

Edward Elgar

Nimrod



This month **Bridget Mermikides** arranges and transcribes an English masterpiece, the sublime Nimrod from Edward Elgar's Enigma Variations, composed at the end of the 19th century.

ABILITY RATING



Moderate/Advanced

| INFO | WILL IMPROVE YOUR |
|------------------------|---|
| KEY: Drop D | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Chordal technique |
| TEMPO: 40 bpm | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Romantic repertoire |
| CD: TRACKS 9-10 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Spread and block chords |

THIS MONTH I'VE arranged a piece by one of England's most celebrated composers, Edward Elgar (1857-1934). Although his music is now considered quintessentially English and is deeply woven into the culture, Elgar in fact drew much of his inspiration from continental composers (most notably Brahms, Schumann and Wagner).

Furthermore his Catholicism in the overwhelmingly Protestant society of the time, coupled with issues of his humble class origins, made his passage to mainstream acceptance (let alone celebrity) challenging. In fact it was not until his forties that he gained significant success. Despite the impression one might get from a rousing Proms performance of his Pomp and

Circumstance marches, Elgar in fact remained a deeply sensitive, humble and melancholic character and this is reflected in many of his works. These include pieces for orchestra, choir, chamber ensemble and solo keyboard.

Of all of Elgar's works, perhaps his most famous is the Enigma Variations. Written at the very end of the 19th century this was a seminal work cementing his international reputation as a significant composer. It remains one of the most popular orchestral works of all time, with a century of repeated performances and recordings occurring since its composition.

The concept of the Enigma Variations is unique and inspired. In a traditional theme and variations, a composer takes a short

“Each of the variations is dedicated to one of Elgar's friends, mimicking their characters - the cadence of one friend's laughter, and even the stutter of another.”

melodic idea (either an original or borrowed one) and writes a series of short movements based on this theme (Paganini's Caprice No. 24 (for violin), and Sor's Variations on a Theme of Mozart (for classical guitar) are just a couple of many examples). In the Enigma Variations however, Elgar never plays the theme upon which the other variations are based. In fact although there has been much speculation on what the theme was, Elgar never revealed the 'enigma', or whether the theme was literary rather than musical, or if indeed there was even a theme at all.

Another beautiful idea of Elgar's is that each of the variations is dedicated to one of his


friends, mimicking their individual characters (even the cadence of one friend's laughter and another's stutter). In this way Elgar immortalised the people that mattered most to him; people who would have been otherwise been long forgotten.

After the death of his wife Alice, Elgar found it hard to concentrate on composing, and anyway by this time his style of music was out of fashion. So he concentrated on his hobbies - horse racing and his football team Wolverhampton Wanderers (for whom he even composed a theme tune, He Banged The Leather For Goal). He also enjoyed being driven around the countryside by his chauffeur and even took a trip up the Amazon. Like his beloved wife, Elgar died of inoperable cancer in 1934. He was 76.

Here I've arranged Variation IX - the ever popular Nimrod - which was dedicated to Elgar's editor and friend, Augustus Jaeger. It is in fact a demonstration of gratitude to Jaeger for rescuing Elgar from a period of depression and disillusionment with his composing, and the sense of rising hope in the piece is appreciated universally.

I had the significant challenge of reducing the orchestral force in Nimrod down to a solo guitar work while maintaining its emotional impact. To do so I transposed the original key of E-flat major down a semitone to D major and used drop D tuning to emulate the orchestral warmth and depth.

Much of the piece is written with large chords and the technical challenge for both the fretting and plucking hands is to play all these chords clearly and musically, while maintaining an audible melody at the top.

Nimrod may take some practice but I hope you enjoy learning this amazing piece, and I'll see you next time with another masterpiece arranged for guitar. 

TECHNIQUE FOCUS

Great warm-up idea

It's always a very good idea to warm up before practising. Just 10-15 minutes of preparation can set you up for a really beneficial practice session, and protect you against injury. One (of many) possible approaches to warming up is to take a very small section of a piece you are working on and play it extremely slowly, focusing on relaxed precision, clarity of tone and efficiency of motion. In this way you can not only improve your technique, warm up optimally and imprint a secure muscle memory in your repertoire. Try it!



