

Friends and Fate: Elgar's Enigma and Tchaikovsky's Fourth

Saturday, October 10, 2026 · 20:00 · Carnegie Hall

Kirill Petrenko, conductor

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	ELGAR 1857–1934 <i>Variations on an Original Theme, 'Enigma', Op. 36</i>	30'
2	TCHAIKOVSKY 1840–1893 <i>Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36</i>	44'
TOTAL MUSIC		74'

Edward Elgar

1857–1934

Variations on an Original Theme, 'Enigma', Op. 36

THE COMPOSER

Edward Elgar (1857–1934) was the composer who, more than any other, restored England to the front rank of European music after two centuries in which it had produced no figure of international stature. Largely self-taught, the son of a Worcester music-shop owner and organist, he made his way slowly from the provinces to national and then world fame, achieving his breakthrough in 1899 with the Enigma Variations. A late Romantic to his core, steeped in Wagner, Brahms and Richard Strauss yet unmistakably English in his blend of nobility, warmth and wistful melancholy, he gave his country a body of great orchestral music: two symphonies, concertos for violin and cello, the Enigma Variations, the oratorio The Dream of Gerontius and the Pomp and Circumstance marches. Knighted and laden with honours, he became the very emblem of Edwardian Britain, though his finest music reaches far beyond pomp into a deep, often autumnal expressivity. His wife Alice's death in 1920 effectively silenced him as a composer for his last years.

ABOUT THE WORK

In October 1898 Edward Elgar, then a forty-one-year-old provincial music teacher in Worcestershire with a modest reputation, came home tired after a day of giving violin lessons and sat down at the piano. As his wife Alice later recalled, he began idly playing a melody that caught her attention, and he started to amuse her by improvising

30 minutes

variations on it in the manner of their friends: how this one or that one would play it. Out of that domestic game grew the *Variations on an Original Theme*, Op. 36, the work that made Elgar a composer of international standing.

The score is dedicated “to my friends pictured within”, and each of its fourteen variations is headed with initials or a nickname standing for one of the people in Elgar’s circle: his wife (“C.A.E.”), amateur musicians and neighbours, a young woman who stammered slightly (“Dorabella”), the organist of Hereford Cathedral, and at the end the composer himself (“E.D.U.”, from Alice’s pet name for him, “Edu”). The most famous of them, “Nimrod”, portrays Augustus Jaeger, Elgar’s editor at the publisher Novello and his closest musical confidant. *Jäger* is German for “hunter”, and Nimrod is the mighty hunter of the Bible. Elgar said the variation recalled a conversation in which Jaeger had spoken about the slow movements of Beethoven.

Then there is the enigma. Elgar wrote that “through and over the whole set another and larger theme ‘goes’, but is not played”, and he never revealed what it was. For more than a century people have proposed solutions, from familiar tunes such as “Auld Lang Syne” or “Rule, Britannia!” to more abstract ideas, and none has been generally accepted. Elgar seems to have enjoyed the mystery, and it has certainly done the work no harm.

The first performance was given in London at St James’s Hall on 19 June 1899, conducted by Hans Richter, one of the most celebrated conductors of the day. Its success was immediate. At Jaeger’s urging Elgar then extended the finale, and it is this longer version that is always played today. Within a few years the *Enigma Variations* had been performed across Europe, and the work that began as an improvisation at the piano became one of the cornerstones of the English orchestral repertoire.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Theme (Andante). The melody is played softly by the strings: short, hesitant phrases broken by rests, in G minor, with a warmer major-key middle section. Remember its shape, because every variation that follows is built from it.

Variations I–V. The first variation, “C.A.E.”, is a tender portrait of Elgar’s wife Alice. It is followed by a series of quick, contrasting characters: the nervous pianist of “H.D.S-P.” with its skitter-

ing strings, the gentle grace of “R.B.T.”, the explosive energy of “W.M.B.” (a country squire who would slam the door as he left), and the serious, then playful “R.P.A.”.

Variations VI–VIII. “Ysobel” features a solo viola, portraying a viola-playing friend. “Troyte” is a thunderous, rhythmic outburst full of timpani: an architect friend’s clumsy attempts to play the piano. “W.N.” is elegant and graceful, an evocation of a country house and its owner.

