

BERLINER PHILHARMONIKER

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

30 minutes

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 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.

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 skittering 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

44 minutes

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.

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.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

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

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