Elgar's Engima Variations

2021 BLOSSOM MUSIC FESTIVAL

Week 9

Saturday, August 28, 2021 at 7 p.m.

The Cleveland Orchestra
Vinay Parameswaran, *conductor*
Jonathan Biss, *piano*

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)
Coriolan: Concert Overture, Opus 62

CAROLINE SHAW (b. 1982)
Watermark (for piano and orchestra)

INTERMISSION

EDWARD ELGAR (1857-1934)
Enigma Variations, Opus 36
(Variations on an Original Theme)

Theme: Enigma (Andante)
Variation 1: "C.A.E." (L'istesso tempo)
Variation 2: "H.D.S.-P." (Allegro)
Variation 3: "R.B.T." (Allegretto)
Variation 4: "W.M.B." (Allegro di molto)
Variation 5: "R.P.A." (Moderato)
Variation 6: "Ysobel" (Andantino)
Variation 7: "Troyte" (Presto)
Variation 8: "W.N." (Allegretto)
Variation 9: "Nimrod" (Adagio)
Variation 10: "Dorabella " (Intermezzo: Allegretto)
Variation 11: "G.R.S." (Allegro di molto)
Variation 12: "B.G.N." (Andante)
Variation 13: "***–Romanza" (Moderato)
Variation 14: "E.D.U." (Finale: Allegro Presto)

ARTIST CHANGE
Vinay Parameswaran is conducting tonight's concert instead of Elim Chan, who is unable to appear due to travel restrictions. The music selections and piano soloist remain as originally announced.

Please turn your phone to silent mode during the performance.

Introducing the Concert

MANY OF US have romanticized the idea of a musical genius toiling away alone in an isolated study, compelled by an interior creative fire. In reality, many masterpieces we've come to love and admire are collaborations, built as a synthesis of exchanges of ideas between cherished friends, respected colleagues, along with input from artists and thinkers from across different centuries. This evening's program, featuring conductor Elim Chan in her Cleveland Orchestra debut, is a case in point.

Beethoven provided the model of a singular creative genius for much of the 19th century. Yet, he drew upon the works of Shakespeare, Plutarch, and most directly, the 1802 play by Heinrich Joseph von Collin for his *Coriolan Overture*. The two men had been working together on an opera, which never came to fruition. Instead, Beethoven embraced Collin's popular retelling of the story of a Roman general, whose fall from grace leads him to attack his own homeland. The resulting concert overture, premiered in 1807 and dedicated to Collin, opens tonight's concert and shows Beethoven at his dramatic best — building music of force and motion into a strong personal statement

Beethoven's influence resonates through the next work on tonight's program. In 2015, pianist Jonathan Biss, this evening's soloist, launched an ambitious commissioning project to pair each of Beethoven's five concertos with a new one by a contemporary composer. Caroline Shaw's *Watermark* represents a modern counterpoint for the Third Piano Concerto. Shaw melds Beethovenian gestures with elements of Biss's playing, while also embedding an artistic freedom for the soloist into the score. *"The imprint of the person you're writing for becomes part of the piece,"* Shaw explains. Biss continues: *"my playing can help the piece evolve."*

The evening ends with Elgar's great *Enigma Variations*, premiered in 1899. Here the composer wrote a series of loving musical portraits of his circle of close friends. Each rendering is remarkable for its poignancy, specificity, and humor. More than a hundred years later, we still smile when we recognize allusions to a dog's bark, a tricycle bell, or a hearty laugh. These variations, while sumptuous on their own, become even more precious owing to cherished relationships at their core.

—Amanda Angel and Eric Sellen

Coriolan: Concert Overture, Opus 62

by **Ludwig van Beethoven** (1770-1827)

Composed: 1807

Premiered: March 1807 in Vienna, conducted by the composer

Duration: about 10 minutes

ACROSS HIS LIFETIME, Beethoven wrote a series of overtures, some as concert works, others for his only opera (*Fidelio*) or attached to incidental music for several dramatic stageworks. All of them are serious in subject matter. Most of them are related to Beethoven's lifelong belief in the ultimate goodness of humanity — and the need both to "fight for good" and for heroes to lead us forward by example and sacrifice.

