

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
2017-2018 Mellon Grand Classics Season

March 23 and 25, 2018

SIR MARK ELDER, CONDUCTOR
ANNE MARTINDALE WILLIAMS, CELLO

EDWARD ELGAR

Symphony No. 1 in A-flat, Opus 55

- I. Andante. Nobilmente e semplice — Allegro
- II. Allegro molto —
- III. Adagio
- IV. Lento — Allegro

Intermission

PIOTR ILYICH
TCHAIKOVSKY

Variations on a Rococo Theme
for Cello and Orchestra, Opus 33
Ms. Williams

RICHARD STRAUSS

Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks, Opus 28

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

EDWARD ELGAR

Symphony No. 1 in A-flat, Opus 55 (1907-1908)

Edward Elgar was born in Worcester, England on June 2, 1857, and died there on February 23, 1934. He composed his First Symphony from 1907-1908, and it was premiered by the Hallé Orchestra and conductor Hans Richter on December 3, 1908. The Pittsburgh Symphony premiered the work at Carnegie Music Hall with conductor Emil Paul on March 5, 1909, and most recently performed it in Heinz Hall with music director Andre Previn on November 2, 1991. The score calls for piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, two harps and strings.
Performance time: approximately 54 minutes

In 1920, George Bernard Shaw, reflecting on the musical situation during his early days as a London critic in turn-of-the-20th-century Britain, wrote, "The phenomenon of greatness in music had vanished from England. For my part, I expected nothing of any English composer.... But when I heard the *Enigma Variations*, I sat up and said 'Whew!' I knew we had got it at last." The inspiration for his enthusiasm was the work of a 43-year-old musician whose military bearing concealed a sensitive, withdrawn, insecure personality who was the most talented English composer in generations — Edward Elgar. The overwhelming success of the *Enigma Variations*, premiered in 1899, and the oratorio *The Dream of Gerontius* the following year, brought Elgar's music to the attention of audiences around the world and gave England its first musical figure of international significance since George Frideric Handel.

In 1899, just at the time of *Enigma* and *Gerontius*, there appeared in the *Musical Times* a brief announcement that Elgar was planning a "Gordon Symphony," inspired by the military and administrative career in China, Egypt and the Sudan of General Charles George Gordon, a hero particularly revered by the composer's mother. "As to 'Gordon,' the thing possesses me, but I can't write it down yet," Elgar told his publisher and dear friend, A.J. Jaeger, who was depicted in the moving *Nimrod* section of the *Enigma Variations*. Later in 1899, Elgar wrote of "making a shot at it," but in 1901 he was still able to tell Hans Richter, champion of his music and conductor of the *Enigma* premiere, only about "the Symphony I am trying to write." The Leeds Festival was anxious to perform the promised Symphony, as were the organizers of an Elgar Festival in 1904, but nothing materialized. In excuse, Elgar offered up frequent complaints of the financial burden imposed by undertaking such a large composition.

Early in 1907, during a series of lectures on the orchestral scores of the great composers he gave at Birmingham University, Elgar said, "Some writers are inclined to be positive that the symphony is dead ... but when the looked-for genius comes, it may be absolutely revived." Elgar forthwith proceeded to take up his own challenge. Acting upon his decade-old interest in writing a symphony and cajoled by his friends (Gustav Holst once said that he never composed anything "unless the not composing of it becomes a positive nuisance"), Elgar displayed a "great beautiful tune" to his family on June 29, 1907 — the grand hymnal melody that opens and recurs throughout the First Symphony. He continued to sketch the new score until the fall, when he left on November 5th to winter in Rome. Unable to secure a quiet studio in that city, he accomplished little on the composition during the next six months, and it was not until the following June, after he had returned home, that entries about the Symphony again appear in his diary. Except for conducting obligations at the Three Choirs Festival and at Ostend in Belgium that summer, his attention for the next three months focused almost entirely on the Symphony. Only the occasional diversions of bicycle riding, bird-watching and tending his daughter Carice's rabbits kept him from completely exhausting himself in the labor. The Symphony No. 1 in A-flat, first mooted nine years earlier, was finally completed on September 25, 1908. Elgar was fifty-one, eight years older than Brahms when he finished his First Symphony.

