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**FRIDAY 5 NOVEMBER 2021, 7.30pm**  
NATIONAL CONCERT HALL

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**BRITTEN** Four Sea Interludes from *Peter Grimes*  
**JONATHAN DOVE** *Stargazer*  
**ELGAR** *Enigma Variations*

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**RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra**

Conductor **John Wilson**

**Peter Moore** trombone

Presented by **Paul Herriott**, RTÉ lyric fm

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**RTÉ lyric fm**

**PROGRAMME NOTES**

## Four Sea Interludes from *Peter Grimes*

- i. Dawn
- ii. Sunday Morning
- iii. Moonlight
- iv. Storm

First staged in June 1945 less than a month after the end of the Second World War, *Peter Grimes* established Benjamin Britten as the leading composer of his generation and, despite its dark tale of an outcast fisherman hounded by his local community to suicide echoing some of the turmoil and grimness of the global conflict of the preceding half decade and more, marked a triumphant re-birth for British opera.

Acclaimed by critics and audiences alike, it was the 31-year-old Britten's second and breakthrough opera. Its ambiguous portrait of the eponymous Grimes – acquitted of the murder of a young apprentice at the beginning of the opera, he subsequently bullies and mistreats a new apprentice who falls to his death in an accident that incites the local community against the fisherman, provoking him to take his own life – makes it a complex, challenging work and one of the first acknowledged operatic masterpieces of the 20th century. For Britten, the opera dealt with 'a subject very close to my heart – the struggle of the individual against the masses', tellingly adding: 'the more vicious the society, the more vicious the individual'.

Originally intended to cover scene changes, the baleful, brooding *Four Sea Interludes* have since found their way into the concert hall as a standard part of the orchestral repertoire. Strikingly, they offer both a portrait of the sea – protean, powerful and always unpredictable – that surges against the Suffolk coast on which Grimes plies his trade, and an unsettling emotional commentary on the fatal events of the opera.

The first, 'Dawn', finds cold, steely sunlight breaking through the last vestiges of night on the desolate coastline as an ominous sea swell begins to lap against the shore as if pulling land and sea perilously out of alignment with each other. 'Sunday Morning' finds the local community busily making their way to church, the apparent security and domestic calm of the ageless routine undercut by the deep, resonant tolling of menacing waves inching ever closer.

'Moonlight' crests the mysterious nocturnal movement of the sea with sharp, silver flashes of slicing luminosity caught on the cusp of waves as they peak and break before being pulled under again into the darkness. The lowering, liquid motion of the final interlude, 'Storm', depicts Grimes himself: a force of nature caught between dangerous primal urges over which he seems to have little control.

An all too brief appearance of sunlight through the cloud-saturated sky is violently extinguished as the storm convulses with one last savage and deadly outburst.

Michael Quinn © R

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## JONATHAN DOVE b.1959

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### **Stargazer**

*Concerto for Trombone and Orchestra*

*Commissioned by the London Symphony Orchestra.*

In 1999, Ian Bousfield invited me to write him a trombone concerto. He felt that modern composers tended to 'typecast' the trombone as 'Big Bad Wolf' or 'Clown', and he was interested in a work with a more lyrical approach. I could not have written a pyrotechnic showpiece, but I was attracted to the idea of creating a miniature 'opera' for the trombone.

The image that started to develop in my mind was of the trombonist as a man with a telescope, a Stargazer, searching the night sky. The orchestra

would represent the constellations he observed, and he would respond to what he saw.

As I was writing, the nursery melody *Twinkle, twinkle, little star* kept coming into my mind. I resisted at first, not least because I did not want to compete with the famous sets of variations by Mozart and Dohnányi. But the tune insisted, and eventually took over, so that the whole piece became a fantasia on it. It is never plainly stated at the speed you would expect to hear it sung, but its contour is clearly audible throughout.

*Stargazer* is in one continuous movement, but falls into six sections:

### **I. Searching the Night Sky**

Stargazer asks questions of the stars: “How old are you? Can you see me? Is there something you want to tell me?” The stars continue on their way. Stargazer calls to them. At first there is no answer – then, faintly at first, the stars begin to respond.

### **II. Constellations**

Stargazer calls out to different groups of stars (different sections of the orchestra) and they answer.

