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## Elgar's Enigmas

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Brian Newbould's recent article in this journal<sup>1</sup> is notable not least for its contention, cited from Bayan Northcott, that a closer analysis of Elgar's compositional methods might well "reveal a more objective, cogent and, not least, original composer than we have realised".<sup>2</sup> In particular, Northcott deplores the silence of Elgar experts about what it was in the slow movement of the String Quartet (1918) that had "never been done before", yet was "nothing you would understand, merely an arrangement of notes". So spoke the mortally ill composer early in 1934, to Troyte Griffith.<sup>3</sup> Modern Elgar specialists are also silent about that remark itself, as if it were of no account.

Certainly Elgar had waited sixteen years before making it. Yet "at the last" he wanted the existence of his "real compositional innovation" to be known, as Northcott notes. And though these two sets of last words have never been linked—he surely tried again to tell the same secret, this time to someone who should understand, namely, Ernest Newman, the best-known music critic of the time, whom the dying Elgar had specially asked to see.<sup>4</sup>

Newman in his turn waited another 21 years before publishing even a hint of what he was told; and his modern successors have stayed silent about this topic too. But Newman's words are well worth citing, in their entirety:

I cannot attempt here to psycho-analyse the man and the artist in Elgar as I myself saw them in their curious interplay; and indeed the subject would be one for a poet or a novelist of the first order. (Among the novelists I can think only of Thomas Mann as being equal to such a task).

But I fancy I have a clue to something that lay almost concealed in the deepest depths of Elgar in a remark he made to me the last time I saw him, a few days before his death. He had been removed by that time from the Worcester nursing home to his house, Marl Bank. He had altered tragically since I had seen him a little while before; and he obviously knew his end was near. In our conversation after [his daughter] Carice had left us together he spoke despondently of his fear that his music would not live after him. I tried to reassure him as to that.

Then, after a brief silence, he made a single short remark about himself which I have never disclosed to anyone and have no intention of ever disclosing, for it would lend itself too easily to the crudest of misinterpretations at the hands of thick-fingered psychologists. But I have thought about it a thousand times since then, and I have come to the conclusion that it explains a good deal in him that has always been obscure or puzzling to us; it has a particular bearing, I am convinced, on that passion of his for public mystification of which the most remarkable outward expressions were his two 'enigmas'—that of the Variations and that of the 'soul' enshrined in the violin concerto. I do not mean that his remark settled the specific identifications of the human subjects of the two enigmas, but only that it threw, for me, a light on the curious mentality that made mystifications of this sort a necessity to Elgar<sup>5</sup>

But this already intimates that Elgar's music embodied many another hidden and inward enigma, or mere "arrangement of notes", such as the well-documented uses of music-cipher freely practised by dozens of composers over the centuries.<sup>6</sup> Even that apparently gratuitous reference to Thomas Mann, though never quoted and long forgotten, speaks volumes. He was, in Newman's considered view, the only novelist capable of psycho-analysing Elgar; and his 1947 masterpiece *Dr. Faustus* is not only the finest psycho-analytical novel but the only book ever written about a great composer who specialized in music-cipher.<sup>7</sup>

So perhaps Newman himself, at the last, may have wished to record (however obliquely) his own knowledge that Elgar had practised what the composer himself believed to be a real compositional

<sup>1</sup> Brian Newbould, "'Never done before': Elgar's Other Enigma", *Music & Letters*, lxcvii (1996), 228-41

<sup>2</sup> Bayan Northcott, 'A Rousing Glash of Symbols', *The Independent*, 1 January 1994, p. 45

<sup>3</sup> Percy M. Young, *Elgar O.M.*, London, 1955, p. 244

<sup>4</sup> Michael Kennedy, *Portrait of Elgar*, London, 1968; rev. 2nd edn., 1982, p. 330.

<sup>5</sup> Ernest Newman, *Sunday Times*, 13 (not 6, pace Kennedy, loc. cit.) November 1955.