TRACK RECORD The recently unearthed 1947 Barbirolli recording of the Enigma is historically significant, but for higher audio quality, the London Symphony Orchestra's (under Sir Adrian Boult) 1970 (EMI 1991) passionate performance is a classic. For an introduction to Elgar's works (including Jacqueline Du Pré's performance of the Cello Concerto) I recommend Elgar: Great Performances (Sony 2006).



An intriguing
'portrait' of
Edward Elgar

PLAYING TIPS

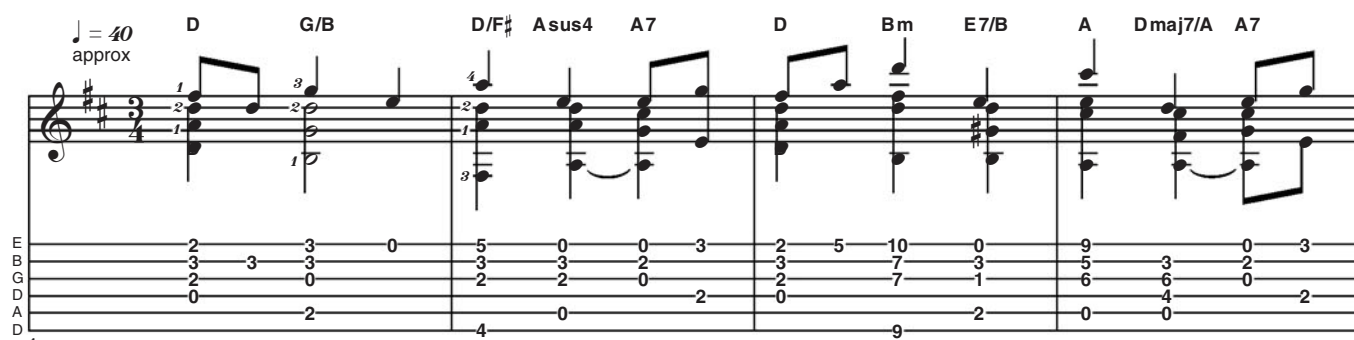
CD TRACK 10

This piece is lush, smooth and legato in its original orchestral form, something hard to emulate on the classical guitar because once we have plucked our strings the notes die quite quickly. Try therefore to make the chords sustain by hanging on to them as long as possible. Of course, doing this means that efficient chord changes will also need to be mastered.

To make the chords sound 'bigger' I have played quite a number of them 'spread': this means rolling the chords from low to high, the bass note thumb first, then the fingers following. This spreading of the chords should not be overdone as it's possible to start to lose the pulse. So keep some of the chords straight but always aim to keep the melody line intact.

$\text{♩} = 40$
approx

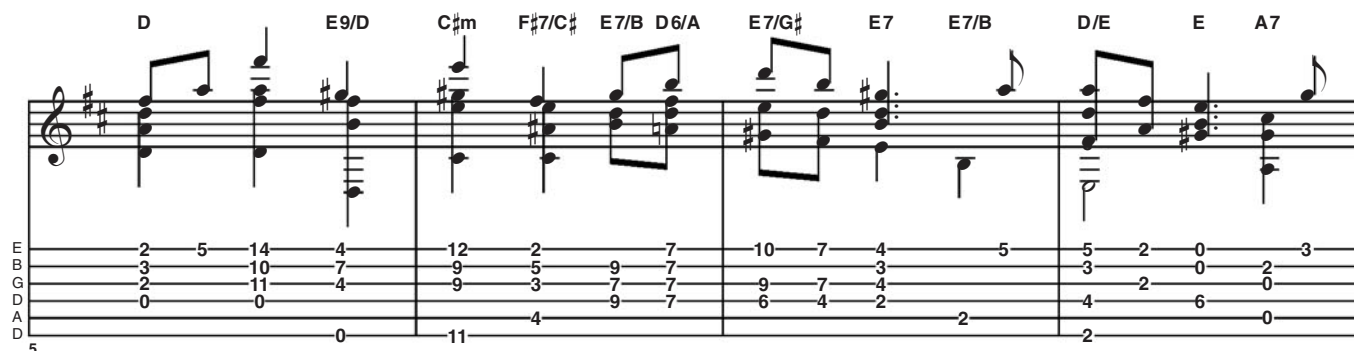
D G/B D/F# Asus4 A7 D Bm E7/B A Dmaj7/A A7



