

# bristol international classical season 2015/16



**VIDEO:** Jonathan James and Oliver Condy delve into Elgar's Enigma Variations and MacMillan's choral Little Mass.  
Watch this video at [https://youtu.be/wnf\\_kNOJ\\_Qk](https://youtu.be/wnf_kNOJ_Qk)



**Editor of BBC Music Magazine Oliver Condy sheds some light on the circumstances surrounding the great works that feature in the Bristol International Classical Season 2015-16 at Colston Hall. These bite-sized programme notes and accompanying videos cut to the heart of the music, allowing you to get that little bit more from your classical experience.**

## Elgar Enigma Variations

It's extraordinary to think that the Enigma Variations was Edward Elgar's first major orchestral work – by the time he had completed it, he was already 41. For years before, however, the English composer had been writing a good deal of choral music, accepting commissions from festivals wherever he could. By now, Elgar was in his mid-thirties, maturing as a composer, and although he was already a fine orchestrator, he reserved his skills for the accompaniments to several cantatas, including Caractacus, King Olaf, The Black Knight and The Light of Life. By writing cantatas, Elgar's music was guaranteed to be performed – there was no shortage of choral societies in the Midlands willing to premiere his music. But still, a large-scale orchestral piece eluded him, save the 15-minute Froissart Overture which was modestly received in 1889, by which time Elgar was married to his piano pupil, Alice Roberts. And it was Alice who awoke his muse.

In October 1898, one evening after dinner, Elgar was absent-mindedly fiddling around on the piano, picking out tunes when Alice stopped him, demanding to hear one particular melody he'd stumbled across. 'Suddenly my wife interrupted,' Elgar later wrote,

thu 11 feb 2016, 7.30pm

## bournemouth symphony orchestra great britons

**Elgar's perennial puzzler and the Overture it momentarily plunders are entwined in an evening given 'Mass' appeal by James MacMillan's new choral work.**

**James MacMillan** Little Mass  
**Mendelssohn** Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage  
**Elgar** Enigma Variations

Conductor **Kirill Karabits**

**Tickets:** £36, £30, £24, £18, students £8.50, under 18s £1 incl. booking fee

**Experience classical music for less**  
Saver seats **£10** including booking fee – ask box office for details. Save up to 30% on tickets when you book for 3 or more international classical season concerts

**buy tickets**

<http://www.colstonhall.org/shows/bournemouth-symphony-orchestra-great-britons/>

# bristol international classical season 2015/16



'by saying, "Edward, that's a good tune." I awoke from the dream: "Eh! tune, what tune?" And she said "Play it again, I like that tune."'

That 'tune', rescued from certain oblivion by Alice, became the basis for the Enigma Variations, and scholars have tried – and failed – ever since to identify the source of the 'Enigma', spurred on by Elgar's own mysterious proclamation that the theme was 'a dark saying' that 'must be left unguessed.' 'Through and over the whole set another and larger theme "goes", but is not played,' Elgar wrote in the programme notes for the premiere, 'So the principal Theme never appears...' So what is this mysterious theme? Theories have ranged from snippets from the slow movement to Mozart's Prague Symphony to Auld Lang Syne, Home, Sweet Home and Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star. Elgar must have chuckled all the while – after all, he was a huge fan of cryptic crosswords, and he'd set the ultimate musical puzzle.

But all of this is a distraction from the piece itself: a sparkling set of 14 remarkable, characterful variations, 12 of them an affectionate sketch of a close friend with one reserved for his wife Alice, and one for a dog! We know, mostly, who these friends (and dog) are because Elgar writes initials and names at the top of each of the variations. The very first, affectionate, variation is devoted to his dear wife Alice – one of the only variations that isn't a mild dig... The second variation, 'H.D.S.-P.', gently mocks a pianist friend for his unusual warming-up exercises, while Variation III chuckles at an amateur thespian friend, attempting to portray an old man on stage.

