

# The British Muse

5 - The Great Outsider

# Sir Edward Elgar

1857–1934



# About Elgar

- Felt himself to be an outsider—neither a product of the British university system, nor a Protestant.
- Always conscious of his origins in the working classes.
- Recognition was slow; not until he was in his 40s.
- Like Sibelius, he grew discouraged and effectively retired from composition. His last major work was written in 1919; he died in 1934.
- For much of the 20th century his posthumous reputation was poor, but he has seen a significant re-evaluation since the 1960s.

Elgar's birthplace in Lower Broadheath.

His family was middle class; his father worked as a piano tuner, owned a music shop, and was a highly-skilled violinist.

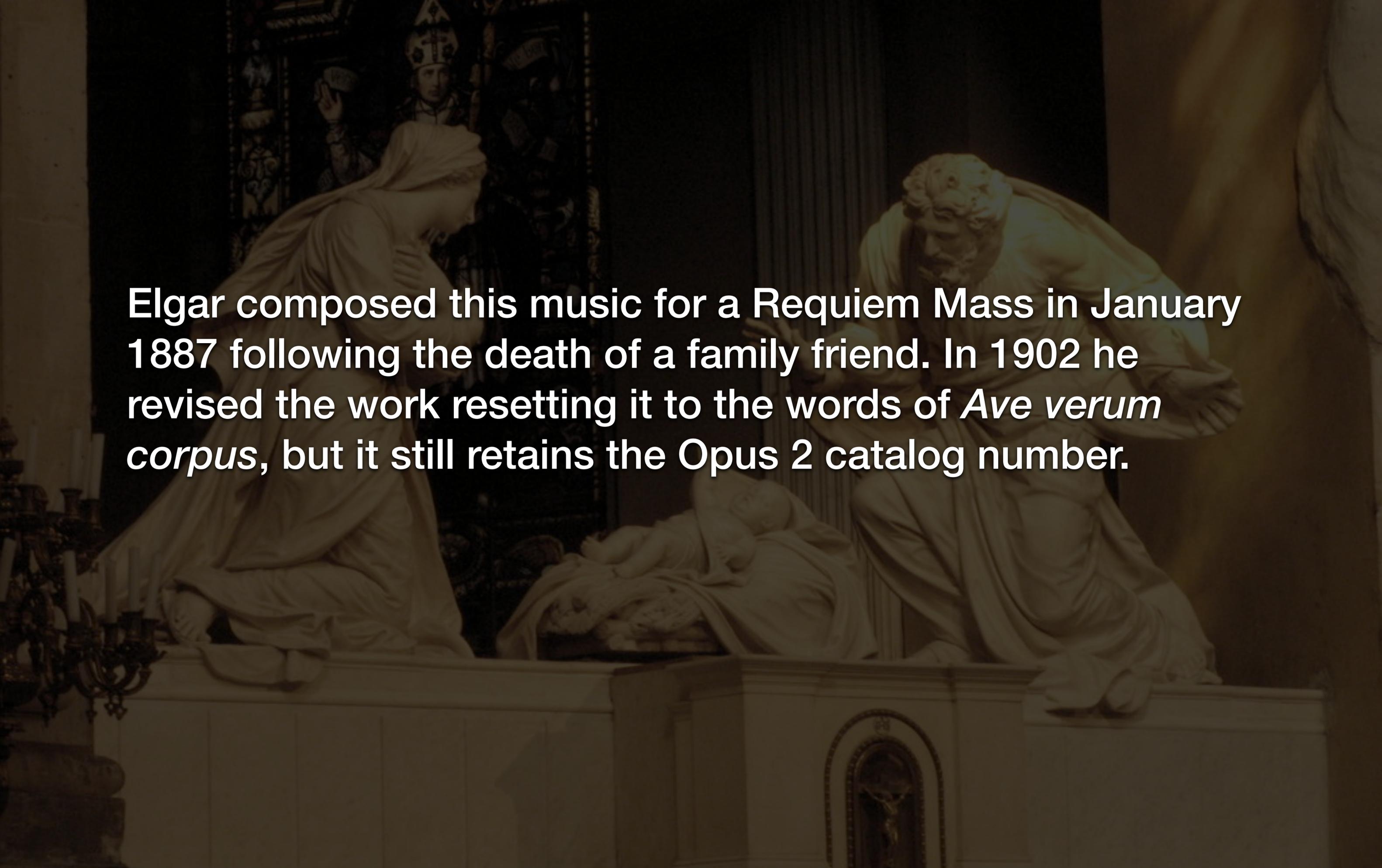
It was a country life, and a quiet one. Elgar might have become a clerk, but he left an apprenticeship to a county solicitor to pursue a career in music.