E 2 3 3 0 5 0 0 3 2 5 10 0 9 0 3
B 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 7 7 3 5 3 2
G 2 0 0 2 2 2 0 2 2 7 7 1 6 6 0
D 0 2 4 0 0 2 9 0 0 2 0 0 4 0 2
A 1

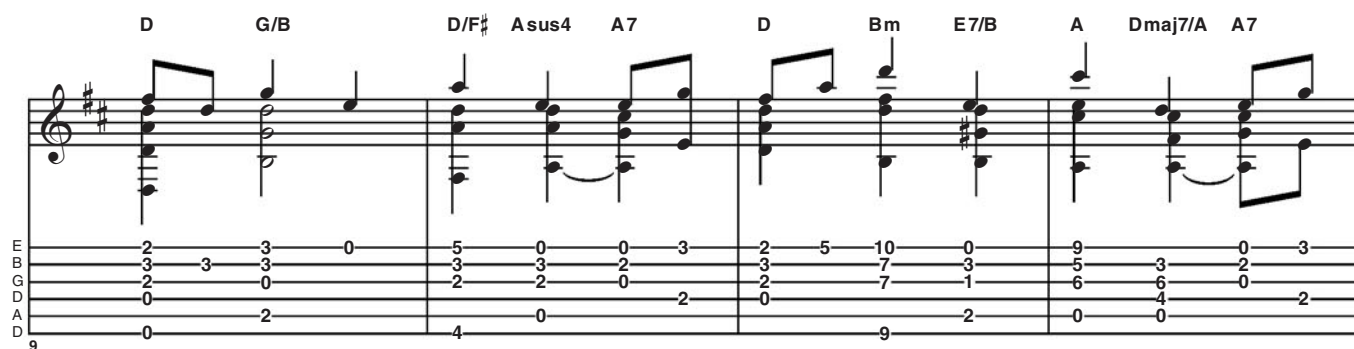
Low string tuned to D

D E9/D C#m F#7/C# E7/B D6/A E7/G# E7 E7/B D/E E A7



E 2 5 14 4 12 2 7 10 7 4 5 5 2 0 3
B 3 10 7 9 5 9 7 3 7 3 5 3 0 2
G 2 11 4 9 3 7 7 9 7 4 2 2 2 0
D 0 0 9 7 6 4 2 2 4 6 0
A 5 0 11 4 6 2 2 2 0

D G/B D/F# Asus4 A7 D Bm E7/B A Dmaj7/A A7



E 2 3 3 0 5 0 0 3 2 5 10 0 9 0 3
B 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 7 7 3 5 3 2
G 2 0 0 2 2 2 0 2 2 7 7 1 6 6 0
D 0 2 4 0 0 2 9 0 0 2 0 0 4 0 2
A 9

PLAYING TIPS

CD TRACK 10

In bars 9, 28 and 40 the D chord is played spread with the thumb plucking twice in quick succession on the two lowest D notes. Listening to the audio

will underline the sound and get it into your head - the tab and notation will then help you to articulate the piece.

