

PROGRAM NOTES

Quincy Symphony Orchestra
October 4, 2026 Quincy, Illinois

Festive Overture, Op. 96.....Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Our season opens with a joyous *Festive Overture* by Dmitri Shostakovich. The initial reason for him to compose this work was a concert in 1947 celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Great October Revolution of 1917. The work was ultimately not performed on this occasion. Seven years later (after the death of Josef Stalin), he was again asked to contribute to a concert at the Bolshoi Theater honoring the Great October Revolution. Within three days he revised the overture, and it was performed on November 6, 1954.

Shostakovich lived his entire compositional life under communist rule in the Soviet Union. He endured the control that the government demanded, and he abided the post-WWII governmental expectations for individual artistic expression. After Stalin died, Shostakovich was recognized as the preeminent Soviet composer and then felt more secure to produce more individual, personal compositions.

The *Festive Overture* follows a predictable pattern for a celebratory work. It opens with a startling fanfare, followed, then underlined, by a ponderous bass line. After securing attention of the audience, the work launches into a fast, active main section that emphasizes fast, scalar melodic lines underlined by an active, rhythmic accompaniment. It continues with a lyric tune accompanied by mostly "off-beat" accompaniment. Occasional startling accents interrupt an increasing excitement until, finally, the initial fanfare reoccurs. After a final statement of the lyric tune, the overture ends in very loud chords.

~Compiled by Dr. Paul Borg (2018)

Knoxville: Summer of 1915, Op. 24 Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

This lyrical concert scene for soprano and orchestra was composed in 1947. The work sets text from James Agee's nostalgic prose poem of the same name. It captures a dreamy summer evening in Knoxville, Tennessee, through the innocent, wide-eyed perspective of a five-year-old child. Barber's luminous, flowing score mirrors the unstructured drift of childhood memory. Gentle, lullaby-like melodies evoke neighbors rocking on front porches and families lying quietly on the grass. Occasional vivid disruptions—like the clatter of a passing streetcar—fade back into the tranquil, secure embrace of a warm southern night.

Song Text Knoxville: Summer of 1915

It has become that time of evening when people sit on their porches, rocking gently and talking gently and watching the street and the standing up into their sphere of possession of the trees, of birds' hung havens, hangars. People go by; things go by. A horse, drawing a buggy, breaking his hollow iron music on the asphalt; a loud auto; a quiet auto; people in pairs, not in a hurry, scuffling, switching their weight of aestival body, talking casually, the taste hovering over them of vanilla, strawberry, pasteboard and starched milk, the image upon them of lovers and horsemen, squared with clowns in hueless amber

A streetcar raising its iron moan; stopping, belling and starting; stertorous; rousing and raising again its iron increasing moan and swimming its gold windows and straw seats on past and past and past, the bleak spark crackling and cursing above it like a small malignant spirit set to dog its tracks; the iron whine rises on rising speed; still risen, faints; halts; the faint stinging bell; rises again, still fainter, fainting, lifting, lifts, faints foregone: forgotten. Now is the night one blue dew

Now is the night one blue dew, my father has drained, he has coiled the hose
 Low on the length of lawns, a frailing of fire who breathes...
 Parents on porches: rock and rock. From damp strings morning glories hang their ancient faces
 The dry and exalted noise of the locusts from all the air at once enchants my eardrums
 On the rough wet grass of the back yard my father and mother have spread quilts. We all lie there, my mother,
 my father, my uncle, my aunt, and I too am lying there...They are not talking much, and the talk is quiet, of nothing
 in particular, of nothing at all. The stars are wide and alive, they seem each like a smile of great sweetness, and
 they seem very near. All my people are larger bodies than mine,...with voices gentle and meaningless like the voices
 of sleeping birds. One is an artist, he is living at home. One is a musician, she is living at home. One is my mother
 who is good to me. One is my father who is good to me. By some chance, here they are, all on this earth; and who
 shall ever tell the sorrow of being on this earth, lying, on quilts, on the grass, in a summer evening, among the
 sounds of the night. May God bless my people, my uncle, my aunt, my mother, my good father, oh, remember them
 kindly in their time of trouble; and in the hour of their taking away
 After a little I am taken in and put to bed. Sleep, soft smiling, draws me unto her: and those receive me, who
 quietly treat me, as one familiar and well-beloved in that home: but will not, oh, will not, not now, not ever; but will
 not ever tell me who I am

Enigma Variations, Op. 36.....Sir Edward Elgar (1898-1937)

Edward Elgar's *Variations on an Original Theme, Op. 36*, universally known as the *Enigma Variations*, stands as a crowning masterpiece of the late Romantic orchestral repertoire. Premiered in London in 1899 under the baton of Hans Richter, this brilliant work instantly transformed Elgar from a localized provincial music teacher into a towering figure of international renown. The piece began casually at the piano on an October evening in 1898, when Elgar improvised a haunting, melancholy melody that caught his wife Alice's attention. Amused, Elgar began altering the tune to mimic the distinct personalities, laugh patterns, and quirks of their closest friends. What resulted from this game is a deeply affectionate musical photo album containing fourteen distinct variations, each labeled with cryptic initials, nicknames, or symbols to mask the identities of the dedicatees.

The foundational "Enigma" encompasses two distinct layers of mystery. The first is the explicit musical portraiture, which showcases Elgar's unmatched genius for orchestration. These portraits range from the delicate, fluttering woodwinds of "Ysobel" to the boisterous, organ-like brass of "G.R.S." and his paddling bulldog, to a nervous pianist and a boisterous amateur timpanist, to Elgar's beloved wife. Most famous among them is the noble, deeply moving "Nimrod," a sweeping adagio dedicated to Elgar's publisher, Augustus Jaeger. This movement captures a profound conversation the two men shared about Beethoven's slow movements, serving as a monument to artistic encouragement. The work concludes with a triumphant self-portrait, "E.D.U.," representing Elgar himself overcoming artistic self-doubt through the enduring love and strength of his inner circle.

The second, more elusive enigma is a hidden musical theme. Elgar famously claimed that a well-known larger tune "goes through and over the whole set" but is never explicitly played, sparking over a century of unsolved musicological debate. Scholars have guessed everything from "Auld Lang Syne" to "Rule, Britannia!", but the secret died with the composer. Ultimately, the true triumph of the *Enigma Variations* does not rest on solving its riddles, but rather on its structural perfection and universal emotional architecture. Elgar weaves a vivid tapestry of human relationships, shifting seamlessly from delicate tenderness to raucous humor, culminating in a triumphant finale that secured his legacy.