

Conductor's Notes

For all you anglophiles out there, we present a gift of English music. **Ralph Vaughan Williams** (1872-1958) is to the English what Aaron Copland is to Americans. His lifelong interest in indigenous folk song as well as his achievement in every genre including Christian hymnody has endeared him to his countrymen. This virile overture to "The Wasps" comes from the incidental music Vaughan Williams composed in 1909 for a Cambridge performance of the comedy by Aristophanes (422 B. C.). 1909 was the year when Vaughan Williams found his individual voice as a composer. The play pokes fun at the law courts in Athens which were tools of the statesman Cleon's demagoguery. Aside from the buzzing we hear at the opening, Vaughan Williams makes no attempts to reference the play or ancient Greece, opting instead to employ modal folk song material. Vaughan Williams' aesthetic philosophy is summed up in his statement, "The proof of the pudding is in the eating." The overture to "The Wasps" is delicious fare!

English composer **Frederick Delius** (1862-1934) can be claimed by many countries. In addition to Great Britain, he lived in France, the United States, Germany, and Norway, but all of his music possesses the sweet *contenance angloise*. One of my abiding interests is the folk music of Lincolnshire. On a trip there in 1989, I was privileged to hear the folk song, Brigg Fair. In 1907 Delius took this tune, which had been discovered in North Lincolnshire by his dear friend Percy Grainger, and subjected it to several variations, thoroughly sensuous, rhapsodic-- evocative of Nature and of true love.

Sir Edward Elgar (1857-1934) created *Enigma Variations*, this "warhorse" of the symphonic repertoire, in 1899. His beloved wife, Alice, whom he nicknamed *Braut* (German for bride), was particularly taken with a little melody he was playing on the piano. To entertain her, he framed this theme in variations that each described one in their circle of close friends. Space does not permit me to tell the story of each variation, so I've selected a few.

I. "C. A. E." Caroline Alice Elgar, the composer's wife. This contains a four-note motive which Elgar whistled to announce his arrival at home. The variation is just like Alice, romantic, delicate, inspiring.

IX. "Nimrod" Augustus Jaeger, music editor, was one of Elgar's closest friends and harshest critics. Once, when the composer was so depressed he was ready to abandon composing, Jaeger urged him to continue. Citing Beethoven's experiences with deafness, ill health, and enormous challenges, Jaeger pointed out that Beethoven had gone on to create ever greater music. "This-is-what-you-must-do," Elgar's friend sang to the melody of the slow movement of Beethoven's *Pathétique* Sonata. The opening bars of the variation allude to this melody. The title, "Nimrod," is a pun. Jaeger is German for "hunter" and Nimrod was a hunter in the Bible.

XIII. "****" Though we know to whom this refers, it's more compelling to keep it a mystery, an "enigma within an enigma." The *ponticello* playing in the strings lends to this sense of mystery. The timpani, played with the butt ends of the sticks, create a sound reminiscent of ships' engines and Elgar's quotation from Mendelssohn's *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage* in the clarinet confirms that we are on the sea.

XIV. "E. D. U." Edu was Alice's pet name for her husband. It is in this Finale that Elgar finds himself. *Enigma Variations* was an autodidactic project, a journey of self-discovery. By forcing upon himself the discipline of creating short, distinct character pieces out of limited material, Elgar hones his compositional skills. Notice that he pays homage to his two greatest inspirations by quoting from the "Alice" and "Nimrod" variations. The conclusion of *Enigma* is one of the most stirring in all the literature!

This concert is a sad occasion for me. After 23 seasons as director of Thalia Symphony I have decided to step down. I will continue to conduct the SPU Orchestra. It's very difficult to say goodbye to people I have cared about and with whom I have shared such beautiful music. I owe them a debt I cannot repay. Please continue to support Thalia Symphony as they chart a new course.