

Zukerman Plays Elgar 16 October 2026

Paul Ben-Haim (1897–1984)

Symphony No. 1
Allegro energico
Molto calmo e cantabile
Presto con fuoco

10:24

Edward Elgar (1857–1934)

Violin Concerto in B Minor, Op. 61
Allegro
Andante
Allegro molto

German-born Paul Frankfurter (1897–1984) Hebraized his name to Paul Ben-Haim after leaving Nazi Germany for British Mandate Palestine in 1933. In his early years he was a conductor and assistant to Bruno Walter (1920–24) and a conductor in Augsburg (1924–31). In Tel Aviv he taught at the Shulamit Conservatory and served as the president of the Israeli Composers' Association. Ben-Haim also directed the Jerusalem Academy of Music. He became an Israeli citizen when the country received its independence in 1948. "Mediterraneanism," a term some musicologists are using for the integration of Middle Eastern modalities and rhythms into Western art and music, accurately describes Ben-Haim's compositional style, with his merger of Jewish and Arab folk music and Western classical traditions. His two symphonies, composed in 1939–40 and 1942–45 respectively, are considered his "war symphonies." Other works include concertos for cello and violin, a clarinet quintet, Songs Without Words, and his popular orchestral Fanfare to Israel (1950). In 1957 he received the Israel Prize for Music. Ben-Haim's Symphony No. 1, considered the first work in that genre to be written in Israel, premiered in 1941 by the Palestine Orchestra, now the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. It begins with an energetic fast movement, Allegro energico. Writing at the beginning of World War II with the Nazis on the march in Europe, Ben-Haim suggests the anxiety of the time with scurrying strings which are offset by low brass. One hears the influence of several German composers, including Mahler and film writers such as Max Steiner. In his program notes for the January 1941 premiere, Ben-Haim wrote, "It is self-evident that this work... is not free from the influence of contemporary events: the horrible terror of the forces of evil has certainly left its mark on my work." A lyrical folksong informs the melodic framework of the poignant central movement, Molto calmo e cantabile (very calm, singing). According to Israeli musicologist Liran Gurkiewicz, Ben-Haim had arranged the Persian tune, "I will lift mine eyes to the mountains," for vocalist Bracha Zefira in 1940. Inclusion of the folk tune in his first symphony indicates the high regard the composer had for the traditional music of the region. The third movement, Presto con fuoco, is indeed "fast and fiery." Rhythm is the heart of this finale, beginning with the opening timpani solo. The heritage of the new Israeli nation is celebrated with folk dance rhythms. "By elevating a simple folk dance [the hora] to a sophisticated contrapuntal structure, Ben-Haim provided the early Yishuv (Jewish community in the Land of Israel, 1880s to 1948) with a symbol of heroic collective identity." [Liran Gurkiewicz, Israeli musicologist who wrote his Ph. D. dissertation on Ben-Haim]

DID YOU KNOW? In tribute to the victims of the 7 October 2023 attacks on Israeli soil, the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra led by Lahav Shani performed Symphonies 1 and 2 by Ben-Haim in Carnegie Hall

Edward Elgar (1857-1934) was born in a small town near Worcester, England, where his father tuned pianos and had a music shop. Young Elgar, who taught himself to play numerous instruments, had to quit school at fifteen to help the family, and his lack of formal education caused the musical establishment to dismiss him. Nevertheless, Elgar composed, conducted local music groups, taught violin and piano, and played organ at the Catholic Church. At age 22 he also became bandmaster for the "attendants' orchestra" at the Worcester and County Lunatic Asylum, where he composed polkas for the patients' dances because the mental health administrators thought music might be therapeutic. His 1889 marriage to one of his students was discouraged by her family and frowned upon by the class-conscious British society; the two were of differing economic status and religions, and she was nine years his senior. Ten years later, however, Elgar's Enigma Variations finally brought him acclaim. In 1901 the first two of five Pomp and Circumstance Marches were written (No. 1 still widely performed today as a graduation processional), and three years later he was knighted by King Edward VII. (Lady Elgar had the last laugh.) The Violin Concerto was composed primarily in 1909-10, and Elgar conducted the November 1910 premiere with soloist Fritz Kreisler, to whom the work is dedicated. This is a long concerto requiring great technical skill, expressive interpretation, and especially stamina for both the physical and emotional challenges. The Allegro is in sonata form, starting with a lengthy orchestral exposition that presents three main themes, one of which is particularly haunting. When the soloist finally enters, it is not with the typical energetic allegro melody but rather a poignant and thoughtful musing. This sets the pattern for much of the concerto with its episodic nature and extensive *rubato* (liberty with the tempo). A lilting, lyrical tune announces the Andante movement. Dialogues between the violinist and orchestra are deeply personal. This is such an emotional work, intimate throughout, not just in "the slow movement." Allegro molto begins playfully, and themes from the two earlier movements return. While the soloist highlights one of the first-movement themes, muted violins "thrum" (move 3-4 fingers gently over the strings) in the background. Another noteworthy element is the uncommon "accompanied cadenza." Concertos generally have a section in the first- and/or third movements in which the orchestra stops playing while the soloist exhibits his virtuosity. Here, Elgar never completely silences the orchestra while the violinist plays the cadenza. The concerto demands much from its listeners as well as its performers, but if you immerse yourself, you will find it richly satisfying.

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DID YOU KNOW? Composer Edward Elgar received an honorary doctorate from Yale University in 1905.