<sup>6</sup> See Eric Sams, "Cryptography, Musical", *The New Grove*, v. 78-82.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, Stockholm, 1947; trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter, London, 1949: "Leverkühn was not the first composer, and he will not have been the last, who loved to put mysteries, magic formulas and charms into his work"; p. 155. His note-for-letter music-cipher devices could be chromatic as well as diatonic, and deployed not only horizontally as melody (including cancrizans and inversion) but vertically as harmony; pp. 156, 191-2.

innovation. Newman later restated the same theme, with variations, in a letter to his fellow critic Gerald Abraham, thus:

Elgar was very grey and weak, and manifestly he knew he was dying. Quite unpremeditatedly and apparently irrelevantly he said something about himself which perturbed me for a long time afterwards. If it were known, it would be of much importance to a psychological biographer. But I told no one, and never will tell a single soul; I feel that a man has a right to certain privacies regarding himself, and biography can go hang. So I am not too critical about "suppressions" in these matters. Elgar's distressing remark consisted of only five words, but the scope they would give to a 'reading' of him is infinite, so I am determined to keep them to myself; they are too tragic for the ear of the mob.<sup>8</sup>

Abraham comments that Newman himself (who was in his late eighties at the time) "had, I suspect, an unusual horror of death"; and perhaps also of music-cipher, as well as psychologists and the mob. But what if Elgar's remark, so far from being unpremeditated, was the whole point of the requested visit, and was addressed to posterity, not just Newman? Further, those five words, on Newman's own showing, related to the music; so if they were 'apparently irrelevant' they must have referred to something extra-musical. How about 'I'm a mere cryptographer', or "encipherer"? In other words, a mere arranger of notes - as he had just said, from the same deathbed, about his String Quartet.

Such remarks are surely no more "distressing" or "tragic" than his much-quoted complaint, in the year after his wife died, that "as a child and as a young man and as a mature man no single person was ever kind to me".<sup>9</sup> This sounds very like another view from the same dark side; nobody ever truly understood him. And perhaps nobody truly understands him now, except those few music-lovers who share his passion for such diversions as puns, acrostics, anagrams, crosswords, chess and cipher.

I have already proposed<sup>10</sup> a simple solution to the Quartet question. Its slow movement had been especially dear to Elgar's wife; it was played at her funeral in 1920, by special family request; "it was exactly right and just what she wd. have loved", said its composer. After her death he lost heart, and wrote little else. She had been "C.A.E." in the "Enigma" Variations of 1899; Elgar had written C-A-E in music<sup>11</sup> at the end of his Caractacus manuscript in 1898 (London, British Library, Add. MS 58002, f. 258), again as a touching tribute to her. Those are the notes with which the cello part of the quartet's slow movement begins. Further, that minor triad, enriched with a varied array of accidentals, makes the marrow of that music, the soft sweet centre of all the strong structure so ably analysed by Brian Newbould.

Music-cipher can certainly be objective, cogent and original. There is massive evidence, also largely ignored, that Elgar's innate cast of mind was that of a cryptanalyst, which demands total objectivity and cogency; and it was reportedly C.A.E. herself who said of the 'Enigma' Variations "surely you are doing something that has never been done before?"<sup>12</sup> No doubt she too was describing a mere arrangement of notes, a compositional device of which Elgar could be either justifiably proud or rather ashamed, in the light or darkness of his celebrated mood-swings. On his deathbed, the latter prevailed.

But he was openly using music-cipher in his twenties, for example in the 1885 *Allegretto on G. E. D. G. E* (the name of friends) for violin and piano. His interest and competence in non-musical cipher is copiously attested to, notably in his solution of a tricky cryptogram announced in 1896 as unbreakable.<sup>13</sup> A decade later, he was still absorbed, not to say obsessed, by such pursuits; "during railway journeys amuses himself with cryptograms".<sup>14</sup> So he was a decade later still; thus in 1913 much of his intellectual energy went towards the diary entry of 21 November: "E. solved Cryptogram. Very wonderful of him".<sup>15</sup> His famous cipher message to Dora Penny<sup>16</sup> is dated 1897; my own 1970 solution and comments<sup>17</sup> remain uncontroversial. In 1971 I inferred its complete cipher table,<sup>18</sup> which has remained unpublished as too technical. But it was, as I had said, based on Elgar's various names and sobriquets; and I noted with interest the new feature that its top line spelt ODIN.

