

EDWARDELGAR - ENIGMA VARIATIONS

Edward Elgar's Enigma Variations is one of the most beloved pieces in the symphonic repertoire. These variations, which depict his friends, are both creative as well as endearing, and the variety, content, and length make it an ideal choice for the second half of a concert.

When I perform the piece, I use a power point presentation with photos of Elgar's "friends pictured within", along with brief descriptions of each person.

The theme, in aba form, with its wonderful arc, rising and falling intervals, and ascending bass line, has a nostalgia and poignancy which immediately grabs the listener's attention. Elgar's marking of Andante, quarter note = 63 I believe works well. Care must be taken that theme is not played too slowly. I like to have the accompanying quarter notes played full value. The second measure sure should continue on the D string. The pianissimo subito in measure 4 is quite special. Measure 5 is also to be played on the D string. I pencil in mf in measure 6 before the diminuendo. I like to push the tempo ever so slightly in the b section, measure 7, relaxing a bit in measure 10. The notes marked *tenuto* can have a little extra expression added to them. I feel in the b section a brief moment of optimism. At #1, I continue the crescendo through both measures, with full value quarter notes in the violins on beat 4 of #1. 3 measures after #1 is quite passionate, as is 5 measures after #1. 5 measures after #1 could use a little extra expression for the c sharp in the viola and bass. A substantial ritardando in the last two measures brings the theme to a sorrowful (*mesto*) conclusion.

The fermata before the Variation 1 can be held on the long side. Although Elgar writes *L'istesso tempo*, I like to move the tempo a little bit, perhaps around quarter note = 72. The balance at 3 measures after #2 is of course the main problem here. The first violins and cellos must play very quietly, at the tip, the second violins and violas a very fast quiet tremolo, and the flutes perhaps without vibrato, all to be sure that the oboes and bassoons can come through the somewhat thick texture. The trombones and timpani add a somewhat somber quality at 3 measures before #3. I stay in tempo into #3. The strings in the b section at #3 can play more expressively here, and I take just a little time 4 measures after #3. I find 3 measures before #4 to be very powerful, and I take extra time on the 3rd and 4th beats, then moving the tempo forward. When arriving at #4, I have the orchestra play with enough sound to enable a further diminuendo to the second measure of #4, which is a really wonderful moment. 3 measures after #4, I have the violas play quasi pizzicato, and louder than pianissimo with three short upbows followed by three the short downbows, to give the violins a good foundation to play their syncopations. I subdivide the 4th beat, 3 measures from the end to set up 2 measures from the end, which I subdivide as well. The clarinet is the leading voice at this point.

Variation 2 is the most difficult variation, and requires the most attention. The difficulty starts right at the beginning, making sure that the first violins enter together. I have found an unusual way of dealing with this problem; I regroup the first 4 measures as two 3/4 measures, and start the piece with a quarter note preparation instead of a dotted quarter

note preparation. I rebeam the 16th notes for the first and second violins so that the players are playing 3 beats of the hemiola in these two measures. I then continue by beating in dotted quarter notes in the 5th measure. This method has worked very well for me, with much better ensemble for the violins, and a good start to a difficult variation. I also find that playing this passage only slightly off the string is helpful. Elgar's marking of quarter note = 72 works well. The next problem I find is making sure that the woodwind entrances in measure 8 and 12 are not late. The same problem occurs at #6, making sure that the cellos and basses play exactly in time. They need to really articulate the 16th notes to be sure to be in tempo. Their crescendo from p to f and back to p makes for a very expressive phrase. They also need to be sure to play the eighth note before #7 in tempo, and not late. While the most difficult passages are behind them, the second violins and violas have to be careful to play the last 4 measures together, playing the eighth notes from the string.

Variation 3 is quite charming; I'm a little slower than Elgar's marking of eighth note = 144, closer to 132 or 136. The movement can be felt "in one", as feeling it in three may make it a little ponderous. I prefer the first note in the bassoons to be played just a little longer, so as to make a more graceful start. The accompaniment is very lovely, but shouldn't cover the solo oboe. At #9, the clarinets can play a very expressive first note, and be sure to project. The violas can play at the tip, accenting their syncopations slightly. I advise the violins to stay piano 6 measures after #9, with no crescendo until printed. At 4 measures before #10, I suggest trumpets, horns, and timpani crescendo to only about mf, with everyone playing a short eighth note 1 measure before #10. At #10, I think that it's a good idea to listen carefully for the intonation between the cellos and bassoon. 7 measures before the first ending, I find that the secondary line in the bassoons, and first violins and violas need to be sure not to cover the solo flute and oboe.

