

25 & 26 October 2024

# ELGAR'S ENIGMA VARIATIONS



Presenting Partner



«SYDNEY»  
«SYMPHONY»  
«ORCHESTRA»

Principal Partner



# SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

**PATRON** Her Excellency The Honourable Margaret Beazley AC KC

Founded in 1932 by the Australian Broadcasting Commission, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra has evolved into one of the world's finest orchestras as Sydney has become one of the world's great cities. Resident at the iconic Sydney Opera House, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra also performs in venues throughout Sydney and regional New South Wales, and international tours to Europe, Asia and the USA have earned the Orchestra worldwide recognition for artistic excellence.

The Orchestra's first chief conductor was Sir Eugene Goossens, appointed in 1947; he was followed by Nicolai Malko, Dean Dixon, Moshe Atzmon, Willem van Otterloo, Louis Frémaux, Sir Charles Mackerras, Zdeněk Mácal, Stuart Challender, Edo de Waart and Gianluigi Gelmetti. Vladimir Ashkenazy was Principal Conductor from 2009 to 2013, followed by David Robertson as Chief Conductor from 2014 to 2019. Australian-born Simone Young commenced her role as Chief Conductor in 2022, a year in which the Orchestra made its return to a renewed Sydney Opera House Concert Hall. The Sydney Symphony Orchestra's concerts encompass masterpieces from the classical repertoire, music by some of the finest living composers, and collaborations with guest artists from all genres, reflecting the Orchestra's versatility and diverse appeal. Its award-winning education program is central to its commitment to the future of live symphonic music, and the Orchestra promotes the work of Australian composers through performances, recordings and its commissioning program.

## PERFORMING IN THIS CONCERT

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### FIRST VIOLINS

**Lerida Delbridge**

*Assistant Concertmaster*

**Fiona Ziegler**

*Assistant Concertmaster*

Sophie Cole  
Seraan Danis  
Claire Herrick  
Georges Lentz  
Emily Long  
Alexandra Mitchell  
Alexander Norton  
Léone Ziegler  
Robert Smith<sup>o</sup>  
Benjamin Tjoa<sup>o</sup>  
Tamara Elias\*  
Thibaud Pavlovic-  
Hobba\*  
Theonie Wang<sup>^</sup>

### SECOND VIOLINS

**Kirsty Hilton**

*Principal*

**Marina Marsden**

*Principal*

**Emma Jezek**

*Assistant Principal*

**Victoria Bihun**

*Acting Assistant Principal*

Alice Bartsch  
Emma Hayes  
Shuti Huang  
Monique Irik  
Wendy Kong  
Benjamin Li  
Nicole Masters  
Maja Verunica  
Emily Qin<sup>o</sup>  
Riikka Sintonen<sup>o</sup>  
Mia Stanton\*  
Lili Stephens<sup>^</sup>

### VIOLAS

**Richard Waters<sup>o</sup>**

*Principal*

**Justin Williams**

*Assistant Principal*

Sandro Costantino  
Rosemary Curtin  
Jane Hazelwood  
Stuart Johnson  
Justine Marsden  
Felicity Tsai  
Leonid Volovelsky  
Stephen Wright<sup>o</sup>  
Andrew Jezek<sup>o</sup>  
David Wicks\*  
Sebastian Coyne<sup>^</sup>

### CELLOS

**Catherine Hewgill**

*Principal*

**Kaori Yamagami**

*Principal*

**Simon Cobcroft**

*Associate Principal*

**Leah Lynn**

*Assistant Principal*

Kristy Conrau  
Fenella Gill  
Timothy Nankervis  
Elizabeth Neville  
Christopher Pidcock  
Adrian Wallis  
Noah Lawrence<sup>^</sup>

### DOUBLE BASSES

**Kees Boersma**

*Principal*

**Alex Henery**

*Principal*

David Campbell  
Dylan Holly  
Steven Larson  
Richard Lynn  
Jaan Pallandi  
Benjamin Ward  
Rio Kawaguchi<sup>^</sup>

### FLUTES

**Emma Sholl**

*Acting Principal*

Carolyn Harris

**Jérémie Abergel\***

*Guest Principal Piccolo*

### OBOES

**Robert Orr\***

*Guest Principal*

**Alexandre Oguey**

*Principal Cor Anglais*

### CLARINETS

**Francesco Celata**

*Acting Principal*

Christopher Tingay

### BASSOONS

**Matt Ockenden\***

*Guest Principal*

Fiona McNamara

**Noriko Shimada**

*Principal Contrabassoon*

### HORNS

**Samuel Jacobs**

*Principal*

**Euan Harvey**

*Acting Principal*

Rachel Silver  
Joshua Davies\*

### TRUMPETS

**Brent Grapes**

*Associate Principal*

Cécile Glémot

Anthony Heinrichs

### TROMBONES

**Scott Kinmont**

*Acting Principal*

Nick Byrne

**Christopher Harris**

*Principal Bass Trombone*

### TUBA

**Steve Rossé**

*Principal*

### TIMPANI

**Antoine Siguré**

*Principal*

### PERCUSSION

**Rebecca Lagos**

*Principal*

**Mark Robinson**

*Associate Principal Timpani*

*/ Section Percussion*

Timothy Constable

### HARP

**Louisic Dulbecco**

*Principal*

### ORGAN

**David Drury\***

*Guest Principal*

**Bold** Principal

\* Guest Musician

<sup>o</sup> Contract Musician

<sup>†</sup> Sydney Symphony  
Fellow

<sup>^</sup> Australian Youth  
Orchestra Musician

# 2024 CONCERT SEASON

## Royal Caribbean Classics Under the Sails

Friday 25 October, 7pm  
Saturday 26 October, 7pm

Concert Hall,  
Sydney Opera House

# ELGAR'S ENIGMA VARIATIONS

## EXPRESSIVE BRILLIANCE

**NICOLAS ELLIS** conductor  
**NOBUYUKI TSUJII** piano

**JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH** (1685-1750)  
**ARR. ANDREW DAVIS** (1944-2024)  
**Passacaglia and Fugue, BWV582** (1708)