<sup>8</sup> Gerald Abraham, "Ernest Newman (1868-1959): a Great Music Critic", *The Listener*, 23 July 1959, p. 153.

<sup>9</sup> Letter to Sir Sidney Golvin of December 1921, quoted in Kennedy, *Portrait of Elgar*, p. [15].

<sup>10</sup> In *Code and Cipher in Music*, a film for Central TV 1989.

<sup>11</sup> As pointed out in Robert Anderson, *Elgar in Manuscript*, London, 1990, p. 190.

<sup>12</sup> Dora M. Powell [née Penny], *Edward Elgar: Memories of a Variation*, London, 1937; rev. 3rd edn., 1949, p. 102. Her well-informed and explicit assurances about Auld Lang Syne in the "Enigma" Variations have been inexplicably ignored.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Buckley, *Sir Edward Elgar*, London, 1904, p. 41, which also mentions the tricky cipher announced as insoluble in the *Pall Mall Magazine* (viii/36 (April 1896), 618), yet solved by Elgar.

<sup>14</sup> Loc. Cit.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Anderson, *Elgar (The Dent Master Musicians')*, London, 1993, p. 113.

<sup>16</sup> Powell, *Edward Elgar*, p. [129].

<sup>17</sup> Eric Sams, "Elgar's Cipher Letter to Dorabella", *The Musical Times*, cxi (1970), 151-4; "Variations on an Original Theme (Enigma)", *ibid.*, pp. 258-62; "Elgar's Enigmas", *ibid.*, pp. 692-4.

<sup>18</sup> [to be found in "Elgar's cipher table", posthumously edited by the CSES]

Why Odin? Because the name Elgar is Old Norse;<sup>19</sup> and Odin, in Norse mythology, invented the runes. As I had pointed out, Elgar's private cipher-system, freely used in the diaries and other papers as well as in the Penny letter, was drawn from the Book of Ballymote. Ogham itself was drawn, literally, from the shapes of trees. This may help to elucidate Elgar's cryptic comment on the Forest Scene in *Caractacus* (Novello vocal score, p. 88, at cue 1) in a 1900 letter to Jaeger: "The trees are singing my music-or have I sung theirs? I suppose I have."<sup>20</sup> The Piano Quintet of 1918 is famously related to twisted trees.<sup>21</sup>

Odin, his runes and their trees were popular topics in the late 1890s,<sup>22</sup> well documented in the London Library, where Elgar's wife, C.A.E., was a life member from 1886. It is worth reiterating that the Book of Ballymote then stood shelved in the same small corner as the only extant essay on "Auld Lang Syne", written by the antiquarian John Rhys. Both the Book of Ballymote and Rhys are mentioned, together with Ogham, in the then current edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Elgar's favourite reference work, under the heading "Druids". Here surely is the genesis of *Caractacus* and the "Enigma" Variations-two very different works which surprisingly share a musical theme. No wonder, then, if the chief place at Elgar's cipher-table of his own pseudonyms and sobriquets had been reserved for "Odin".