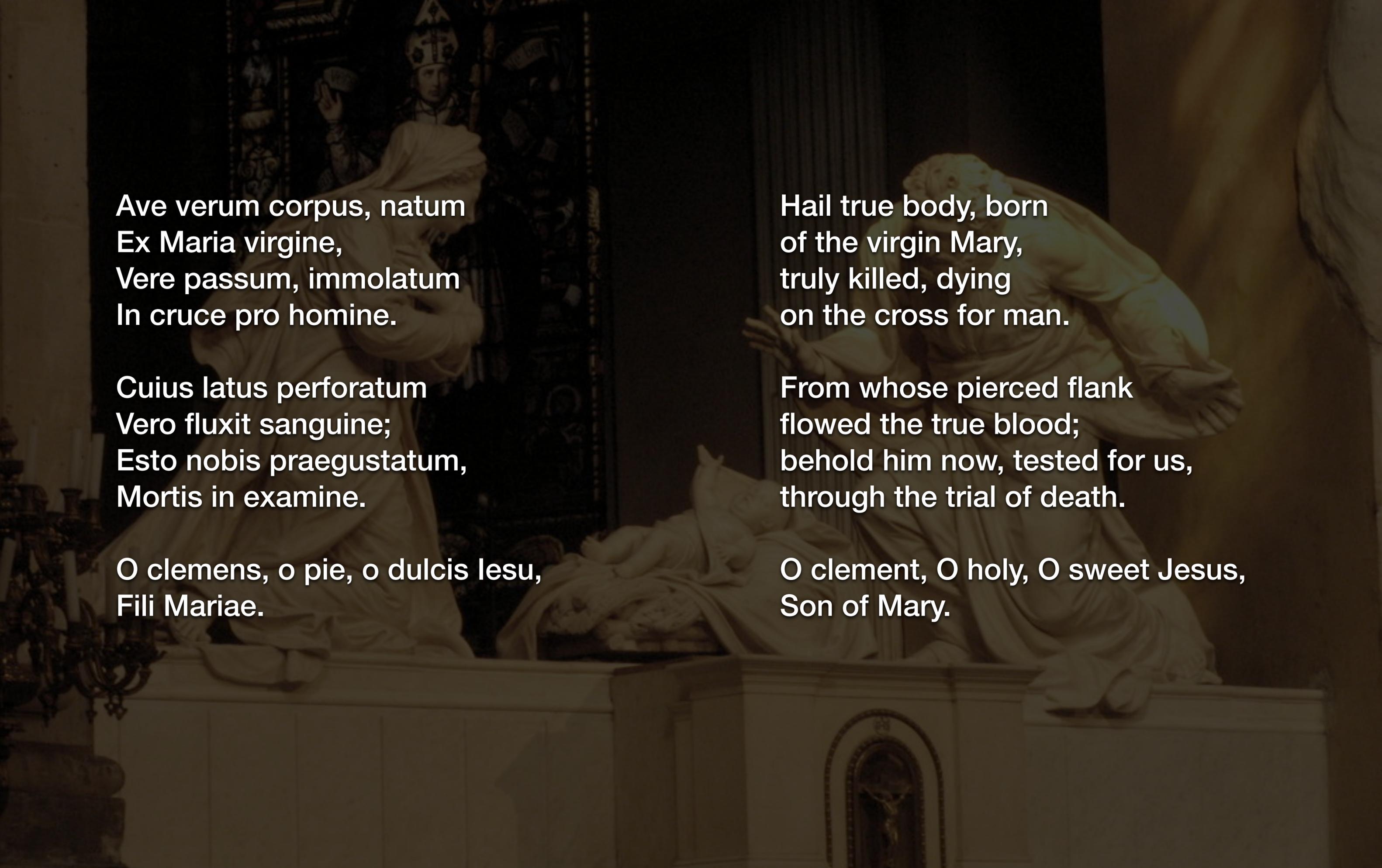


# **Ave Verum Corpus, Op. 2 No. 1**

Henry Brama, organ / Christopher Robinson, conductor / Chorus of Worcester Cathedral



Elgar composed this music for a Requiem Mass in January 1887 following the death of a family friend. In 1902 he revised the work resetting it to the words of *Ave verum corpus*, but it still retains the Opus 2 catalog number.



Ave verum corpus, natum  
Ex Maria virgine,  
Vere passum, immolatum  
In cruce pro homine.

Cuius latus perforatum  
Vero fluxit sanguine;  
Esto nobis praegustatum,  
Mortis in examine.

O clemens, o pie, o dulcis Iesu,  
Fili Mariae.

Hail true body, born  
of the virgin Mary,  
truly killed, dying  
on the cross for man.

From whose pierced flank  
flowed the true blood;  
behold him now, tested for us,  
through the trial of death.

O clement, O holy, O sweet Jesus,  
Son of Mary.

Elgar did some things very, very right. One of those was to marry well: Caroline Alice Elgar (née Roberts) was from a good family that disinherited her when she married the penniless young musician, son of a shopkeeper, and Roman Catholic. Yet she was the underlying engine that powered Elgar's life and career. No account of Elgar's success as a musician can underestimate her encouragement, inspiration, and unfailing support.





# Salut d'Amour, Op. 12

Neville Marriner / Northern Sinfonia

Elgar wrote the original version of *Salut d'Amour* as an engagement present to Alice.

We hear it in the later version for small orchestra.





The years following were difficult and frustrating.

Elgar taught violin in local music schools, wrote music — generally unprofitably — and lived the life of a quiet country dweller who had more dignity than funds.



He made contacts: certain conductors, publishers, and other musicians recognized his potential. He wasn't a nobody, in other words.

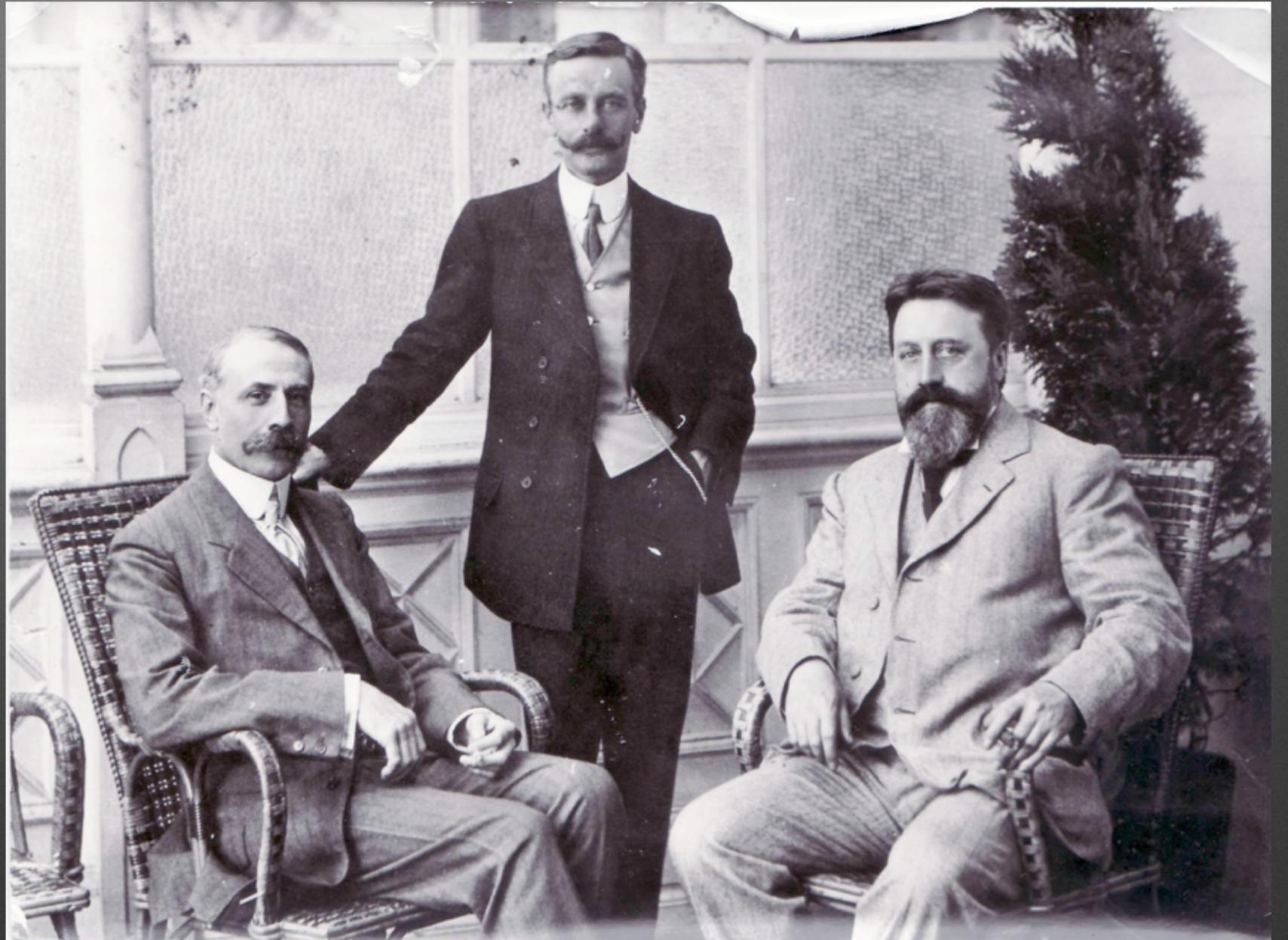
But he was far outside the select circle of the Gentlemen of the Club. Such prestigious locales as the Royal Academy of Music might as well have been the moon.