**SERGEI RACHMANINOV** (1873-1943)  
**Piano Concerto No.3 in D minor, Op.30** (1909)  
i. Allegro ma non tanto  
ii. Intermezzo (Adagio) –  
iii. Finale (Alla breve)

INTERVAL

**EDWARD ELGAR** (1857-1934)  
**Variations on an Original Theme, Op.36 Enigma**

- i. Theme (Enigma)
- ii. Variation 1 (CAE)
- iii. Variation 2 (HDS-P)
- iv. Variation 3 (RBT)
- v. Variation 4 (WMB)
- vi. Variation 5 (RPA)
- vii. Variation 6 (Ysobel)
- viii. Variation 7 (Troyte)
- ix. Variation 8 (WN)
- x. Variation 9 (Nimrod)
- xi. Variation 10: Intermezzo (Dorabella)
- xii. Variation 11 (GRS)
- xiii. Variation 12 (BGN)
- xiv. Variation 13: Romanza (\*\*\*)
- xv. Variation 14: Finale (EDU)

### Pre-concert talk

By Alastair McKean in the  
Northern Foyer at 6.15pm.

### Estimated durations

Bach – 11 minutes  
Rachmaninov – 40 minutes  
Interval – 20 minutes  
Elgar – 30 minutes

The concert will run for  
approximately two hours

### Cover image

By Craig Abercrombie

These performances were originally advertised as being conducted by Sir Andrew Davis, who sadly passed away in April 2024. We are grateful to Canadian conductor Nicolas Ellis, who will lead these performances in his Sydney Symphony Orchestra debut.

In celebration and memory of Sir Andrew Davis, we will perform Sir Andrew's own arrangement of JS Bach's Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor.

Presenting Partner



Principal Partner





# WELCOME

Welcome to **Elgar's Enigma Variations**, a performance in *the Classics Under the Sails Series*.

As the Presenting Partner of the *Classics Under the Sails Series*, we are delighted to be bringing audiences the opportunity to hear classical music's greatest works performed by the world's leading artists.

Described by *Gramophone* magazine as 'a stunningly gifted pianist', Nobuyuki Tsujii is a brilliant musician who has been blind since birth. With his signature style and élan, his performances of Rachmaninov's most famous concerto are legendary.

Elgar's *Enigma Variations* is one of the most-loved works in the English orchestral music canon. Begun almost by accident, it was the music that firmly and finally established Elgar's reputation at the highest level.

While each variation is composed with a friend in mind, its central enigma is less a puzzle to be solved and more, as Elgar put it, a 'dark saying [that] must be left unguessed', akin to a main character that never appears, expressing the 'nothingness' from which it arose. Regardless of its origins, this is a swelling and majestic work, rich in harmony and meaning.

Tonight's concert opens with JS Bach's Passacaglia and Fugue BWV582. Like Elgar's work it features a theme followed by 20 variations, variations that the composer Robert Schumann once described as 'intertwined so ingeniously that one can never cease to be amazed.'

The Sydney Symphony's performance of these works invites us all to consider memorable journeys and new vistas – something we at Royal Caribbean also aspire to do.

When in port, our award-winning ships are a feature of the stunning backdrop of Sydney Harbour, an iconic scene shared by the equally emblematic Sydney Symphony.

Royal Caribbean are immensely proud of our partnership with the Orchestra. With an unwavering focus on creating exceptional experiences, both Royal Caribbean and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra share a deep and longstanding commitment to excellence in all that we do.

I hope you enjoy these performances of **Elgar's Enigma Variations**, one of five extraordinary concerts in the 2024 *Classics Under the Sails Series*.



**Gavin Smith,**  
Vice President & Managing Director  
Royal Caribbean





# IN MEMORIAM



Photo by Dario Acosta

## SIR ANDREW DAVIS

**All of us at the Sydney Symphony Orchestra were greatly saddened by the death of renowned British conductor Sir Andrew Davis, who passed away in April 2024.**

A tremendous musician and a man of great warmth and humour, Sir Andrew's career spanned more than 50 years, during which he led several of the world's most distinguished musical institutions. Best known in Australia as Chief Conductor of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra from 2013–2019, and subsequently honoured as their Conductor Laureate, he also led Lyric Opera of Chicago (Music Director Emeritus; Music Director/Principal Conductor, 2000–2021), BBC Symphony Orchestra (Conductor Laureate; Chief Conductor, 1989–2000), Glyndebourne Festival Opera (Music Director, 1988–2000), Toronto Symphony Orchestra (Conductor Laureate; Principal Conductor, 1975–1988) and held the honorary title of Conductor Emeritus from the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra.