Beethoven wrote his concert overture *Coriolan* in 1807 in response to the hero portrayed in a contemporary play by Heinrich Joseph von Collin (to whom Beethoven dedicated the overture). Collin's play was itself a retelling of an older tale, made popular through Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. The storyline concerns a Roman general, Gaius Marcius, who saves the city of Corioli (thus gaining the honorary title Coriolanus), but then becomes embroiled against Roman society's expectations of what is right and wrong, honorable and disreputable. This hero is multisided, at first strong and heroic and honored, but later filled with venom and hatred at those who have turned against him. Such strong emotions and contrasts make good theater — and good music.

The trajectory of the play's hero — alternately lionized and despised — mirrors Beethoven's own beliefs in goodness and character, his struggles against society's expectations, and his fate-filled fight against deafness. Heroes must make choices, civilization must move forward. Onstage, Coriolanus resolves his conflicting actions in response to his mother's pleas to forgive the citizens arrayed against him. He relents, knowing that he will die.

The Overture begins with a series of dramatic chords across a harmonic progression, immediately unfolding into an agitated melody that keeps unrolling. Suddenly, there is calm and serene music. But this, too, is stabbed with chords of challenge and rumblings of timpani. Beethoven works through and develops this material, with an almost continuous sense of foreboding and energetic conflict. The opening chords return midway, as does the beautiful melody, briefly giving us a sense of safety. The hero's stormy life continues, however, amidst

bursts and stops, soundings and momentary calms. Eventually, the material gathers itself to the opening chords once more — and finally angles downward to a quiet, subdued ending. This hero has split his life between good and bad, but fully accepts the outcome of his fateful choices.

—*program note by* Eric Sellen © 2021

SCORED FOR: *Woodwinds in pairs plus 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, and strings.*

CLEVELAND ORCHESTRA TIMELINE: *The Cleveland Orchestra first played this overture in December 1921, under the direction of founding music director Nikolai Sokoloff. It was most recently performed at Severance Hall in May 2018 as part of the Prometheus Project, conducted by Franz Wesler-Möst.*

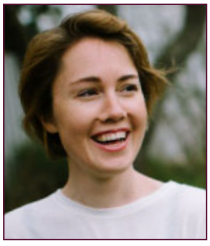
Watermark

by **Caroline Shaw** (b. 1982)

Composed: 2018-19

Premiere: 2019 by the Seattle Symphony, conducted by Ludovic Morlot with Jonathan Biss as soloist

Duration: about 25 minutes



IN 2015, pianist Jonathan Biss and the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra launched an ambitious commissioning project called *Beethoven/5*. Linking past and present, the project tapped a contemporary composer to create a new piano concerto inspired by each of Beethoven's five.

"Beethoven's music has been an obsession for as long as I can remember," says Biss. *"Working on it has been a constant source of joy, inspiration, and frustration. In this, I'm joined by most musicians I know, regardless of age, training, or background. That is why the idea of asking five very different composers to write a piece that, in some way, responds to Beethoven, is so exciting to me: each of them will have a relationship with him that is unique and intense, and these five works should constitute a significant and varied addition to the concerto repertoire. Beethoven's own five concerti cover a huge amount of formal and emotional territory. I'm sure that these new works will as well, and I'm incredibly excited to discover them."*

American composer Caroline Shaw drew Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto as her point of entry to the project. Shaw burst on the scene with her wildly inventive *Partita for 8 Voices*, written for her vocal ensemble, Roomful of Teeth. That piece won the 2013 Pultizer Prize for Music and also caught the attention of Biss (along with musicians from Renee Fleming to Kanye West, the Los Angeles Philharmonic to the indie rock bands The National and Arcade Fire).