His Catholicism was another hurdle in staunchly Protestant England.



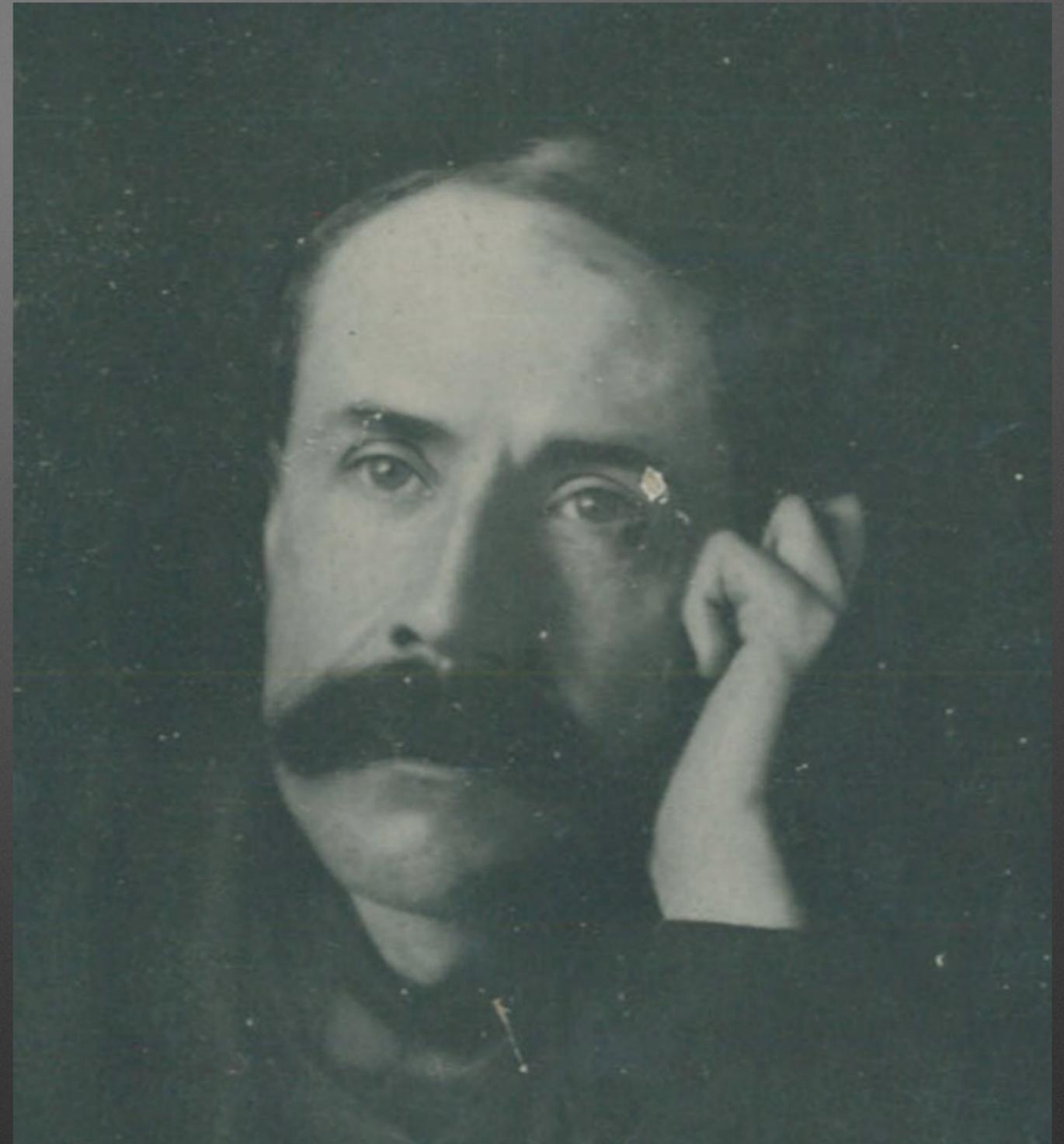
More than anything else, his warm circle of good friends, and of course his life with Alice, kept him going.

Until he was about 40, Elgar was an obscure musician with a few interesting compositions to his name and a reputation for being a fine, if exacting, violin teacher.



He was an amateur scientist,  
bordering on professional level (save  
the formal education.)

He even had a few inventions to his  
credit.



Tamburo piccolo  
e Triangolo

Gran Cassa  
e piatti

Systeme für die Orgel  
nur auf Pag. 1. und im Finale

Organo  
ad lib  
(tacet tutti  
finale)

Andante.  $\text{♩} = 63$

legato e sostenuto  
molto espress.

