

ENIGMA VARIATIONS

The New Jersey Roots Project continues this weekend with the NJSO premiere of **Edward T. Cone's Concerto for Violin and Small Orchestra**, featuring concertmaster Eric Wyrick. Cone, a longtime Princeton professor who died in 2004, was best known as a musicologist, but he also composed prolifically.

“Cone’s music reminded me of the Second Viennese School,” says Music Director Jacques Lacombe. “I considered programming Berg or Schoenberg with the concerto. Then I thought of **Webern’s orchestration of Bach’s “Ricercare” from *The Musical Offering***. Cone was a very structured composer, and Bach’s writing is the perfect example of structured music. You can sense the influence of Bach’s technique in the Cone Violin Concerto.”

Both Lacombe and Wyrick are struck by the enigmatic qualities of Cone’s concerto, in its synthesis of modernism and tradition. That makes it a suitable companion piece to **Edward Elgar’s Enigma Variations**, one of music’s most celebrated unsolved mysteries. “In fact, the Bach/Webern has a sense of unanswered questions,” says Lacombe. “Each of these works presents a different enigma.”

“Ricercare” from *The Musical Offering*, BWV 1079

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

Orchestrated by Anton Webern

Born December 3, 1883 in Vienna

Died September 15, 1945 in Mittersill, near Salzburg, Austria

I have taken on the task of setting for orchestra a classical composition (from the clavier or organ literature). I am not quite decided as yet, but am thinking very much of the great six-voice fugue from The Musical Offering by Bach.

Anton Webern reported this news to his former teacher Arnold Schoenberg in August 1934. Faced with mounting medical bills to treat his daughter's kidney disease, Webern had requested the assignment from his publisher, Universal Edition. The widow of Universal's CEO interceded on his behalf. She arranged for Webern to receive a lump sum in exchange for an arrangement of his choice.

Bach: inspiration for the Second Viennese School

Why did he select Bach's *Musical Offering*? Despite his abandonment of tonality, Webern embraced the formal discipline of traditional musical methods. No composer embodied this more than Bach. His late masterpieces, *The Musical Offering* and *The Art of Fugue*, are the summit of 18th-century contrapuntal art and landmarks of western music.

Ironically, neither work was well known. In the same letter to Schoenberg, Webern guessed that *The Musical Offering* had probably never been performed except by an organist. He was drawn by its abstract intellectual rigor and the theme's elegant simplicity. (The *ricercare* was an early Baroque precursor of the fugue.)

Webern's unique approach

Webern's orchestration changes none of Bach's notes, but he alters the character by breaking the theme into motivic building blocks. Trombone states the first five notes; horn, trumpet and harp add increments as brief as one or two notes. Webern allocates the second statement to flute, second violin and viola, presently joined by clarinet and oboe, still in these morsels of sound.

Clearly, the specific tone color of each instrument was important to him. The process of fragmentation and the juxtaposition of varied instrumental timbres imposes Webern's personality and style on Bach's music. The result is that we hear an old piece in a new way, with fresh ears.

Webern's orchestration calls for flute, oboe, English horn, clarinet, bass clarinet, bassoon, horn, trumpet, trombone, timpani, harp and strings. Timing: approximately 8 minutes.

Concerto for Violin and Small Orchestra (1959)

Edward T. Cone

Born May 4, 1917 in Greensboro, North Carolina

Died October 23, 2004 in Princeton, New Jersey

Edward Cone was a Princeton man for life. He earned undergraduate and graduate degrees there, studying composition with Roger Sessions, and served on the university's faculty from 1947 to 1985. Cone was best known for his writings on music theory, including the *Perspectives of New Music* series, which he co-edited in the 1960s. Later in his career, he veered more toward music history. As a musicologist, he conducted important interviews with living composers as well as publishing articles on Schubert, Schumann, Chopin, Berlioz and Brahms.

Professor and composer

Through this impressive and productive career, Cone continued to compose. His list of works spans nearly a half-century. The earliest is an orchestral *Prelude to Victory* from the end of World War II; his last completed composition was *New Weather* for high voice and piano, completed in 1993. The Concerto for Violin and Small Orchestra is the first of two Cone compositions that the NJSO presents this season as part of its New Jersey Roots Project. It dates from 1959, when many American composers, particularly those in academia, were embracing the serial theories and techniques of the post-Schoenberg generation.

Not so Edward Cone. Indeed, his concerto is a surprisingly traditional work, cast in three movements arranged fast-slow-fast and using conventional instruments and compositional techniques. His language is certainly modernist, but definitely not 12-tone. NJSO Concertmaster Eric Wyrick says, "His style is what I grew up thinking how modern music sounded." That means dissonant and chromatic, but still firmly grounded in an extended tonal framework.

