

# ALL THINGS MAJESTIC

SUNDAY, MARCH 26, 2023 | 3:00 PM

CENTURY II CONCERT HALL

**Rei Hotoda**  
*Guest Conductor*

**Awadagin Pratt**  
*Piano*



PROGRAM NOTES



# JENNIFER HIGDON

Born December 31, 1962 in Brooklyn, NY

## All Things Majestic (2011)

1. Teton Range
2. String Lake
3. Snake River
4. Cathedrals

This is the first performance by the Wichita Symphony.

- Higdon is one of America's most frequently performed composers.
- She is an avid outdoors person who has hiked in all parks all over the country.
- All Things Majestic is a paean to Grand Teton National Park.
- Each section explores a different aspect of that park's stunning landscapes.

Jennifer Higdon burst onto the American music scene more than twenty years ago, when her Concerto for Orchestra was featured at the flagship concert of the 2002 American Symphony Orchestra League meeting. That electrifying performance was greeted enthusiastically by the League audience and by the many prominent critics in attendance. The warm reception accorded to Higdon's Concerto led to performances by dozens of other orchestras in the United States.

Since then, Ms. Higdon has fulfilled the promise of that work. Her *blue cathedral* has become one of the most frequently performed American orchestral works. Her Violin Concerto won the 2010 Pulitzer Prize in music, and she has won three Grammys for Best Contemporary Classical Composition. Higdon served on the composition faculty of the Curtis Institute from 1994 to 2021. She continues to maintain a busy schedule fulfilling commissions.

A native of Brooklyn, Jennifer Higdon grew up in Atlanta and Seymour, Tennessee. She holds degrees from Bowling Green and University of Pennsylvania and an Artist Diploma from Curtis. Her composition teachers have included George Crumb and Ned Rorem. Ms. Higdon is also an accomplished flutist and conductor.

All Things Majestic was commissioned by the Grand Teton Music Festival and inspired by the magnificent national park that is the festival's backdrop. Ms. Higdon's composer's note follows.

Having grown up in the shadow of the Smoky Mountains, and having hiked many of our parks, I have come to the conclusion that the National Parks are one of America's greatest treasures. So, when asked by the Grand Teton Music Festival if I would compose a work to commemorate the festival's 50th anniversary, I jumped at the chance. All Things Majestic is a tribute to not only the Festival and its home, the Tetons, but also to the grandeur and majesty of all of our parks.

In this work, each movement represents a musical postcard: the first, the grandeur of the mountain ranges, with their size and sheer boldness, and the solidity with which they fill the ground and air; the second, the lakes and the exquisite mirror quality of reflection upon their serene surfaces; the third, the rapid flow, and unpredictability of the rivers and streams... ever-changing and powerful, yet at times, gentle.

# All Things Majestic (2011)

## *continued*

The final movement pictures the experience of being in the parks, as in a vast cathedral... the beauty of small details, such as flowers and plants, within the larger picture of forests and fields... every part contributing to the sheer majesty.

Cast in four discrete sections, *All Things Majestic* is an orchestral suite; however, the trajectory of its four movements approximates a programmatic symphony. One could think of it as the seasons of the Tetons. A brass chorale opens *Teton Range*, evoking the splendor of the mountains. As woodwinds, strings, and thunderous timpani join, the orchestra swells in recognition of the stunning landscape's breadth. *String Lake* is a marked contrast: gentle strings in a reverie. The pristine lake is an oasis: calm, reflective, static, a quieter aspect of the park. One can imagine lily pads on the lake on a peaceful autumn day, before winter disrupts their fragile abode.

*Snake River* functions as a scherzo. Small details chronicle the patterns of the river as it meanders through the landscape, like the reptile for which it is named. Higdon employs full orchestra, emphasizing winds, brass, and timpani in skittering, unpredictable paths.