Violini I  
Violini II

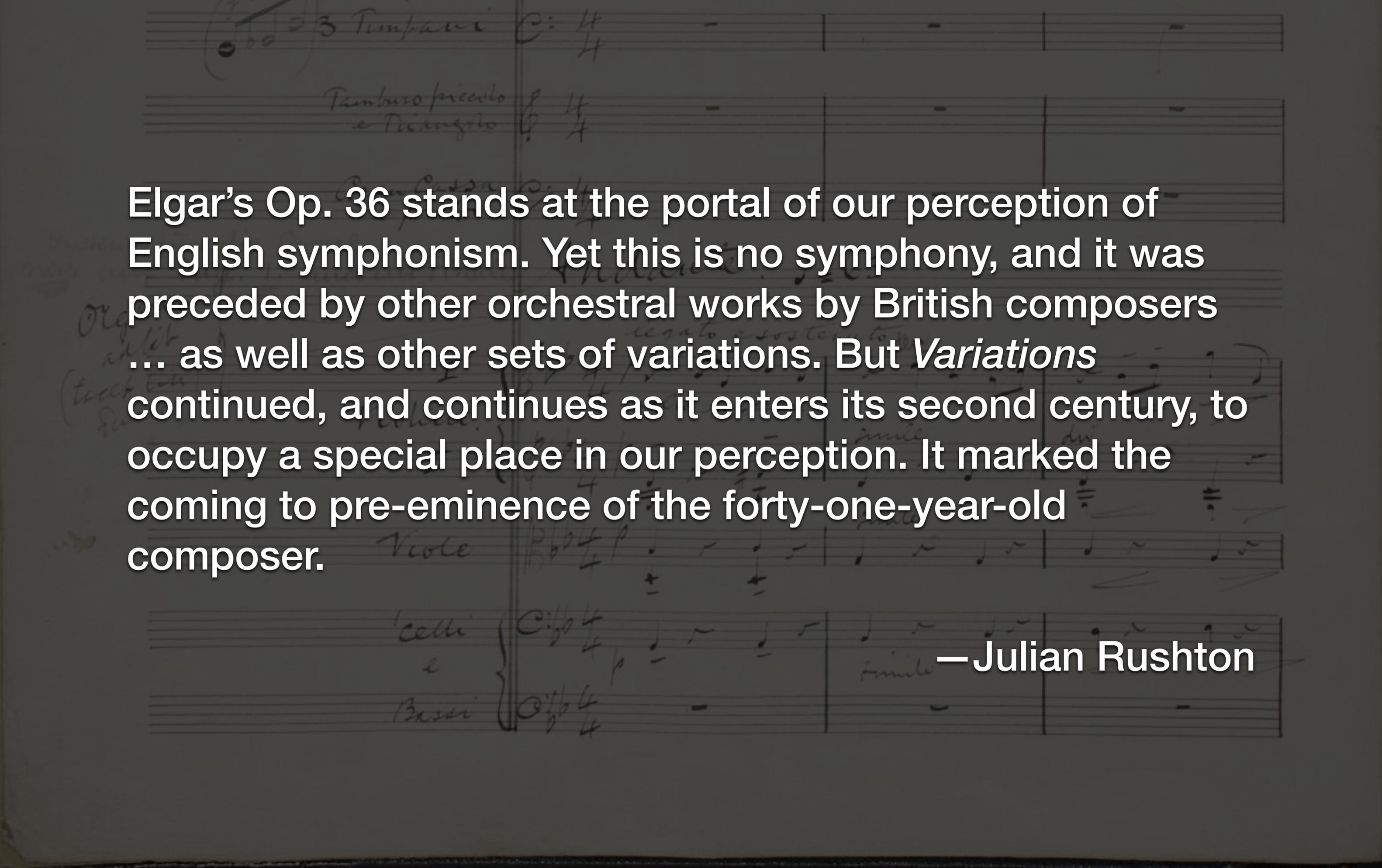
Viola

Cello  
e  
Bassi

simile  
simile  
simile

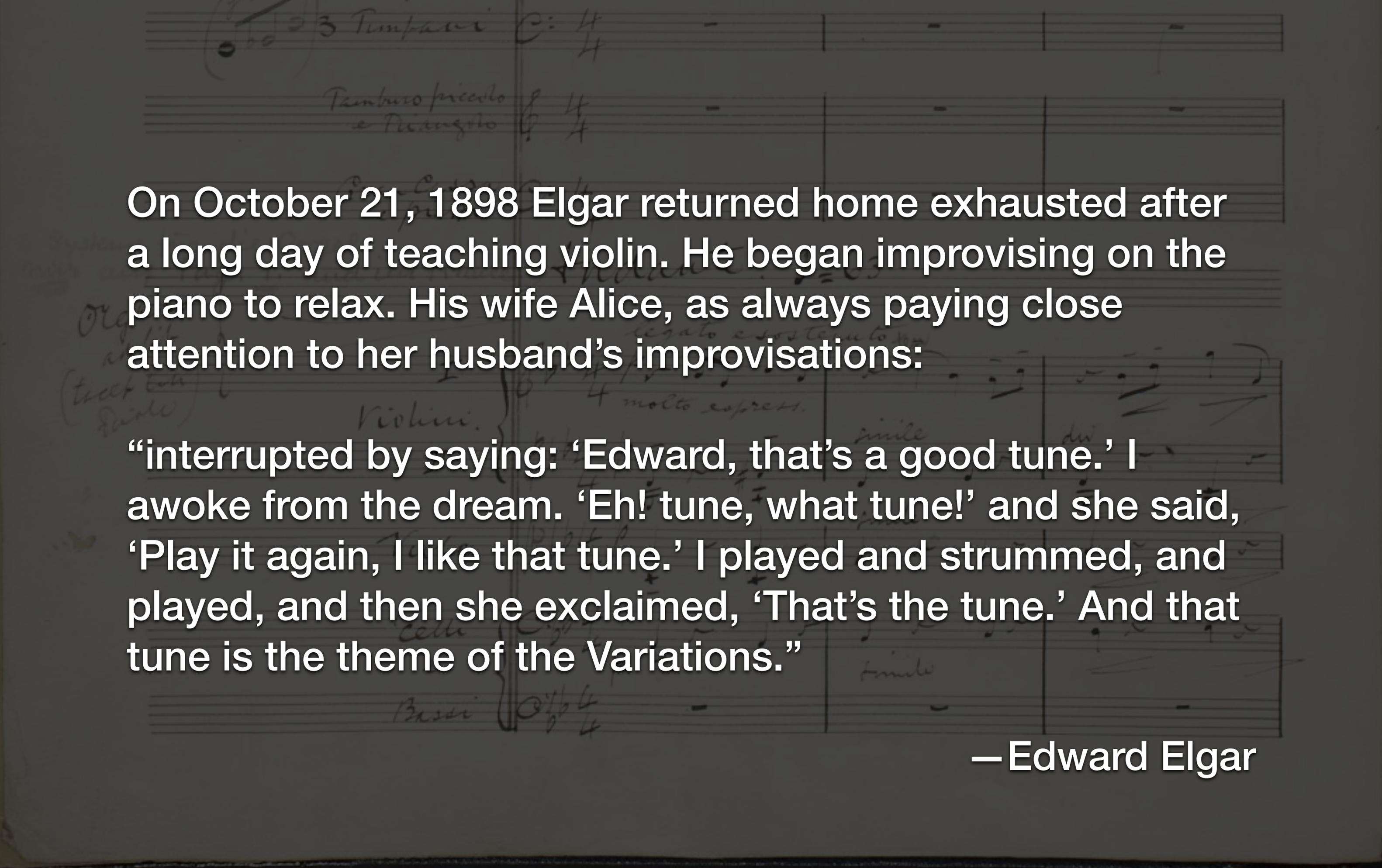
# Variations on an Original Theme, Op. 36 "Enigma"

Sir John Barbirolli / Philharmonia Orchestra (rec. 1963)



Elgar's Op. 36 stands at the portal of our perception of English symphonism. Yet this is no symphony, and it was preceded by other orchestral works by British composers ... as well as other sets of variations. But *Variations* continued, and continues as it enters its second century, to occupy a special place in our perception. It marked the coming to pre-eminence of the forty-one-year-old composer.