That character had already played a significant part in *King Olaf* (1895); and so perhaps had those characters, in a motif which looks (to me, at least) very like an encipherment of O,D,I,N on some private note-for-letter scheme. Ex. 1 shows its first occurrence (Novello vocal score, p. 41)-on the first syllable of the name "Odin". It looks, and sounds, like a new language. It recurs thrice, transposed but readily recognizable in its bizarre guise of sharps, flats and naturals (like C.A.E. in the Quartet) before and at the words "Odin the Goth" (p. 50). Then it reappears twice, again at a different pitch but still with the same key-signature, to illustrate the phrase "the Wraith of Odin" (p. 71) in the recitative passage introducing the section so entitled. There, that wraith appears, a true *trouble fête*, at Olaf's banquet; it sounds its signature chord on the threshold of the word "guest" (p. 75). Or unguessed, as Elgar might have noted with ironic amusement. When Odin disappears, and "none had seen the stranger pass", that same curious chord occurs at the word "stranger" (p. 86) and recurs at the same word on the following page, to appear for the last time at "wraith" (p. 88). Then it, too, disappears.

Ex. 1



But this chord is no mere tangent to the music; it is centrally original, in usages which can be analysed by all interested and informed parties. Thus the sequence of minor triads at "The door swung wide with creak and din/ A blast of cold night air came in" (pp. 73-4) is a transparent reference to this same Odin motif.

Some readers might care to exercise their own ingenuity in identifying a viable cipher system. One useful clue could be that adjacent notes would correspond to adjacent letters, such as N and O. But there are a myriad possible arrangements, results and usages, including verticalization, that is, the simultaneous sounding of significant notes, as seen and heard in the instances cited above. The melody of "Auld Lang Syne" was used thus, I proposed, in the "Enigma" Variations, as the cipher notes A-B-E-G-G had been treated in Schumann's Variations Op. 1 and As-C-H in his *Carnaval*. I later learnt<sup>23</sup> that the programme note for the first performance of the "Enigma" Variations had named both those works as forerunners in the art of picturing friends. No doubt Elgar had supplied that information himself; and he

<sup>19</sup> As recorded by the Elgar family and many biographers, for example Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Edward Elgar: a Creative Life*, London, 1984, p. 3; for confirmation, see Basil Cottle, *The Penguin Dictionary of British Surnames*, Harmondsworth, 1967, pp. 35, 126.

<sup>20</sup> Letter to Jaeger, July 1900, in Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Elgar and his Publishers*, Oxford, 1987, i. 212.

<sup>21</sup> As explained by, for example, Michael Pope, in the introduction to Eulenburg miniature score No. 399, 1971. Some listeners may be disposed to link those "Spanish monks who ... were struck dead", and the "dead trees" into which their "dead forms" were mystically metamorphosed, with the first violin's repeated D-E-A-D in the first movement at bars 5-7 and 13-15 after cue 1 on page 2, and again at bars 6-8 and 14-16 after cue 24 on page 26 each time amid the strange strains that Lady Elgar described in her diary as "weird" and "reminiscent of sinister trees".

<sup>22</sup> Gertrude Burford Rawlins, "Runes and Oghams", *Knowledge*, 1 October 1896, pp. 232-4. "Odin is said to have invented them . . ."; the derivation from trees is discussed.

<sup>23</sup> From A. W. Savage, *The Enigma*, *The Musical Times*, cxi (1970), 502-3.

(if almost nobody else) would have noticed those chordal arrangements. Schumann was always “my ideal!”<sup>24</sup> to Elgar. So was that equally well documented encipherer Brahms,<sup>25</sup> who enshrined the name Agathe in his String Sextet Op. 36.

A study of *King Olaf* suggests other name-encipherments, such as “Thor” at the surprising chord Bb-E-Db-Ab on that word (p. 6), again in the key of B flat. Only prejudice can explain such dismissive comments as Percy Young’s throwaway reference to “Elgar’s occasional Schumannesque and cryptical disposition of notes-shown by the immurement of some of those he disliked within the demons’ chorus of *Gerontius*”.<sup>26</sup> We are not told -does anyone now know?- who was thus enciphered, or how. But why deprecate such devices, or deny their prevalence?

