lifetime.[20] Numbers refer to discussion below the familiar