

# San Juan Symphony

October 2, 2011

Program Notes

by Michael Allsen

The San Juan Symphony begins with this season with a program dedicated to “friends and family,” and we open with a reprise of *Song of the Mountain Poets*, a work commissioned last year for our 25th anniversary celebration by our friend and Farmington native, Sam Cardon. Though Beethoven’s third piano concerto was written primarily to play for his own profit, its story does include a rough practical joke played by Beethoven on one of his good friends. It is played here by long-time friend of music in the Four Corners and frequent SJS guest, pianist Norman Krieger. We end with a piece that is entirely *about* friends and family—Elgar’s *Enigma Variations* is a set of affectionate musical portraits of his circle of friends, including snapshots of his wife and the composer himself.

## Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

### Concerto No.3 in C minor for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 37

*Much of the work on this concerto was done in 1799-1800, though Beethoven continued to revise the work through 1802-03. The first performance took place on April 3, 1803, with Beethoven as soloist. Duration 37:00.*

When Beethoven moved to Vienna in 1792 his greatest notoriety was as a pianist—there are astonished reports of his virtuosity and almost arrogant mastery of the instrument. Throughout the 1790s, he played private concerts in aristocratic homes of aristocratic music and was eventually able to put on more profitable public concerts for large audiences. Most of Beethoven’s piano works were written for his own performances, and he logically turned to the concerto as a showcase for his talents. There was an unfinished concerto in E-flat composed when he was only 16, but his first complete concerto was the work we now know as the *Piano Concerto No.2*, written in 1794-95. The *Concerto No.1* was completed in 1800. Though his third piano concerto was more or less finished by the spring of 1800, Beethoven set it aside before adding the finishing touches. The impetus for finishing the work seems to have been a benefit concert staged at the Theater-an-der-Wein on April 3, 1803. This program, which included his first symphony, the premieres of his second symphony and the oratorio *Christ on the Mount of Olives*, would not have been complete without a new solo concerto. Preparation for this concert—a marathon by today's standards—was limited to a single long rehearsal, and Beethoven himself was actually completing the oratorio on the morning of the concert, so an incident recounted by the conductor Ignaz von Seyfried should come as no surprise. Beethoven conducted the concerto from the piano, and Seyfried, who was assigned to turn pages for Beethoven, later remembered:

“I saw almost nothing but empty leaves; at the most, on one page or another a few Egyptian hieroglyphs, wholly unintelligible to me were scribbled down to serve as clues for him; for he played nearly all of the solo part from memory since, as was so often the case, he had not had time to set it all down on paper. He gave me a secret glance

whenever he was at the end of one of the invisible passages, and my scarcely concealable anxiety not to miss the decisive moment amused him greatly and he laughed heartily at the jovial supper which we ate afterwards.”

It is entirely possible in fact that Beethoven may have improvised some bits—and certainly the cadenza—on the spot, though he later wrote a cadenza that has become a standard in performing the concerto.

The opening movement (*Allegro con brio*) begins with a lengthy orchestral introduction that lays out both main ideas: a tragic main idea and a more *cantabile* theme played by the clarinet. The piano's first entrance is with three bold runs that lead into the main theme. While the movement proceeds in rather conventional sonata form, with development of the primary theme at the forefront most of the way, the surprising ending dispenses with the usual Classical convention, which has the piano part rest after the closing cadenza to leave the orchestra alone for brief coda. Here, the piano remains in control almost until the final chord.

The *Largo* begins with a whispered meditation by the solo piano that is picked up with hushed intensity by the orchestra. Orchestra and soloist exchange roles in the central section, with a lovely duet for bassoon and flute accompanied by piano arpeggios. The opening music returns once more, lightly developed, and there is a short coda with a brief horn solo that closes the movement.

In the final movement (*Rondo: Allegro*) the piano introduces the main theme, which ties together a series of contrasting episodes. The central section serves almost as a development: after a nice little clarinet duet, the orchestra begins a brief but intense fugue that leads the piano into a Major-key version of the theme, and further developments of the main idea in the orchestra. There is a cadenza, and then Beethoven gives us a final surprise, a shift to 6/8, and a furious coda.

### **Edward Elgar (1857-1934)**

#### **Variations on an Original Theme (“Enigma”), Op.36**

*Elgar composed this work in 1898-1899. It was first performed in London, of June 19, 1899. Duration 29:00.*

Today, when we can access digital images in dozens of different ways—online, on our phones and computers, by email—it’s all too easy to forget just what a powerful thing the photo album used to be. In an age before home movies and video, photo albums were a means of organizing our memories: events, sights, and beloved friends and family. The first photo albums appeared in the 1850s, shortly after the advent of photography itself. But by the turn of the 20th century, when Elgar wrote his *Enigma Variations*, amateur photography made snapshot albums a fixture in middle class homes, and Elgar’s own photos attest to a large group of good friends. Writing to his friend August Jaeger in 1899, Elgar described a recently-completed composition: a set of variations that depict thirteen of his musical and non-musical friends. In his *Enigma Variations*, Elgar created an album of musical snapshots, affectionately dedicated to “the friends pictured

within.”