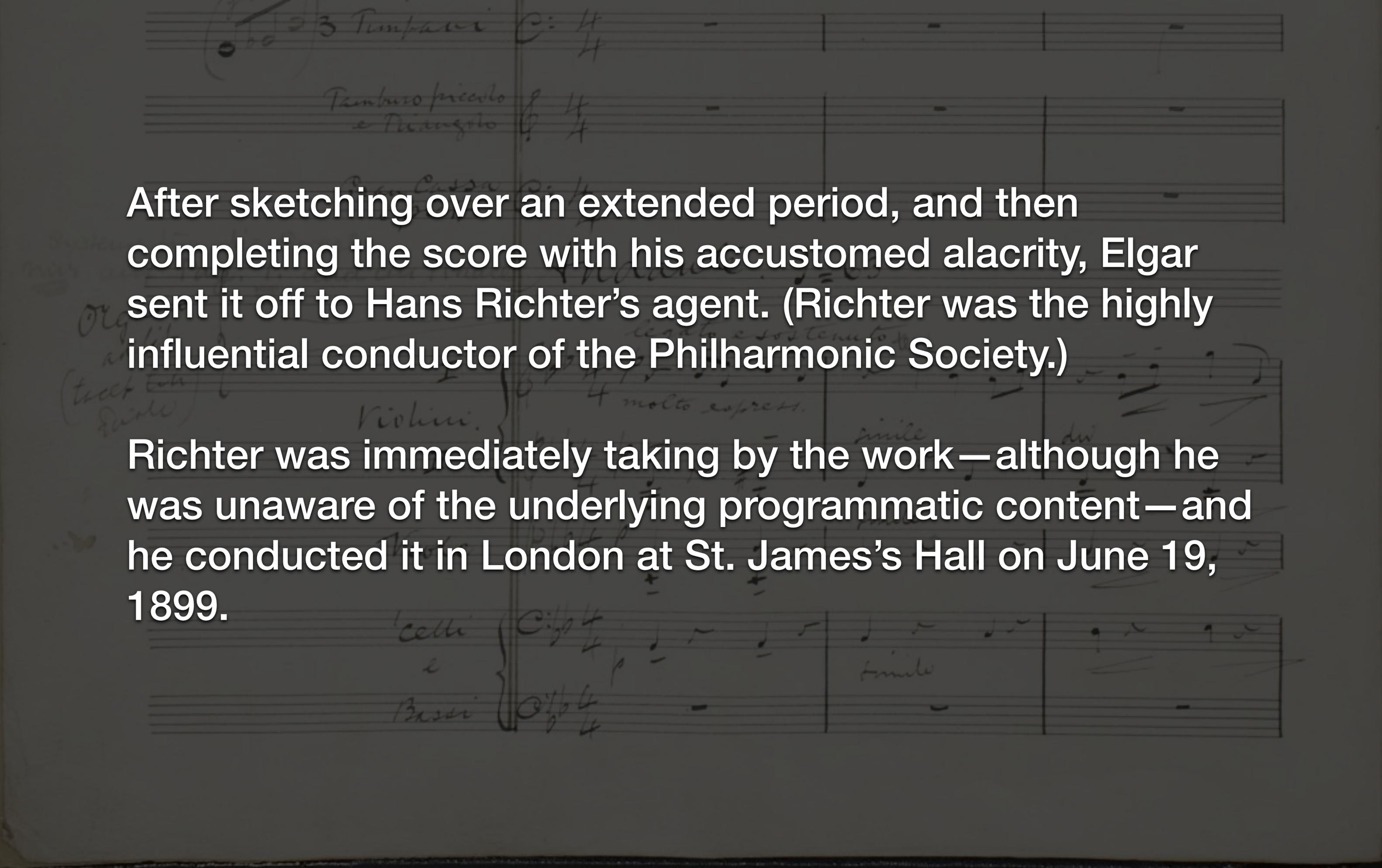
—Julian Rushton



On October 21, 1898 Elgar returned home exhausted after a long day of teaching violin. He began improvising on the piano to relax. His wife Alice, as always paying close attention to her husband's improvisations:

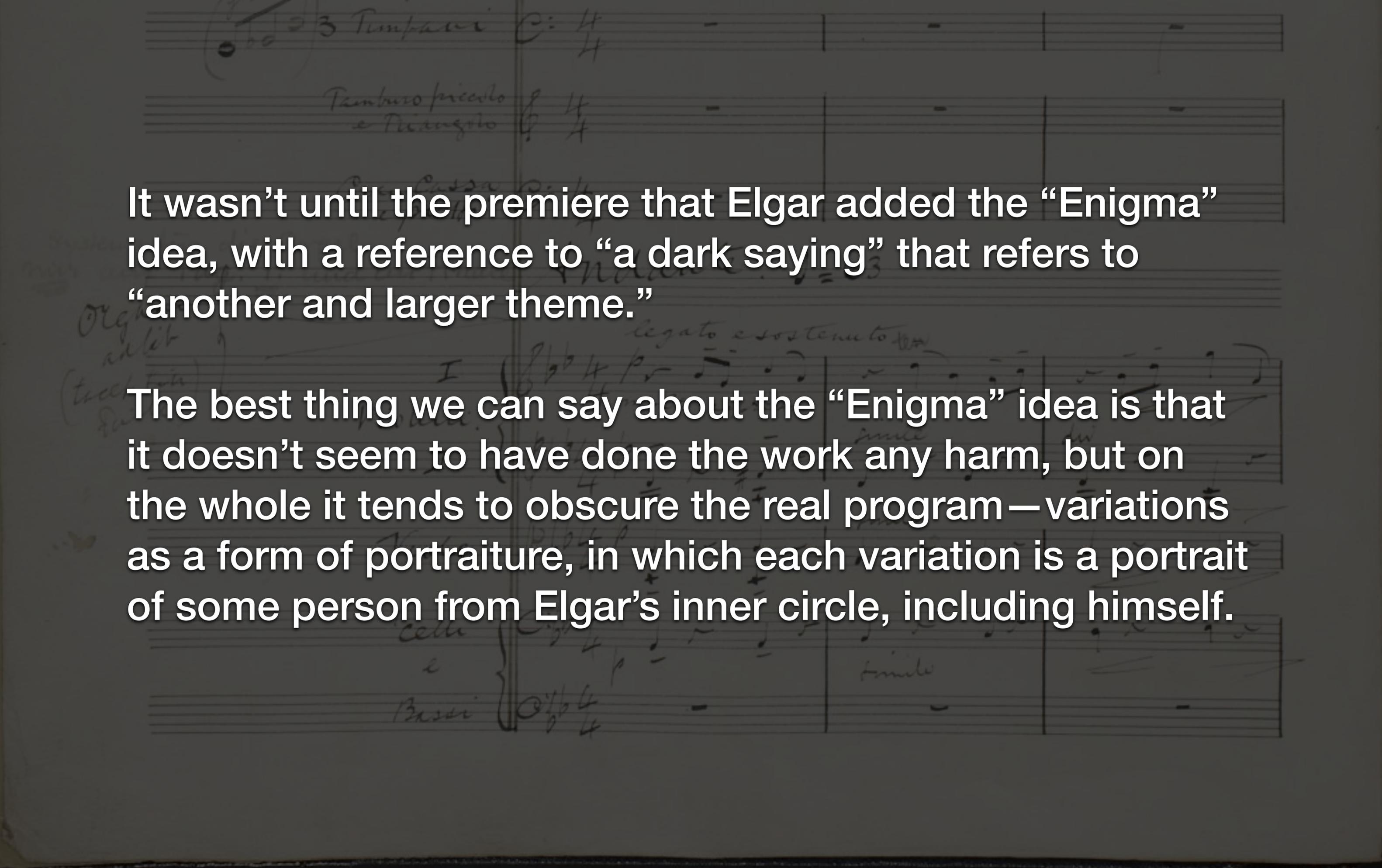
“interrupted by saying: ‘Edward, that’s a good tune.’ I awoke from the dream. ‘Eh! tune, what tune!’ and she said, ‘Play it again, I like that tune.’ I played and strummed, and played, and then she exclaimed, ‘That’s the tune.’ And that tune is the theme of the Variations.”