Variation 4's metronome marking of dotted half note = 72 works well. It's important to be sure to that the loud dynamic and heavy articulation doesn't slow down the tempo. The brilliant passage at #13 in the oboe and clarinet, marked mf, is supported by the violins, whose dynamic is piano. The timpani before #14 must be careful not to cover the woodwinds. I suggest limiting the crescendo at first, with most of the crescendo in the last measure before #14. At #14, full quarter notes in the places marked *tenuto* are very effective, and can be added to all woodwinds and brass to agree with the strings. I start the crescendo two measures from the end softly, with a huge crescendo, as this person apparently had a habit of slamming the door when he left the room. To that end, I have the strings play 3 measures from the end with two downbows on the quarter, upbow-downbow on the two eighth notes, and a huge up bow crescendo on the last note.

To reflect the changing moods in Variation 5, I incorporate two tempos, beginning at about dotted quarter note = 50, and doing #16 at about dotted quarter note = 58. The violins must be attentive to play their 16th notes exactly in time in the first measure. I suggest full quarter note on the 4th beat in measures 1 and 3 for cellos, basses, and bassoons. At #16, flute, oboe, and clarinet must line up together. For the pickup to 3 measures after #16, violins can start upbow, and then play the two notes after the downbeat also upbow, as well as the two f's. Second violins can play 3 upbows, then 2 upbows on the two d's. At one

measure before #17, first violins and cellos need to line up with the solo clarinet. #17 is back to tempo primo, with #18 back to the second tempo. I suggest staying in tempo so that dotted quarter of Variation 5 is exactly the same as the half note of Variation 6. The tempo will probably relax a little bit 4 measures before Variation 6, to the first tempo of Variation 5, so the tempo for Variation 6 then is also about half note = 50.

In Variation 6, although the quarter notes have dots, I suggest playing slightly *tenuto* and expressively. I take just a little bit of time on the last beat before #20. Bassoons can be very expressive at #20. At #21, section violists and later cellists should play a real *pp* to be sure that the solo viola is heard easily. Again, I take a little time into #22. At #22, strings can play very expressively. Although first violins are marked *diminuendo molto*, I prefer a very gradual *diminuendo* from *forte* over the next two measures.

Variation 7 is a very excitable and somewhat frenetic movement. I conduct the movement in 2, adhering to Elgar's marking of whole note = 76, but doing half note = 152. I base this tempo on the passage for the violins from #25 to #26, which if too fast, is next to unplayable, as the string crossings and wide leaps are very difficult to negotiate. 4 measures before #26 and the same passage 4 measures before #29 are particularly exposed, and must be played accurately. Timpanists know this variation intimately, but the cello and bass players are faced with very awkward string crossings. They are very happy when the timpani plays with them, but at several places, they are left to their own devices. The conductor must be aware of this difficulty, and find a way to help them cope with these passages. At 5 measures after #26 and at #27, I have the violins accent each bow change of their roller coaster ride. At 2 measures before #26 and 2 measures before #29, first violins may add *ff* and *sfz*. 9 measures after #26 and 5 measures after #27, I suggest that the players with piano marked on beat 2 play *diminuendo* rather than *piano subito*. For the brilliant brass passage at #29, I prefer a well articulated attack rather than over accenting.

