

Schumann's Cello Concerto

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Jessie Montgomery: *Snapshots* (East Coast Premiere; New Jersey Symphony Co-Commission)

Jessie Montgomery is on a roll. This gifted young woman - she is not yet 42 – has rocketed to the forefront of American music, writing scores that are both powerful and accessible. Her latest, *Snapshots*, is a series of four vignettes. She has written, “Each movement [is] distinct in character and based on an imagined scene, mood, or effect. After a boisterous introductory movement, typical of my works that are inspired by dance music, the subsequent movements II and III are whimsical and playful, like peering into a diorama, precisely staged and complete, evocative of a town square where children may play boisterously, followed by a passing storm that never quite breaks. The final movement is a call to my earlier influences of film music and Ravel and Debussy string quartets.”

Robert Schumann: Concerto in A minor for Violin, Cello and Orchestra, Op. 129

Schumann was the consummate romantic, writing music of intense emotion and ravishing harmonies. He played cello as a youth and understood the instrument's expressive capacity. As in his Piano Concerto, the soloist enters almost immediately: an impetuous romantic departure from the classical orchestral exposition. The concerto's three movements are played without pause. Schumann plumbed the cello's soulfulness and warmth for an additional solo cello in the orchestra -- and an accompanied cadenza for the soloist.

Sir Edward Elgar: *Variations on an Original Theme (Enigma)*

The secret of Elgar's subtitle remains controversial, but there is no dispute about the splendor of this quintessentially British work. Musical portraits of Elgar's friends are the subject matter, ingeniously rendered through his symphonic treatment of the opening theme. The “Nimrod” variation is performed in England as a memorial when a prominent public figure has died. The larger message of these *Variations* is life-affirming and confident.

Jessie Montgomery: *Snapshots* (East Coast Premiere; New Jersey Symphony Co-Commission)

Jessie Montgomery

Born: December 8, 1981, in New York City

Composed: 2023

World Premiere: October 12, 2023, in Dallas, Texas

Duration: 18 minutes

Instrumentation: three flutes (third doubling piccolo), three oboes (third doubling English horn), three clarinets (second doubling E-flat clarinet, third doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons (third doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion [anvil, bass drum, bell, bongos, chimes, cowbell, crotales, glockenspiel, marimba, mark tree, ratchet, snare drum, suspended cymbal, tam-tam, tom toms], vibraphone, xylophone, harp, piano, celesta, and strings

Jessie Montgomery has emerged as a major voice in American music – and a familiar presence here in New Jersey. Last season, during our Centennial celebration, the New Jersey Symphony presented two of her compositions: *Banner*, a free rhapsody based on our national anthem, and *Rounds*, a concerto for piano and string orchestra. Montgomery is having multiple works performed around the country with both major and regional orchestras, and stays busy fulfilling commissions. In May of this year, Riccardo Muti led the Chicago Symphony in the premiere of Montgomery's *Transfigure to Grace*. Just last month, she had orchestral performances in London, England; Lancaster PA, Waterbury CT, Petoskey MI, Kalamazoo MI, Dayton OH, St. Peter MN, Nashville, and Atlanta. She is clearly on a roll, consistently composing music that is powerful and accessible. This weekend, the NJS presents the East Coast Premiere of her *Snapshots*.

A violinist and educator as well as a composer, Montgomery grew up in a musical household on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Her parents worked in music and theater and were active in neighborhood arts initiatives. Montgomery earned her undergraduate degree from the Juilliard School in violin performance, and subsequently completed a master's in Film Composition and Multimedia in NYU. She was a Graduate Fellow in Music Composition at Princeton, and is currently Mead composer-in-residence with the Chicago Symphony.

Montgomery has graciously provided the following introductory note for her new work.

Snapshots is part of a series of pieces I have been writing recently that are comprised of short "vignettes," each movement distinct in character and based on an imagined scene, mood, or effect. After a boisterous introductory movement, typical of my works that are inspired by dance music, the subsequent movements II and III are whimsical and playful, like peering into a diorama, precisely staged and complete, evocative of a town square where children may play boisterously, followed by a passing storm that never quite breaks. The final movement is a call to my earlier influences of film music and Ravel and Debussy string quartets.

