

**Edward Elgar: Enigma Variations**  
**What Secret?**

Perusal script

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*In addition to the orchestra and conductor:*

Five performers

Edward Elgar, an Englishman from Worcestershire, 41 years old

Actor 2 (female) playing:

Caroline Alice Elgar, the composer's wife  
Carice Elgar, the composer's daughter  
Dora Penny, a young woman in her early twenties  
Snobbish older woman

Actor 3 (male) playing:

William Langland, the mediaeval poet  
Arthur Troyte Griffith (Nimrod), an architect in Malvern  
Richard Baxter Townsend, a retired adventurer  
William Meath Baker, a wealthy landowner  
George Robertson Sinclair, a cathedral organist  
August Jaeger (Nimrod), a German music-editor  
William Baker, son of William Meath Baker  
Old-fashioned musical journalist

Pianist

Narrator

ME 1 Orchestra, theme, from opening to figure 1

48"

VO 1

*Embedded Audio 1: distant birdsong*

**NARRATOR**

The Malvern Hills...

A nine-mile ridge of rock in the far west of England  
standing about a thousand feet above the surrounding countryside...

From up here on a clear day  
you can see far into the distance...

on one side...

across the patchwork fields of Herefordshire  
to Wales and the Black Mountains...

on another...

over the river Severn... Shakespeare's beloved river Avon...  
and the Vale of Evesham...

to the Cotswolds...

and... if you're lucky...

to the north, you can just make out the ancient city of Worcester<sup>i</sup>...

and the tall square tower of its cathedral...

in the shadow of which...

Edward Elgar spent his childhood and his youth...

*[pause]*

These hills are not especially high

but they dominate the surrounding landscape...

and in ancient times they formed

a place of safety and a natural stronghold...

*[pause]*

Here... more than two thousand years ago...

Iron Age warriors dug and piled up

deep ditches and tall banks of earth

to make a mighty fortress...

inside which... so archaeology tells us...

there once lived at least four thousand people...<sup>ii</sup>

*[pause]*

***[Embedded Audio 1 fades out]***

More recently... just 600 years ago...

these same hills inspired a great mediaeval poet...

**WILLIAM LANGLAND**

*[heightened poetic tone]*

In summer season... when soft was the sun...

On a May morning... on Malvern Hills...

A wonder befell me...

And I began to dream... a marvellous dream...<sup>iii</sup>

**ME 2**            **Orchestral theme, from 1 to bar before 2**

**40"**

VO 2

**NARRATOR**

About a thousand years ago

on the steep slopes below the Hills

a monastery was founded...

and a small town grew up around it...

and a spring was discovered

with holy water that people believed had healing properties...

So the sick came to be cured...

and by the 19th century, Malvern was a prosperous spa...

a place of doctors, wealthy invalids and respectable retired folk...

and private boarding schools  
to educate the children  
mostly of the scattered army officers and administrators  
of the British Empire...

This particular school... was called The Mount...

Its pupils were all girls  
and Elgar's daughter was one of them...

and he himself came here every week  
to teach the young ladies... violin...

**CAE** *[reading from her diary, sitting down as CAE]*

Friday October the 21st, 1898 [eighteen ninety eight]

Wet and warm...

E to the Mount...<sup>iv</sup>

**NARRATOR**

After a long day with his mostly unwilling students

Elgar walked back home

through the streets and across the common...

His wife... Caroline Alice...

noticed that he seemed on that particular evening

somewhat tired and preoccupied...

**CAE**        *[remembering, telling a story]*

I suggested a cigar...

He lit it... sat at the piano...

and began to improvise...

**ME 3**        **Piano sketch page 5, first 7 bars**

24"

VO 3

**CAE**        *[entering over the music, bar 4 - affectionately]*

What is that tune?

**EE**

What tune?

Oh... that...

Nothing...

but something might be made of it...

**NARRATOR**      *[entering after music]*

'Something might be made of it'...

Why did he think that?

Was it just a certain wistful melancholy?

Or maybe it was something more precise?

Like the way that in every bar

the tune nervously avoids the strong beat,

almost as though it were trying to hide from it

or escape from it?

**ME 4**      **Piano sketch 5, first 3 bars, just tune and bass**      **15"**

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VO 4

**EE** *[slightly roguishly, sharing a secret with one of his listeners]*

The alternation of two quavers and two crotchets in the first bar...  
should be noticed...

