

**Samuel Coleridge-Taylor** was a noted Afro-English composer whose works thrived mostly around the decades surrounding the turn of the 20th century. Born and raised near London, he received much of his musical training from his mother's side of the family, being taught the violin by her father from an early age. He was educated at the Royal College of Music, switching from violin to composition, and studying the latter with Charles Villiers Stanford. Following the completion of his degree, he became a professional musician, and was eventually appointed to a professorship at the Crystal Palace School of Music. He also conducted the orchestra at the Croydon Conservatoire. His greatest success as a composer was the choral trilogy, *Scenes from the Song of Hiawatha*. Its opening section, "*Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*," still retains a foothold in the repertoire today.

The *Ballade in A Minor, Opus 33*, was commissioned by and composed for the Three Choirs Festival 1898 series of concerts (on the strength of a recommendation by Sir Edward Elgar) while Coleridge-Taylor was still a student at the Royal College of Music. The work is scored for a large orchestra featuring woodwinds in pairs (including piccolo), full brass, timpani, cymbals, and strings; it lasts a little over 11 minutes. Coleridge-Taylor alternates primarily between two thematic ideas, the first being very rhythmic, with the second being much more lyrical and songlike; the second iteration of the A theme becomes gentler before returning to the B theme, giving this work a bit of an archlike form, basically a rondo plus a short coda that brings the work to its conclusion.

### **Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904): Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in A Minor, Opus 53**

Antonin Dvořák was one of the first leading composers of a Czech national style (immediately following Bedrich Smetana), and he incorporated many elements of folk and dance music into his compositions. He was born in the village of Nelahozeves, Bohemia, 15 or so miles north of the capital city of Prague. A butcher's son, he began violin lessons at the age of six, adding organ and piano in his early teens. Dvořák played viola in the Bohemian Provisional Theatre Orchestra, leaving the orchestra in 1871 in order to focus more closely on his composing. His works began to be performed in Prague a year later, and became known to a wider European audience as the result of first place finishes in the Austrian State Prize (composition) in 1874, 1876, and 1877. Dvořák served as Director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York City from 1892 until 1895, and encouraged his students to incorporate the music of African-Americans and Native-Americans into their compositions to strengthen an emerging American nationalistic style.

Dvořák's *Violin Concerto in A Minor, Opus 53*, was composed in 1879. Its premiere took place in Prague in 1883, featuring František Ondříček as soloist (he also gave the Vienna and London premieres.) The work is scored for woodwinds in pairs, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, and strings, and takes approximately 30 minutes to perform. It is crafted in the usual three-movement pattern of fast-slow-fast, and the first two movements are played with no break in the music. The soloist enters very early into the first movement, rather than following an orchestral exposition, and is featured in two short quasi-cadential passages before the orchestra continues with the movement's thematic materials. It's a beautiful movement, alternating between the strong rhythms and lilting lyricism so closely associated with the folk music of Dvořák's native Bohemia. The second movement sings through all of the alternating solo violin and orchestra tutti passages, with the

third movement concluding as a rollicking *furiant*, reminiscent of Dvořák's *Slavonic Dance No. 1*. This concerto is a true virtuoso showpiece for the soloist, while keeping the orchestra equally involved, and remains a mainstay in today's repertoire for this combination.

### **George Walker (1922-2018): *Lyric for Strings***

George Theophilus Walker, a native of Washington, D.C., was the son of West Indian-American parentage; his father, originally from Jamaica, emigrated to the United States, becoming a physician following his graduation from Temple University. Young George began piano lessons at age five, giving his first public recital at Howard University when he was 14 years old. He was accepted into the Oberlin College Conservatory of Music shortly thereafter, and graduated with highest honors at age 18. From there, he pursued graduate studies at the Curtis Institute of Music, where his teachers included Rudolf Serkin (piano), William Primrose and Gregor Piatigorsky (chamber music), and Rosario Scalero (composition). He received Artist Diplomas in piano and in composition from Curtis in 1945. His professional life was equally balanced between being a concert pianist, a composer, and a teacher. Orchestras with whom he appeared as piano soloist include the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Baltimore Symphony. Significant faculty appointments included the Peabody Institute at Johns Hopkins University, Rutgers University, and the Dalcroze School of Music. He received numerous commissions, including from the New York Philharmonic, the Cleveland Orchestra, the Boston Symphony, and the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. In 1996, Walker was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in Music for *Lilacs for Voice and Orchestra*. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1999, and in 2000 was inducted into the American Classical Music Hall of Fame.

*Lyric for Strings* was composed in 1946 and is dedicated to Walker's grandmother, who had passed away the previous year. It was originally conceived as the Second Movement of Walker's String Quartet No. 1, and titled, "Lament." Later, it was arranged for string orchestra, and was given its premiere performance in a radio broadcast by the student orchestra of the Curtis Institute of Music, conducted by Seymour Lipkin. Its first public performance took place the following year in Washington, featuring the National Gallery Orchestra, conducted by Richard Bales. From the George Walker website: "After a brief introduction, the principal theme is stated by the first violins with imitations appearing in the other instruments. The linear nature of the material alternates with static moments of harmony. After the second of two climaxes, the work concludes with reposeful cadences that were presented earlier."

### **Sir Edward Elgar (1857-1934): Variations on an Original Theme, Opus 36, "Enigma" Variations**

Edward William Elgar was born in Lower Broadheath, not far from Worcester, where his father, William, worked as a piano tuner and sheet music salesman. Edward began taking piano and violin lessons by the time he was eight years old. As a teenager, he was quite active in musical activities in and about Worcester, and had also begun to compose and arrange, and eventually added conducting to his growing number of skills. By the time he reached his mid-twenties, he had succeeded his father as organist at St. George's Roman Catholic Church in Worcester. During this

same period, Caroline Alice Roberts became his student, and she would become his wife three years later. The couple relocated to London, and Elgar began to devote more of his time to composition. The 1890s saw his reputation growing, albeit slower than he would have liked. The needed breakthrough came in 1899; the London premiere of his *Enigma Variations* was an instant hit, and solidly established his international reputation. Lady Elgar's death in 1920 was a devastating blow from which he never recovered, and his creativity suffered accordingly. While he never completely stopped composing, he never completed another major work. Elgar remains the first truly great composer to come out of England since Henry Purcell.

The *Enigma Variations* were composed between 1898 and 1899, and premiered later that summer in London, conducted by Hans Richter. Shortly thereafter, Elgar revised and expanded the work; the premiere of this version took place in the middle of September at the Worcester Three Choirs Festival with Elgar on the podium, and this is the version usually played today. The theme is followed by fourteen variations. Each is in a different character, and depicts one of Elgar's friends (the work is dedicated to "my friends pictured within"), beginning with his beloved wife, Lady Alice, who is portrayed in Variation 1. Probably the best-known section of the work is Variation 9, *Nimrod*; this beautiful variation is frequently used for funerals, memorial services, and other solemn occasions, especially in England; it was featured during the Opening Ceremonies of the Games of the XXX Olympiad (held in London during the summer of 2012), and most recently, an adaptation was used in the 2017 film, *Dunkirk*. Some of the other highly descriptive imagery in the Variations include references to a viola student learning how to maneuver string crossings (V. 6), a friend with a mild stutter (V. 10), a bulldog rolling down a steep embankment into a river (V. 11), and the distant vibrations of an ocean liner engine on a sea voyage (V. 13).