### **III. Arcturus & Canis chasing Ursa Major & Minor with Lyra**

Chilly arctic wind, suggested by the name of the Herdsman (Arcturus, who gave his name to the Arctic) chasing both bears (Ursa Major and Minor – Polaris, the Pole Star, is in Ursa Minor). Canis, the dog, joins the chase, and Stargazer sees Lyra (which includes Vega, the harp star – this used to mark the North Pole).

### **IV. Gemini**

Brotherly love; duality; the coexistence of the mortal and immortal sides of man. Castor and Pollux spent alternate nights in Hades and on Olympus. In Rome they stood for Life and Death.

### **V. Orion, Pegasus**

Orion, the hunter, a giant famous for his beauty. Blinded by Oenopion (with whose daughter he was in love), he regained his sight by travelling east and gazing into the sunrise.

Pegasus, snowy white, with a mane of gold, the winged horse was the favourite of the muses as his hoof-marks caused their fountain of inspiration to start flowing.

## VI. The Milky Way

Seen by many cultures as the pathway along which the dead return to their true home in the immortal stars. Each star is a departed hero or loved one.

*Jonathan Dove*

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## EDWARD ELGAR 1857-1934

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### ***Variations on an Original Theme, 'Enigma'***

*Theme*

*Variation I: 'C.A.E.'*

*Variation II: 'H.D.S-P.'*

*Variation III: 'R.B.T.'*

*Variation IV: 'W.M.B.'*

*Variation V: 'R.P.A.'*

*Variation VI: 'Ysobel'*

*Variation VII: 'Troyte'*

*Variation VIII: 'W.N.'*

*Variation IX: 'Nimrod'*

*Variation X: Intermezzo 'Dorabella'*

*Variation XI: 'G.R.S.'*

*Variation XII: 'B.G.N.'*

*Variation XIII: Romanza \*\*\*\**

*Variation XIV: Finale 'E.D.U.'*

After a decade spent languishing on the fringes of England's increasingly confident and buoyant musical scene as the composer of politely admired choral works, Edward Elgar had begun to despair of ever receiving the recognition (and financial reward) he felt his music deserved.

As late as 1898 his despondency was threatening to overwhelm him. 'I am,' he confessed to one friend, 'very sick at heart over music'. Yet within a matter of months his fortunes had been transformed, his reputation as the musical laureate of the Edwardian age secured. The premieres of the *Enigma Variations* in 1899, *The Dream of Gerontius* the following year and the first of his *Pomp and Circumstance Marches* in 1901 transformed his standing and placed him at the very heart of the British musical establishment. Proof of such, if proof were needed by then, came with his knighthood just three years later.

The *Enigma Variations* was Elgar's most ambitious orchestral work to date. First performed in London in June 1899, it takes the form of a series of musical impressions conceived as a set of 14 *Variations on an Original Theme* (as Elgar's original title had it). Dedicated to 'my friends pictured within', it concludes with a final variation depicting the composer himself.

Why he gave it the title *Enigma* remains a riddle. Elgar himself resolutely refused to explain, insisting instead that 'Its "dark saying" must be left unguessed... the chief character never on stage'. More gnominically, he added: 'through and over the whole set another and larger theme "goes", but is not played... the principal Theme never appears'.

The conundrum at the music's heart continues to preoccupy scholars, the most recent theory – allying Elgar's anonymous theme to the opening of Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* of 1736 – attracting headlines as recently as 2019. Earlier 'solutions' suggest connections to the British national anthem, the popular Scottish Hogmanay song *Auld Lang Syne* and Beethoven's *Pathétique* Sonata. All – and yet none – seem wholly persuasive, the mystery at the *Enigma Variations'* indecipherable core remaining to add piquancy to its abiding poetry.

It begins in a mood of searching introspection with the G minor **Theme** on which the succeeding variations will be built, the immediate inversion of its opening bar – a sequence of two short and two long notes – and constant shifting between minor and major key hinting at currents stirring but yet to be felt beneath the music's surface.

What can be said about the *Enigma Variations* is that they are forged from and with love, the lyrical **Variation I** dedicated to ‘**C.A.E.**’, the composer’s wife of 10 years, Caroline Alice Elgar – ‘one whose life,’ the composer declared, ‘was a romantic and delicate inspiration’.

