

3<sup>rd</sup> September 2024

## Variations

**“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.”**

Edward Elgar, *Programme note on “The Enigma Variations” (1911)*

On a fortnightly basis, I join a jam-session in the pub in the village to play traditional Irish and Scottish music. Accordions, flutes, pennywhistles, guitars, banjos, mouthorgans, mandolins, bodhrans all make an appearance, in a free-flowing music session. We play some tunes in “sets” – a march, strathspey and reel, for example – and we all pitch in as we “feel” the music unfolding. Sometimes there’s a new tune to pick up and play along to as we are able. It’s spontaneous and fun.

However ... we’ve been asked to play at a local festival in a few weeks’ time, so we have to be better organised. What tunes? What speed? Who starts off? How many repeats? Will we finish together? To make sure everyone’s “on the same page”, we’ve been directed to a traditional music website, so we can download the appropriate music. But I discovered that for most of the tunes there are any number of variations. Key ... rhythm ... grace-notes ... speed ... repeats ... So, which is the one we can all play together? Variations are good in a free-flowing jam-session. Nothing is good or bad, right or wrong. It’s all enjoyable. But when there’s the need for clarity, organisation and cooperation, variations can be problematic.

Variations have their place. They allow for newness and spontaneity. They provide an opportunity for freedom of expression. Everyone benefits from that. But sometimes, variations need to give way to organisation, for the greater good, or simply so that everyone knows what’s expected of them. It’s a balance. Variations matter, but so does organisation. Organisation has its place, and so do variations.

Edward Elgar didn’t explain the enigma of his “variations”. His music was based on an unidentified theme, and the variations were descriptive of people’s personalities. So, he didn’t need to explain. Maybe we don’t either and should learn to live with enigmas. If the theme is constant, there will always be a place for variations – which I’m more than happy to get back to in the local pub once playing at the festival is over for this year.

### **A prayer for today**

*Your love having variations, Lord? I expect it must, if you love me as I am.*

*But organised so it’s constant for everyone? Now, there’s an enigma I like! Amen*