

CELEBRATE THE BRASS PROGRAM

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS (1872-1958)

Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis

Vaughan Williams was born into a prominent British family that included not only highly respected clergymen and judges but also famous public figures, such as Josiah Wedgwood and Charles Darwin. After studying music as a child, Vaughan Williams received degrees from Cambridge and the Royal College of Music, where one of his teachers advised him to “Write choral music as befits an Englishman and a democrat.” In 1908 he traveled to Paris for additional orchestration lessons with Maurice Ravel, who urged the young Englishman to stop imitating foreign models and determine his own compositional style.

Vaughan Williams returned to England and began work as a church organist and choral director, writing music in his spare time. He supervised the publication of some odes for the Purcell Society and was then asked to edit the English Hymnal for the Church of England. Afraid that this would hinder his time for composition, he hesitated at first; however, he finally agreed to undertake the project.

Little did Vaughan Williams realize that intense immersion into old English folk and sacred tunes would prove decisive in his development as a composer. When commissioned to write a choral work in 1910, he remembered a Renaissance melody that he had included in his hymnal and felt inspired to use this melody—*Third Psalm Tune* by organist-composer Thomas Tallis (c. 1505-1585)—as the basis for his new composition.

Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis is scored for three groups of string instruments—a full-size orchestra, a smaller ensemble, and a quartet. The composer specifically states that the ensembles must be spaced apart, since sometimes they echo or respond antiphonally with each other. The

work is loosely structured, hence the term “fantasy,” with two phrases in the first half and two contrasting phrases with greater rhythmic variety in the second portion.

Fantasia begins quietly and mysteriously with sustained notes and parallel triads, which impart a modal atmosphere. Melodic material is derived from Tallis’ tune, but phrases are repeated, varied, and freely elaborated, with small fragments or motives intertwining throughout the piece. Approximately halfway through, in a slightly more animated tempo, a solo viola announces a dotted-rhythmic figure that is quasi-developed. Gradually all the ensembles are combined to achieve a *fortissimo* climax before the slower tempo resumes. The work ends with the same mystical chords that appear in the beginning, and a solo violin delivers one final benedictory statement.

The premiere of *Fantasia* took place at Gloucester Cathedral. Vaughan Williams, who was a native of a nearby town, was thoroughly familiar with this cathedral, and he deliberately exploits its acoustics in his *Fantasia*. Both critics and audience members were mesmerized by the rich, expressive sweetness of the strings. Even the composer was pleased, remarking that, “I feel...I am perhaps beginning to emerge from the fogs at last.” With *Fantasia*, Vaughan Williams shook off two centuries of German domination, enabling him to develop a highly personal style that was not only “English” but also one of international significance.

In the 2003 film, *Master and Commander*, the work appears as background music during the sailors’ burial at sea. Despite the solemnity of the sound, *Fantasia* has been ranked in the last few years as one of the most popular classical compositions in England.

© Program notes by Dr. La Wanda J. Blakeney

CELEBRATE THE BRASS PROGRAM *(continued)*

JENNIFER HIGDON (1962-)

Low Brass Concerto

Jennifer Higdon is one of America's most acclaimed figures in contemporary classical music, receiving the 2010 Pulitzer Prize in Music for her Violin Concerto, a 2010 Grammy for her Percussion Concerto and a 2018 Grammy for her Viola Concerto. Most recently, Higdon received the prestigious Nemmers Prize from Northwestern University, which is awarded to contemporary classical composers of exceptional achievement who have significantly influenced the field of composition. Higdon enjoys several hundred performances a year of her works, and *Blue Cathedral* is one of today's most performed contemporary orchestral works, with more than 600 performances worldwide. Her works have been recorded on more than 60 CDs. Higdon's first opera, *Cold Mountain*, won the International Opera Award for Best World Premiere and the opera recording was nominated for two Grammy awards. She holds the Rock Chair in Composition at The Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. Her music is published exclusively by Lawdon Press.

Program note by the composer:

"Normally, when people think of brass they think of power, which is not an inaccurate assessment. But brass players are quick to tell you that they also can play beautiful melodies, and do so quietly and with exquisite control. So early on in the planning process for this concerto, I decided to think about the music as reflections of the qualities of majesty, grace, and power.

Writing this concerto was a tremendous challenge, primarily because there is normally one person standing at the front of the stage and this work requires four. Fortunately, I've had the opportunity on several occasions to write a concerto for multiple soloists. My first opportunity was with my bluegrass/classical hybrid concerto for Time for Three, "Concerto 4-3" and the second time was writing "On A Wire" for the four-time Grammy winners Eighth Blackbird.

