Interpreting Elgar's "Enigma Variations"

BY ANDREW P. SIMCO

The "Enigma Variations" (or "Variations on an Original Theme," opus 36) by Sir Edward Elgar is generally considered to be the composition that made Elgar's reputation as a composer. It is the most often played of his orchestral works, particularly in the United States, where the bulk of his musical output remains largely unknown. In addition to being one of his most often-played compositions, it is both challenging and musically rewarding for timpanists. In this article, I will concentrate on two of the most well-known "problem" variations—those that provide the timpanist with more than the usual technical and/or musical challenge.

For most of the composition, Elgar presents no real problems. The work is scored comfortably for three timpani. At the time it was written (ca. 1898–99), this meant hand-tuned timpani. Although pedal or machine-tuned timpani were being developed and manufactured on the Continent, British players were leery of such instruments, as they felt that any type of machine-tuning apparatus would interfere with the pure tone provided by hand-tuned timpani. (This feeling persisted in Britain until the mid- to late-1950s.)

Nowadays, we have the luxury of larger drum sizes for projection, as well as the use of a fourth drum to cover the upper register (in the case of the Variations, the high G in Variation VII, "Troyte"). As this variation is one of the two "problem" variations, we will discuss this first.

VARIATION VII (TROYTE)

For those unfamiliar with the "Enigma Variations," the work consists of an introduction and fourteen variations. Each of the variations is subtitled with the initials of a person. These are the initials of Elgar's friends, whom he portrayed in music, and to whom he dedicated the work. Variation Number One, for example, is subtitled C.A.E. This is Elgar's wife Caroline Alice Elgar. Variation fourteen is subtitled E.D.U., which was Mrs. Elgar's nickname for the composer. Variation VII is subtitled Troyte, which was the middle name of one of Elgar's friends, Arthur Troyte Griffith. The variation describes in musical terms Troyte Griffith's maladroit attempts to play the piano.

The variation is marked Presto (whole note = 76), and is marked one in a bar! Timpani, accompanied by celli and bassi, start the whole thing off with a rhythmic figure on C and octave G's, and this figure (with some rhythmic displacement) underpins the entire variation (see Figure 1).

While the bass and celli continue the rhythmic underpinning at bar 5, the timpani remain silent until four bars before Rehearsal 24, where they catch the syncopation (see Figure 2).

Here, the timpani make a diminuendo on the second half of the third bar, and then repeat the opening rhythmic ostinato at Rehearsal 24, this time with a big crescendo to triple *forte*.

This recurs throughout the movement, and while not overly difficult, it is musically challenging for several reasons. First and foremost, Elgar was a first-rate orchestrator with hands-on knowledge of many of the orchestral instruments. In addition to being an excellent organist and violinist, he also played viola and bassoon. He was also curious by nature, and when he found that he was lacking

Figure 1

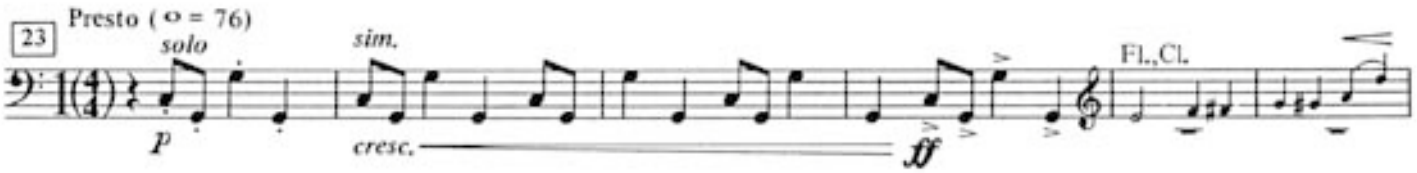
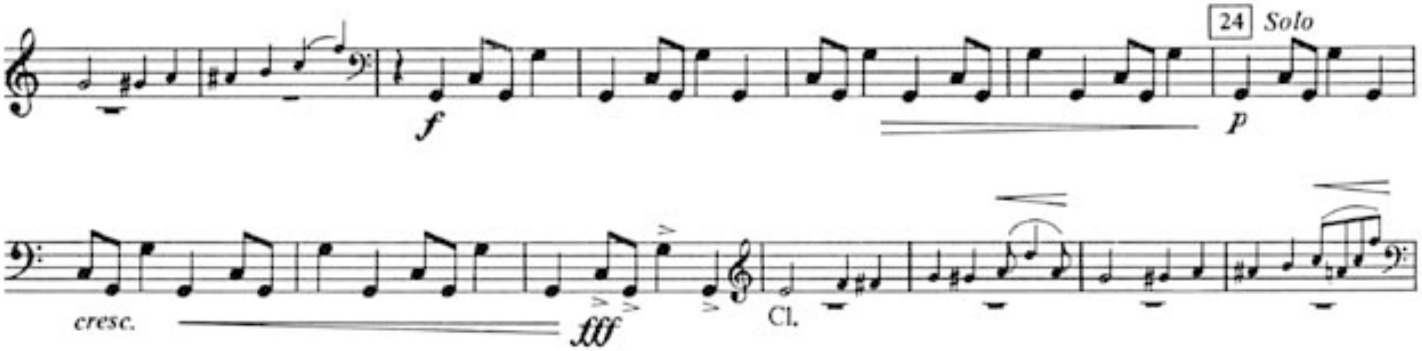