Variation IX, “Nimrod”. The heart of the work. It begins very quietly in the strings and grows slowly, over only a few minutes, into a noble, radiant climax before fading away. Listen for the way the melody keeps rising, phrase by phrase: it is one of the most moving passages in English music, and it is often played on its own at occasions of national mourning.

Variations X–XIII. “Dorabella” is a light, fluttering intermezzo, with woodwinds imitating the slight stammer of the young woman it portrays. “G.R.S.” depicts the organist George Robertson Sinclair’s bulldog, Dan, falling into the River Wye, paddling upstream and barking on the bank. “B.G.N.” is a warm cello melody for a cellist friend. In “***”, *listen for the clarinet quoting Mendelssohn’s overture Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage** over a soft drum roll, suggesting the throb of a ship’s engines: a portrait of a friend who was travelling abroad by sea.

Variation XIV, “E.D.U.” (Finale). Elgar’s self-portrait, bold and confident, bringing back the themes of Alice and Nimrod, the two people who supported him most. Listen for the organ joining the full orchestra in the final pages for a grand, triumphant close.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

1840–1893

Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36

THE COMPOSER

Tchaikovsky was Russia’s first truly international composer and, in his own lifetime, one of the most beloved figures in European music. Born in 1840 in Votkinsk, he trained as a civil servant before turning to music in his early twenties, studying composition at the newly founded St. Petersburg Conservatory. He began teaching harmony at the newly opened Moscow Conservatory in 1866, and over the following twenty-five years produced six symphon-

44 minutes

ies, three ballets (*Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Nutcracker*), a string of operas, numerous concertos, and a wealth of chamber and song repertoire that has never left the international stage.

Tchaikovsky was a man of intense feeling, much of it conflicted. Homosexual in an unforgiving Russian society, often paralysed by depression and self-doubt, he poured the full weight of his emotional life into his music. He died in St. Petersburg in 1893, days after conducting the premiere of his Sixth Symphony. The official cause was cholera, though the precise circumstances of his death have been debated ever since.

ABOUT THE WORK

Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony was written in 1877, the most turbulent year of his life. In the spring he entered into a hasty marriage with a former student, Antonina Milyukova, in the hope, as his letters make clear, that it would silence gossip about his homosexuality. The marriage was a disaster from the start. Within weeks Tchaikovsky had fled, suffered what seems to have been a nervous collapse and left Russia to recover in Switzerland and Italy. It was there that he finished the symphony.

In the same year a very different relationship began. Nadezhda von Meck, a wealthy widow who loved his music, started writing to him and soon gave him an annual allowance that let him devote himself to composition. The two never met, but over thirteen years they exchanged hundreds of letters. Tchaikovsky dedicated the Fourth Symphony to her ("to my best friend"), and in a long letter he described its hidden programme in detail. The loud fanfare that opens the work, he wrote, represents "Fate, the fatal power which prevents our hopes of happiness from being realised", a force that "hangs over our heads like the sword of Damocles". The rest of the symphony describes the struggle between that force and the attempt to escape it through dreams, memories, and finally the joy of other people.

Tchaikovsky himself was not entirely comfortable with his explanation. He wrote to his former pupil Sergei Taneyev that the symphony was of course a programme work, but a programme that could not be put into words. The music, however, speaks very clearly. The first performance took place in Moscow on 22 February 1878 (10 February in the Russian calendar), conducted by Nikolai Rubinstein, while the composer was still abroad.

The Fourth is the first of Tchaikovsky's three great last symphonies, and the one that most openly marries the drama of his ballets and operas to the symphonic tradition. Its first movement alone is almost as long as the other three combined; its slow movement is a lament of great tenderness; its scherzo is a famous experiment with orchestral

sound, with the strings playing pizzicato throughout; and its finale is an explosion of energy built on a Russian folk song. Heard after Elgar's gallery of friends, it offers the other side of the coin: a symphony about solitude, and about finding consolation among others.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

First movement (Andante sostenuto; Moderato con anima).