*Cathedrals*, at about nine minutes, is the longest segment in *All Things Majestic*. The peaks, snow-capped throughout the winter and for much of the rest of the year, re-emerge, reminding us of the magnificence of this range. The winter wildlife that flourish in this harsh environment have a strength that echoes that of the mountains. *Cathedrals* concludes *All Things Majestic* with the affirmation that Mother Nature's beauty is the ultimate sacred space.

The score calls for 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion [vibraphone, glockenspiel, crotales, Chinese cymbals, tam-tam, snare drum, tom-tom, bass drum, temple blocks, 2 suspended cymbals], harp, celesta, and strings.

# JESSIE MONTGOMERY

Born December 8, 1981 in New York City, NY

## ***Rounds* for Piano and String Orchestra (2021-22)**

This is the first performance by the Wichita Symphony.

- Montgomery is an active violinist and teacher as well as a composer.
- Though experienced in orchestral writing, *Rounds* is her first work for piano.
- T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* provided the literacy impetus for *Rounds*.
- She drew inspiration from the rhythms and patterns in the poetry.
- Listen for varied textures, dense chords, and dream-like ephemeral figures.
- The solo pianist has a blockbuster cadenza!

First performance was March 27, 2022 in Hilton Head, SC. Awadagin Pratt was the soloist.

Jessie Montgomery's music is being performed a lot. This month alone, the National Symphony in Washington D.C. played her *Hymn for Everyone*, and the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra performed *Records from a Vanishing City*. With five performances in March alone, her *Strum*, *Banner*, and *Starburst* have practically become standard repertoire. Only 41, Montgomery has rocketed to the top of the most-frequently-performed list, writing powerful and accessible music for chamber ensemble, chorus, solo instruments, and orchestra.

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.

*Rounds* is her first composition for piano. The work was a consortium commission among nine American orchestras by The Art Of The Piano Foundation for pianist Awadagin Pratt.

Her composer's note explains the poetic origins of *Rounds*.

*Rounds* for solo piano and string orchestra is inspired by the imagery and themes from T.S. Eliot's epic poem *Four Quartets*. Early in the first poem, "Burnt Norton," we find these evocative lines:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;  
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,  
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,  
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,  
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.

(Text © T.S. Eliot. Reproduced by courtesy of Faber and Faber Ltd)

# ***Rounds for Piano and String Orchestra (2021-22)***

*continued*

In addition to this inspiration, while working on the piece, I became fascinated by fractals (infinite patterns found in nature that are self-similar across different scales) and also delved into the work of contemporary biologist and philosopher Andreas Weber who writes about the interdependency of all beings. Weber explores how every living organism has a rhythm that interacts and impacts with all of the living things around it and results in a multitude of outcomes.

Like Eliot in *Four Quartets*, beginning to understand this interconnectedness requires that we slow down, listen, and observe both the effect and the opposite effect caused by every single action and moment. I've found this is an exercise that lends itself very naturally towards musical gestural possibilities that I explore in the work – action and reaction, dark and light, stagnant and swift.

Structurally, with these concepts in mind, I set the form of the work as a rondo, within a rondo, within a rondo. The five major sections are a rondo; section “A” is also a rondo in itself; and the cadenza – which is partially improvised by the soloist – breaks the pattern, yet, contains within it, the overall form of the work.

To help share some of this with the performers, I've included the following poetic performance note at the start of the score:

Inspired by the constancy, the rhythms, and duality of life, in order of relevance to form:

Rondine – AKA Swifts (like a sparrow) flying in circles patterns

Playing with opposites – dark/light; stagnant/swift

Fractals – infinite design

I am grateful to my friend Awadagin Pratt for his collaborative spirit and ingenuity in helping to usher my first work for solo piano into the world.

- Jessie Montgomery, February 2022

The principal sections of *Rounds* are discernible by their varied textures: rapid-fire repeated triplets, dense chords somewhat prescient of Messiaen, but rendered with a percussive approach more akin to Prokofiev; and dreamy floating figures that seem to post half-questions. The extended solo cadenza – approximately four minutes of the work's duration – draws freely on these disparate elements, underscoring the subtle similarities in melodic and rhythmic contours that lend Montgomery's piece its cohesion.