Soloist's perspective

The first movement is centered on—but not in—D. It shifts back and forth between a lilting, lyrical opening passage and a brisk section (*doppio movimento*) that occurs three times, slightly varied in each recurrence. “The structure is very clear,” says Wyrick. “Cone’s phrasing and motivic material are beautifully crafted, and the *doppio movimento* passages have their own distinct character.”

Cone’s central Nocturne features long, arching phrases with extended leaps in the solo part. “He gives the soloist an opportunity to show expression,” Wyrick says. “The music has emotional content; it’s not all academic.”

The Rondo is an enigma, at once brilliant and subtle. Echoes of figuration in the orchestral fabric hark back to the first movement. The concerto evaporates in a surprise ending.

“I find this piece to be well-crafted with a fine sense of texture and balance,” continues Wyrick. “Cone was skilled in academic counterpoint, and there are many wonderful moments of instrumental color. I’m impressed with his violin writing. Everything fits in the hands very well. Cone knew where the instrument would sound best for his needs. It jumps right out at you how much talent he had as a composer.”

Cone dedicated the concerto to Yfrah Neaman (1923–2003), a Palestinian-born violinist who settled in Britain and taught at the Guildhall School of Music for 40 years. Neaman played the premiere with the Princeton Symphony Orchestra in October 1964, and again with the Chamber Symphony of Princeton in April 1993.

The score calls for two flutes (second doubling piccolo), oboe, English horn, two clarinets (second doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, two trombones, timpani, harp, solo violin and strings. Timing: approximately 35 minutes.

Variations on an Original Theme (Enigma), Op. 36 (1899)

Sir Edward Elgar

Born June 2, 1857 in Broadheath, England

Died February 23, 1934 in Worcester, England

Not-so-mysterious monograms

Edward Elgar catalyzed a major renaissance in English composition. Enigma Variations was his breakthrough work, catapulting him to international fame.

The work is extremely personal. The score is inscribed: “Dedicated to my friends pictured within.” Over the first page, the word “Enigma” appears. Elgar labeled each variation with a monogram or a nickname identifying one of his friends. Thus “C.A.E.” of the first variation is the composer’s wife, Caroline Alice Elgar; Variation II’s “H.D.S.-P.” is Hew David Steuart-Powell, pianist in Elgar’s trio (along with “B.G.N.,” Basil Nevinson, the cellist and subject of Variation XII), and so forth. Many of their Worcestershire circle thereby achieved a measure of immortality in Elgar’s piece.

Musical portrait gallery

The 14 variations are a treasure trove of brilliant character sketches. William Meath Baker, the “W.M.B.” of Variation IV, is said to have been a decisive, athletic man who went about life with great physical flourishes punctuating his activities; his variation is appropriately resolute. Isabel Fitton, the “Isobel” of Variation VI, was a viola student of Elgar’s; her lyrical, gentle variation features a viola solo and allegedly satirizes technical problems in her string playing that she never overcame.

Contemporaries described Arthur Troyte Griffith (“Troyte,” Variation VII) as an argumentative type. Elgar paints him with vigorous timpani, then brasses in animated dialogue with rapid violin triplets; this is a true virtuoso variation, enough to convince us that Troyte was a formidable opponent in debate!

The most famous of all is “Nimrod,” Variation IX, named for Elgar’s friend and publisher August Jaeger. (*Jaeger* is German for hunter.) Its elegiac character has made it a frequent choice to be played *in memoriam* at British concerts.

“Dorabella” (Variation X) was Elgar’s pet name for Dora Penny, the youngest member of his circle included in the Enigma Variations. Her nickname was a conscious allusion to Mozart’s *Così fan tutte*; her variation has the airy delicacy of ballet music. Sprightly, chirping fillips of woodwinds and strings invite choreography; Frederick Ashton created a ballet from Elgar’s piece in 1968.

Personal signature

Technically, Enigma Variations is a marvel of splendid orchestration, careful gauging of key changes and brilliant transitions between variations. Spiritually, what binds them is Elgar’s overriding affection for his friends. Variation XIV, “E.D.U.” (Alice’s pet name for her husband was “Edu”) provides an exuberant conclusion, as if to say “Lucky me, that my life is enriched by these wonderful people.”

The score calls for flutes (second doubling piccolo), two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones (third doubling tuba), timpani, percussion, organ ad lib. and strings. Timing: approximately 29 minutes.