In *Watermark*, Shaw combines elements of *Partita* that drew Biss to her music as she unpacks the 1803 original. Both Shaw and Biss have described sections of the work as an emulation of the writing process — kernels of musical threads arise, evolve, and are polished into complete phrases. Shaw writes in her own words:

"Watermark *is woven from strands and patches and patterns of Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto, Opus 37. At times the connection is direct, as when the end of the first movement morphs into the final bars of Beethoven's own race to the cadence. At other points there is a more oblique and subtle kind of illumination of Beethoven's approach to serenity and tragedy, in the mirroring of Opus 37's harmonic shifts and textures. Throughout the writing process, I was always inspired by Jonathan Biss's artistry, listening constantly to his recordings of the Beethoven Sonatas and other works, and to his wise insight into this music. The title,* Watermark, *refers in one sense to the research done (by musicologist Alan Tyson) on Beethoven's manuscript paper to determine the dates of composition for Opus 37, and more broadly to the notion of the origin of a document being expressed and embedded in subtle ways, like fragments of older language peeking through a palimpsest."*

SCORED FOR: *Solo piano, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, clarinet, bass clarinet, bassoon, contrabassoon, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, percussion, strings.*

CLEVELAND ORCHESTRA TIMELINE: *This evening's performance of* Watermark *marks The Cleveland Orchestra premiere.*

Enigma Variations, Opus 36
(Variations on an Original Theme)

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

Composed: 1898-99

Premiered: June 19, 1899, at St. James's Hall in London, under the direction of Hans Richter

Duration: about 30 minutes

ELGAR'S *Variations on an Original Theme* is the work that — almost overnight — made the 42-year-old into a famous composer. At the premiere in 1899, the work was greeted as the greatest composition for large orchestra ever written by an Englishman. And, for more than a century now, audiences have delighted in what Elgar wrote. They have been equally intrigued by what he withheld — a secret that he refused to divulge beyond some carefully worded "enigmatic" clues.

The story of the *Enigma Variations* began one night late in 1898 when Elgar was improvising at the piano at home in Worcestershire. His wife, Alice, was struck by a particular melody and asked her husband what it was. Elgar replied: "Nothing — but something could be made of it." As he continued to develop his short theme, Elgar started to toy with the idea of how it could be made to reflect the personalities of some of his friends. Out of this private little game grew what is arguably Elgar's greatest masterpiece.

On October 24, 1898, Elgar announced his new work in a letter to his close friend August Jaeger (who is depicted as "Nimrod" in Variation 9): *"Since I've been back I have sketched a set of Variations (orkestry) on an original theme: the Variations have amused me because I've labelled 'em with the nicknames of my particular friends — you are Nimrod. That is to say I've written the variations each one to represent the mood of the 'party' — I've liked to imagine the 'party' writing the var; him (or her)self & have written what I think they wd. have written — if they were asses enough to compose — it's a quaint idee & the result is amusing to those behind the scenes & won't affect the hearer who 'nose nuffin': What think you?"*

With one exception, each of the fourteen variations that follow the theme is preceded by a heading that specifies the person behind the music. Although

Elgar only wrote out monograms for each in the score, he quickly enough admitted who was who — and at various times openly commented about each person's musical portrait. The names of all but one of the movements had been identified publicly soon after the premiere.

At the first performance, the "anonymous" exception (Variation 13, or XIII) helped to reinforce the "enigmatic" nature of the overall work. Even more mysterious, however, were the implications of a statement Elgar made at the time of the premiere: *"The Enigma itself I will not explain — its 'dark saying' must be left unguessed, and I warn you that the apparent connection between the Variations and the Theme is often of the slightest texture; further, through and over the whole set another and larger theme 'goes,' but is not played. . . . So the principal Theme never appears."*

THE MUSIC IN DETAIL

Before considering possible answers to the Enigma itself, let's walk through the theme and variations themselves and visit Elgar's "friends pictured within" — outlined in below. All quotes are by Elgar himself (unless indicated otherwise):

The Theme (Andante, G minor, 4/4) consists of two ideas: an expressive string melody that is constantly interrupted by rests on the downbeat (and that fits the words "Edward Elgar" surprisingly well), and a second melody that is more continuous, and is built of parallel thirds played by strings and woodwinds.

Variation 1. "C.A.E." (L'istesso tempo ["the same tempo"], G minor, 4/4) is a portrait of Caroline Alice Elgar, the composer's wife. *"The variation is really a prolongation of the theme with what I wished to be romantic and delicate additions; those who know C.A.E. will understand this reference to one whose life was a romantic and delicate inspiration."* The little motif played by oboes and bassoons that acts as a counterpoint of sorts to the main theme was the signal Elgar used to whistle to let Alice know that he was home.

