

VICS-1107 STEREO



Samuel Cooper: Portrait of Thomas Alcock

PIERRE MONTEUX conducts

ELGAR
Enigma Variations

BRAHMS
Variations on a Theme by Haydn

LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA



Few composers worth their salt would deny an interest in what is called "variation form." Music, after all, is almost a synonym for motion: to hold the attention it has to move, grow, develop right in front of our ears. And plain, literal repetition represents a purely static condition. But vary the theme and it appears to lift its wings, soar, take adventurous directions. The art of varying a tune is the art of giving it interest, vitality and buoyant life.

Indeed, the two examples here are firm proof that the concept of "theme and variations" is as one with the concept of high art. Both the *Variations on a Theme by Haydn* and the *Enigma Variations* are masterscores, to coin a term. And in each case their mastery rests on the composer's ability to take a basic melody and reshape it so completely that every restatement of the theme informs it with a new meaning and new expressive vitality.

Elgar's *Enigma Variations* is one of the few British works to have been granted international popularity. The "enigma" of the title, about which much has been written and conjectured, in the final analysis comes to this: the melody on which the variations are based was called enigmatic by the composer himself. And throughout his lifetime he would give no clue as to its center of origin or meaning or why he had called it an enigma in the first place. What we do know is that the fourteen variations were meant as musical tone-portraits of some of his closest cronies and confederates. Actually, Elgar had no patience with musical cryptograms; he is on record as saying that "I have sketched, for their amusement and mine, the idiosyncracies of fourteen of my friends, not necessarily musicians; but this is a personal matter and need not have been mentioned publicly; the Variations should simply stand as a 'piece' of music."

Regarded in that light it is surely a remarkable work of art, the best Elgar ever produced and a deserved pillar of the orchestral repertoire. It is of no consequence to discover that the variation marked C.A.E. refers to his wife Caroline Alice or that G.R.S. is a picture of George R. Sinclair, cathedral organist in the town of Hereford. What *does* count is the quality of the music involved, and concerning that there has never been any enigma. For the world has taken it as the token of an inspired musician, who, with all his internal plotting and mystifications, has not obscured for a moment the caliber of his many-sided genius.

Historically speaking, the *Haydn Variations* was a milestone in Brahms' career, but it is also a perfect specimen of the way in which a tune can be cajoled and twirled into a symphonic structure of major proportions. Brahms found his inspiration in a *Feldpartita*, or divertimento, in B-flat, which Haydn wrote for the soldier-band attached to the retinue of his patron, Prince Esterházy. Brahms was especially taken by the second movement, entitled *Chorale St. Antoni*, and promptly copied it into his notebook. Some scholars claim the theme to be an old Pilgrims' Chant, others a folk song. But since no melody approximating the *Chorale St. Antoni* has been discovered in the literature of either of these sources, it may be fairly well posited that the tune was Haydn's own.

The *Haydn Variations* was the first orchestral work of Brahms' maturity and one which proudly established him as a figure to contend with. It was written in 1873, three years before his First Symphony, though it is crammed with auguries of future works. In fact, as has been printed, the Brahms *Haydn Variations* is almost "a source book of the procedures, the moods and the instrumental colorings of the four mighty symphonies to come."

But this is not meant to indicate that the *Variations* are simply a skeletal outline of later, greater works—far from it. They represent him at the peak of his ingenuity. For notable examples of Brahms' incredible dexterity in manipulating the fiber of a melody, listen to Variation I, in which the bell-like tones heard at the end of Haydn's theme are used as a supple rhythmic pivot for the bulk of this initial movement; and as another argument to support the genius of Brahms, turn to the Finale, where the composer utilizes the theme as a ground bass—a repeated passage in the lower strings—while he embroiders above it all manner of delicious figurations. And between this opening and close is a kaleidoscope of variational ideas, one more imaginative than the next.

A final word about the conductor of these performances, Pierre Monteux, who died in July 1964 at the age of 88. Wherever he went—to virtually every symphonic organization and opera house in the world—he planted the banner of his impeccable musicianship and unerring musical taste. And far from showing signs of a deterioration in power, he seemed to increase his stature with every passing year. Proof? Play this recording, made when he was in his eighties, and you will hear directorial mastery so disciplined as to approach the supernatural.

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