When I accept a commission and start the process of deciding what kind of music to write in a piece, I think a lot about the personalities of the players. I have, after decades of writing music, learned that the low brass players are always fun to work with. They bring an infectious joy to everything they play, which in itself is inspiring.

With all of this in mind, I decided to write a traditional work that highlights these qualities, in straightforward lines and melodies. It is sometimes the most challenging thing for a composer to do: compose a melody or chorale, with no special effects or colors, just focusing on the moving line. This is a work in one movement, with alternating slow and fast sections. There are solos for each player, as well as a few duets, and some chorales. This is a musical portrait of four extraordinary players, each working individually and as a group, bringing to the front of the stage, all of their majesty, grace, and power.

The Low Brass Concerto was commissioned by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, with the Philadelphia Orchestra and Baltimore Symphony Orchestra serving as co-commissioners."

The Shreveport Symphony Orchestra is the first orchestra to perform this work after the commissioning orchestras.

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

Elgar's professional beginnings were hardly auspicious. As a youth he worked in his father's music shop, played violin in ad hoc orchestras, and served as a church organist. After attending a choral festival in London, he wrote a cantata of his own and quickly established himself as a respectable composer. Elgar longed to write a major orchestral work, but with no formal education in music, he wasn't certain how to sustain a large-scale work. The answer came one evening in 1898 as he was mindlessly improvising on the piano at home. His wife, Caroline Alice,

CELEBRATE THE BRASS PROGRAM *(continued)*

asked what he was playing, and he responded, "Nothing—but something might be made of it." He began experimenting with the tune, adapting it in different ways, and before long the idea for 14 orchestral variations began to emerge. Each one refers to a special friend of the composer, either a distinct aspect of the individual's personality or a specific incident that they shared.

The theme, which is based on a four-note pattern of eighth and quarter notes, is very slow and expressive. The first variation, designated CAE for his wife's initials, contains a short melodic figure that Elgar often whistled to his wife when he arrived home. One of the composer's friends was a pianist who often warmed up by playing diatonic scales, and as a result, Elgar humorously fills Variation 2 with playful chromatic passages. The following variation uses the bassoon and flute to portray an elderly man whose low voice can jump unexpectedly to the high register. Variation 4 is loud and boisterous, depicting an acquaintance's exuberant personality; the fifth portrays an amateur pianist; the sixth represents a viola student; the seventh is a good-natured jab at someone who was "enthusiastically incompetent on the piano"; and in the eighth variation an associate's characteristic laugh can be heard through lighthearted trills and staccato notes in the woodwinds.

Variation 9, named *Nimrod* after the Old Testament patriarch ("mighty hunter of the Lord"), is a pun on the name Jaeger, which, in German, means "hunter." When Elgar was severely depressed and seemingly unable to compose, August J. Jaeger was the one who strongly encouraged the composer never to give up. This particular variation is quite famous and has often appeared as an independent work in various media. The 32nd-note figures in the following variation gently parody a friend who stuttered, while Variation 11 portrays an acquaintance's bulldog that tumbles down a steep bank into a river, paddles in the water and climbs

out, only to do it again and again. At the end there is a *sforzando* chord, indicating the loud bark of a very satisfied dog!

Written for a cellist friend, the hauntingly beautiful 12th variation opens and concludes with a brief solo on that instrument. In the next variation a clarinet solo quotes a passage from Mendelssohn's *Calm and Prosperous Sea Voyage*, in honor of a patron who was on vacation while Elgar was composing this work. The finale is a subtle self-portrait that incorporates melodies from *CAE* and *Nimrod*, in honor of the two people who had the most positive influence on Elgar's life.

The composer dedicated the Variations to "my friends pictured within" and penciled in the word "Enigma" at the top of the autograph after it was sent to the publisher. Elgar hints that his work is "dark" and that "Over the whole set another and larger theme 'goes,' but is not played..." Such an intriguing comment has created endless speculation about what, if any, theme could serve as a counterpoint to the Variations. Perhaps Elgar has the best solution, since he adds in a program note in 1911 that "although the work was written with friends in mind, it may be listened to as a 'piece of music' apart from any extraneous consideration." And perhaps Elgar's intentions should always remain just that...an enigma.

In 1899 Hans Richter, the leading conductor of the day, selected Elgar's innovative orchestral work for one of the London concerts, and *Enigma Variations* became a sensation overnight. Always an ardent supporter of Elgar, Richter premiered additional compositions by the Englishman and even conducted a festival devoted entirely to his music, an event described at that time as "an unprecedented tribute to a living composer." Today the work still remains one of England's most beloved compositions.

© Program notes by Dr. La Wanda J. Blakeney