

# **‘Variations’ on an ‘Enigma’: Contest composition, Schadt winner pace Allentown Symphony concert**

**Friday, October 21, 2016 by DIANE WITTRY Special to The Press in Focus**

e·nig·ma /iˈnɪgmə/ noun a person or thing that is mysterious, puzzling, or difficult to understand.

This is the word used by Sir Edward Elgar as part of the title for the set of variations that he wrote on a single theme, the “Enigma Variations.”

The story goes that Elgar was improvising on his piano and came up with this nice melody that reminded him of his wife, Alice. As he experimented with the music, changing it around, he jokingly called out to his wife in the kitchen, “Who does this sound like?”

What eventually resulted was a piece of music, a set of variations, all based on the same theme, but where each variation depicted the character or something specific about a good musician friends of theirs. One of their friends played the cello and so that instrument was featured in their variation. Another friend had a bulldog named Dan, and Dan, trotting on his short legs, became the star of that variation.

At the premiere, only the initials of the friends were printed in the music, so of course, everyone in the audience spent the evening trying to guess who was who. The biggest “enigma,” however, was the 13th variation, where instead of initials, Elgar simply put \* \* \* .

Was it a secret love affair? We don’t really know. That variation was later said to characterize a friend named Lady Mary Lygon, who was supposed to be on a sea voyage and therefore had not given permission for her initials to be used. However, research revealed that she did not leave for her voyage until later, and so there would have been plenty of time to ask her permission.

Instead, rumors have it that perhaps there was yet another woman in Elgar’s life. And so the “Enigma” continues.

What a clever idea to immortalize all of your friends in music. I liked the idea so much, that we decided to host a composer competition with the Allentown Symphony Orchestra. We put out a call for scores where each composer had to take the original melody that Elgar used for his “Enigma Variations,” and then write their own variation that captured the character of a friend of theirs.

The competition was open to residents of the Greater Lehigh Valley and the variations they composed were to be 30 seconds to 2 minutes in length. Each composer submitted the initials of their friend and a short description of their friend’s personality.

To keep things fair, there was a K-8 category, a High School and College Category, and an Adult Category, and all entries were submitted under pseudonyms.

More than 25 composers entered the contest which was judged by Larry Lipkis of Moravian College, Kirk O’Riordan of Lafayette College, and myself, ASO Music Director-Conductor. The criteria we considered for the judging was based upon the composer’s musical originality, use of the theme, and the ability to capture and express the personality traits of a person.

The winning variations from this contest have been combined together by Lipkis, Composer-In-Residence at Moravian College, to create a new composition, “Variations on a Theme by Elga,” to be premiered by the Allentown Symphony Orchestra, 7:30 p.m. Nov. 5 and 3 p.m. Nov. 6, Miller Symphony Hall, Allentown.

Yash Pazhianur, a seventh-grader Lambertville, N.J., is the winner in the K-8 division. Yash is a pianist and was recently admitted into the Julliard pre-college program to study composition for the 2016-17 academic year.

In the High School College category, we have Christopher Lazzaro of Zionsville, Upper and Lower Milford townships, a Composition student at Temple University, and Griffin Woodard of Bethlehem, a 2016 graduate of Lehigh Valley Charter High School for the Arts now attending Oberlin Conservatory, majoring in Music Composition.

The winner in the Adult Composer category is Steve Reisteter of Bethlehem. He performs regularly as a member of the Allentown Symphony Orchestra and an accomplished music educator, composer, arranger and clarinetist.

For the concerts Nov. 5 and 6, the Allentown Symphony features the 2016 National Schadt String Competition winner, cellist Alexander Hersh. He won the coveted \$8,000 First Prize last spring, competing against cellists from all over the world.

Hersh is pursuing a Masters Degree at the New England Conservatory, has soloed with the Boston Pops and won numerous awards as soloist and chamber music player. With the ASO, he will perform Schumann’s Cello Concerto in A minor.

A world premiere by talented composers from the Lehigh Valley, a rising young cello soloist who is dynamic and engaging, and the powerful “Enigma Variations” by Sir Edward Elgar make the second concerts in the 2016-17 Classical Series something for everyone to enjoy.

“Meet the Artist,” with Diane Wittry, Alexander Hersh, Larry Lipkis and Steve Reisteter, noon Nov. 4, Miler Symphony Hall, Allentown. The event is free for patrons and those attending the Nov. 5 or 6 Allentown Symphony Orchestra concert.

Diane Wittry is Music Director and Conductor of the Allentown Symphony Orchestra, Artistic Director (USA), International Cultural Exchange Program for Classical Musicians, Sarajevo Philharmonic, Bosnia, and author, “Beyond the Baton” and “Baton Basics” (both, Oxford University Press).

Allentown Symphony Orchestra concert tickets: Miller Symphony Hall Box Office, 23 N. Sixth St., Allentown; [allentownsymphony.org](http://allentownsymphony.org); 610-432-6715