

The background of the entire image is a light-colored, veined marble surface. On the left, a man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a dark blue jacket and light blue trousers, stands in profile facing right. On the right, an older man with grey hair, wearing a dark suit jacket over a patterned shirt, stands in profile facing left. The text is centered between them.

ELGAR

Cello Concerto
Enigma Variations

Giovanni Sollima *cello*

**ORCHESTRA FILARMONICA
DELLA CALABRIA**

Filippo Arlia *conductor*

Edward Elgar 1857-1934
Cello Concerto • Enigma Variations

1. Pomp and Circumstance Op.39 March No.1	6'45	Variations on an Original Theme for Orchestra Op.36 "Enigma"	
Cello Concerto in E minor Op.85		6. Thema	1'53
2. I. Adagio	7'47	7. Variation I – C. A. E.	2'05
3. II. Lento	4'25	8. Variation II – H. D. S. - P.	1'00
4. III. Adagio	4'55	9. Variation III – R. B. T.	1'36
5. IV. Allegro	11'00	10. Variation IV – W. M. B.	0'33
		11. Variation V – R. P. A.	2'26
		12. Variation VI – YSOBEL	1'19
		13. Variation VII – TROYTE	1'11
		14. Variation VIII – W.N.	2'18
		15. Variation IX – NIMROD	5'14
		16. Variation X – DORABELLA	2'47
		17. Variation XI – G. R. S.	1'09
		18. Variation XII – B. G. N.	2'35
		19. Variation XIII – ROMANZA	2'58
		20. Variation XIV – E.D.U Finale	6'40

Giovanni Sollima *cello*
Orchestra Filarmonica della Calabria
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Breast-beating and soul-baring: Edwardian Elgar

The two major works on this album effectively book-end Elgar's career. Until the Variations on an Original Theme appeared in 1899 he had been a provincial composer, earning a living as a violinist and teacher into his 40s. While Elgar had 15 years left to live when he completed the Cello Concerto in 1919 he was a largely spent creative force after this time. A number of 'incidental' projects were undertaken, sketched out and occasionally completed such as the *Severn Suite* for brass, but the creative blaze required to sustain a long-form structure had dwindled to a fitful flame, and the pages of the Third Symphony required Anthony Payne's creative intervention, 65 years on, to knit them together.

Elgar dropped any number of hints and laid all kinds of snares for friends, commentators and biographers seeking to solve the 'Enigma' code of his variations – *Auld Lang Syne*? The 'Meditation' from his once-popular oratorio *The Light of Life*? The best musical fit seems to be the one put forward by Joseph Cooper, of the second theme to the slow movement of Mozart's 'Prague' Symphony, especially when the image has been passed down to us of Elgar the inveterate cyclist taking one of his lady-friends up into the Malvern Hills with a gramophone and a packet of 78s, and then lying back (presumably not on a slope) and letting the strains of Mozart mingle with the song of the song of the skylarks and the hum of the bees.

Once Elgar had begun developing the theme which his wife Alice first heard him fiddling about with on the piano in October 1898, work proceeded with unusual rapidity. Notwithstanding a further revision and extension to the autobiographical finale, the score was complete less than four months later, and dedicated to 'my friends pictured within'. After its first performance in London under Hans Richter in June 1899, the Variations won belated acclaim for Elgar, and became his calling-card for success across Europe and America. Thereafter he wrote about them with the sensitivity, bordering on touchiness, which marked so many of his dealings with the outside world.

In 1911, for example: ‘This work, commenced in a spirit of humour & continued in deep seriousness, contains sketches of the composer’s friends. It may be understood that these personages comment or reflect on the original theme & each one attempts a solution of the Enigma, for so the theme is called. The sketches are not ‘portraits’ but each variation contains a distinct idea founded on some particular personality or perhaps on some incident known only to two people. This is the basis of the composition, but the work may be listened to as a ‘piece of music’ apart from any extraneous consideration.’

Even taking their face value into account, Elgar’s comments are evidently designed to deflect the accusation that he was writing ‘programme music’ with, by inference, an unacknowledged debt to the example of Richard Strauss. In this same year Arturo Toscanini introduced Italian audiences to Elgar’s music, and continued to perform the Variations throughout his career. Then in 1912, introducing his setting of Arthur O’Shaughnessy’s ode *The Music Makers* – already a deeply retrospective work all of 13 years later – Elgar remarked that the theme expressed ‘when written (in 1898) my sense of the loneliness of the artist as described in the first six lines of the Ode, and to me, it still embodies that sense.’

