

MSO

CLASSROOM

ENIGMA VARIATIONS

GUIDED OPEN REHEARSAL RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

THE COMPOSITION

WHO:

Sir Edward Elgar remains one of England's most celebrated composers. Elgar gained notoriety in the late 19th Century as a Romantic Period tunesmith, capable of sculpting immensely emotive palettes of orchestral colours.

WHAT:

Variations on an Original Theme (Opus 36), more affectionately known as the *Enigma Variations*, is a set of 14 Variations based on a short theme Elgar penned. Legend has it that he arrived home frustrated by a long day of violin teaching and commenced 'noodling' at the piano. It was not until his wife Alice alerted Elgar to the ear catching melody falling beneath his fingers, that he stopped to notice what we now celebrate as the iconic theme of the *Enigma Variations*.

WHEN & WHERE:

Developed between October 1898 and February 1899, the *Enigma Variations* were premiered at **St. James' Hall in London on June 19, 1899** under the baton of Hans Richter. This would be Elgar's first large-scale success.

HOW:

Elgar expertly manipulates an array of [musical elements](#) (page 13 of VCE Music Study Design) throughout the 14 variations to create musical sketches of [his friends and family](#). Elgar explained: "The sketches are not 'portraits' but each variation contains a distinct idea founded on some particular personality or perhaps on some incident known only to two people." He included their names with [musical cryptography](#) where letters spelling their names represent literal note names on the piano.

LISTEN OUT FOR:

1. Arguably, the most remarkable feature of the work is the *Enigma Variations* theme. It comprises six short melodic statements less than a bar in length, employing skips of a 3rd and leaps of a 7th. These devices serve to create precariously balanced phrases of mirrored rhythmic material, deprived of the reassurance of beat one. At least we have the lift of the [tierce de picardie](#) at the cadence to provide some optimistic stability...



2. The *Enigma Variations* demonstrates highly sophisticated manipulation of orchestral textures and colours. Listen for the melody being passed around the orchestra, sometimes only for a fleeting moment.

- Can you describe the tone colour of each of the instruments you hear?
- Which instruments does he use in combination? What trends can you identify? (e.g.: Are the woodwinds the primary voice or are they used to add colour to the upper strings? Do all of the low instruments play together all of the time?)
- How does Elgar create light and sparse textures?
- What does he do differently to create a thick and dense texture?

CURRICULUM LINKS

- Victorian F-10: Music
 - Explore and Express
 - Music Practices
 - Respond and Interpret
- VCE Music Performance:
 - Unit 2 Outcome 4 – Organisation of Sound
 - Outcome 3 – Music Language
- VCE Music Style and Composition:
 - Outcome 3 – Creative Response

3. Elgar develops and adapts the main theme in many ways to create the 14 Variations, yet the rhythm, harmony and accompaniment almost tell us more about the subjects of his 'portraits'.

- How is the character of the music manipulated by changes in the rhythmic feel?
- Sometimes the harmony is simplistic. How does this influence the mood?
- How does the mood change as more complexity and chromaticism is added to the harmony?
- What is the effect of the [tierce de picardie](#)?
- Listen to the accompanying parts – what trends do you notice?
(FYI – Elgar sometimes hides [musical cryptography](#) in the counter melodies).

KNOW THE SCORE:

- Listen and follow a recording with the [score](#).
- Go "[beyond the score](#)" with the Chicago Symphony.

COMPOSE YOUR OWN

Use the iconic *Enigma* Theme (see above) to compose your own *Enigma* Variation.

- Think of a friend and imagine their 'musical portrait'.
- Pick up your instrument and experiment with the [elements of music](#) (page 13 of VCE Music Study Design) to create their 'musical portrait'.
- Use a notation program ([Sibelius](#), [Noteflight](#), [Finale](#), [Dorico](#), etc.) to arrange and orchestrate your new variation (perhaps start with just a few instruments and work up to the full orchestra).
- Consider using [musical cryptography](#) to include your friend's name as a counter melody. Or do as Elgar did and include your own name....

There is significant mystery surrounding the *Enigma* Theme. Elgar writes: "***The Enigma I will not explain – its "dark saying" must be left unguessed...through and over the whole set another and larger theme "goes", but is not played . . .***" For more than 100 years academics have been trying to identify this mystery melody that floats over the entirety of the work but is never heard. Can you 'crack' the Enigma?

Better yet, compose your own counter melody over Elgar's *Enigma* Theme.

SHARE

Send a PDF and an MP3 recording of your composition to your friends, family and teachers, and of course, send it in to the MSO at schools@mso.com.au for feedback!

THE REHEARSAL

BEFORE THE DOWNBEAT

There is a mountain of work that has already occurred, months and sometimes years before the first downbeat in a rehearsal. From programming repertoire and contracting conductors and musicians, to setting the stage and opening the box office – the MSO employs hundreds of people both on and off stage.

One thing is certain, the musicians will have studied and learned their part to professional performance standard, **before** the first rehearsal, because unlike a school group which may spend a month preparing for a performance, the MSO will have just a few days!