In addition to the influences she cites, Montgomery employs a number of techniques that acknowledge major trends in new music, including the complex repetitive patterns of minimalism, compelling rhythmic shifts, and use of a large and colorful percussion complement. She has an excellent sense of forward momentum, and uses the large orchestra judiciously, allowing individual orchestral cameos – or snapshots, if you will – to pop.

Snapshots is a consortium commission among the Dallas Symphony, Baltimore Symphony, Buffalo Philharmonic, Detroit Symphony, New Jersey Symphony, and Seattle Symphony, with acknowledgment of Amplifying Voices, a New Music USA initiative.

Robert Schumann: Concerto in A minor for Violin, Cello and Orchestra, Op. 129

Robert Schumann

Born: June 8, 1810, in Zwickau, Germany

Died: July 29, 1856, in Endenich, Germany

Composed: October 1850 over an intense 15 days

World Premiere: June 9, 1860, in Leipzig

Duration: 25 minutes

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, solo cello and strings

Schumann's Cello Concerto dates from autumn 1850, shortly after Robert and Clara Schumann moved their growing family to Düsseldorf so that he could assume the music directorship of the city's orchestra. Their hopes were high for the new position, which would finally give Robert the chorus and orchestra he had sought for so long. Sadly, his stint in Düsseldorf ended four years later in the tragedy of his attempted suicide. At first, however, he was warmly received. Düsseldorf's enthusiastic welcome catalyzed a burst of creativity. Within a couple of months he produced the Cello Concerto, the "Rhenish" Symphony, Op. 97, most of his music for Goethe's *Faust*, and a number of songs.

Opus 129 is a deceptively late opus number for this work. It is a consequence of the arduous road the cello concerto traveled prior to its posthumous publication in full score in 1883. (A cello-piano reduction of the score appeared in August 1854.) Similarly, the circumstances of the first performance remain cloaked in some uncertainty. The piano/cello version is believed to have been performed in April 1860 -- four years after the composer's death -- and an orchestral performance followed that June. The first reliably documented performances with cello soloist and full orchestra did not take place until 1866, when the esteemed Italian cellist Alfredo Piatti introduced Schumann's concerto to London.

Just as it took a long time for this work to be published, so the Cello Concerto has had difficulty in establishing itself firmly in the repertoire. Schumann's own list of compositions calls the concerto a *Konzertstück*, which can mean "concerto-piece" or "concert-piece." By this categorization he was perhaps indicating that he recognized in the piece a major stylistic and formal departure from examples by his eighteenth-century predecessors.

Several bold musical gestures differentiate the piece from earlier instrumental concertos. As in Schumann's Piano Concerto, Op. 54, the soloist enters immediately, without an extended orchestral exposition. Though the work is in three movements, there is no pause between them. Schumann's transitions are imaginative and seamless, and the emotional integrity of the work remains undisturbed. The cadenza is in the third movement, rather than the first, and it is accompanied by orchestra, a brilliant tactic that succeeds in further unifying the work.

Schumann had played cello briefly in 1832, after he was forced to shelve his keyboard career because of permanent injury to his right hand. Consequently, he understood the cello, and was able to compose idiomatically for the instrument. He was sympathetic to the problems a tenor-voiced instrument would face in order to project over full orchestra. One of the great achievements of the piece is Schumann's success in saving the soloist from "burial" in the mass of orchestral sound.

With Haydn and Boccherini as his chief predecessors in the realm of the solo cello concerto, Schumann looked to a fine but distant tradition. This work established a new romantic model for the genre. As Alfred Nieman has so eloquently observed, "Here is the distilled essence of Schumann. It is a song for 'cello, bringing to the surface the dreamer that is in us all."