Variation 2. "H.D.S-P." (Allegro, G minor, 3/8). Hew David Steuart-Powell was a pianist and Elgar's chamber music partner. *"His characteristic diatonic run over the keys . . . is here humorously travestied in the semiquaver [sixteenth-note] passages; these should suggest a Toccata, but chromatic beyond H.D.S-P.'s liking."* The violins and woodwind instruments play the humorous sixteenth notes, while the main theme appears in the cellos and basses.

Variation 3. "R.B.T." (Allegretto, G major, 3/8). Richard Baxter Townshend, a writer and scholar who lived in Oxford, used to ride his tricycle around town with the bell constantly ringing. (He had a hearing problem.) He also participated in amateur theatrical performances, and the oboe solo in the variation is supposed to represent him as his voice occasionally cracked. In her book *Memories of a*

Variation, Dora Penny (see Variation 10), who later became Mrs. Richard Powell, wrote: *"Elgar has got him with his funny voice and manner — and the tricycle! It is all there and is just a huge joke to anyone who knew him well."*

Variation 4. "W.M.B." (Allegro di molto, G minor, 3/4). William Meath Baker was *"a country squire, gentleman and scholar. In the days of horses and carriages it was more difficult than in these days of petrol to arrange the carriages for the day to suit a large number of guests. This Variation was written after the host had, with a slip of paper in his hand, forcibly read out the arrangements for the day and hurriedly left the music-room with an inadvertent bang of the door."* This boisterous variation, lasting less than half a minute, is the shortest in the set.

Variation 5. "R.P.A." (Moderato, C minor, 12/8). Richard Penrose Arnold, son of the poet Matthew Arnold, was *"a great lover of music which he played (on the piano-forte) in a self-taught manner, evading difficulties but suggesting in a mysterious way the real feeling. His serious conversation was continually broken up by whimsical and witty remarks."* According to Mrs. Powell, the staccato (short-note) figure in the woodwinds represents his characteristic laugh. Thus far, this is the longest and most elaborate of the variations.

Variation 6. "Ysobel" (Andantino, C major, 3/2). Isabel Fitton was a viola player — hence the special treatment of the viola in this variation, both as a section and as a solo instrument. *"The opening bar, a phrase made use of throughout the variation, is an 'exercise' for crossing the strings — a difficulty for beginners; on this is built a pensive, and for a moment, romantic movement."* Isabel was quite tall, a circumstance suggested by the wide leaps in the melody.

Variation 7. "Troyte" (Presto, C major, 1/1 [i.e. a single beat per bar]). Arthur Troyte Griffith was an architect and a close friend of Elgar's. *"The uncouth rhythm of the drums and lower strings was really suggested by some maladroit essays to play the pianoforte; later the strong rhythm suggests the attempts of the instructor (E.E.) to make something like order out of chaos, and the final despairing 'slam' records that the effort proved to be in vain."* The "uncouth rhythm" is, in fact, a combination of triple meter in the bass with duple in the upper voices.

Variation 8. "W.N." (Allegretto, G major, 6/8). The initials stand for Winifred Norbury, but the variation was inspired more by the 18th-century house where this lady (co-secretary of the Worcestershire Philharmonic Society) lived — in the words of musicologist Julian Rushton, the *"epitome of an ideal civilisation in a rural environment."* The theme is played by the clarinets.

Variation 9. "Nimrod" (Adagio, E-flat major, 3/4). This is the most famous variation in the set, often performed separately in England as a memorial to deceased celebrities. "Nimrod" was August Jaeger, a German-born musician and Elgar's closest friend. He worked for Novello, the publisher of Elgar's music, and

was the recipient of the composer's above-quoted letter announcing the Variations as a work in progress. (Jäger or Jaeger means "hunter" in German, and Nimrod is the "mighty hunter" mentioned in Genesis 10:9.) Here, Elgar took the rests out of the original theme and created a hymn-like, soaring melody with a certain Beethovenian quality. Elgar and Jaeger shared a special love for Beethoven.