The ‘**H.D.S.-P.**’ remembered in **Variation II** is Hew David Steuart-Powell, an amateur pianist with whom Elgar often played in a trio alongside the cellist Basil George Nevinson. Parodying his friend’s pre-performance warming-up exercises, it playfully roots itself in a chromatic language designed, with tongue firmly in cheek, to gently lampoon his keyboard colleague.

Another amateur, this time the actor-manqué and Oxford don, Richard Baxter Townshend, is memorialised in **Variation III**, a sprightly *allegretto* that mimics the theatrical antics of ‘**R.B.T.**’ on stage as an old man.

There’s a comic edge, too, to the rumbustiously succinct **Variation IV** – the shortest of all the variations – a blustery brass- and percussion-led depiction of Townshend’s brother-in-law ‘**W.M.B.**’ (William Meath Baker), a Gloucestershire squire renowned for slamming doors behind him as he vacated rooms.

**Variation V**’s ‘**R.P.A.**’ was Richard P Arnold, son of the poet Matthew Arnold, whose pianistic abilities Elgar much admired, not least for ‘evading difficulties but suggesting in a mysterious way the real feeling’ of a particular piece. It leads, without pause, into **Variation VI**. Dedicated to ‘**Ysobel**’ (in reality Elgar’s viola student, Isabel Fitton) it both teases and tributes his pupil, the challenging crossing from fourth to second string it demands of the viola in its opening statement followed by a warmly affectionate aside.

The bracing *presto* ‘**Troyte**’ (**Variation VII**) pays homage to Elgar’s friend, the architect Arthur Troyte Griffith, its bustling energy owing something to Griffith’s blundering technique at the piano and to a thunder storm the pair were once forced to take refuge from.

And after the storm, the tranquillity of **Variation VIII**, ‘W.N.’ – Winifred Norbury, whose signature laugh can be heard within the graceful depiction of the 18th-century house she owned.

The *Enigma’s* most familiar passage, the sombre but noble *adagio* of **Variation IX** that carries the title ‘Nimrod’, is a heartfelt tribute to Elgar’s trusted publisher, Augustus J Jaeger. The title puns Jaeger’s surname with the German word for ‘hunter’, its opening bars discretely alluding to a theme in the *Pathétique* Sonata by Beethoven, whose music both men revered.

Dedicated to Dora Penny, an earlier claimant for the bachelor Elgar’s affections, ‘Dorabella’ (**Variation X**) is a bright, summer-breeze of a piece, delicately pastoral, unabashedly poetic and innocently affectionate as young love usually is.

The briskly accelerated **Variation XI**, ‘G.R.S.’ refers to the Hereford Cathedral organist George Robertson Sinclair, although, in truth, it is his ebullient bulldog, Dan, caught here in animated musical aspic as he tumbles down a bank into, and scrambles triumphantly out of, the River Wye, that is remembered here.

**Variation XII**, ‘B.G.N.’, is a heartfelt commemoration of the amateur cellist Basil George Nevinson – remembered by Elgar as ‘a serious and devoted friend’ – appropriately bookended by an evocative passage in solo cello.

Additional intrigue was injected late into the *Enigma Variations* by the dedication of **Variation XIII** to ‘\*\*\*’, whose identity remains uncertain save for Elgar’s admission that ‘the asterisks take the place of the name of a lady who was, at the time of composition, on a sea voyage’. A quotation from Mendelssohn’s *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage* in clarinet underlines the nautical connection. The obvious affection and pensive ‘what might have been’ quality of the piece suggests the likely dedicatee was Helen Weaver, who had broken off her engagement to the composer in 1884 immediately prior to emigrating to New Zealand.

The work concludes with a self-portrait in **Variation XIV, 'E.D.U.'**, a reference to Elgar's wife's pet name for the composer, 'Edu' (a diminution of the German *Eduard*). Tellingly, it weaves themes from two earlier variations – Alice, 'C.A.E.', and his publisher, Augustus J Jaeger, 'Nimrod' – into a boisterous, self-confident statement that suggests a recognition of his emotional and creative debts to both. Ending in a blaze of orchestral colour and energy, it reveals Elgar not at his most enigmatic, but, contrarily, at his most explicit in a stirring testament to love and friendship and the fortune they bring.

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