The Sydney Symphony had been eagerly looking forward to these performances, which were to be Sir Andrew's debut with the Orchestra; somehow, schedules had never aligned to bring him to Sydney. But of course he had friendships with many across our company and his death is deeply felt across the world of music.

We are grateful to Canadian conductor Nicolas Ellis, who will lead these performances in his Sydney Symphony Orchestra debut. And in celebration of Sir Andrew, we will perform his own arrangement of JS Bach's Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor.

Our thoughts are with Sir Andrew's family and colleagues around the world.

# YOUR CONCERT AT A GLANCE

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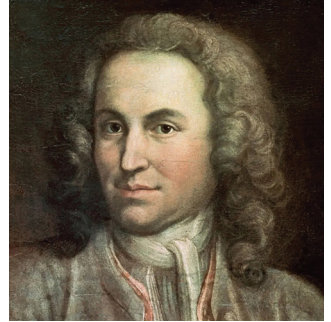
**JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH** (1685-1750)

**ARR. ANDREW DAVIS** (1944–2024)

Passacaglia and Fugue, BWV582

Bach's early work is an 11-minute tour de force of elaboration – over a simple bass line (a 'ground') heard in the cellos and piano he writes 20 variations. Andrew Davis orchestrated the piece in 2004; the fugue is a breathtaking piece of counterpoint, using the ground as one of its themes.

The earliest copy of the music (not in Bach's hand) suggests it might have been written in 1708, the year that Peter the Great foiled a Swedish invasion of Russia; Dresden china was invented; the Japanese Imperial Palace in Kyoto was destroyed by fire.



JS Bach as a young man

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**SERGEI RACHMANINOV** (1873 –1943)

**Piano Concerto No.3 in D minor, Op.30**

'The Rach Three' is work of legendary difficulty – not merely because of its technical challenges but because of its intense emotional states. In three substantial movements, it begins with the apparent simplicity of folk music reaching its first movement climax in a brilliant cadenza for solo piano. The slow movement is almost unbearably tragic, but bursts into the energetic finale without a break, but with a reminiscence of the opening.

It was composed in Russia and performed in the USA in 1909, the year that Bakelite was invented and Balmain forfeited the NSWRL Grand Final to South Sydney.

Contemporary music included Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Golden Cockerel*; Richard Strauss' *Elektra*; Webern's Five movements for String Quartet.



Rachmaninov in 1906

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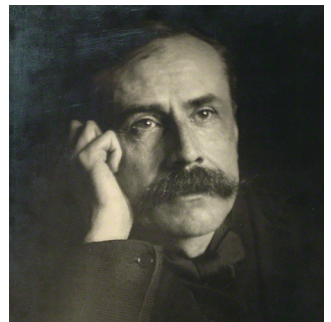
**EDWARD ELGAR** (1857–1934)

**Variations on an Original Theme, Op.36 *Enigma*** (1899)

Elgar's breakthrough work was composed when he was in early middle age and despairing at his prospects. The *Enigma Variations* proved an instant hit, with its 24 musical portraits – mostly loving, but often poking gentle fun – of people (and a dog) close to the composer. The enigma of the title is just what the musical theme is: Elgar suggested it was itself a variation on a well-known tune, but refused to say what.

It was completed and premiered in 1899, the year that the second Boer War began; Ferdinand Porsche's first car win the Berlin Road Race; an electric tram along George Street Sydney links Central and Circular Quay.

Contemporary music included Amy Beach's Piano Concerto; Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht*; Sibelius' First Symphony.



Edward Elgar c. 1903. Photo by Charles Frederick Grindrod (1847–1910).

# ABOUT THE ARTISTS

## **NICOLAS ELLIS** conductor

Nicolas Ellis is Music Director of the Orchestre National de Bretagne, Principal Guest Conductor of Les Violons du Roy, as well as Artistic Director and Conductor of the Orchestre de l'Agora, which he founded in Montreal in 2013.

The 2024/25 season sees Nicolas take up his role at Orchestre National de Bretagne, and his inaugural season includes repertoire from JS Bach, Vivaldi and Schubert to Dvořák, Rimsky-Korsakov and Ravel. In addition to his performances in France, he'll make debuts with the Luxembourg Philharmonic, Tampere Philharmonic and Sydney Symphony Orchestra. He returns to the Orchestre Métropolitain (where he previously held the title of Artistic Partner). Last season included his debuts with the San Diego Symphony and the Vancouver Symphony Orchestras.

Known for his versatility in a vast repertoire, Nicolas has distinguished himself with the Orchestre de l'Agora by the conception of concerts with a dramaturgical approach. In collaboration with the Opéra de Montréal, the Agora has presented a number of opera projects in atypical venues in Montreal, including *The Turn of the Screw* which took place in an industrial warehouse, and *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges* presented at the Théâtre le Paradoxe, a church converted into a performance space that offers arts training to marginalized youths. In addition, concerts such as *Electra and Iphigenia* featuring the music of Mozart, Gluck and Haydn with soprano Karina Gauvin, and *Bach, le voyage éphémère*, used unique lighting effects to create immersive musical experiences for a wide variety of audiences.

Alongside the Orchestre de l'Agora, Nicolas won a JUNO Award in the Classical Album of the Year, Large Ensemble category for the album *Viola Borealis* featuring violist Marina Thibeault. Agora also won the Opus Prize for Musical Event of the Year for the

*Gala de la Terre* featuring Mahler's Third Symphony, a major fundraising event for several environmental organizations. The eclecticism of Agora's repertoire as well as the talent and curiosity of its musicians constitute the core of the ensemble's artistic identity, as demonstrated by its recent critically acclaimed productions of Monteverdi's *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* and the contemporary music showcase titled *Big Bang*.