—Edward Elgar



After sketching over an extended period, and then completing the score with his accustomed alacrity, Elgar sent it off to Hans Richter's agent. (Richter was the highly influential conductor of the Philharmonic Society.)

Richter was immediately taken by the work — although he was unaware of the underlying programmatic content — and he conducted it in London at St. James's Hall on June 19, 1899.



It wasn't until the premiere that Elgar added the "Enigma" idea, with a reference to "a dark saying" that refers to "another and larger theme."

The best thing we can say about the "Enigma" idea is that it doesn't seem to have done the work any harm, but on the whole it tends to obscure the real program—variations as a form of portraiture, in which each variation is a portrait of some person from Elgar's inner circle, including himself.

## The portraits include:

- Elgar's close friend August Jaeger, whom Elgar dubbed as "Nimrod" in the variations (Nimrod = hunter, as does Jaeger in German)
- Country gentry such as William Meath Baker
- Amateur musicians such as Hew David Steuart-Powell and Basil Nevinson
- Lady friends of Elgar and his wife— Isabel Fitton, Winifred Norbury
- Professional and local friends such as Richard Penrose Arnold, and organist George Robertson Sinclair (and his bulldog Dan.)

# Theme

3 Timpani  $\text{C} = 4$   
Tamburo piccolo e Triangolo  $\text{C} = 4$   
Gran Cassa e piatti  $\text{C} = 4$

Systeme für die Orgel  
nur auf Pag. 1. und im Finale

Andante.  $\text{♩} = 63$

Organo  
ad lib  
(tacet etc  
dicitur)

Violini I  $\text{p}$  *legato e sostenuto*  
Violini II *molto espress.*  
Viola *simile*  
Celli e Bassi *simile*

## Var. 6: Ysobel (Isabel Fitton)

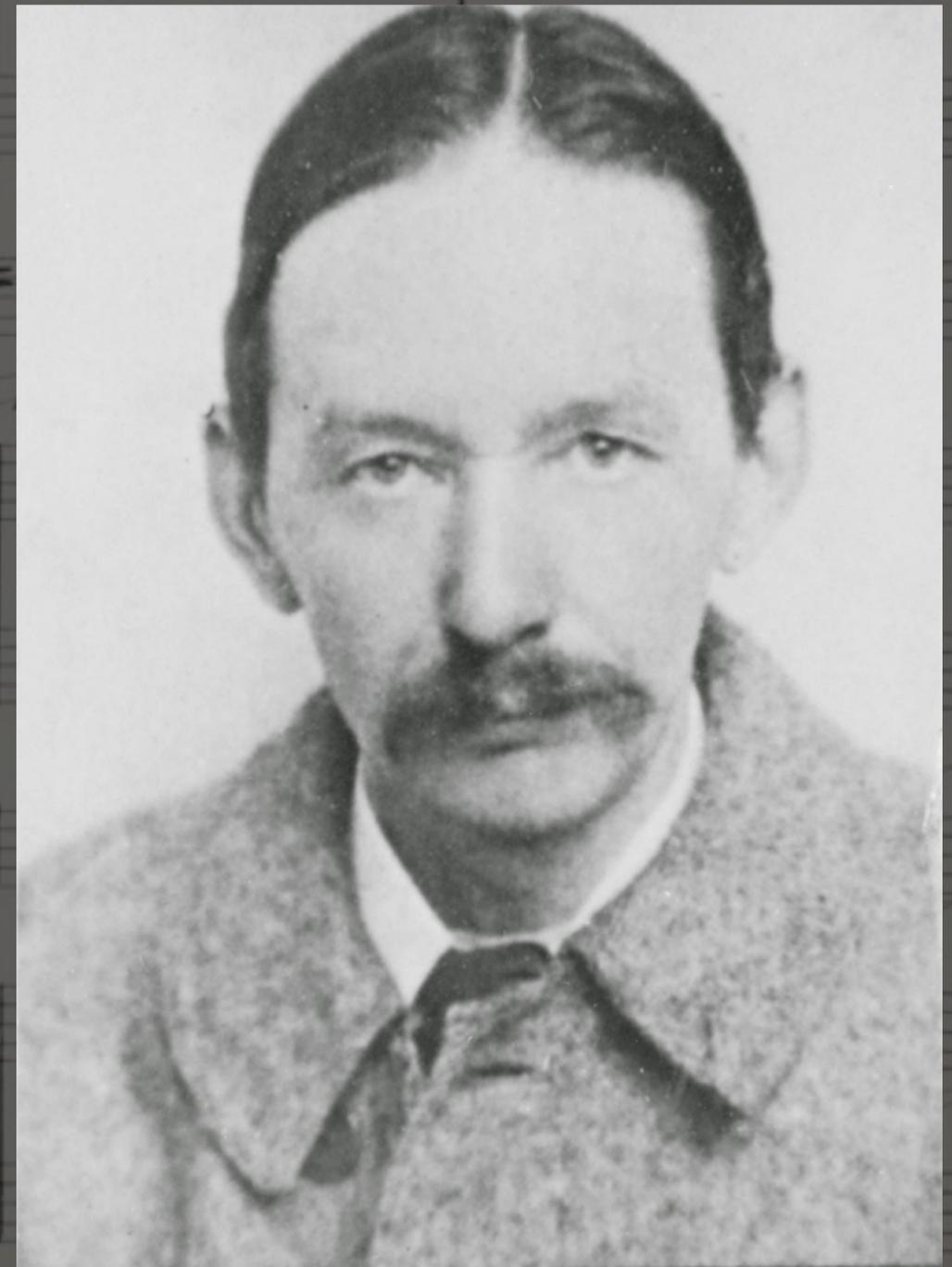
Tall young violin student of Elgar's, she came from a family of musical amateurs. She helped Elgar in various musical activities, including correcting proofs.



