

Variations on a Rococo Theme, for Cello and Orchestra, Op. 33

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky composed his *Variations on a Rococo Theme* — often called just the *Rococo Variations* — in Moscow in December 1876 (probably spilling into the ensuing month), when things were not going quite as well as he might have hoped. His compositions were receiving performances abroad, but not always good ones. Word had just arrived in Moscow that his *Romeo and Juliet* Fantasy-Overture had been a failure in Paris, done in by inept conducting. That work had recently been performed in Vienna, too, on that occasion, apparently well. Nonetheless, Eduard Hanslick, the all-powerful critic there, had released considerable vitriol when he penned his review: “This love-bliss runs down the spine like a cold snake-skin” ... and so on. All that might not have mattered so much if Tchaikovsky’s newly premiered opera *Vakula the Smith* had fared better, but it, too, was a flop.

Tchaikovsky forged on. He first turned to another Shakespeare project, an opera based on *Othello*, but dropped it to start afresh on something entirely different: a set of variations for cello and orchestra. It was written with a specific cellist in mind: Wilhelm Fitzenhagen, a 28-year-old German musician who since 1870 had served as principal cello of the Moscow division of the Imperial Russian Music Society and also was cello professor at the Moscow Conservatory. Tchaikovsky wrote the piece quickly, and Fitzenhagen played the premiere a year later in Moscow, in December 1877.

It appears that what he played on that occasion was the *Rococo Variations* as Tchaikovsky created it: an orchestral introduction, a presentation of the theme (featuring solo cello), a working out of the theme’s possibilities in the course of eight variations,

and a concluding coda. When it came time for the composition to be published, Fitzenhagen worked through a copy of Tchaikovsky’s manuscript, entered extensive alterations into the solo part (essentially re-writing it in places), and then had a go at the piece’s structure. He deleted one of the variations entirely, re-ordered the remaining seven (only the first and second remained where Tchaikovsky had envisioned them), and made a substantial cut in the coda.

He presented these alterations to Tchaikovsky’s publisher with a demand that they be formally incorporated. “Horrible Fitzenhagen insists on changing your cello piece,” wrote the publisher to Tchaikovsky:

He wants to ‘cello’ it up and he claims you gave him permission. Good God! Tchaikovsky

IN SHORT

Born: May 7, 1840, in Votkinsk, in the district of Viatka, Russia, about seven hundred miles east-northeast of Moscow

Died: November 6, 1893, in St. Petersburg

Work composed: December 1876 through (probably) January 1877; dedicated “A Monsieur Guillaume Fitzenhagen”

World premiere: December 30, 1877, in Moscow, at a concert of the Imperial Russian Musical Society, Nikolai Rubinstein, conductor, Wilhelm Fitzenhagen, soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: March 8, 1901, Emil Paur, conductor, Hugo Becker, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: February 1, 2014, Long Yu, conductor, Jian Wang, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 17 minutes

Tchaikovsky's "Rococo Theme"

The "Rococo theme" that runs through the *Rococo Variations* was composed by Tchaikovsky himself. It would seem that his goal was not to duplicate or emulate the musical style of the "Rococo Period" — which in the history of music fell in the mid-18th century — but rather to portray a sort of fantasy about its courtly charm. Tchaikovsky was greatly drawn to that period. His reverence for Mozart was utter and unshakable, and in his opera *The Queen of Spades* he actually composed an episode in more or less Mozartian style. (At least it sounds more Mozartian than does his Fourth Orchestral Suite, titled *Mozartiana*, though the latter actually incorporates themes by the earlier master.)

In any case, the *Rococo Variations* are well mannered, even if the specific sound of the piece seems derived more from Schumann than from early Mozart or other Rococo types. The variations are not strictly in the Classical mode; rather than embellish or otherwise elaborate the melody within its defined proportions, Tchaikovsky shows no compunction about extending his material as the case demands, yielding a set of variations in which each section defines its own musical world.

revu et corrigé par Fitzenhagen! [Tchaikovsky revised and corrected by Fitzenhagen!]

Another composer might have put his foot down and brought an end to the meddling, but Tchaikovsky, typically given to self-doubt, decided that Fitzenhagen must be listened to. So it was that the piece was published, in both orchestral and cello-piano editions, in a version that might more accurately be described as by Tchaikovsky-Fitzenhagen.

Tchaikovsky's original version was not published until 1956. By then the "Fitzenhagen version" was well established, having been in circulation for eight decades. It remained unshakeable, and it continues today as by far the more commonly played edition — and, indeed, it is what you hear in this concert.

Tchaikovsky would grumble a good deal about Fitzenhagen's presumption in revising his piece, but on the whole he seems to have respected his colleague. What's more, a decade later, in 1887, he invited a replay of the experience by sending Fitzenhagen a manuscript of his *Pezzo capriccioso* (Op. 62), also for cello and orchestra, so the cellist could have a look-through while changes could still be made. That he grew to accept the *Rococo Variations* in their Fitzenhagened form is made clear from a conversation reported by the cellist Yulian Poplavsky, who visited the composer about two weeks before he died:

We, seeing his particularly good spirits, approached him with our perpetual request — that he should write a cello concerto. "Why don't you play my [*Rococo Variations*]" was always the one and the same reply. I repeated the old line about how some of the variations were uncomfortable for the cellist, that in them there was little singing. "They can't play them, and so they pester me," Pyotr Ilich joked.

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Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, and strings, in addition to the solo cello.