Figure 2



in knowledge about a particular instrument, he went right to the source. In the case of the "Enigma Variations," he went to the timpanist with the Halle Orchestra! This was the orchestra that gave the world premiere of the "Enigma Variations" under the direction of Hans Richter in June 1899. As we shall see later on, the timpanist (probably Wilhelm Gezink) was extremely helpful to Elgar in providing solutions to some of the problems. As a result of the care he took in orchestration, Elgar's timpani parts (particularly in the variations, but also in his other compositions) are a joy to play, with everything laid out beautifully. There are no tricks (for the most part; the exception is Variation 13, which we will discuss below). The parts lay within the best part of the register (particularly nowadays when we have the larger instruments), and they fit the music like a glove!

In the case of Variation VII, Elgar was particular as to how he placed the accents so that the music made the intended effect (see Figures 3 and 4).

I mentioned before that Elgar's timpani parts fit his music like a glove. This is another reason why this particular variation is musically challenging! Great care must be taken to be absolutely precise, and to be aware of what the celli and bassi are doing. The problem here is keeping up the pace. It is very easy to rush this movement. A good conductor is helpful here by setting the tempo and generally keeping things in order. However, the placement of the timpani to the rear of the orchestra (at a great distance from the celli and bassi) make it difficult for the timpanist and lower strings to coordinate this perfectly. The timpanist has to anticipate things a bit (generally speaking), while the lower strings tend to be a little bit late, particularly with an athletic rhythmic figure such as this. My advice to the timpanist (particularly one new to the piece) is to take particular care to study the score and be aware of what is going on. A good conductor can make this movement go smoothly with the right amount of rehearsal and coordination.

As to the technical aspects of the part, it is played on the upper three drums. In most cases, that would mean the 28-inch, 25-inch, and 23-inch, depending on manufacture. The low G and C sound better on the largest drums, but why create problems by having the low G on the 32-inch, the C on the 28-inch, and having to hop over the 25-inch to get to the 23-inch G? I prepare the drums during the previous variation. Up until that point, I have been using the larger drums for the G, C, D, and what-have-you. At the beginning of Variation VI (Ysobel), I retune the 25-inch drum from D to C, and actually play variation VI on that drum. The roll on the note C at Rehearsal 22 is helpful in getting ready for Variation VII. I also use the time to retune the C on the 28-inch drum to G. In this manner, I am ready for Variation VII.

With regard to mallet selection, I would choose medium-hard to hard mallets, as articulation is extremely important here. As far as sticking goes, it is played hand to hand, with the player being careful to observe the accents and dynamics! With regard to the roll on C at Rehearsal 28, I would play that as a three-stroke roll, as the fast tempo does not allow for more than that. The important thing to remember is, don't be late!

VARIATION XIII (ROMANZA) (***)

This is the penultimate variation in the work, and the only one without a name. Elgar calls it "Romanaza," and then puts three asterisks in parentheses. Apparently, these asterisks stand for one Lady Mary Lygon, a friend of Elgar who was away on a sea journey at the time of composition. Elgar's orchestration in this variation certainly supports this, particularly in the use of the timpani. I mentioned earlier that Elgar was very clear in his instructions to the performer in the execution of the parts, with very few exceptions. This, in my view, is one of the exceptions. In order to imitate the sounds of the engines of an ocean liner, Elgar directs the timpanist to play the passage at one bar after Rehearsal 56 with side drum sticks (see Figure 5).

This all right in itself, but as the music continues, we come to Rehearsal 58,

Figure 3

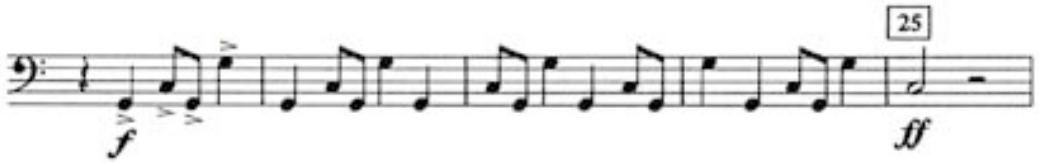


Figure 4

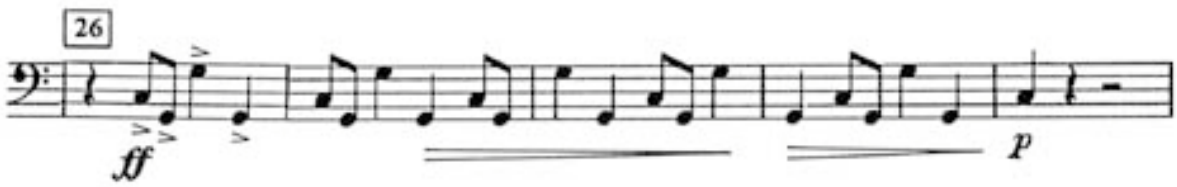


Figure 5

where he directs the player to use natural sticks—without giving the player the chance to make the change (see Figure 6).