At any rate, the major-minor, dappled quality of the theme – shared with so many Elgarian melodies to come – seems to owe something to the ‘Woodland Interlude’ of his recently completed cantata *Caractacus*. The three main personalities embodied by the subsequent variations are the composer himself, rising triumphant at the close, his devoted wife Alice depicted at the start, and his publisher and friend August Jaeger, the subject of ‘Nimrod’ – as a ‘solemn, wholesome, hearty old dear’ according to the composer, and not at all in the elegiac spirit of the threnody often heard.

A second tier of close friends – whose music surfaces subtly outside the variations dedicated to them – includes Dora Penny, ‘Dorabella’, the shyly stuttering violist, and the cellist Basil Nevinson, ‘BGN’, with whom Elgar played piano trios (along

with Hew David Steuart-Powell, subject of the second variation with its perhaps intentionally awkward writing for the violins). GRS famously represents not Sinclair, the organist of Worcester Cathedral, but his dog Dan, whose tearabout character crops up elsewhere in Elgar’s work (Sinclair’s score of *Caractacus* bears an annotation in Elgar’s hand at one point, ‘Dan falls down the stairs’).

Elgar now speaks to audiences across the world in a universal tongue; we have come far from the days of the (possibly apocryphal) South American programme note for his *Cockaigne* Overture, which informed its audience that the music depicts the ravages wrought by the homonymic intoxicant on the English capital. And yet the ‘local’ character of the music insists upon itself. Do timpanists beyond British shores know to play the roll accompanying the clarinet solo of the *Romanza* (an enigma in itself, probably wishing safe voyage abroad to Lady Mary Lygon, another of Elgar’s unfulfilled loves) with a 50-pence piece, in order to evoke the sound of a ship’s engine?

What is it that makes French music French and English music English? Rather than a DNA map of definite characteristics, it’s a more subtle and often instinctively understood tangle of influences and preconceptions. Whereas the subtle and fluid orchestration of the Variations places it in the lineage of contemporary masterpieces such as Ravel’s orchestration of *Pictures at an Exhibition*, and Strauss’s *Don Juan*, there is no mistaking the English identity of the first *Pomp and Circumstance* March (1901).

‘I’ve got a tune that’ll knock ’em dead,’ Elgar first announced when he came up with it, and yet in time, rather like the Variations, he felt defensive about the very success of the piece, and its inimitable vein of jumpy, prickly yet exultant pride that runs through its companions as if through the very blood of his fellow Englishmen. ‘I know that there are lots of people who like to celebrate events with music,’ he said. ‘To these people I have given tunes. Is that wrong? Why should I write a fugue or something that won’t appeal to anyone, when the people yearn for things which can stir them?’

During his lifetime, Elgar's mastery of conducting played a significant role in stirring a sense of that yearning in foreign audiences. One of many European tours found the Elgars in the Belgian seaside town of Oostend in August 1908. Edward conducted *In the South, Sea Pictures*, the *Wand of Youth* Suite No 1, the 'Enigma' Variations and finally the Triumphal March from *Caractacus*. One ovation followed another, then the orchestra spontaneously played God save the King, and the 7,000-strong audience rose to its feet: 'most stirring & affecting, proud to be English', Alice wrote into her diary.

Perhaps through the sheer dearth of alternatives in their attenuated concerto repertoire, solo cellists have never exhibited the squeamishness of other non-English musicians when faced with Elgar's music. Of the last century's notable soloists, only Mstislav Rostropovich seems to have given the Cello Concerto a wide berth. In fact Pablo Casals was at one stage the intended soloist for a Cello Concerto by Elgar, when the Leeds Festival committee of 1913 were discussing their commission of the composer for a new piece. However, the Catalan cellist's fee of 125 guineas was deemed prohibitive, and in the end Elgar produced his 'symphonic study' *Falstaff*.