Chord progression: D, Gmaj7/D, A7/C#, D/C#, G/B, A, A9/G, A/G, D/F#, Dm6/F, A7/E

13

| Bar | E | B | G | D | A | D |
|-----|---|----|----|----|----|---|
| 13 | 2 | 5 | 14 | | | |
| 14 | 3 | 10 | 8 | | | |
| 15 | 2 | 11 | 11 | 12 | 11 | 8 |
| 16 | 0 | 0 | 9 | 12 | 11 | 9 |

Chord progression: Em/D, A7/C#, D6, F#/C#, Emadd9/B, A/C#, G6/B, D/A, A7, D/A, Bm/D

17

| Bar | E | B | G | D | A | D |
|-----|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 17 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 18 | 2 | 0 | 7 | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| 19 | 5 | 4 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| 20 | 0 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 2 | 4 |

Chord progression: A9/C#, A9/E, A, A9/G, D/A, A/E, D/A, G

21

| Bar | E | B | G | D | A | D |
|-----|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 21 | 7 | 5 | 6 | 5 | 2 | 0 |
| 22 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 4 | 2 | 2 |
| 23 | 7 | 7 | 5 | 4 | 2 | 2 |
| 24 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 2 |

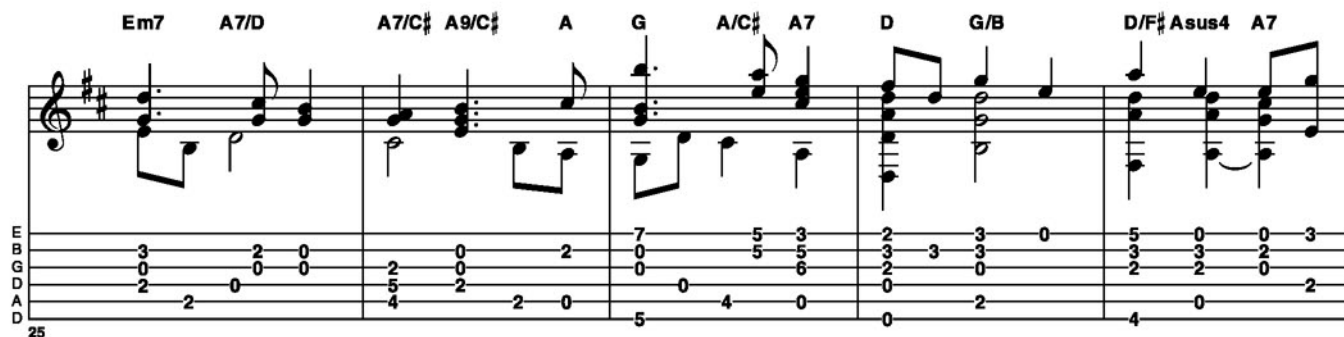
PLAYING TIPS

CD TRACK 10

To get a piece like this sounding as good as possible, cleanly articulated chord changes are vital. Once you've learnt the music and can play it

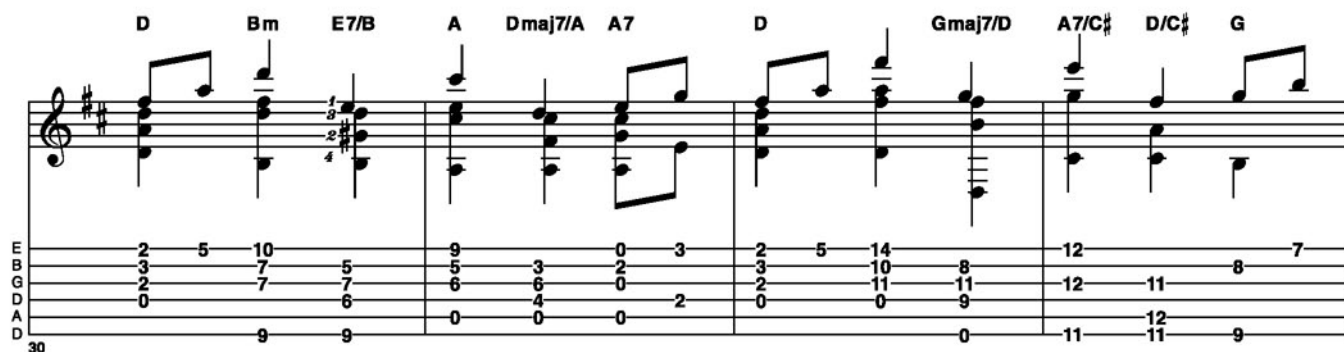
without mistakes, take some time to add in something of your own - playing pieces like this convincingly, is all about expression and feel.