It begins with the "Fate" fanfare: horns and bassoons, then trumpets, blaring out a harsh, rhythmic call in F minor. Remember it: it will return at every crucial moment of the symphony. The main part of the movement is a restless, limping waltz theme in the strings, which Tchaikovsky marked "in the movement of a waltz". A gentler second idea, introduced by the clarinet, suggests a dream of happiness. But each time the music reaches a climax, the Fate fanfare breaks in and destroys it. Listen for the enormous final climax and the fierce, driven coda.

Second movement (Andantino in modo di canzona). A melancholy song, played first by a solo oboe over plucked strings. Tchaikovsky described it as the mood that comes over you in the evening, when you sit alone and tired and remember the past. Listen for the warmer middle section, which rises to a passionate climax, before the oboe's song returns, taken up by bassoon at the end.

Third movement (Scherzo: Pizzicato ostinato; Allegro). One of the most original movements Tchaikovsky wrote. The strings play pizzicato (plucking with their fingers) from start to finish, with no bows at all. In the middle section the woodwinds enter with a jaunty peasant dance, and then the brass with a distant military march. Listen for the way the three groups (plucked strings, woodwinds and brass) are combined at the end, in a sparkling game of question and answer.

Fourth movement (Finale: Allegro con fuoco). A sudden blast of sound from the whole orchestra. Between the cascades, listen for the woodwinds introducing a simple Russian folk song, "In the field a birch tree stood", which Tchaikovsky treats in a series of variations. Tchaikovsky's idea: if you cannot find joy in yourself, go out among the people and share in theirs. Just when the celebration is at its height, the Fate fanfare returns from the first movement, like a warning. But this time it does not have the last word: the folk festivities resume and the symphony ends in a blaze of F major.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Portrait of Elgar**

Michael Kennedy, Oxford University Press 1987

Michael Kennedy's readable life of Elgar traces the friendships behind the *Enigma Variations*, the work that made Elgar's name in 1899.

ACCESSIBLE **Tchaikovsky: The Man and His Music**

David Brown, Faber and Faber 2007

A one-volume life of Tchaikovsky by the author of the four-volume study, with a close guide to the Fourth Symphony and the crisis years in which he wrote it.

DEEPER **Elgar: Enigma Variations**

Julian Rushton, Cambridge University Press 1999

A Cambridge Music Handbook devoted to the *Enigma Variations*: their origins, the friends pictured in each variation and the famous unsolved riddle.

SOURCES

1. Berliner Philharmoniker, Kirill Petrenko, 10 October 2026, Carnegie Hall. <https://www.carnegiehall.org/Calendar/2026/10/10/Berliner-Philharmoniker-0800PM>
2. Berliner Philharmoniker/Kirill Petrenko, Bachtrack. <https://bachtrack.com/22/291/view/443947>
3. Edward Elgar: Enigma Variations, Op. 36 (programme note by Malte Krasting), Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/programme-notes/edward-elgar-enigma-variations-on-an-original-theme-op-36>
4. Enigma Variations, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enigma_Variations
5. Variations on an Original Theme ("Enigma"), op. 36, Runyan Program Notes. https://www.runyanprogramnotes.com/program_note/variations-original-theme-enigma-op-36/
6. Elgar's Enigma Variations, Mobile Symphony Orchestra. <https://mobilesymphony.org/news/elgars-enigma-variations>
7. Symphony No. 4 (Tchaikovsky), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._4_\(Tchaikovsky\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._4_(Tchaikovsky))
8. Pyotr Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36 (programme note by Malte Krasting), Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/programme-notes/pyotr-tchaikovsky-symphony-no-4-in-f-minor-op-36/>
9. Symphony No. 4, Tchaikovsky Research. https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Symphony_No_4
10. Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36, Hollywood Bowl. <https://www.hollywoodbowl.com/musicdb/pieces/3998/symphony-no-4-in-f-minor-op-36>
11. Portrait of Elgar, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780192840172>
12. Tchaikovsky: The Man and His Music, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780571231959>
13. Elgar: Enigma Variations, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521636377>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/bp-2026-10-10-petrenko>

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