Variation 8 is a gentle depiction of a lady regarded as particularly easygoing, and this variation is particularly charming and warm. Elgar's tempo of dotted quarter = 52 seems fast; actually quarter note = 52 seems to work better. It doesn't make any sense to feel this variation in 3 beats to a measure, so this tempo, for me at least, was an "enigma", until I found out that English conductor Sir Adrian Boult has written that this was a mistake of Elgar's, and that the tempo should read eighth note = 104. I do eighth note = about 96. I prefer the accents here to be more like sighs, played expressively and with warmth. In the 4th measure, d string for first violins on the last two eighth notes is quite nice, with vibrato, not as a harmonic. At #31, I suggest first violins to start upbow, on the string at the tip, with a *diminuendo* on the last two 16th notes. The same idea is effective in the second measure, with a harmonic on the high e. The pickup to 3 after #31 can be played with warmth and expression. At 5 after #31, the lovely cello solo can end with a harmonic on the high e. For me, the only full *forte* in this movement is the top of the crescendo that occurs at 3 measures before #32. At 5 measures from the end, I prefer the second violins and violas to play at the tip of the bow, with slight accents and clipped second 16th notes. Cellos can also play clipped. All strings 5 measures from the end should play quietly to assure that the flute and clarinets are easily heard. I prefer a substantial *allargando* at the

end, subdividing the last two 16th notes, with a harmonic on the d. A long fermata on the g leads to Variation 9, as the root of G Major becomes the 3rd of E flat Major.

The famous Variation 9 was written to honor Elgar's closest friend, Augustus Jaeger, and has been excerpted for use many times at solemn occasions. The deep relationship with Jaeger is reflected in the profundity of this moving tribute. Elgar's metronome marking of quarter note = 52 is faster than is generally performed. I'd suggest around 38 or 40. Elgar's own two recordings of the work (from 1920 and 1926) are quarter = 46 to 50 and quarter = 42 to 54, respectively. Boult's begins at quarter = 34. The majesty of this music is best served by the general crescendo that occurs from the beginning to the last 4 measures. The beginning can be played with little or no vibrato, with minimal crescendo in the first phrase up to #34. One measure before #34 can broaden slightly, with a little extra expression on the A flat in the viola. As the second phrase begins, a gradual increase in intensity occurs, with more vibrato in the strings. 4 measures after #34, the first violins can play in the d string, and 7 after, the first violins can play on the a string to keep the sound warm, and avoid too much intensity too soon. The tempo at #34 can increase slightly as well. 9 measures after #34, I prefer the violas and cellos playing somewhat less than forte, again, saving some intensity for later. One can relax a little into #35. The tempo at #35 can move a bit. I feel that the danger at #36 is that the orchestra can peak too soon. The crescendo into #37 is so emotionally charged that somehow the orchestra needs to save something for that moment. Notice that the timpani one measure before #37 plays crescendo/diminuendo, then plays crescendo to beat 2 of #37, the real top of the phrase. Despite the diminuendo marking for the first violins, they need to be mindful that they are playing the melody; I think that continuing the diminuendo to the last 2 measures is very effective, also suspending the last a flat.

After the intensity of the previous variation, something light and frothy is in order, and Variation 10 supplies both. Dora Penny apparently had a slight speech problem, and the woodwinds supply this little joke by stressing and slightly lengthening the first note of their four 16th notes. Before beginning, be sure that the strings have a moment to put on their mutes. The crescendo into #39 I think needs some definition; I add forte to the end of one measure before #39. I also add forte to 4 measures before #41 and 1 measure before #42. I take a tiny bit of time on the last beat of #41 and at the beginning of #46. Note that at #42 the different dynamics for various string players. At two after 42, it's possible to add mf to the top e flat in the viola, followed by a dim. to p. At 1 measure before #44, I suggest pp at the start for second violins and violas. Note that at #45, the major version of the melody is to be played much more quietly. I have invented a story for myself; starting at the second measure of #46, as the flutes and clarinets do not lengthen the first note, that Dora's speech problem has been cured! Although the last pizzicato is marked pianissimo, I'd suggest playing it a little louder, so that it's heard clearly.

Familiarity with the story of Variation 11 is helpful. In measure 1, the bulldog Dan jumps into the river to fetch a stick, in measure 2 and 3, he does the dogpaddle, and in measure 5, beat 2, he lets loose a ferocious bark, in the last 4 measures, he climbs up the river bank, and in the last measure, he shakes the water off his body. In measure 5, I have everyone play very loudly and roughly. As in an earlier brass chorale, I'm a big proponent of a

glorious grand sound at #48, well articulated, but without excessive accenting. Starting at 3 measures after #49, starting with the cellos, I have each entering string section play *fp* and crescendo to *forte*, and then drop down to *piano* after playing *sf* on the downbeat of the third bar. For the last two measures, perhaps the brass can start a little softer, making the crescendo more effective. The last note for everyone is, of course, as dry as possible.