What is certain that any such concerto written in 1913 would have been an alien creature to the withdrawn, introverted masterpiece he produced in the wake of the First World War's inferno. The mood of fatalistic pessimism he was in by 1919 is captured in a letter to Alice Stuart-Wortley: 'Terrible gun-firing, raid, etc. etc.... I am not well and the place is so noisy & I do not sleep. The guns are the quietest things here. I long for the country & Stoke. I think all the time of it – and you. I have been thinking also so much of our lost festivals – no more music . . . Everything good & nice & clean & fresh & sweet is far away – never to return.'

The pared-down nature of the orchestration, required by any sympathetically written concerto for the instrument, complemented a vein of expression that had in any case become progressively more slender and refined through the course of Elgar's career. This stylistic evolution had inevitably affected the image of Elgar in the popular imagination; the public wanted more 'stout and steaky' tunes after the

fashion of Cockaigne and Pomp and Circumstance, and Elgar was no longer in any mood to supply them, yet he was acutely sensitive to any loss of regard, and the cool reception accorded to the Second Symphony in 1913 had cut him to the quick.

At its premiere in October 1919, the Cello Concerto hardly fared any better, though lack of rehearsal time rather than audience sympathy was the likely cause. Nevertheless, even the form of the Concerto – superficially conventional along a four-movement symphonic design – is imbued with nostalgia and an acute awareness of what is lost and irrecoverable. The first movement ruminates on its ideas rather than developing them; Elgar pursues his Scherzo idiom of elusive harmonies half-lit instrumentation to extremes in the fleeting Scherzo before ending the brief if aching slow movement on a harmonic question mark; and the finale's initial sense of purpose is lost at length in the melancholic introspection which culminates in the soloist's cadenza-memory of the opening movement. Even more than the Dvořák Concerto at the same point, the coda embodies the stiffest of upper lips and the most forced of formal resolutions.

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Uno storico molto noto, che alla Calabria e alle sue intricate vicende nel tempo ha dedicato gran parte dell'attività di ricerca, era solito dire che natura e cultura hanno diviso i calabresi tra loro e con il resto del mondo, confinando le loro storie ai margini della storia. “Fino a quando la natura ha dispiegato sull'uomo tutto il suo potere incoercibile” – questo è stato il giudizio dello storico – “è risultato difficile per l'uomo, che non fosse aiutato da forze e progetti sovraindividuali, resistere e vincere e attuare il bello, il razionale, il duraturo”. Più facile, invece, lasciarsi sopraffare da un percepibile senso di approssimativa e caduca provvisorietà. E di inerziale stanchezza. “Effetti infelici”, dirà ancora lo storico, “di una geografia e di una storia anch'esse infelici”. Arduo, invero, non essere d'accordo con il giudizio, e il relativo metro, di Augusto Placanica.

D'altronde, a confermarne la bontà è proprio la rappresentazione abituale che di questa terra e dei suoi abitanti hanno lasciato nei loro diari i viaggiatori stranieri dei secoli passati. Almeno quelli giunti in Calabria, coraggiosamente sfidando il giudizio di chi invece - come ad esempio Creuze de Lesser - riteneva che “L'Europe finit à Naples, et même elle y finit assez mal. La Calabre, la Sicilie, tout le rest est de l'Afrique”. Marginali, dunque, nel tempo e nello spazio: “niente è più pittoresco di un calabrese in cui ci si imbatta nella curva di una strada, nelle radure di un bosco”, dirà Stendhal nelle pagine in cui racconta il viaggio da Milano a Reggio Calabria.

E tuttavia, se le suggestioni poetiche di un altro grande scrittore intriso di Calabria come Leonida Repaci hanno un qualche valore, quella natura e quella cultura, con i loro effetti negativi, devono essere ricondotte ad una fonte originaria: sono invero la perfida vendetta armata dal diavolo per tormentare il riposo divino, ormai troppo compiaciuto per essere riuscito a creare il più bell'angolo dell'orbe. Ma esse non rappresentano né una condanna immutabile e neppure una immutabile condizione dell'essere. Infatti, risvegliato dal sonno, osservata “in tutta la sua vastità la rovina recata alla creatura prediletta”, il Creatore – almeno così riferisce Repaci - decreta: “Questi mali e questi bisogni sono ormai scatenati e debbono seguire la loro parabola. Ma essi non impediranno alla Calabria di essere come io l'ho voluta.