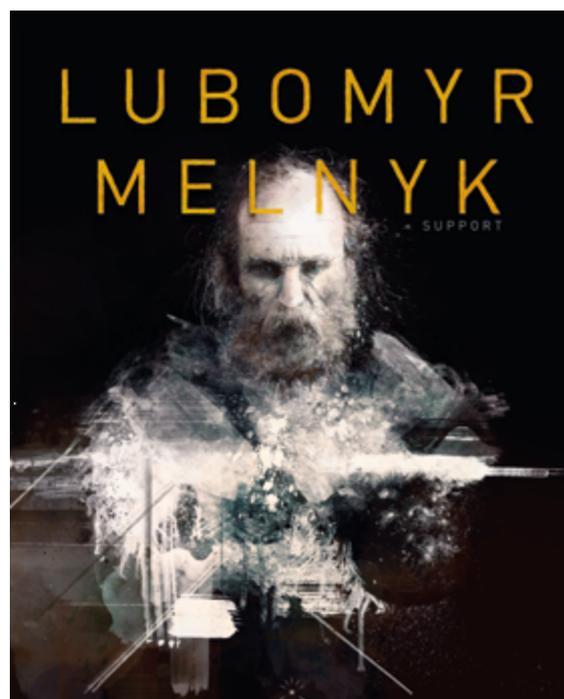
Variation IV is William Meath Baker, 'country squire, gentleman and scholar' who 'expressed himself somewhat energetically'. The fifth variation is headed 'R.P.A.' (Richard P Arnold): a music-lover and pianist and son of the poet Matthew Arnold. Arnold was an amateur pianist whose playing had a habit, wrote Elgar, of 'evading difficulties but suggesting in a mysterious way the real feeling. His serious conversation was continually broken up by whimsical and witty remarks.'

The following variation, VI, describes Elgar's viola-playing friend Isobel Fitton. 'It may be noticed,' Elgar explained, 'that 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.' Arthur Troyte Griffith is the subject of the seventh variation which mimics his unrhythmic and precarious piano technique. Elgar moves back to tenderness for the next, a whimsical description of the jovial atmosphere at Winifred Norbury's 18th-century house.

The most celebrated variation, 'Nimrod', follows without a break, a warm-hearted, portrait of Augustus Jaeger (Jaeger means 'hunter' in German, hence 'Nimrod', the biblical 'mighty hunter'). Jaeger was Elgar's closest friend and publisher, and it was he who encouraged Elgar to keep composing through his darkest

mon 14 mar 2016, 8pm

## lubomyr melnyk



**"The world's fastest yet little-known pianist ... can play up to 19.5 notes per second," The Guardian tells us – "the effect is of iridescent notes that could be a thousand wind chimes, caught between turmoil and serenity". Lubomyr Melnyk's 2015 album, Rivers and Streams, is "tuneful and meditative" (Pitchfork), a hypnotic collection of tracks that frequently nudge the 10-minute mark. Seen live, "his limbs (are) a blur of poise and motion and the air (is) a collective held breath of awe" (The Line of Best Fit).**

in The Lantern, support TBA

**Tickets:** £16.10 incl. booking fee

## buy tickets

<http://www.colstonhall.org/shows/lubomyr-melnyk-2/>



depressions. The music has a Beethovenian quality to it, as Elgar wrote: 'The Variation ... is the record of a long summer evening talk, when my friend discoursed eloquently on the slow movements of Beethoven, and said that no one could approach Beethoven at his best in this field, a view with which I cordially concurred.'

Next follows a sketch of the beautiful Dorabella (Dora Penny) for whom the frisky Elgar had something of a thing. The music's rhythmic unsteadiness is a musical reference to her stutter. And then we move to Dan the bulldog (who belonged to the organist of Hereford Cathedral, George Sinclair) whom we hear tumbling down the bank into the River Severn, swimming upstream and, wrote Elgar, 'his rejoicing bark on landing.' At the time, Sinclair challenged Elgar to set the incident to music. And, of course, he did.

Elgar then reserves one of his most tender melodies for the cello section, paying homage to his fine cellist friend Basil G Nevinson (Variation XII). 'The Variation,' wrote Elgar, 'is a 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.'

The penultimate variation is titled '\*\*\*Romanza' – not much of a clue as to the character within, except for the fact that Elgar quotes from Mendelssohn's symphonic poem Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage (also featured in this concert) leading scholars to match the movement to Lady Mary Lygon who was en route by ship to Australia at the time. But Variation XIII could also point to Helen Jessie Weaver, Elgar's first love to whom he was once engaged. After all, Elgar did include the word 'Romanza' in the title...

Finally, Elgar himself is represented – 'E.D.U.' aren't initials, but spell out Alice's affectionate nickname for her husband: Edoe. It's a triumphant finale to Elgar's masterpiece, a confident self-portrait that draws together all sorts of threads, including a return to the 'Nimrod' theme to the C.A.E variation: a nod to his beloved Alice.

**next concert in the season:**

fri 11 mar 2016, 7.30pm

**oslo philharmonic**

a scandinavian  
spring

The Oslo Philharmonic goes back to its roots for its Hall debut with lyrical Grieg, virtuosic Sibelius and amorous Mahler, under dynamic Music Director Vasily Petrenko.

**more info**

[www.colstonhall.org/classical](http://www.colstonhall.org/classical)

**Catch up with previous  
notes and videos from  
this season**

[www.colstonhall.org/news/classical](http://www.colstonhall.org/news/classical)

**Subscribe to our  
YouTube for more videos**

[www.youtube.com/ColstonHallTV](http://www.youtube.com/ColstonHallTV)