

Elgar – Enigma Variations

Listening

Full piece ►

Theme ►

Variation 4 ►

Variation 9 ►

Variation 11 ►

Context

Sir Edward Elgar was a British composer born in 1857. He is one of the most famous British composers writing at the end of the Romantic period and into the twentieth century.

In 1898, Elgar wrote a set of musical pieces called *Enigma Variations*, completed in 1899. He based it on a mysterious theme (that's the 'enigma') and then created 14 variations, each one a musical portrait of a friend or loved one. In the concert we're going to explore:

- **Theme** – the musical idea Elgar used for all the variations
- **Variation 4 ("W.M.B.")** – lively, bouncy, and a bit cheeky
- **Variation 9 ("Nimrod")** – slow, noble, emotional (and Elgar's most famous)
- **Variation 11 ("G.R.S.")** – elegant and graceful, with a stormy middle section

You'll hear the music of the theme again in the variations, but the theme will use the elements of music in different ways to create variety.

Remembering the work we did in the Concert Etiquette section – remember to only clap at the end of Variation 11, when the overall piece finishes in this performance.

This piece was played by the Philharmonia in 1995 in their first concert at Bedford's Corn Exchange, marking the start of an exciting partnership which continues some 30 years later.

Short 5-minute task: Matching Moods

This could be done using flash cards, a central whiteboard, individual whiteboards or paper around the classroom. The challenge is to display different moods and ask students to select the mood they think is being represented by the music they are hearing. If you have space (for example, use of a hall) this is a great one to get students moving around the space.

Some moods to consider using:

Calm, Proud, Cheeky, Graceful, Restless, Angry, Nostalgic

Play short (5-10 second) extracts from the theme and 3 different variations and discuss as a class. Remember, each of the extracts is based on the same theme but uses the musical elements to create variety.

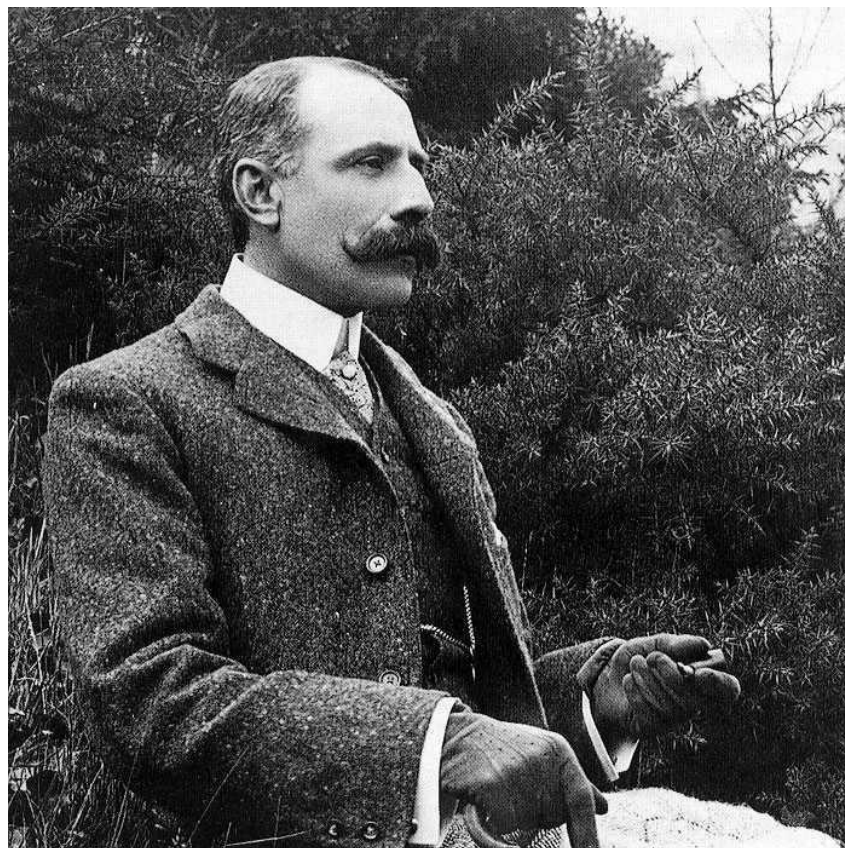
If you want a practical way to achieve this task, ask pupils to dance and move to the music. What links can they make between their movements and the music they hear?

Stretch and Challenge

- Introduce more complex descriptive words to expand vocabulary
- Ask students to justify their reasons using musical vocabulary ('I think it is restless because the tempo changes from slow to fast to slow')

Support and Scaffold

- Use more appropriate vocabulary, perhaps linked to other learning that has taken place to ensure students can access the task.