One solution to this is to use a pair of double-ended timpani mallets, with one end having wooden ball or egg-shaped ends, and the other covered with medium to medium-hard felt. I used a pair of Hinger mallets in this fashion quite successfully on several occasions. However, in performing the work under the direction of the noted British conductor and Elgar specialist Vernon Handley, it was brought to my attention that the sound of the double-ended sticks, or even the snare drum sticks that Elgar specified in the score, would be much to loud for the passage.

It so happens that after the printing of the orchestral parts, Elgar, being very anxious that the proper effect be obtained for this passage, went up to the timpanist of the Halle Orchestra, Wilhelm Gezink. The Halle Orchestra gave the world premiere of the work, and naturally Gezink was the one responsible for obtaining the proper effect. He agreed with Elgar that perhaps the sticks would be too heavy, and suggested that coins be used instead, near the edge of the timpani head. At the time, the half crown was used, and apparently produced the effect that the composer was after. But this leaves the player with even more of a problem. How does one put the coins down and switch to the "naturale" mallets at Rehearsal 58?

Many timpanists solve this by playing the passage themselves with coins, and having a colleague from the percussion section come over to play the passage from Rehearsal 58 to 59. This is perfectly legitimate, and works very well. A variation on this is to have the colleague do the tremolo with coins while the timpanist plays the Naturale passage.

I have tried the passage with sticks and coins, and agree that the coins near the edge are quite the thing to use here. It gives the eerie feeling of a ship's engines and underlies perfectly the clarinet quotation from Mendelssohn's "Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage" four bars after Rehearsal 56. For myself, I use very small coins. The new Norwegian half crowns are small and thin enough; perhaps the American dime would work well also. I know of a colleague who actually plays the passage with his fingernails!

With regards to switching to the regular mallets at Rehearsal 58, I have played the passage with coins until one bar before 58, where I make a diminuendo on the very last part of the bar, then snatch a mallet from under my arm (where it had been during the entire passage with coins) and play the Naturale section with the mallet, albeit one-handed. In order not to make too much noise when putting the coins down, I make sure that the surface where I lay them down (usually on the adjacent stick tray) is covered with felt, so as to absorb the sound of the coins being put down. The problem repeats itself, although on a smaller scale, one bar after Rehearsal 60, when the tremolo recurs on the note G for the last nine bars of the variation (see Figure 7).

This is not a problem in itself except for the fact that many conductors like to go right into the finale (Variation XIV) with only the most minute of pauses. Again, I play the passage with coins, making the most of the diminuendo on the last bar. I quickly grab a mallet for the first offbeat of the next variation, and I play this one-handed until I have safely (and rapidly) disposed of the coins and have grabbed the other mallet. Another way to do this is to have one of the percussionists hand you the mallets and take the coins at the proper moment. Make sure all of this is coordinated with the conductor!

There are lots of ways to make it work, and it is my hope that whatever way you choose works well for you and adds to your enjoyment of one of the most beautiful and well-written timpani parts of the last one hundred years!

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Andrew Simco is timpanist with the Des Moines Metro Opera. He was timpanist with the Oslo Philharmonic from 1983–98 and with the Norweigeian Chamber Orchestra from 1987–98. PN

Figure 6

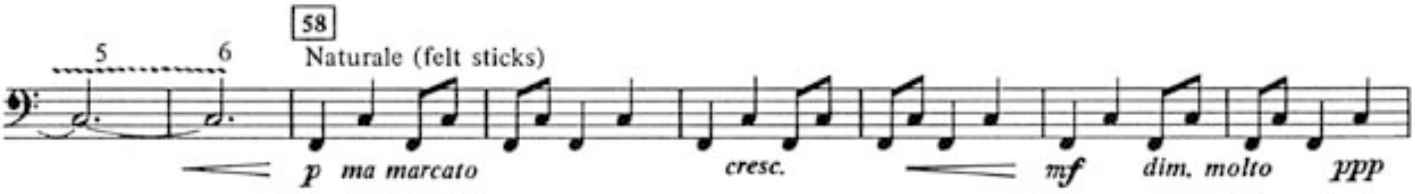

Figure 7