Among the musical encounters and projects that have strongly influenced him are his former position as Artistic Collaborator of the Orchestre Métropolitain and Yannick Nézet-Séguin from 2018 to 2023, and his role as assistant conductor to Raphaël Pichon and the Ensemble Pygmalion in opera productions at the Opéra comique, the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, and the Salzburg Festival.

Nicolas Ellis was the recipient of the 2017 Fernand Lindsay Career Grant and has also been awarded the Prix Goyer Mécénat Musica 2021.



Photo by Maxime Girard-Tremblay.



# ABOUT THE ARTISTS

## **NOBUYUKI TSUJII** piano

Described by *The Observer* as the ‘definition of virtuosity’ Japanese pianist Nobuyuki Tsujii (Nobu), who has been blind from birth, won the joint Gold Medal at the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition in 2009 and has gone on to earn an international reputation for the passion and excitement he brings to his live performances.

Nobu’s 2024/25 season opened with an extensive concert tour of Japan with Robin Ticciati and London Philharmonic Orchestra. This was closely followed by a solo appearance with Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra and a tour of Australia encompassing concertos with the Sydney, Queensland and Tasmanian symphony orchestras, and recitals at Melbourne Recital Centre and UKARIA.

Earlier seasons have seen Nobu appear with leading orchestras including Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Hollywood Bowl, Philharmonia Orchestra, NHK Symphony, Seattle and Baltimore symphony orchestras, Münchner Philharmoniker, Filarmonica della Scala, Tonkünstler-Orchester Niederösterreich at the Wiener Musikverein, Sinfonieorchester Basel, Orchestra Sinfonica di Milano Giuseppe Verdi and Hong Kong Philharmonic. He maintains a close relationship with Domingo Hindoyan and Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, with whom he performed a sold-out concert at the Royal Albert Hall as part of the BBC Proms in 2023.

An exclusive recording artist for Avex Classics International, Nobu’s growing album catalogue encompasses the breadth of the piano concerto repertoire. It currently includes Chopin’s Piano Concerto No.2 with Vladimir Ashkenazy and Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, Grieg’s Piano Concerto and Rachmaninov’s *Variations on a theme of Paganini* under Vasily Petrenko with Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, Rachmaninov’s Piano Concerto

No.2 with Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto No.1 with Yutaka Sado and BBC Philharmonic, Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No.5 with Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. Nobu has also recorded several recital programs of Chopin, Mozart, Debussy and Liszt.

A live DVD recording of Nobu’s 2011 Carnegie Hall recital was named DVD of the Month by *Gramophone*, as was his latest DVD release, ‘Touching the Sound – The Improbable Journey of Nobuyuki Tsujii’, a documentary film by Peter Rosen.

Nobu’s international tours are supported by All Nippon Airways (ANA) and he gratefully acknowledges their assistance.



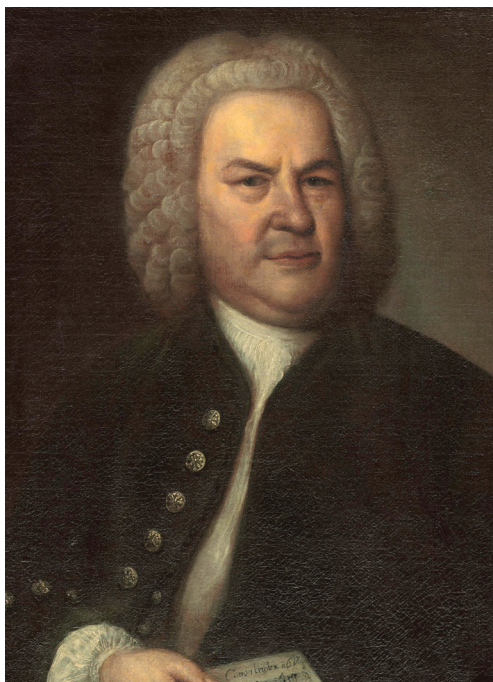
Photo by Giorgia Bertazzi

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## WHO WAS JS BACH?

Sebastian Bach was orphaned before his tenth birthday and was brought up by a much older brother, Johann Christoph, who was organist in the small Thuringian town of Ohrdruf. It is generally agreed that Christoph 'laid the foundation' for Sebastian's keyboard technique, and for his intense interest in the construction of keyboard instruments, especially the organ. His first job as a musician, though, was as a violinist in the orchestra of the Duke of Weimar for six months in 1703, and returned to the Weimar court some years later serving as chamber musician and organist from 1708 to 1717. In the interim he held a series of organist positions in towns such as Arnstadt and Mühlhausen, but in 1717 entered the employment of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Köthen. This was possibly the happiest period of Bach's life, though he was devastated at the death of his first wife Maria Barbara, but soon married Anna Magdalena Wilcke, a fine musician herself. The Prince had been raised a Calvinist so required no music for his chapel, but maintained a distinguished music staff for whom Bach wrote some of his most important instrumental music.