Medium 20-minute task: Listening to Variations

Having established that the variations have different moods linked to Elgar's friends that they represent, this task takes a well-known tune (Happy Birthday – after all the Philharmonia is turning 80!) and asks students to consider how they might change the melody to create variations, listening to some examples. This will help to equip students to create their own variations in the next task, should you wish to explore that with them.

This theme is well-known – try singing it as a class and following along with the music above.

However, what if you were to create variations on this melody? The composer Heidrich did just that, creating variations on this famous theme in the style of different composers and themes.

Check out the versions based on the Polka (6:40), Film Music (7:34), Ragtime (8:31) and Tango (9:03) to hear how the famous melody has been varied.

[Listen to the music here ►](#)

Polka	Film music	Ragtime	Tango
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Starts with a pop – like a cork popping from a bottle Tempo changes Melody is ornamented Waltz accompaniment – omp – pah – pah 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cinematic sustained strings Lots of pauses Chromatic accompaniment and clashes Expansive high pitched violin line 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ragtime accompaniment – stride bass (low/high chords) Off beat rhythms – syncopation Use of pizzicato (plucking strings) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minor key Dramatic Pauses Syncopated rhythms Tempo changes

How might your class create a variation to this famous melody? See what they can create using their voices to help create variations.

Stretch and Challenge

- If students have access to music technology (e.g. through a phone at home) they might want to explore making remixes of a melody of their choice to learn how to create variety. Programmes like GarageBand (Apple) or BandLab (Android) are popular free apps where students can experiment with sounds and creating variations.

Support and Scaffold

- Give students more multiple-choice questions – e.g. loud/quiet, slow/fast, happy/sad initially to support their analysis
- Encourage students to use pre-recorded loops if using Apps

Longer 45-minute task: Musical Links

This task asks students to create a musical representation of either themselves, or a friend or relative, similar to the way Elgar wrote his variations. You might even try to do this for animals, as that can be a bit easier to articulate (consider listening to *The Carnival of the Animals* if you are planning on asking for animal portraits!)

This encourages students to think about the character of the person/animal they are describing musically, and then to link to the musical elements to aid their composition.

Choose:

- **Mood:** Is the person loud, funny, quiet, dreamy?

Then consider how to achieve this mood musically:

- **Tempo:** fast/slow?
- **Pitch:** high or low sounds?
- **Instruments:** what instrument suits their personality?
- **Dynamics:** loud/quiet?
- **Rhythm:** sustained chords or dramatic beats?
- **Melody:** smooth (like a scale) or jumpy with leaps between notes?

Students should then plan their composition and have a go trying to put some ideas together using the equipment you have available in your setting.

Stretch and Challenge

- Encourage more able students to use the theme from Elgar's piece for the basis of their composition
- Ask students to notate their ideas using graphic score
- Encourage structure – e.g. ABA with a contrasting middle section

Support and Scaffold

- Encourage students to use the opening bar of 'Happy Birthday' to start their composition
- If using animals to support their composition, compare Saint-Saens's *Carnival of the Animals*
 - Elephant (using the low double bass to suggest a big animal)
 - Fossils (using the xylophone to suggest a brittle material)

Listening Guide

The composer notes here have audio files linked to the score and description of the music which might be useful for more able learners:

Composer notes ►

Timings	Musical features to listen out for
Theme	The first theme is slow and in a minor key – it sounds emotional The second theme feels more exciting, rising in the violas and clarinets The first theme returns with a new melody to develop the music.
Variation 4	This is faster and full of energy and still in a minor key. This variation ('WMB') is dedicated to William Meath Baker. When Elgar visited, Baker was known to charge in and out of rooms making lots of noise.
Variation 9	This is the most famous variation and uses the first theme only. It is called Nimrod as Nimrod was a great hunter in the Bible, and it is remembering Elgar's friend August Jaeger; Jaeger is also a German word meaning 'hunter' hence the title. The music is slow, in a major key, with focus on the strings and a rousing climax at the end.
Variation 11	This variation - 'GRS' - does not actually link to George Sinclair but his dog, Dan, who fell into a river and rejoiced as he managed to get out. Can you hear this in the music? The music is fast combining the two themes from the opening freely.

Links to other subjects

This piece can link well to these other areas of the school curriculum:

Subject	Links
English	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Character descriptions can be linked to imaginative writing or poetry creation
History	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Elgar was writing in the late Victorian era, and this piece could be linked to a historical study of this period
Computing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">If using music technology (GarageBand or BandLab) this could be linked to computing lessons, if this happens in your setting