**ME 5** Piano sketch 5, opening bar of tune 5"

VO 5

**EE**

...and their reversal in the second...

**ME 6** Piano sketch 5, bar 2 of tune 5"

VO 6

**EE**

And the drop of a seventh should be remembered...<sup>v</sup>

**ME 7** Piano sketch 5, the 2 falling sevenths 8"



VO 7

**NARRATOR**

The tiniest details of the music...

**ME 8**      **Piano, third structure of opening phrase**      **12"**

VO 8

**NARRATOR**

...encouraged the composer's improvising fingers  
to make the most delicate connections...

**ME 9**      **Piano sketch, bars 7 and 8**      **10"**

VO 9

**NARRATOR**

And those same connections  
led him just a few bars later to the ending of the melody...

with its distinctive change from minor...

...to major...

**ME 10**      **Piano, G minor to major cadence**      **8"**

VO 10

**NARRATOR**

...which the composer proudly labelled with its ancient name...

**EE**

Tierce de picardy<sup>vi</sup>...

**ME 11**      **Orchestra, theme, from 5 bars after 1 to end of 7th bar**      **15"**

VO 11

**EE**      *[slightly more assertively]*

Something might be made of it...

**ME 12**      **Piano sketch page 7, WMB - 7 bars**      **15"**

VO 12

**EE** *[with boyish excitement]*

Whom does that remind you of?

**CAE** *[with laughter and excitement]*

That's Billy Baker going out of the room!<sup>vii</sup>

**EE**

Yes!

And here's how Powell might do it...

**ME 13** Piano sketch page 4 - 7 bars 9"

VO 13

**EE** *[a little more solemnly]*

But Nevinson... he'd look at it quite differently...

like this...

**ME 14** Piano sketch (invented) - 4 bars 16"

VO 14

**CAE** *[in love and amazement]*

You're doing something that's never been done before...<sup>viii</sup>

**ME 15** Piano sketch page 4 - 7 bars

24"

VO 15

*[brief silence... so that we understand that it is her]*

**NARRATOR**

C... A... E...

Caroline Alice Elgar...

**TROYTE** *[remembering her fondly, and how eccentric she was]*

I can see her now, with a pair of scissors in her hand...  
sitting at her heavy Indian writing-table  
piled high with letters, programmes, tickets, newspapers...  
and on top of everything...  
an enormous scrapbook...

It was extraordinary!

She kept every little piece of paper!<sup>ix</sup>

**EE** *[teasing his wife]*

You'll need a truck to take it all away in!

Much better burn it on a bonfire in the garden...

**CAE**            *[slightly shocked]*

Oh, Edward dear, how can you?<sup>x</sup>

**NARRATOR**

In her diary

she recorded the smallest details of their lives...

**CAE**            *[with a feeling of organisation]*

Saturday October the 22nd...

Warm and wet...

Blanche to tea...

E to dine with Dr Jebb Scott...

**NARRATOR**

And on the Sunday...

Elgar went to church...

while Alice visited their daughter at the school...

and then...

**CAE**            *[with pleasure]*

Troyte to lunch...

**EE**            *[with gusto]*

Ninepin!

**CAE**            *[making sure we understand]*

It was the shape of his head  
that made us call him 'Ninepin'...

**EE**            *[teasing her again]*

He always reminded me of a big dog...<sup>xi</sup>

**NARRATOR**

Troyte was a local architect...

His name was Arthur Troyte Griffith...

He loved music, but he was no musician...

**TROYTE** *[so excited by his friendship with Elgar!]*

I went into his study  
where the piano was open  
and on the notes were little bits of sticky paper  
with numbers written on them...

"What's this for?"

**EE** *[He is the more assertive partner in this friendship]*

That's for you...

Learn the notes by heart...

then hit them, in order, with one finger, hard and fast...

*[over the start of the next ME, waiting for only a bar or two]*

That's it!<sup>xii</sup>

**ME 16** **Piano sketch p.35 - opening 8 bars** **7"**

*[This ME should begin slowly, like someone playing with one finger, then quickly accelerate to reach the correct speed by the time the right hand comes in]*

**ME 17** **Orchestra, Troyte from 9 bars after 23 to downbeat of 26**  
**22"**

VO 16

**NARRATOR**

After their regular sunday lunch together  
Elgar and Troyte set out for a country walk...  
three miles along steep and narrow lanes...