La sua felicità sarà raggiunta con più sudore, ecco tutto”. Con più sudore, ecco tutto, con un di più di fatica, che però, se e quando accolta, può trasformarsi in originale risorsa creativa, e si tramuta quasi in dono. Insomma, a dirla in breve, a me pare che sia quel di più di fatica quotidiana a segnare in modo permanente chi vive e lavora in Calabria e qui intenda tenacemente “resistere e vincere e attuare il bello, il razionale, il duraturo”. Filippo Arlia è uno di questi calabresi testardi che, nonostante tutto, nonostante la fragilità di quella natura e l'asperità di quella cultura, i propri talenti è riuscito a trasformare in dono per sé e per gli altri; uno di quei calabresi, cioè, per i quali natura e cultura non sono stati vissuti come elementi di marginalizzazione ma semmai come sprone a intraprendere un percorso professionale in cui le abilità musicali si sono opportunamente ed armonicamente intrecciate con competenze organizzative e manageriali. Non a caso, Filippo si diploma giovanissimo in pianoforte presso il Conservatorio Fausto Torrefranca di Vibo e si laurea in giurisprudenza presso l'Università Magna Graecia di Catanzaro. Ma non è solo l'orgoglio del docente a innervare il mio dire su Arlia, quanto piuttosto l'essere consapevole di quale gratitudine questa terra deve a chi non ha ceduto al richiamo migratorio - che segna naturalmente la vita degli artisti e fra questi, in particolare, dei musicisti - ma ha operato semmai per costruire in Calabria il campo base dove sempre tornare, per respirare e fare anima, arricchito dalle esperienze vissute in giro per il mondo, pronto a ripartire per una nuova sfida.

Una circolarità virtuosa tra qui e altrove, tra il dare e il ricevere, che si propone e che deve essere proposto come modello positivo, da sostenere e promuovere anche e soprattutto da parte dei policy makers. È soltanto in questa prospettiva che si comprende lo sforzo di Arlia di animare ed organizzare non solo una istituzione musicale come il Conservatorio intitolato a Tchaikovsky, ubicato nelle colline di Nocera Terinese, là dove storia e mito sono di casa, ma anche di dirigere l'Orchestra Filarmonica della Calabria, che dalla Tianjin Opera House e dalla Harbin Opera House richiama ormai prepotentemente l'attenzione delle istituzioni calabresi per essere messa in grado di affermarsi quale stabile ente di produzione concertistica.

Luoghi dell'anima e per l'anima, dunque, dove tornare a casa dopo Haifa, il Cairo, Gerusalemme, New York, Madrid, Mosca, Praga e dove portare con sé artisti come Sergei Krylov, Yuri Shishkin, Michel Camilo, Sergej Nakariakov, Ilya Grubert, Danilo Rea e Giovanni Sollima. Alcuni fra i tanti, non potendo qui nominarli tutti. Ma sufficienti a dimostrare quanto ragione aveva Leonida Repaci: natura e cultura saranno stati pure diabolicamente innescati per macchiare l'opera divina, ma per comando divino non negheranno pienezza di vita alla gente di Calabria: "la sua felicità sarà raggiunta con più sudore, ecco tutto".

Ecco tutto. Questo dunque è il segreto: non una condanna irreversibile ma una sfida continua che continuamente si trasforma in opportunità. Come l'incontro con Giovanni Sollima, Accademico di Santa Cecilia, del quale è doveroso e possibile qui riferire soltanto un dato indiscutibile: Sollima non è solo un violoncellista di fama internazionale ma anche il compositore italiano più eseguito al mondo, collaboratore di artisti di eccezionale eccellenza. D'altronde potrebbe essere diversamente per un siciliano che suona un violoncello di ghiaccio, restituito alla natura dopo l'incisione? Ghiaccio nel mare caldo e profondo di Palermo. D'altronde è lui stesso ad aver detto in una intervista: "da siciliano ho viaggiato tantissimo pur rimanendo della mia isola perché attingevo tutte le culture". Al centro del Mediterraneo, crocevia di genti e religioni, di carovane e navigli, di storie e di passioni, di visioni e di ferite. Di colori e di odori. Di suoni. Da sempre, tanto da poter ripetere ancora oggi le parole di **Edward Elgar**: "there is music in the air, music all around us, the world is full of it and you simply take as much as you require".

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