The score calls for solo piano and strings.

# SIR EDWARD ELGAR

Born June 2, 1857 in Broadheath, England

Died February 23, 1934 in Worcester, England

## Variations on an Original Theme (Enigma), Op. 36

Last performed by the Wichita Symphony on March 11 and 12, 2012 with Daniel Hege conducting.

- No one knows what the "enigma" is - Elgar never revealed his secret!
- Each movement is a musical portrait of one of Elgar's good friends.
- Some variations bluster and argue, others soothe and ajole.
- The lovely "Nimrod" variation is played in England on its own, as a memorial tribute when someone of note has died.
- Which variations are like *your* friends?

Elgar is widely regarded to be the most important English composer of the turn of the century. During the nineteenth-century, England was disparagingly referred to by Germany and Austria as "*das Land ohne Musik*" -- the land without music. Elgar was both catalyst and symbol of a major renaissance in English composition, and his Enigma Variations catapulted him to fame both in his own country and on the continent.

Born into a musical family, Elgar learned to play violin, organ, and bassoon as a child. His father owned a music shop, tuned pianos, and played in the local orchestra. By the 1870s, young Edward knew he wanted to be a composer, but practical considerations steered him toward his father's various businesses. He became active in the musical life of Worcestershire County, playing primarily violin but also organ. Not until the Enigma Variations did he gain recognition from his contemporaries as a composer.

Elgar composed the Variations in 1898 and 1899. The inner page of the 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 that identifies one of the composer's friends. Thus "C.A.E." of the first variation is the composer's 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 their circle in Worcestershire achieved thereby a measure of immortality in Elgar's piece.

The portrait gallery of the fourteen variations is a treasure trove of brilliant character sketches, despite Elgar's insistence that his work was absolute music to be considered independently 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 "Isobel" 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 nickname was a conscious allusion to Mozart's *Così fan tutte*; her variation has the airy delicacy of the ballet music from Ponchielli's *La Gioconda* or Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*.

# Variations on an Original Theme (Enigma), Op. 36

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"Dorabella"'s sprightly, chirping fillips of woodwinds and strings 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.

Elgar's Variations are scored for a large orchestra of 2 flutes (second doubling piccolo), 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones (third doubling tuba), timpani, percussion, organ ad lib. and strings.

## THE UNSOLVED ENIGMA

When the Enigma Variations first appeared, listeners mistakenly believed that the identities masked by the variation titles were the enigma of the subtitle. The composer promptly debunked this theory in his own program note for the piece, 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" and "Home sweet Home."

In 1991, the English pianist Joseph Cooper came forth with a new theory, that the enigma was derived from Mozart's slow movement to the *Prague* Symphony. Just this past December, another Englishman, Dr. Clive McClelland of Leeds University, proposed that Elgar's theme derived from the hymn "Now the Day is Over," by Sabine Baring-Gould, the composer of "Onward Christian Soldiers."

No satisfactory solution has been universally accepted, and the secret of the enigma remains one of music's great unsolved mysteries. Perhaps Elgar was not referring to a melody at all, but rather a place implied by the "spelling" of the notes in his theme, much as Robert Schumann did with the town of Asch in *Carnaval*.

# Variations on an Original Theme (Enigma), Op. 36

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## THE NIMROD VARIATION

Elgar took delight in expressing his friends' personalities in musical terms. To his friend August Johannes Jaeger, he wrote 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 Book of Genesis. -L.S.*] That is to say I've written the Variations each one to represent the mood of the 'party.' I've liked to imagine the 'party' writing the variation him (or her) self and have written what I think they would have written--if they were asses enough to compose--its a quaint idea & the result is amusing to those behind the scenes & won't affect the hearer who 'nose nuffin.' What think you?

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.