

Pappano: Elgar's Enigma Variations and Mahler's Fifth

Thursday, June 11, 2026 · 19:00 · Barbican
Antonio Pappano, conductor

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	ELGAR 1857–1934 <i>Variations on an Original Theme, 'Enigma', Op. 36</i>	30'
2	MAHLER 1860–1911 <i>Symphony No. 5</i>	70'
TOTAL MUSIC		100'

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

Elgar's 'Enigma' Variations is the work that made him famous overnight and remains one of the best-loved of all English orchestral works: a set of fourteen variations on an original theme, each a musical portrait of a friend or family member. Completed in 1899, it grew out of a charming domestic moment: improvising at the piano one

30 minutes

evening, Elgar played a tune and then began varying it in the manner of various friends, amusing his wife by sketching their personalities in music. From that game came this affectionate, brilliantly orchestrated gallery of portraits of 'my friends pictured within,' each headed with initials or a nickname. The result is both deeply personal and universally appealing, full of warmth, humour, tenderness and nobility, and it announced a major new symphonic voice in British music.

The 'enigma' of the title has two layers. The first is simply that each variation is a coded portrait of a real person (their identities are now well known). The second is a genuine, unsolved puzzle: Elgar hinted that the theme itself is a counterpoint to another, famous melody that is never actually heard, a 'hidden tune' running 'through and over the whole set.' He never revealed what it was, and musicians have argued about it ever since (suggestions range from 'Auld Lang Syne' to 'Rule, Britannia'). The mystery only adds to the work's charm. It makes a warm, characterful first half, and on this occasion carries extra poignancy, the concert being dedicated to the memory of the LSO's Conductor Laureate Michael Tilson Thomas.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen first to the 'Enigma' theme itself: a wistful, slightly melancholy melody in the strings, with a distinctive falling-and-rising shape, which then undergoes its fourteen transformations. Each variation has its own character; listen for how Elgar conjures a different personality in each.

A few highlights to listen for: the very first variation ('C.A.E.'), a tender portrait of Elgar's wife Alice; the boisterous, leaping 'Troyte' (a friend's hopeless attempts at the piano); the gentle, watery 'Dorabella' with its fluttering woodwinds (depicting a young woman's slight stammer, affectionately); and above all the great central variation, '**Nimrod**': a profound, slowly building hymn of friendship (portraying Elgar's friend A. J. Jaeger), one of the most moving pieces in all music, often played at memorials and ceremonies. Listen for the way it grows from hushed strings to a glorious, noble climax. The finale ('E.D.U.', Elgar's own self-portrait) gathers up earlier themes and builds, with organ and full orchestra, to a triumphant, life-affirming close. Throughout, savour Elgar's masterly orchestration and his gift for melody, warmth and nobility.

Gustav Mahler

1860–1911

Symphony No. 5

THE COMPOSER

Gustav Mahler was born on July 7, 1860, in the Bohemian village of Kaliště (now in the Czech Republic), the second of fourteen children in a Jewish family. Death was a constant presence in his childhood: many of his siblings died in infancy. This early acquaintance with mortality would permeate his music throughout his life.

Mahler's prodigious musical talent emerged early: at four he discovered his grandparents' piano and took to it at once. At fifteen he entered the Vienna Conservatory, and he later turned to conducting to earn his living, reserving composition for summer holidays. His conducting career was meteoric: by 1897, at age thirty-seven, he had become artistic director of the Vienna Court Opera, where his innovative productions and exacting standards made him one of the most celebrated opera conductors of his era.

As a composer, Mahler worked on a monumental scale. His nine completed symphonies (plus an unfinished tenth) and five song cycles represent a titanic achievement, bridging nineteenth-century Romanticism and twentieth-century modernism. Yet during his lifetime, his conducting reputation far outstripped his recognition as a composer. It was only after his death in 1911, and particularly after 1945, that Mahler's compositions gained the worldwide acclaim they enjoy today.