Variation 10. "Dorabella" (Intermezzo: Allegretto, G major, 3/4). Dora Penny was a young woman in her early twenties, to whom Elgar gave an affectionate nickname taken from Mozart's opera *Così fan tutte*. She later recollected the day he played through the entire work for her: *"My mind was in such a whirl of pleasure, pride and almost shame that he should have written anything so lovely about me."* This movement is less a "variation" strictly speaking than a lyrical intermezzo; its melody is only very distantly related to the original theme.

Variation 11. "G.R.S." (Allegro di molto, G minor, 2/2). George Robertson Sinclair was organist of Hereford Cathedral. *"The first few bars were suggested by his great bulldog Dan (a well-known character) falling down the steep bank into the River Wye (bar 1); his paddling up stream to find a landing place (bars 2 and 3); and his rejoicing bark on landing (second half of bar 5). G.R.S. said 'set that to music'."*

Variation 12. "B.G.N." (Andante, G minor, 4/4). Basil Nevinson was a cellist who, with Steuart-Powell (Variation 2), often played trios with Elgar, a violinist. This is why in this variation the melody is entrusted to a solo cello, in *"tribute to a very dear friend whose scientific and artistic attainments, and the wholehearted way they were put at the disposal of his friends, particularly endeared him to the writer.*

Variation 13. "*"** (Romanza: Moderato, G major, 4/4). The identity of the person behind the asterisks is the first, and smaller, enigma in Elgar's work. Elgar himself only said that the *"asterisks take the place of the name of a lady who was, at the time of the composition, on a sea voyage. The drums suggest the distant throb of the engines of a liner . . ."* Because some early manuscript sketches include the initials L.M.L., it is often assumed to refer to Lady Mary Lygon, an acquaintance of Elgar's, but several people who knew Elgar intimated that the variation had to do instead with a youthful "romanza" of the composer's. The music is lyrical and gentle and is only tenuously related to the theme, if at all. Included is a quote from Mendelssohn's *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*, played by the first clarinet.

Variation 14. "E.D.U." (Finale: Allegro Presto, G major, 4/4). "Edu" was the nickname Alice Elgar had given to her husband, who disguised it as a set of initials to camouflage the fact that the last variation was a self-portrait. The theme is turned here into a march with a sharp rhythmic profile. There are two slower, lyrical episodes, and then the work ends in a grandly magnificent climax.

—program note by Peter Laki © The Cleveland Orchestra

Vinay Parameswaran

Associate Conductor, Elizabeth Ring and William Gwinn Mather Endowed Chair
The Cleveland Orchestra

Music Director
Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra

The 2021-22 season will mark Vinay Parameswaran's fifth year as a member of The Cleveland Orchestra's conducting staff. He came to Cleveland following three seasons as associate conductor of the Nashville Symphony (2014-2017), where he led over 150 performances. In the summer of 2017, he was a Conducting Fellow at the Tanglewood Music Center.

Recent seasons have included Mr. Parameswaran making his guest conducting debuts with the Rochester Philharmonic and the Tucson Symphony, and also making his subscription debut with the Nashville Symphony.

A native of the San Francisco Bay Area, Vinay Parameswaran played percussion for six years in the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra. He holds a bachelor of arts degree in music and political science from Brown University, where he began his conducting studies. He received a diploma from Philadephia's Curtis Institute of Music.

Jonathan Biss

Pianist Jonathan Biss channels his deep musical curiosity into performances and projects in the concert hall and beyond. In addition to performing with today's leading orchestras, he is a teacher, musical thinker, and one of the great Beethoven interpreters of our time. He was recently named co-artistic director of the Marlboro Music Festival and also leads an ambitious open online course, *Exploring Beethoven's Piano Sonatas*, which has reached more than 150,000 people globally.

In 2020, in conjunction with the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth, Mr. Biss released recordings of the composer's complete piano sonatas. During the 2019–20 season, he performed a series of recitals of these works throughout Europe and the United States, as well as a virtual recital at New York's 92nd Street Y for an online audience of nearly 300,000.

Additionally, Mr. Biss performed Beethoven's "Emperor" Concerto worldwide last season, including in concerts at Carnegie Hall and in Philadelphia's Kimmel Center.

Piano by Steinway & Sons.

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