Though the A-flat Symphony may trace its original inspiration to the exploits of General Gordon, there is no specific program for the finished work. Elgar made only general comments about the Symphony's content: "a composer's outlook on life"; "the innumerable phases of joy and sorrow, struggle and conquest, and especially between the ideal and actual life"; "a wide experience of human life with a great charity (love) and a massive hope in the future." The music itself, with its persistent reiterations and final acclamation of the grand, hymnal theme that opens the work, gives the strongest proof to Elgar's last

comment, which confirms his belief in the Romantic ideal of the symphony as a vehicle for spiritual uplift, here made all the more moving by testing that traditional philosophy against the stylistic challenges of a turbulent new century. For much of its length, the work is unsettled and apprehensive in mood, a quality engendered by Elgar's use of undefined tonalities and complex textures. The brilliant triumph of tonality and melody at the Symphony's end over its earlier chromatic peregrinations confirms Elgar's commitment to music as a medium of human communication — the old-fashioned belief that a composer could, and should, move the emotions of those who would listen to his creations. This, indeed, is the timeless quality of the greatest masterpieces of music.

The Symphony opens with an expansive introductory melody marked "nobilmente," which Elgar said was intended to be "simple &, in intention, noble & elevating ... something above everyday & sordid things." This motive is the motto theme whose recurrences play such an important part in the emotional progress of the work. The rest of the first movement is filled with a vast sonata form whose restless mood is in stark contrast to that of the majestic introduction. The movement closes inconclusively, mysteriously. Next comes a portentous essay headed *Allegro molto*. (Elgar eschewed for this movement the designation of scherzo, with its implications of humor and jesting.) The theme of the second movement is transformed in the *Adagio*, which follows without pause, in music that Michael Kennedy said exudes "a benedictory tranquility which is marvelously sustained and intensified.... Elgar seems, for once, to have been at peace with himself." The restlessness of the first two movements resumes with the finale, but is banished at the work's end by the transcendent apotheosis of the great hymn theme that opened the Symphony.

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Variations on a Rococo Theme for Cello and Orchestra, Opus 33 (1876)

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky was born in Votkinsk, Russia on May 7, 1840, and died in St. Petersburg on November 6, 1893. He composed *Variations on a Rococo Theme* in 1876 for a fellow professor at the Moscow Conservatory, and it was premiered by the Orchestra of the Russian Musical Society with Nikolai Rubinstein conducting and Wilhelm Fitzenhagen as soloist on November 30, 1877. The Pittsburgh Symphony premiered the work at Carnegie Music Hall with Victor Herbert conducting and Hugo Becker as soloist, and most recently performed it on the 2013-14 Gala with music director Manfred Honeck and soloist Yo-Yo Ma. The Pittsburgh Symphony won their first Grammy for their recording of the work with Yo-Yo Ma and conductor Lorin Maazel in 1993. The score calls for pairs of woodwinds and horns, strings. Performance time: approximately 18 minutes

Tchaikovsky was far from happy with his teaching duties at the Moscow Conservatory, which left him less time for composing than he wished. One of the positive aspects of the job, however, was that he was able to meet some fine musicians in the course of his work, one of whom was the sonorously named German professor of cello at the school, Wilhelm Carl Friedrich Fitzenhagen. Fitzenhagen, like Tchaikovsky, was rather shy and introverted, and a nice friendship sprang up between them; it was for Fitzenhagen that Tchaikovsky composed his *Rococo Variations*.

The style of the *Rococo Variations* may be traced to Tchaikovsky's reverence for Mozart, whom he called "the greatest of all composers" and even "the Christ of music." Tchaikovsky's interest in the Salzburg master extended beyond mere matters of musical technique, however, to other of the sensitive composer's concerns, especially the sense of social dislocation caused by his homosexuality, as John Warrack noted: "The rococo represented for Tchaikovsky a world of order and balance that seemed hopelessly lost. He is by no means the only Romantic composer to feel an ache for the rejected classicism — it is, indeed, one of the typically contradictory ingredients of Romanticism. But in him the reaction was as usual acutely personal, a dramatization of his sense of being cut off from a once-familiar security and delight. He was often to find in his music occasion for what he frankly regarded as escape from his real situation of unhappiness to which the world had no answer. In these *Variations* he turned again to the rococo for consolation." This is a work of deliberate grace, charm and elegance that plumbs no great emotional depths nor reveals any of those melancholy corners of Tchaikovsky's soul that were to be exposed in the Fourth Symphony, composed only a few months later. "The *Variations*," according to Edward Garden, "were from a world of happy make-believe where the frustrations and terrors of the present existence could be forgotten for a time in the contemplation of the past."