ABOUT THE WORK

Mahler's Fifth Symphony is one of his greatest and most popular, a vast, five-movement journey from the depths of a funeral march to a blaze of triumphant joy. Composed in 1901–02, it marks a new phase in his work: he set aside the songs, voices and explicit programmes of his earlier 'Wunderhorn' symphonies and wrote a purely orchestral symphony of immense scale and ambition, relying on the orchestra alone to carry an overwhelming emotional and spiritual argument. It was also composed during the happiest period of his life (he met and married the beautiful Alma Schindler while working on it), and the symphony's progress from darkness to radiant light reflects that turn toward love and hope.

The symphony is built in three large parts spanning five movements, tracing an arc from tragedy to exultation. At its heart, famously, lies the Adagietto, a hushed, achingly beautiful slow movement for strings and harp alone, widely believed to be a wordless love-letter to Alma, and made universally famous by Visconti's film *Death in Venice*. From the shattering trumpet fanfare and funeral march of the opening to the exuberant, life-affirming counterpoint of the finale, it is a work of tremendous emotional range and orchestral brilliance: a

fitting, and on this occasion deeply moving, conclusion to a concert dedicated to the memory of Michael Tilson Thomas, a great Mahlerian.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The symphony falls into three parts. **Part One** (movements 1–2): listen for the very opening: a solo trumpet sounding a fateful fanfare (echoing Beethoven’s Fifth) that launches a grim funeral march, full of grief and shattering outbursts. The second movement is stormy and turbulent, wrestling with the first’s despair, but listen for the blazing brass chorale that flares up like a vision of triumph, only to collapse, the victory not yet won.

Part Two is the gigantic central **Scherzo**, the symphony’s pivot from darkness toward light. Listen for the exuberant Ländler (Austrian country dance) rhythms, the prominent solo horn (a real concerto-like role), and the sheer life and energy bursting out. **Part Three** (movements 4–5): listen for the famous **Adagietto**, scored for strings and harp alone: slow, tender, intimate and heart-melting (Mahler’s love-song to Alma); let its hushed beauty envelop you. Then, without a break, the **Finale** bursts in, joyful, intricate and contrapuntal, full of bustling fugal energy and rustic good humour. Listen for how Mahler brings back the brass chorale from the second movement, now in full triumph, and drives the whole symphony to an exultant, life-affirming close: darkness conquered, joy attained.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Mahler: A Biography**

Jonathan Carr, Overlook Press 1998

A readable biography of Mahler that sets the Fifth Symphony, with its famous Adagietto, in the years of his marriage to Alma.

ACCESSIBLE **Portrait of Elgar**

Michael Kennedy, Oxford University Press 1987

Michael Kennedy’s study of Elgar’s life and music, with an account of the Enigma Variations and the friends portrayed in them.

DEEPER **Elgar: Enigma Variations**

Julian Rushton, Cambridge University Press 1999

A handbook devoted to the Enigma Variations: their genesis, the friends behind each variation, and the music itself.

SOURCES

1. London Symphony Orchestra/Sir Antonio Pappano: Elgar's Enigma Variations & Mahler 5, Barbican. <https://www.barbican.org.uk/whats-on/2026/event/london-symphony-orchestrasir-antonio-pappano-0>
2. Elucidated Elgar and marinated Mahler: Pappano and the LSO at the Barbican Hall, Seen and Heard International. <https://seenandheard-international.com/2026/06/elucidated-elgar-and-marinated-mahler-pappano-and-the-lso-at-the-barbican-hall/>
3. Enigma Variations, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enigma_Variations
4. Enigma Variations, Op. 36, LA Phil. <https://www.laphil.com/works/enigma-variations-op-36>
5. Programme note: Enigma, Variations on an Original Theme, Op. 36, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/programme-notes/edward-elgar-enigma-variations-on-an-original-theme-op-36/>
6. Symphony No. 5 (Mahler), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._5_\(Mahler\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._5_(Mahler))
7. Symphony No. 5, LA Phil. <https://www.laphil.com/works/symphony-no-5-mahler>
8. Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 5, Nashville Symphony. <https://www.nashvillesymphony.org/classical-program-notes/gustav-mahler-symphony-no-5/>
9. Mahler: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780879518028>
10. Portrait of Elgar, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780192840172>
11. Elgar: Enigma Variations, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521636377>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/lso-2026-06-11-pappano>

Version 3, 30 September 2026