Sir Edward Elgar: *Variations on an Original Theme (Enigma)*, Op. 36

Sir Edward Elgar

Born: June 2, 1857, in Broadheath, near Worcester, England

Died: February 23, 1934, in Worcester

Composed: 1898-1899

World Premiere: June 19, 1899 at London's St. James Hall; Hans Richter conducted

Duration: 31 minutes

Instrumentation: two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones (third doubling tuba), timpani, snare drum, triangle, cymbals, bass drum, optional organ and strings

During the 19th century, German and Austrian musicians referred disparagingly to England as "*das Land ohne Musik*" -- the land without music. Elgar was a pivotal figure in the renaissance in English composition. His *Enigma Variations* catapulted him to international fame.

This remarkable score bears the inscription "Dedicated to my friends pictured within." Over the first page, the word "Enigma" appears. Each of the fourteen variations is titled either with a monogram or a nickname referring members of Elgar's circle. Thus "C.A.E." of the first variation is his 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 his Worcestershire friends thus achieved a measure of immortality.

Elgar clearly delighted in expressing their personalities through music. Writing to his friend August Johannes Jaeger in October 1898:

Since I've been back I have sketched a set of *Variations* on an original theme; the *Variations* have amused me because I've labelled 'em with the nicknames of my particular friends--you are "Nimrod." ["Jaeger" means hunter in German; Elgar's reference is to "Nimrod," the mighty hunter in the Bible.] That is to say I've written the *Variations* each one to represent the mood of the 'party.'

Jaeger was also Elgar's advocate at the London music publishing house of Novello, and did much to promote Elgar's music and encourage his friend.

Elgar returned the support by making Jaeger's the central variation of the set, the pivotal slow movement with the greatest emotional impact. "Nimrod" is said to have been inspired by an evening walk during which Jaeger waxed poetic about Beethoven's slow movements. Surely it is no accident that Elgar placed this variation in E-flat major, Beethoven's heroic key. Many listeners have also perceived a strong similarity between the "Nimrod" variation's opening theme and that of the famous slow movement to Beethoven's "Pathétique" Sonata, Op. 13.

What is the 'enigma'?

Elgar never revealed the meaning of his subtitle, writing:

The enigma I will not explain--its "dark saying" must be left unguessed, and I warn you that the apparent connection between the variations and the theme is often of the slightest texture; further, through and over the whole set another and larger theme "goes," but is not played.

This cryptic clue has led to countless theories about the hidden, unstated theme, with guesses ranging from "God Save the King" and "Auld Lang Syne" to "Ta ra ra boom-de-ay," "Home sweet Home," and Martin Luther's chorale "A Mighty Fortress is our God." No definitive solution has been universally accepted, and the secret of the enigma remains one of music's tantalizing mysteries.

That stated, this musical portrait gallery is a treasure trove of brilliant character sketches, belying Elgar's insistence that *Enigma* was absolute music, independent of those who had inspired it. 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 "Ysobel" 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!

“Dorabella” (Variation X) was Elgar’s pet name for Dora Penny, the youngest member of his circle included in the *Enigma Variations*. Her variation has the airy delicacy of ballet music. Sprightly, chirping fillips of woodwinds and strings in “Dorabella” invite choreography; it comes as no surprise that Frederick Ashton created a ballet from Elgar’s piece in 1968.

Technically, what makes the *Enigma Variations* so marvelous is a combination of splendid orchestration, careful gauging of key changes, and brilliant transitions from one variation to the next. Spiritually, what binds it is the overriding affection Elgar had for his friends. Variation XIV, “E.D.U.” (Alice’s pet name for her husband was “Edu”) binds the set together in exuberant conclusion, as if to say “Lucky me, that my life is enriched by these wonderful people.” Whether heard as an independent piece of music or in the context of Elgar’s musical portrait gallery, the *Enigma Variations* is one of the masterpieces of the repertoire, and Elgar’s finest composition.

This information is provided solely as a service to and for the benefit of New Jersey Symphony subscribers and patrons. Any other use without express written permission is strictly forbidden.