With the Prince's marriage to an unmusical bride, Bach left and took up employment in the city of Leipzig where he would spend the 27 years until his death in 1750. He was Cantor of the Thomasschule, training the students to provide music at the city's two main churches. This period saw the composition of the bulk of his surviving church music, notably cantatas for regular Sunday use and larger works like the St Matthew and St John Passions for Eastertide. But Bach also cultivated instrumental works, taking over the directorship of the local Collegium musicum (a pro-am orchestra founded by the composer Telemann) for which a number of larger scale pieces, some for visiting soloists keen to work with Bach, were doubtless written.



Portrait of JS Bach painted in 1947 by German painter Elias Gottlob Haussmann (1695–1774)

Bach's innovations included his development of the keyboard concerto – often based on works (by himself or other composers like Vivaldi) for single-line instruments. The 48 Preludes and fugues of *The Well-tempered Clavier* explored, probably for the first time, the use of all possible keys, and works like *The Art of Fugue* (not Bach's title) or the B-minor Mass are mind-blowing compendiums of technical and structural ingenuity.

## Passacaglia and Fugue, BWV582

In 1708 Bach entered the service of Wilhelm, Duke of Weimar, initially as Court Organist, though he was promoted to *Konzertmeister* in 1714. It is from the first part of this period (1708–12) that, most scholars agree, the bulk of Bach's organ music dates. That is certainly the consensus about the Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor, though some have argued that the piece may have been written for pedal harpsichord, rather than organ: Malcolm Boyd has noted

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

that certain sections of the work ‘seem more idiomatic to a stringed keyboard instrument than to the organ’.

Be that as it may, the piece remains one of the most intricate and fascinating of Bach’s ‘free-standing’ works and has therefore, unsurprisingly, attracted the interest of conductor-arrangers such as Respighi, Stokowski and Ormandy.

The passacaglia section is a substantial set of 20 variations over a repeating eight-bar pattern of notes that is stated first by the pedals alone. (There are thus 21 statements of it, and scholars have noted that 21 is a product of two sacred numbers, 3 and 7.) This pattern, or ground, appears in each of the subsequent variations – usually, though not always, in the bass. The organ (and for that matter, the harpsichord) can only increase volume by the addition of notes (unlike the piano where the force of the player’s attack determines the dynamics), so Bach moves from simple to more complex and textures by the superimposition of ever more intricate lines and, we can assume, the addition of organ stops for extra weight and brightness. The particular power of Bach’s climaxes tends to support the theory that the work was composed for organ. It is, moreover, likely that Bach was influenced to write such a work by certain chaconnes (pieces also based on a repeating ground) for organ by Dietrich Buxtehude, the Danish composer revered so much by Bach that he went AWOL in 1705 to spend time in Lübeck and hear Buxtehude play. Bach may also have known a 1698 passacaglia of Johann Krieger which has 29 variations over an eight-bar ground.

The Passacaglia’s trajectory is not, simply, from simple to complex music though; it reaches a climax at the end of the twelfth and fifteenth variations, ‘retreats’ into relative simplicity and gathers strength again. Bach then outdoes himself by

concluding with a double fugue, based on the notes of the first half of the passacaglia ground, a unique of example of unity between companion pieces in the composer’s output.

A former organist and now preeminent conductor, Andrew Davis was well placed to make his orchestral version of the piece in 2004. The score requires triple winds (with doubling such as piccolo and alto flute, cor anglais, E-flat and bass clarinets and contrabassoon, standard brass and string sections, and both piano and harp joining the percussion). The piano is used to striking effect in the opening announcement of the ground, where it gives a terse attack to each note, which is then sustained softly, as if resonating in a large space, by the cellos. Davis never overscores, moving gradually through wind and brass textures – the latter often used in exuberant heraldic counterpoint – and, as the piece unfolds, displaying a wide range of instrumental doubling that places different lines in relative relief in passages of intensely complex polyphony. The full tutti makes for thrilling, dramatic climaxes that also articulate the work’s structure.

Sir Andrew Davis’ arrangement of Bach’s Passacaglia and Fugue, BWV582 is scored for three flutes (the second doubling piccolo, the third doubling alto flute), three oboes (the third doubling cor anglais), two clarinets (the second doubling E flat clarinet), bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon; four horns, two trumpets and three trombones; percussion, harp, piano doubling celeste and strings.

This is the first time the Sydney Symphony has performed this arrangement.

**Gordon Kerry © 2012/2024**



# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## WHO WAS SERGEI RACHMANINOV?

Rachmaninov never cut a cheery figure – Stravinsky famously (or maybe Craftily) described his countryman as ‘a six foot three inch scowl’. That Rachmaninov felt his exile keenly is clear, and he only took out US citizenship in the final months of his life despite having lived there from 1918. Even before his departure from Russia, however, his was a temperament given to intense, and often depressive, emotion.

The composer was born on a large estate near Novgorod, but his childhood was marred his father’s alcoholism. Rachmaninov senior drank away the family fortune, and left his family when Sergei was nine years old. Sergei’s mother had to sell the property and move to St Petersburg. His studies were undistinguished there, but in 1885 he moved to Moscow to attend the Conservatory where he studied composition with Tanayev and Arensky. His graduation piece, the opera *Aleko* (performed at the Bolshoi in 1893) earned high praise from Tchaikovsky, but the first of many artistic crises hit with the abject failure of his First Symphony, conducted by Glazunov, in 1897. For three years Rachmaninov was unable to compose, and underwent treatment by the

hypnotist Nikolai Dahl. This was supremely successful: the next year saw the production of two masterpieces of his early maturity, the Piano Concerto No.2 (dedicated to Dahl) and the second Suite for two pianos.