**Var. 7: Troyte (Arthur Troyte Griffith)**

**Professional architect, artist, and stage designer, and lifelong friend of Elgar's.**

**Elgar called him 'Ninepin' due to his height. He was known for his blustery manner, and for his intensity in arguments.**



**Var. 11: G.R.S.  
(George Robertson Sinclair and  
bulldog Dan)**

**The organist at Hereford  
Cathedral, Sinclair's athletic  
energy was easily matched by  
his bulldog Dan, who would  
eagerly jump into the river Wye  
whenever Sinclair threw a stick  
for him to fetch.**



**Var. 14: Finale E.D.U.  
(Elgar himself)**

**The Finale actually  
contains two  
complete variations,  
followed by a  
substantial Coda.**





# The Dream of Gerontius, Op. 38

Benjamin Britten / London Philharmonic / John Shirley-Quick, bass

Elgar set John Henry Newman's long poem to music in 1900.

The text tells of a pious elderly man's death, his journey to the afterlife, and his judgment before God.

Elgar, a devout Catholic, wrote the work in a glow of inspiration. However, the premiere was a disaster—unprepared, unrehearsed, and plagued with accidents. Later performances revealed *Gerontius* for the radiant masterpiece it is.

*Gerontius* doesn't always sit well with modern audiences.

The libretto is, for some, unacceptably preachy and uncomfortably pious.

But music this good can make up for a lot...

Part 1 Ending: *Proficiscere, anima Christiana, de hoc mundo!*

Gerontius has just died and his priest, together with the chorus, shepherd him out of this world.

The music is made of two main ideas:

- 1 - A recitative, almost a reciting tone
- 2 - An arioso (quasi-aria) that expands the reciting tone into a soaring melodic line over a pulsating orchestral accompaniment.

## The Form

**Recitative:** Priest

**Arioso:** Priest

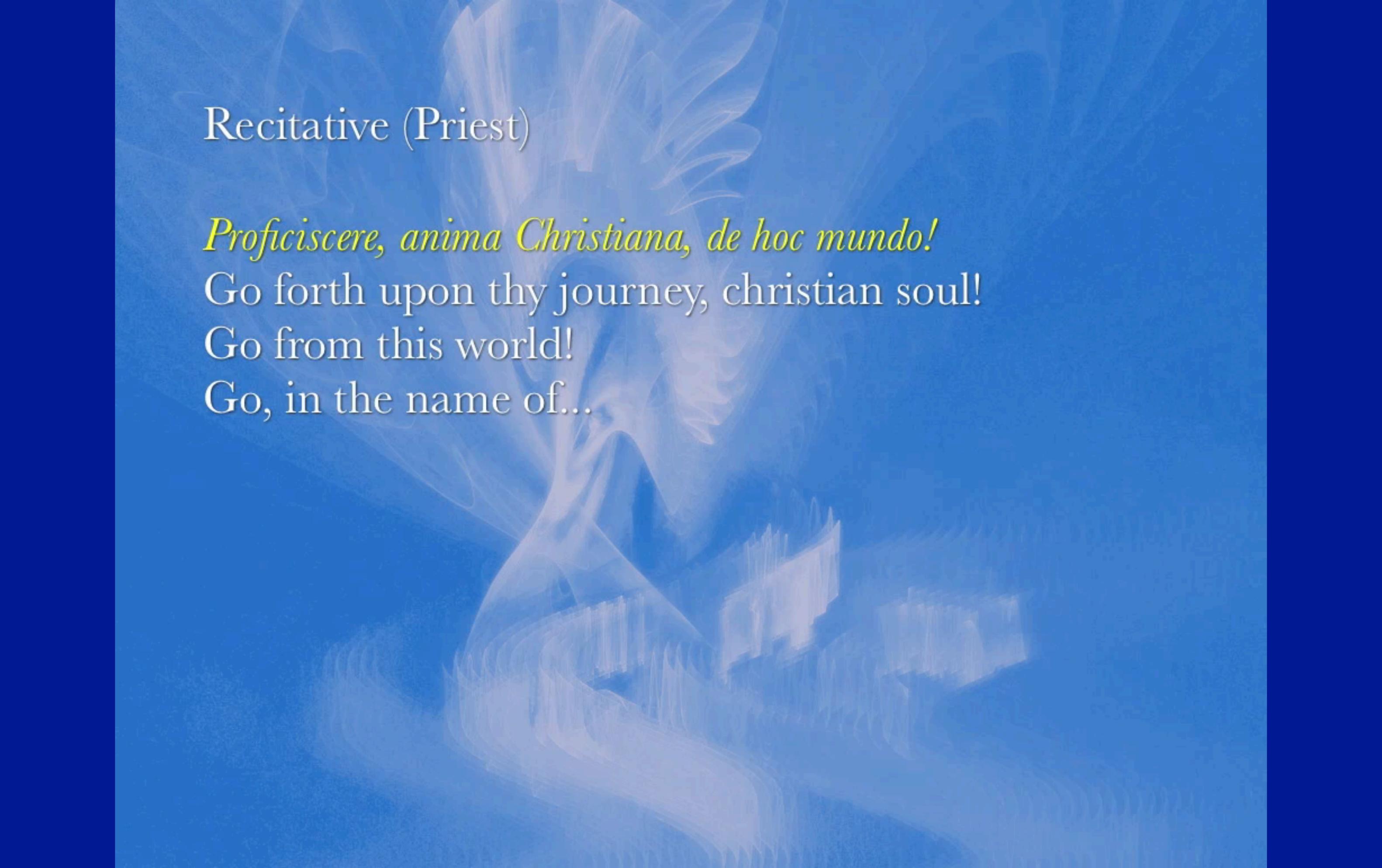
**Recitative:** Chorus

**Canon:** Chorus

**Recitative:** Priest and Chorus

**Arioso:** Priest and Chorus

**Hymn:** Priest, Chorus, and Semi-Chorus



Recitative (Priest)

*Proficiscere, anima Christiana, de hoc mundo!*

Go forth upon thy journey, christian soul!

Go from this world!

Go, in the name of...



# Symphony No. 1: III

Sir Mark Elder / Hallé Orchestra

# Symphony No. 1, Op. 55

- Written in 1908 and premiered by the Hallé Orchestra (Manchester), with Hans Richter conducting.
- Immediate and lasting success.
- Elgar himself made the first recording, but it has been performed and recorded many times since.