Em7 A7/D A7/C# A9/C# A G A/C# A7 D G/B D/F# Asus4 A7



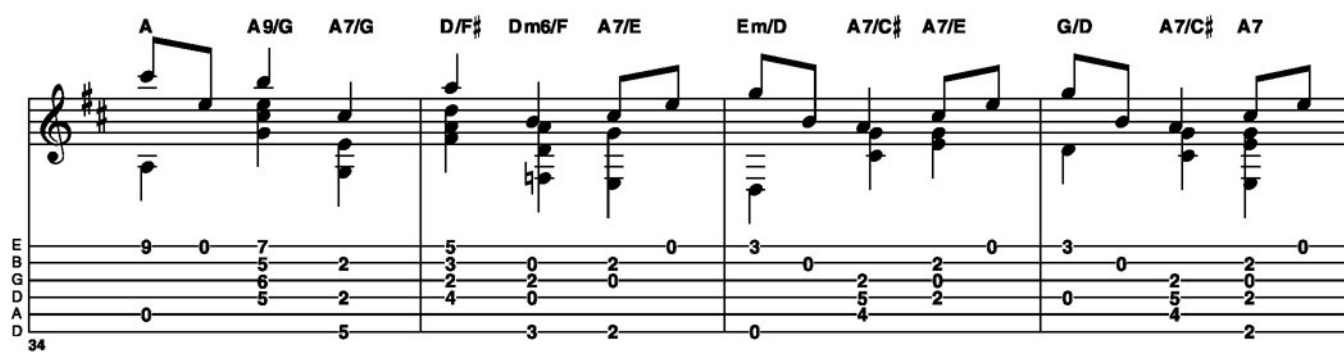
25

D Bm E7/B A Dmaj7/A A7 D Gmaj7/D A7/C# D/C# G



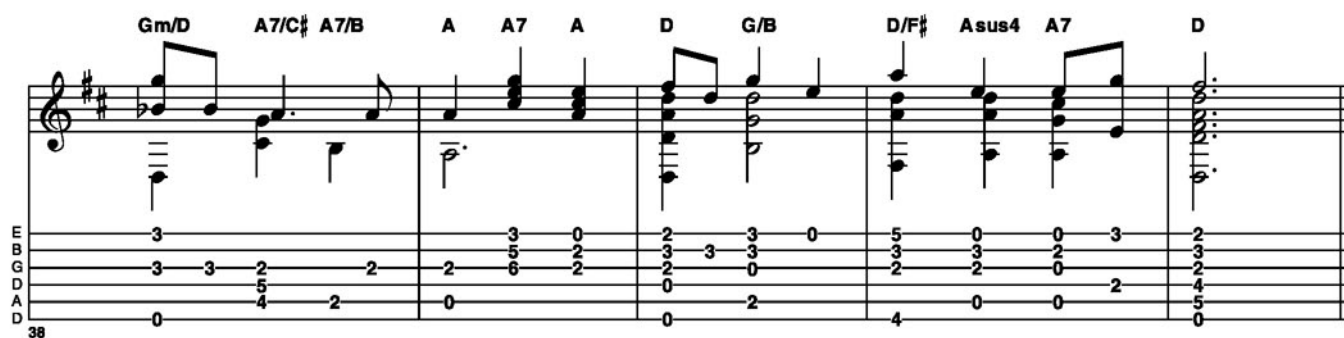
30

A A9/G A7/G D/F# Dm6/F A7/E Em/D A7/C# A7/E G/D A7/C# A7



34

Gm/D A7/C# A7/B A A7 A D G/B D/F# Asus4 A7 D



38