Rachmaninov had left Russia two months after the 1917 revolution. Effectively exiled from his homeland and what remained of his fortune after the revolution, Rachmaninov focused his energies on being a piano virtuoso. Like Grainger and pianists such as Liszt before them, Rachmaninov expanded his recital repertoire with transcriptions of popular vocal or orchestral music.

Rachmaninov’s idiom is steeped in that of Beethoven, Liszt and Chopin. But as recent scholarship has argued, there are ways in which Rachmaninov remains fundamentally Russian: his most characteristic melodies move by step in the manner of Orthodox chant (and this piece was composed at the same time as his magnificent Vespers), and often, his piano figurations ring out like the bells of churches. Russian churches.

## PIANO CONCERTO NO.3

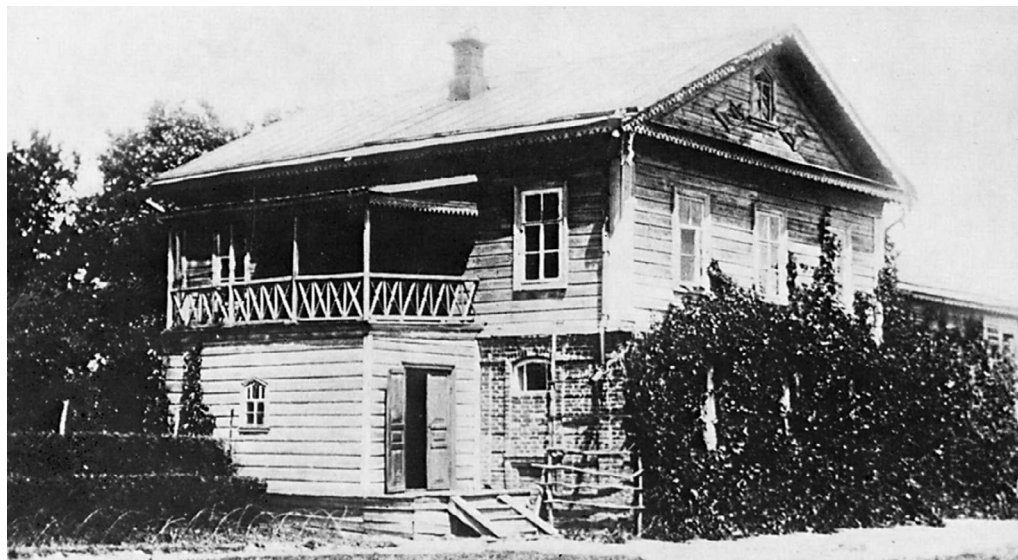
Rachmaninov’s Piano Concerto No.3 was composed at his summer estate at Ivanovka in 1909. He wanted a new concerto for his forthcoming American tour. Not keen on going to America at first, he was persuaded to go when he realised he would make enough money out of America to buy an automobile.

This was a busy period in Rachmaninov’s life, and he was unable to spend much time practising prior to departure. It is extraordinary therefore, considering the difficulties in the solo part (almost mythologised in the movie *Shine*), that he practised much of the piano part on a dumb keyboard aboard ship.



Rachmaninov in 1900

# ABOUT THE MUSIC



The estate at Ivanovka

The work was first performed in New York City under Walter Damrosch that same year; followed, not much later, by a second New York performance under Gustav Mahler, of which Rachmaninov recalled: 'He touched my composer's heart straight away by devoting himself to my concerto until the accompaniment, which is rather complicated, had been practised to the point of perfection...'

This concerto has been described by critic John Culshaw as 'a masterpiece of conciseness'. There are thematic ties between the first and third movements, which may explain why the second movement is labelled *intermezzo*. Much of the melodic material is derived from the opening rhythm (long-short, long-short), played by clarinet and bassoon accompanied by strings, though the concerto lacks none of Rachmaninov's typical lyricism.

The piano enters with a simple melody similar to a chant sung at the Monastery of the Cross at Kiev. The structural subtlety of the work is soon apparent. After a short piano cadenza, a variant of the piano's opening theme is played on bassoons and lower strings.

The woodwinds lead in a new direction and the music builds to a big new theme. This, however, is not the second subject, as we might expect; merely a 'premonition' of future themes, which gradually, building bit by bit, add meaning to the work.

The true second subject soon appears, a characteristically romantic Rachmaninov melody, first introduced very clearly as a variation of the *trochaic* rhythm of the opening. The piano has become more and more dominant and the culmination of the movement is actually to be found in the cadenza. Then, after another straightforward statement of the simple opening piano theme, a sudden ending, almost breathless, promises more.

The second movement begins with some of the saddest music ever to come from a composer whose characteristic mood, even at the best of times, was melancholic. When the piano enters, it gives two versions of its opening theme. The first section builds to an impassioned climax and then slips smoothly into the *scherzo* middle section. This fast section provides some relief from the gloom, but the tragic atmosphere soon returns.

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

The *Finale* breaks in with great urgency. The piano's opening tattoo is derived from the theme of the very opening of the concerto, and Culshaw sees in the linking of the second and third movements further evidence of the tight binding of the concerto. The 'long-short' feel underlies the second subject, which in its melodic shape recalls that theme which has not been heard since the first movement. The largely episodic nature of the development gives the movement a rhapsodic, formless impression. The piano presents two light-hearted versions of its opening melody which strike the listener as diversions from the main thrust of the movement.