The theme of the *Rococo Variations*, original with Tchaikovsky, is prefaced by a subdued introduction. After a brief, vaguely Oriental interlude for double reeds that looks forward to the nationality dances in *The Nutcracker*, the cello presents the first of the seven variations. The opening two variations are decorated versions of the theme, each ending with a strain for double reeds. Variation 3 presents a long-breathed cantabile in a new key and tempo. The fourth variation resumes the earlier tempo, and includes some dazzling, airborne scale passages that exploit fully the tone, agility and range of the solo instrument. The next variation allots the cello a trilled accompaniment to the theme, played by the flute; a cadenza closes this section. The penultimate variation slips into a minor mode that both balances the preceding tonalities and creates a good foil to the virtuosic closing variation that immediately follows.

RICHARD STRAUSS

Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks, Opus 28 (1894-1895)

Richard Strauss was born in Munich on June 11, 1864, and died in Garmisch-Partenkirchen on September 8, 1949. He composed *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks* from 1894-1895, and it was premiered in Cologne by the Gürzenich Orchestra and conductor Franz Wüllner on November 5, 1895. The Pittsburgh Symphony first performed the work on at Carnegie Music Hall with Richard Strauss conducting on March 11, 1904, and most recently performed the work with music director Manfred Honeck on June 10, 2012. The score calls for piccolo, three flutes, three oboes, English horn, clarinet in E-flat, two clarinets in B-flat, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings. Performance time: approximately 16 minutes

"If you want to create a work that is unified in its mood and consistent in its structure, and if it is to give the listener a clear and definite impression, then what the author wants to say must have been just as clear and definite in his own mind. This is only possible through the expression of a *poetical idea*." Thus wrote Richard Strauss in 1888 in a letter to his mentor, the great pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow, even before he had composed his first successful tone poem, *Don Juan*. The "poetical idea" from which *Till Eulenspiegel* sprang was a well-known character of German folklore, a "rude mechanical" born in Brunswick in 1283, according to the account of 1515 by a Franciscan monk, Thomas Murner. So popular were the tales of Till that they were soon translated into a half dozen languages, including English, and fully twenty editions of his adventures had been published in French by the beginning of the 18th century. Olin Downes wrote of this impish character, "Till, they say, was a wandering mechanic who lived by his wits, turning up in every town and city. He made himself out to be whatever the situation required — butcher, baker, wheelwright, joiner, monk, or learned metaphysician. He was a lord of misrule, a liar and villain, whose joy it was to plague honest folk and play foul jests upon them. He pillaged the rich, but often helped the poor.... For Till is freedom and fantasy; his is the gallant, mocking warfare of the One against the Many and the tyranny of accepted things. He is Puck and Rabelais, and [he inspired] quicksilver in Strauss' music."

The performance of an opera based on the Till legends by the forgotten Wagnerite Cyrill Kistler in Würzburg in 1889 first piqued Strauss' interest in the subject. Strauss began sketching a libretto for a projected opera about Till by June 1893, but his lack of talent at poetry and the failure of his first opera, *Guntram*, the following May discouraged him from further work on the plan. When he returned to the subject several months later, the opera had become a tone poem. The work scored an immediate triumph at its premiere, and was soon being performed by orchestras around the world.

"Eulenspiegel" in German means "owl-mirror," and it is generally agreed that the name of this legendary rascal, who both embodies and exploits human foibles, alludes to a German proverb: "Man sees his own faults as little as an owl recognizes his ugliness by looking into a mirror." When asked to elucidate his music, Strauss wrote to Franz Wüllner, the conductor of the premiere, "By way of helping listeners to a better understanding, it seems sufficient to point out the two Eulenspiegel motives, which, in the most manifold disguises, moods, and situations, pervade the whole up to the catastrophe, when, after he has been condemned to death, Till is strung up to the gibbet. For the rest, let them guess at the musical joke which the Rogue has offered them." The two motives that Strauss mentioned occur immediately at the beginning of the work — the "once upon a time" phrase played by the strings, and the bounding horn theme, whose ambiguous rhythm offers a musical joke to those trying to tap their toes. Strauss, a master of thematic manipulation, spun most of the melodic threads of *Till* from these two

motives. Unlike the historical Till, who reportedly died in bed of the plague, Strauss sentenced his scoundrel to swing for his crimes amid threatening rolls on the drums and great blasts from the trombones. The closing pages, however, revive the impish specter of the physically departed Till, as if to say that his insouciant spirit remains always evergreen.

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