Elgar incorporates several “enigmas” into this work. The first is the theme itself, which he labels “enigma.” Each variation is titled according to the person represented, but their identities are hidden by his use of initials and nicknames. (Elgar himself soon gave away the secret identities, however.) He also states that there is another larger theme, which is never actually played, that nevertheless runs “through and over” the entire work. The *Enigma Variations* was the first of Elgar’s works to be widely heard, and it remains his most popular work today. It consists of a brief theme and fourteen variations (Elgar adds a self-portrait to the depictions of his friends.).

**Theme.** Elgar’s theme, only 17 measures long, is deceptively complex and contains a huge amount of melodic and harmonic raw material to be used in the succeeding variations. It begins with strings alone, in minor, and then shifts to contrasting material in Major, returning to minor in the last phrase. Supposedly, Elgar improvised the theme at the piano for his wife Alice, and the later orchestral piece was born from the two of them amusing themselves by imagining how various friends of their might play it.

**Variation 1** (“C. A. E.”), *L’istesso tempo*. Caroline Alice Elgar was married to the composer in 1889, and according to Elgar, her life “...was a romantic and delicate inspiration.” This section stays close to the harmonic and melodic outlines of the theme, but fleshes it out with ornamentation and lush orchestration.

**Variation 2** (“H. D. S.-P.”), *Allegro*. Hew David Stuart-Powell was a gifted amateur pianist who often played trios with Elgar (a violinist) and the cellist Basil Nevinson (the “B. G. N.” of Variation 12). The toccata-style figuration probably refers to Stuart-Powell’s habitual warm-up routine, although the highly chromatic melody is probably intended a joke—this pianist was notoriously conservative in his musical tastes.

**Variation 3** (“R. T. B.”), *Allegretto*. Richard Baxter Townsend was an author with a passion for amateur theater. According to his friends, Townsend had an extremely high voice, but loved to play old men in comic roles: growling his lines as low as he could, and suddenly breaking into a high falsetto. There is accordingly a humorous contrast between low and high textures in this variation.

**Variation 4** (“W. M. B.”), *Allegro di molto*. In this variation, Elgar pokes gentle fun at a somewhat pompous country gentleman and scholar, William M. Baker. During one of Elgar’s visits to his home, Baker officiously read an itinerary of the day’s activities and left the music room with an inadvertent slam of the door. The tittering of his guests is heard in the middle of this variation.

**Variation 5** (“R. P. A.”), *Moderato*. Richard P. Arnold, son of the poet Matthew Arnold, is characterized in this section. He is alternately solemn and lighthearted. This variation continues without pause into Variation 6.

**Variation 6** (“Ysobel”), *Andantino*. The viola’s prominent role in this variation refers to Isobel Woods, an amateur violist. The figure given to the violas throughout this section is taken from a

beginner's exercise in crossing strings.

**Variation 7** ("Troyte"), *Presto*. The architect Arthur Troyte Griffith was a boisterous friend and sometime piano student of Elgar's, although he was apparently not a star pupil. Elgar notes that he tried "...to make something like order out of the chaos," but that "...the final despairing 'slam' records that the effort proved to be in vain."

**Variation 8** ("W. N."), *Allegretto*. Elgar was associated with Winifred Norbury, an elderly devotee of music, through his connections with the Worcestershire Philharmonic Society. The music depicts both her stately 18th-century home and her characteristic laugh. This variation continues directly into the next.

**Variation 9** ("Nimrod"), *Adagio*. The title is a labored pun on the name of August Jaeger, one of Elgar's closest friends: "Jaeger" in German means "hunter," and Nimrod was the "mighty hunter" of the Book of Genesis. This movement is not a portrait of Jaeger's forceful character, but rather depicts a long conversation between Elgar and Jaeger on the grandeur of Beethoven's music. Elgar has provided some reminiscences of the slow movement of Beethoven's "Pathétique" sonata in the opening bars.

**Variation 10** ("Dorabella — Intermezzo"), *Allegretto*. According to at least one Elgar biographer, the fluttering nature of this section refers to the voice of Miss Dora Penny, an acquaintance of the composer. Elgar himself referred to this as "...a dance of fairy-like lightness." This section serves as a bridge between the serious Variation 9 and the more rowdy Variation 11.

**Variation 11** ("G. R. S."), *Allegro di molto*. George Robertson Sinclair was organist of Hereford Cathedral, but this music also refers to his bulldog Dan. One day, during a picnic, Dan slipped down a muddy bank into the River Wye, and had to swim for a time, looking for a place to climb out. In the opening bars, we hear Dan sliding down the slippery slope, paddling in the water, and barking with joy when he finds a landing-place. The more majestic tones of the brass depict Dan's master.

**Variation 12** ("B. G. N."), *Andante*. Basil G. Nevinson, an amateur cellist, was a longtime friend of Elgar's. In this section the theme is expressively developed by the cellos. Variation 13 follows immediately.

**Variation 13** ("\*\*\* — Romanza"), *Moderato*. Being intentionally enigmatic, Elgar let the asterisks "...stand for the name of a lady who was, at the time of the composition, on a sea voyage." (In all probability, it was his friend Lady Mary Lygon.) According to Elgar, we hear "...the distant throb of the engines of a liner." He also quotes a melody from Mendelssohn's *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*.

**Variation 14** ("E. D. U. — Finale"), *Allegro*. The stirring finale is about Elgar himself: the initials refer to his nickname, "Edoo." This brilliant finale certainly presents the composer in an optimistic light. The quotations from Variations 1 and 9 are programmatic: Elgar saw his wife Alice and August Jaeger as the two greatest influences on his life and his music.

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