Eventually, however, we are shepherded back on track with the return of the opening material from the first movement in the lower strings, joined by a hint of the first movement's second subject. The urgent material and the main tempo of the movement returns, picking up hints of the second subject of this and the first movement in its momentum. The concerto's signature rhythm sounds from the depths of the orchestra, and leads us to a coda in which the 'mystery' theme planted in the first movement finally blooms into a broad romantic statement.

Much is made of the difficulties of this concerto. 'Oh, the Rach Three!', gasps Sir John Gielgud in *Shine*; but the greatness of the concerto lies not merely in its technical hurdles. It lies in the way the material organically grows – and in the way the immense technical challenges never swamp the lyrical purposes of the work.

Rachmaninov's Third Piano Concerto is scored for pairs each of flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons; four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba; timpani, percussion, strings and piano soloist.

It was premiered on 28 November 1909 with the composer as soloist, accompanied by the New York Symphony Society under Walter Damrosch.

The Sydney Symphony first performed the work in November 1941, with Russian-born Australian pianist Alexander Sverjensky conducted by Percy Code. Other notable performances include: William Kapell conducted by Malcolm Sargent (1945); Aleksandr Helmann/Eugene Goossens (1949); Colin Horsley/Goossens (1955); Moura Lympany/Charles Mackerras (1960); Gina Bachauer/Bernard Heinze (1962); Marie Crouch/Charles Mackerras (1963); Jorge Bolet/Paavo Berglund (1965); Vladimir Ashkenazy/Moshe Atzmon (1969); Michele Campanella/Leif Segerstam (1982); Oxana Yablonskaya/Louis Frémaux (1985); Stephen Hough/Vassily Sinaisky (1992); Simon Trpčeski/Alexander Lazarev (2003); Garrick Ohlsson/Ashkenazy (2007); Joyce Yang/Edo de Waart (2011) and Lukáš Vondráček conducted by Alexander Lazarev (2014).

Our most recent performance of the work was in 2017, with Piers Lane conducted by Brett Dean.





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# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## WHO WAS EDWARD ELGAR?

Elgar in some respects rose without a trace, working for many years as a provincial teacher, violinist and organist while composing salon pieces (for which he is still justly admired), music for provincial bands (including one at a lunatic asylum) and that other staple of English concert life: choral music.

Elgar is often imagined as the quintessentially English composer. (The old *Oxford Companion to Music* has a truly awful engraved portrait complete with flannel suit, visor, cigarette holder, huge moustache and King Charles spaniel.) But apart from such things as the *Pomp and Circumstance* marches, Elgar's music is less British Imperial than modern European. The Second Symphony of 1911 is dedicated 'to the late King Edward VII', but is in fact a much more personal essay on a line from Shelley, 'Rarely, rarely com'st thou, Spirit of Delight.'

His 'breakthrough' piece was the *Enigma Variations* which appeared in 1899 and which showed a mature (forty-something) composer with a masterly technique, a full awareness of current European musical thinking and a sense of humour. His innate talent, his experience of working as an

orchestral musician and his interest in the legacy of Wagner's musical language created a style which enabled him to write symphonic works of a quality comparable to those of his continental contemporaries such as Mahler and Richard Strauss. Like them, he was often the 'hero' of his symphonic dramas.

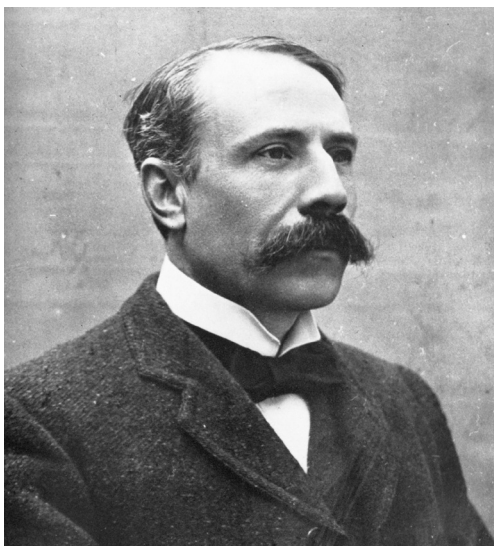
In *The Dream of Gerontius* of 1900, a setting of the long poem of Cardinal Newman, Elgar was also able to re-imagine the oratorio as a cosmic drama of salvation rather than the reflection of the values of empire that it had arguably become. In it, Elgar brought together the large scale planning, the opulent orchestration and erotic chromatic harmony of Wagner's music-dramas. *Gerontius*, a kind of Catholic *Pilgrim's Progress*, was heard in Germany a year after the British premiere; on the strength of a performance there Richard Strauss proclaimed Elgar the 'first English progressivist' and remained a great fan.

Elgar always felt himself to be an outsider – a lower middle-class Catholic from the provinces never entirely comfortable with fame or the honours lavished on him in later life (he was knighted in 1904 and created baronet in 1931). In his Cello Concerto of 1919, the aging composer created an economical, spare and genuinely tragic masterpiece that mourns the world swept away by World War I – even though that world, he felt, had never fully accepted him.

## THE 'ENIGMA' VARIATIONS

In middle-age, Edward Elgar found himself in his native Malvern region, eking out a living as a humble rural music teacher. He took in students, made instrumental arrangements, gave an occasional performance and continually threatened to give away music altogether.