It was surely some such system that enclosed a loved soul in the Violin Concerto, another famous enigma. As Elgar’s daughter Carice once told me,<sup>27</sup> when her father had finished a Sunday cryptic crossword it was as if he had completed one of his big scores. During the composition of the concerto, scraps of manuscript were arranged all over the room, pinned on the backs of chairs or framed on the mantelpiece.<sup>28</sup> The small-scale ideas were being visibly collated into large-scale structures, just as cross-words and ciphers are compiled and solved. And why not? The printed score was subtitled “Aquí esta encerra [sic: “encerrada” is intended] el alma de .....” (“here is enclosed the soul of .....”). Elgar told Basil Maine that “it was a feminine spirit he had in mind”.<sup>29</sup> The five dots clearly represent a five-letter name. One recent commentator<sup>30</sup> has identified Julia Worthington; others favour Alice Stuart Wortley, known to Elgar as Windflower. Cryptanalysts will note that a simple alphabetical encipherment of the name Alice (which also belonged to Elgar’s wife) yields the notes A, B, C and two E’s; and these lie at the heart of the theme described by Elgar as “Windflower 2”<sup>31</sup> (see Ex. 2).

Ex. 2



This theme, transplanted into the finished work at cue 4 in the first movement, soon flowers into the “feminine” second subject (as some commentators instinctively call it) at cue 16, duly variegated with accidentals and transposition, just like C.A.E. in the String Quartet and Odin in *King Olaf*. The middle three notes of Ex. 2 unfold in major sequences in the third movement at cue 68; meanwhile Ex. 2 itself has shyly emerged in bar 2 of the Andante; and so on. Such treatment makes the music windflower-coloured throughout. But Elgar had surely delved deeper still. His chosen epigraph appears as an epitaph in “Gil Blas au lecteur”, a preliminary address to the reader feigned to emanate from the eponymous hero of Lesage’s picaresque fiction. Two Spanish students find a headstone inscribed “Here is enclosed the soul of the graduate Pedro Garcias”. One of them points out that graves can’t enclose souls; so “there’s some mystery here that I want to clear up”. His digging discloses a purse containing 100 ducats and a message: “Be my heir, you who had wit enough to unravel the inscription, and make a better use of my money than I did”. Lesage draws the moral: pay attention, and you’ll find both pleasure and profit; otherwise you’ll derive no benefit from this work.

The same applies to Elgarian encipherment, which is fully as objective and cogent as the Wagnerian motif, and arguably far more original. Wagner built on the secure German tradition of verbo-musical meaning founded by Bach and extended by Schubert and Loewe in the realm of solo song; the Lied motif led to the leitmotiv. In any undisclosed and private use of motivic music-cipher, however, Elgar would have been far in advance of his time, and entirely unaware of any precedent or predecessor.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Letter to Dr Charles Buck, July 1883, quoted in, for example, Young, Elgar O.M., p. 50.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from E. W. Whinfield 1889, quoted in Anderson, Elgar, p. 12: “you being a congenial Schumannite, & Brahmsite . . .”

<sup>26</sup> S Young, Elgar O.M., p. 279

<sup>27</sup> Carice (i.e., Caroline Alice) Blake née Elgar, personal communication, summer 1970.

<sup>28</sup> W. H. Reed, Elgar (The Master Musicians), London, 1939, p. 101.

<sup>29</sup> Basil Maine, Elgar: his Life and Works, London, 1933, ii. 141.

<sup>30</sup> Nicholas Reed, “Elgar’s Enigmatic Inamorata”, *The Musical Times*, cxxv (1984), 430-34, at p. 431, following Powell, Edward Elgar, p. 86.

<sup>31</sup> Anderson, Elgar, p. 350.

<sup>32</sup> The private name-encipherments of Brahms and Schumann were not discussed until 1904 and 1969 respectively: see Max Kalbeck, *Johannes Brahms*, i/2 (Berlin, 1904), 524 (on “Agathe”) and Eric Sams, *The Songs of Robert Schumann*, London, 1969; rev. 3rd edn., 1993, pp. 22 ff. (on “Clara”).