ON STAGE

The Conductor

The conductor's role is to lead the orchestra in realising the artistic vision of the composer. Before the first rehearsal they will have spent hours studying the score to develop a considered and informed interpretation of every minute detail. On the podium, they use physical gesture to show how they want the music to sound. Conductors are constantly listening and adjusting these gestures to provide feedback to the musicians. [Can you see and hear the link between the conductor's movement and the orchestra's sound?](#)

Sometimes things do not come together the way they should and the conductor may need to use verbal instruction to make their point. [Take note of what they stop to "fix"](#). Elements such as balance, rhythmic alignment, dynamic shaping and uniformity of articulation are common areas requiring rehearsal.

The Concertmaster and Principals

Rehearsal time is precious as there is always much to achieve. To create a productive working environment the etiquette is to keep chatter to a minimum. A section principal (leader of an instrument group) may address the conductor to seek clarification, but in general issues are resolved through excellent ensemble skills (knowing your part, watching the conductor, listening to each other and discussion with the Principals). [Keep an eye out for any communication from the Concertmaster \(Principal First Violin\).](#)

The Sections

- **The Strings** are divided into 5 sections – first violin, second violin, viola, cello, basses. Each section is arranged in 'desks' and it is everyone's responsibility to match their sections' tone, dynamics, bowing and articulation, vibrato, and of course pitch and rhythm.
- **Woodwinds** – the Classical Period Orchestra features two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets and two bassoons. However, during the Romantic Period composers like Elgar started adding more exotic sounds like piccolo, cor anglais, bass clarinet and contrabassoon. The Woodwinds are required to be equally comfortable playing as a soloist and in a section.
- Featuring trumpets, french horns, trombones and tuba, the **brass** are an essential colour of the orchestra. Often reserved for the moments of impact, nothing sounds more glorious than a fleet of horns in full flight!
- The **percussion** section is capable of adding an array of unique colours from the resonant timpani through to the shimmering metallic tone of the glockenspiel or triangle. Like the brass, Elgar uses percussion sparingly but with significant impact.
- **Keyboard** instruments such as piano and celeste or the harp are not always utilised in orchestral works. Even more uncommon is the organ which features in the final variation of Elgar's masterpiece.

REFLECT

Think about your own experiences:

- What surprised you about seeing the MSO in rehearsal?
- Are there similarities between your rehearsals and the MSO rehearsals?
- What were the differences?
- What might you like to see implemented in your own rehearsals?

These resources have been devised by James Le Fevre for exclusive use in Melbourne Symphony Orchestra Schools Programs. Reproduction without permission is prohibited and totally not cool.

BIOS



NICHOLAS BOCHNER

After training in Adelaide and London, Nicholas spent 3 years as Artist-in-Residence at the University of Queensland as part of the ensemble *Perihelion*, forging a strong reputation as an exponent of contemporary music. He joined the MSO as Assistant Principal Cello in 1998. Since then he has appeared as a soloist, chamber musician and recitalist. He has also taught cello and improvisation at the Australian National Academy of Music (ANAM).

Nicholas has always had a strong commitment to music education and community engagement. In 2010 he was awarded the Dame Roma Mitchell Churchill Fellowship to study the LSO's iconic Discovery program and the use of improvisation in training classical musicians at the Guildhall School of Music.

In 2016, Nicholas' considerable experience as an orchestral musician and his passion for communication led him to undertake a fellowship at ANAM where he developed, conducted and presented educational concerts for primary school children. During the fellowship he was mentored by Paul Rissmann, Graham Abbott and the legendary Richard Gill AO. Since then he has presented educational concerts for children and adults for MSO, ANAM and the Melbourne Chamber Orchestra.

In 2020 he was named the MSO's Cybec Assistant Conductor for Learning and Engagement. He is also the conductor of the Melbourne University Biomedical Students' Orchestra. In support of his work as an education presenter, Nicholas has been studying conducting with Benjamin Northey and won a coveted place at the TSO's 2019 Australian Conducting Academy.

RESOURCES & CONTENT



JAMES LE FEVRE

For the past 15 years, James Le Fevre has been sharing his passion and enthusiasm for music education with students and colleagues from around the country across the Independent, Catholic and State School systems. He was recently appointed as Head of Music at the Victorian College of the Arts Secondary School having served as The Arts Learning Area Leader and also Director of Bands at Our Lady of Sion College for 7 years prior. As an active member of the music community, James performs regularly across a wide range of genres and is forging a reputation as an engaging presenter and conductor. He proudly serves as the Immediate Past National President and as a Vice President of the Australian Band and Orchestra Directors Association.

James holds a Bachelor of Music with Honours from the Australian National University majoring in Jazz Saxophone, and education qualifications from Monash University. In 2016, James completed studies in Education Leadership on scholarship to the Expert and Leading Teachers Colloquium through the National Excellence in School Leadership Initiative.

PARTNERS



Principal Partner



Proudly presented by the Seven Network. Proudly supported by Crown Resorts Foundation and Packer Family Foundation. Nicholas Bochner's position as Cybec Assistant Conductor for Learning and Engagement is generously supported by the Cybec Foundation