But one evening in October 1898 Elgar began to doodle away at the piano. Chancing upon a brief theme that pleased him, he started imagining his friends confronting the same theme,



Elgar in 1904

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

commenting to his wife, ‘This is how so-and-so would have done it.’ Or he would try to catch another friend’s character in a variation. This harmless bit of fun grew into one of England’s greatest orchestral masterpieces, Elgar’s *Variations on an Original Theme*.

Where the word ‘Theme’ should have appeared in the score, however, Elgar wrote ‘Enigma’. He stated that the theme was a variation on a well-known tune which he refused to identify. It’s a conundrum which has occupied concertgoers and scholars alike ever since. Elgar himself rejected suggestions of *God Save the King* and *Auld Lang Syne*. Other suggestions have included *Rule, Britannia*, an extract from Wagner’s *Parsifal*, and even *Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay*. Another suggestion is that it’s a simple scale, while Michael Kennedy has proposed that the unheard theme could be Elgar himself, with the famous two-quaver two-crotchet motif on which the entire work is based capturing the natural speech rhythm of the name ‘Edward Elgar’. Elgar went to his grave without revealing the truth and no one has come up with the definitive answer.



Caroline Alice ‘Carice’ Elgar



Isabel Fitton

The second enigma was the identity of the characters depicted within each variation, who were identified at first only by their initials in the score. This enigma has proved much easier to solve.

**Variation 1**, which simply elaborates the main violin theme with prominent wind playing, depicts Elgar’s wife, Caroline Alice (‘Carice’). The **second variation** brings the first hint of actual imitation. Pianist HD Steuart-Powell was one of Elgar’s chamber music collaborators, who characteristically played a diatonic run over the keyboard as a warm-up. **Variation 3** depicts the ham actor RB Townshend whose drastic variation in vocal pitch is mocked here.

The Cotswold squire W Meath Baker is the subject of **Variation 4** while the mixture of seriousness and wit displayed by the poet Matthew Arnold’s son Richard is captured in the **fifth variation**. The next two variations parody the technical inadequacies of Elgar’s chamber music acquaintances.

Violist Isabel Fitton (**Variation 6**) had trouble performing music where the strings had to be crossed while Arthur Troyte Griffith (**Variation 7**) was a pianist whose vigorous



# ABOUT THE MUSIC

style sounded more like drumming! Poor Winifred Norbury is actually represented in **Variation 8** by a musical depiction of her country house, 'Sherridge'.

The most famous variation of course is **Nimrod (No.9)**. Nimrod (the 'mighty hunter before the Lord' of Genesis chapter 10) was Elgar's publisher AJ Jaeger (German for 'hunter'). Apparently the idea for this particular variation came when Elgar was going through one of his regular slumps. Jaeger took Elgar on a long walk during which he said that whenever Beethoven was troubled by the turbulent life of a creative artist, he simply poured his frustrations into still more beautiful compositions. In memory of that conversation, Elgar made those opening bars of *Nimrod* quote the slow movement from Beethoven's *Pathétique* Sonata.

**Variation 10** depicts a young woman called Dora Penny, whose soubriquet 'Dorabella' comes from Mozart's *Così fan tutte*. And then **Variation 11** goes beyond the human species, depicting the organist GR Sinclair's bulldog Dan, falling down the steep bank of the river Wye, paddling upstream, coming to land and then barking.



A J Jaeger – 'Nimrod'

The cello features prominently in **Variation 12** – a tribute to cellist Basil Nevinson. Mendelssohn's *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage* is quoted in **Variation 13**, said to depict Lady Mary Lygon's departure by ship to Australia. Finally we hear 'EDU' where the composer depicts himself (his wife's nickname for him was Edo) cocking a snook at all those who said he'd never make it as a composer.

Elgar's *Enigma Variations* are scored for two flutes (the second doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon; four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba; timpani, percussion, organ and strings.

The work was first performed on 19 June 1899, at St James's Hall in London, conducted by Hans Richter.

The Sydney Symphony's first performance was in November 1939, conducted by Malcolm Sargent, and it has been a regular feature in Sydney seasons ever since. Other notable performances include those conducted by Eugene Ormandy (1944); Eugene Goossens (on our 1951 regional tour to Canberra, Goulburn and Cootamundra); John Hopkins (1966 Proms); Willem van Otterloo (1978); Louis Frémaux (1982); Vernon Handley (1989); Edo de Waart (1996 and 2003); William Southgate (2002); James MacMillan (2004); Miguel Harth-Bedoya (2006) and Donald Runnicles (2014).

This piece was a favourite of our former Principal Conductor Vladimir Ashkenazy's, who performed it many times during his tenure: in our 2008 Elgar Festival; on our Asian Tour of 2009 with performances in Macau, Guangzhou and Kuala Lumpur; in 2010 in Sydney and again on our European Tour with performances in Wiesbaden, Bremen, Amsterdam and Edinburgh; and again in 2019.

Our most recent performance of the complete Variations was in September 2022, under Asher Fisch, and *Nimrod* featured in our 2022 People's Choice Concert led by Simone Young.

**Notes by Gordon Kerry (Bach) © 2012/2024, composer sketches; Gordon Kalton Williams (Rachmaninov) Symphony Australia © 1998/2001 Martin Buzacott (Elgar, abridged) © 2000**

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The Sydney Symphony Orchestra is assisted by the Australian Government through Creative Australia, its principal arts investment and advisory body.



The Sydney Symphony Orchestra is supported by the NSW Government through Create NSW.

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