The metronome marking for Variation 12 of quarter note = 58 I think works well; perhaps just a little slower is possible. The opening cello solo can be played very freely; be sure that the harmony in the violas isn't too softly played. In measure 3, be sure that the bass downbeat is clear and speaks right away. The last beat of measure 3 in the cellos can be full value, and I would be sure that the cellos sustain in measure 4 across the bar line. A big warm sound for the cellos gives credence to the dedicatee of this variation, cellist Basil Nevinson. The same previously mentioned details apply to the phrase at measure 7. At #53, the outside first violins might be encouraged to play over the fingerboard for a quieter color to the sound. At the second measure #53, I would suggest continuing the *diminuendo* all the way to the fourth measure after #53. At 3 measures before #54, I would make a very gradual *diminuendo*, playing on the d string for the cellos 1 measure before #54. I do a big *allargando* 5 measures after #54, and a very gradual *diminuendo* all the way to the *pp*, with d string for the cellos 1 measure before the fermata. The basses can also add *diminuendo*, same as the cellos and bassoons. Again, the cello solo is very free.

The metronome marking for Variation #13 seems slow; I suggest something more like quarter note = 88. In the Elgar's 1920 recording, he begins at 96 and in his 1926 recording he begins at 84. The accompaniment in the second violins and cellos needs to be quiet enough for the clarinet, and later for the flute and oboe, to be heard clearly. As in Variation 6, a *tenuto* quarter note with a space gives the phrase more expression. I like to sustain the phrase in the strings into the fifth measure. The *tranquillo* metronome marking might be around quarter note = 56. In order to give a little more expression to the violas at the second measure of #56 and at 2 measures before #57, inserting a dynamic of *mf* at the top of the crescendo might be helpful. The timpani roll with sticks, incorporated to imitate the sound of the engines of an ocean liner, is often played with coins on the timpani. The intensity of the phrase at #58, gives way to the lighthearted sounds of the music of the opening. I have the clarinet at the end play a long grace note as an anticipation of the last measure.

The metronome marking for Variation 14, the composer's self portrait, half note = 84, works well. It might be helpful to divide the cellos into front and back, with the last few stands playing the rhythm with the basses. I always rehearse the second violins, violas and cellos in measure 9, often under tempo, for them to feel their rhythm correctly. I do #62 in 4, which I think is fairly standard. Again, a noble brass sound is what I'm after in the third measure of #2. I suggest on the string, exaggerated length, 3 measures before #63. 1 measure before #65, I add *forte*, *espressivo*, *diminuendo* to the second violins and violas. Starting at #65 to #67, broad and expressive playing is in order. At #68, the reoccurrence of the music of Variation 9, a beautiful, sonorous (*sonore* in the score) tone from the trumpets and trombones in counterpoint with the previous music, is very stirring. The amount of *stringendo* at #69 is subjective to each conductor. The last note before #70 is

most effective played very short and dry. Tempo primo at #70 is very similar to the last 8 measures of the introduction. I prefer at the second measure of #72 a gradual diminuendo of 6 measures, with a slight holding back of the tempo, as we hear Mrs. Elgar's music of Variation 1, this time in 2/2 time instead of 4/4. The same comments from Variation 1 apply here as well, and also the passages starting at #65 apply to #74. The accelerando at #77 has always been problematic for me, since I don't think that the tempo can get quite fast enough to reach the prescribed tempo at #79. Again, for me, the music between #78 and #79 would get too fast to make any sense; I wind up going a little faster at #79, which seems to work fine for me. I then conduct in 3 at #79, and in 4 at #81, taking a little time into #82. Boult mentions that the Presto whole note = 84 should come at figure 79, not one bar earlier. The last note for me is a Berlioz-like full half note.

I hope that this article may be of help to my colleagues. I have always found conducting this piece to be a great joy, and strongly feel that the more the audience is connected to the personalities of Elgar's friends, the more they take away from the listening experience.