*[continue speaking, ignoring the beginning of the embedded audio]*

***Embedded Audio 2: Elgar improvising 1927***

and round the north side of the Malvern Hills...  
to Birchwood...  
a little cottage... hidden away in the woods...

VO 17

*[pause, to allow embedded audio to be audible for 8" approx]*

**TROYTE** *[proudly explaining]*

It was I who found it for him...  
He told me... he needed somewhere hidden away...  
a place where he could play piano and write music undisturbed...

*[pause, to allow embedded audio to be audible for 8" approx]*



**CARICE ELGAR**

*[his daughter, remembering with love]*

Inside my parents' cottage there were several rooms...

but they were all quite small...

It was hard to fit the furniture in... and the piano...

[pause]

Outside the front door, just beyond the fence....

there was a well...

where we drew water - beautiful clear water - up in a large bucket...

[pause]

And in the garden, in a tree quite close to the house...

my father had an elaborate system for trapping wasps and hornets

which he looked after every day,

putting in fresh syrup and so on...

[pause]

From one side of the cottage...

***[Embedded Audio 2 fades out under speech]***

we walked straight out into a lovely wood...

and our enjoyment there was to make paths between the trees...

and I would follow him, picking up the branches as he cut them off...<sup>xiii</sup>

**NARRATOR**

A weekend with friends and family  
in the provincial English countryside  
more than one hundred years ago...

Nothing more than that...  
except for one small detail...

The next day, on the Monday morning...  
Elgar scribbled a hasty letter to his closest friend in London...

**EE**            *[follow the mercurial and evasive shifts of tone]*

My dear Jaeger!<sup>xiv</sup>

Our woods look lovely but decidedly damp and rheumatically...  
unromantic just now....

I have sketched a set of variations... on an original theme...

The different variations have amused me because I've labelled 'em  
with the nicknames of my particular friends...

You... are Nimrod...

I've liked to imagine each 'party' writing the variation him- or herself  
and I've written what I think they would have written...

*[waiting for the next music example to begin, then placing the final sentence  
after a bar or two]*

that is to say... if they were asses enough to compose...<sup>xv</sup>

**ME 18** Piano sketch 54, including fake of previous bar, then top system and downbeat of second system 30"

**ME 19** Orchestra, Nimrod, from second beat of 7th bar after fig 34, to downbeat of fig 35, not including any new instruments that are starting 22"

VO 18

**DORA PENNY** [*standing up to be Dora Penny, with girlish excitement*]

The very first time that I visited the Elgars...

it was summer... and hot...

and in the afternoon

he asked me to go walking with him on the Hills above the town...

***Embedded Audio 3: distant birdsong***

*[Wait a few beats to let the audio establish]*

How lovely it was up there!

I'd never been before...

with the wonderful sweet air

and on every side the view...

**EE**            *[he is moved by being with her]*

Look!

We're above the world

and far away from smoky cities...

**DORA PENNY**    *[thrilled]*

He pointed out to me

all the different places and the landmarks...

"You're as good as a map!"

**EE**            *[he finds her attractive]*

You should've come for longer...

You mustn't leave so soon...

Next time, we'll climb the Beacon...<sup>xvi</sup>

*[Embedded Audio 3 fades out]*

**TROYTE**    *[amused at the memory]*

Dora Penny!

In those days she was just 19 years old...

and mad about music... and mad about the Elgars...

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<sup>i</sup> Pronounced 'Wooster'

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- ii Mike Smart, Malvern Hills, London, 2009, p.15
- iii Piers Plowman, Prologue. Attwater translation
- iv On screen: CAE's actual diary entry
- v From Elgar's annotation, 'My Friends Pictured Within'
- vi French words, literally meaning 'a third from Picardy'. No one seems to know the origin of this name for the minor/major cadence.
- vii These and following quotations taken from: Elgar's 'Enigma' Variations, Julian Rushton, CUP, 1999, p.11
- viii From Christopher Hogwood's introduction to the Bärenreiter Urtext Edition
- ix Mrs Richard Powell, Memories of a Variation, pp.55-6
- x Memories of a Variation, p.57
- xi Rosa Burley, The Record of a Friendship, p.85
- xii Percy Young, Friends Pictured Within, p.102
- xiii Carice Elgar, in Alice Elgar: Enigma of a Victorian Lady, Percy Young, London, 1978, p.139
- xiv Jaeger is pronounced 'Yay-ger'
- xv We have this original letter
- xvi Mrs Richard Powell, Memories of a Variation, pp.15-16

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