# The “Motto” Theme

# Exposition



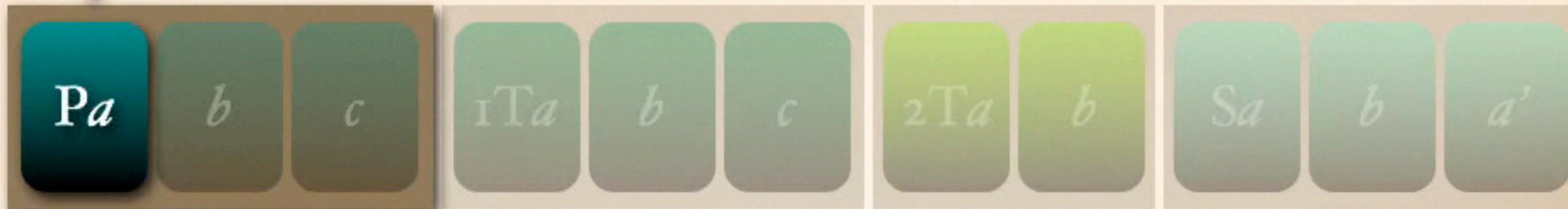
# Development



# Recapitulation



# Exposition



# Development



# Recapitulation





# Elgar and the Gramophone

Edward Elgar / Various Orchestras

# Elgar and the Gramophone

- Elgar was the first major composer to recognize the potential of the gramophone for furthering his music.
- As a man with a strongly scientific bent, he was fascinated by the gramophone and its swift evolution during the course of his lifetime.
- HMV (The Gramophone Company) always saw to it that he had the very latest model machine in his house.
- Elgar's collection of his own gramophone discs has survived fully intact, thanks to his, and his estate's, loving care.

# An Elgar Medley



We'll hear four separate Elgar recordings, made from 1914 (his first) to 1933 (one of his very last.)





# Symphony No. 2 in E-flat Major, Op. 63: III - Rondo (Presto)

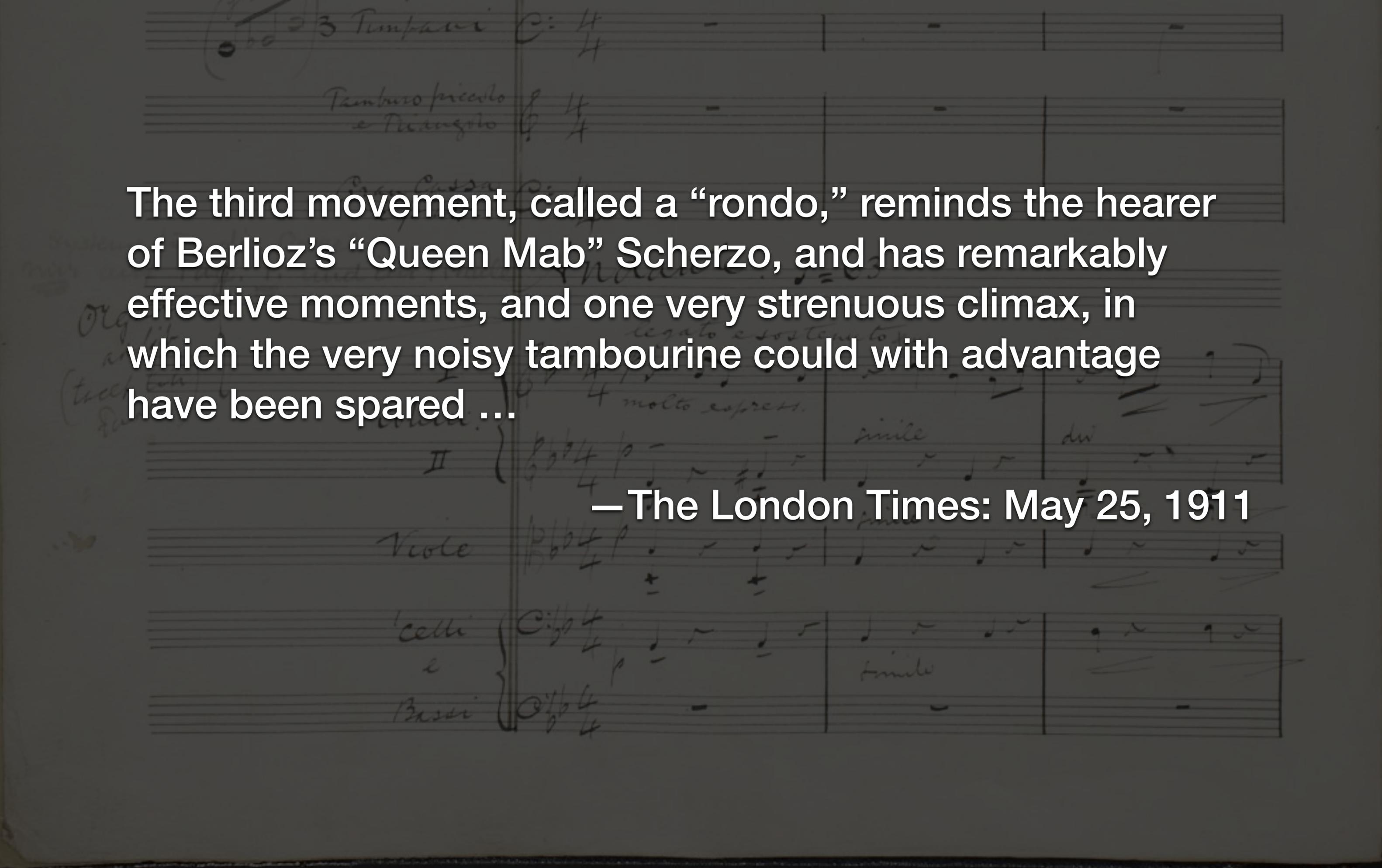
Sir John Barbirolli / Hallé Orchestra (rec. 1964)

# Symphony No. 2, Op. 63

- From 1911
- It was a fine success, but less than Symphony No. 1
- There have always been “Symphony 1” and “Symphony 2” people—i.e., who prefers which one—but in fact they’re both superlative symphonies in the grand manner.

# Symphony No. 2, Op. 63

- Symphony No. 2 lacks the overriding “motto theme” of the First Symphony, but has a slow movement nearly as good as its predecessor.
- The third movement—an expansive Rondo in which all the materials are generated out of the Reprise theme—is a superlative piece of writing.



The third movement, called a “rondo,” reminds the hearer of Berlioz’s “Queen Mab” Scherzo, and has remarkably effective moments, and one very strenuous climax, in which the very noisy tambourine could with advantage have been spared ...

— The London Times: May 25, 1911

A

A

Trans

B

A

C

A

Trans

D

B

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A

A

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Trans

B

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D

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