

Pytor Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893): *Variations on a Rococo Theme, Op. 33 (1877)*

Sadly, Tchaikovsky never wrote a cello concerto, but he did come through with these lovely variations. While the title might hint that he composed these on a pre-existing classical melody—as Brahms famously did on a theme by Haydn—this melody is Tchaikovsky’s own. His model was Mozart, whom he deeply admired. And, in keeping with a classical style, the orchestration is quite light, scored for strings, woodwinds, and two horns. Unlike the other variations we hear today, these variations lack an accompanying story or program; rather, each is a purely musical exploration of the theme, challenging both the virtuosity and stamina of the soloist, especially in the higher range of the instrument. Rather than hiding the tune amidst increasingly complex variations, Tchaikovsky keeps the melody in the foreground. It’s never far from our ears, but our interest is kept through inventive settings of the tune and Tchaikovsky’s transformation of the connective passages between variations.

The work was written for and premiered by Tchaikovsky’s friend, the young German cellist Wilhelm Fitzenhagen, who was also a professor at the Moscow Conservatory. Famously, Fitzenhagen also played an important role in shaping the work as we hear it today. In fact, it’s a great example of the creative (if not always cooperative!) collaboration that can emerge between composer and performer. And, perhaps, the extent to which a good friend can test the limits of a friendship. In this case, Tchaikovsky was feeling the pressure of impending deadlines in 1876 when he began composing the work: “Many people keep dropping in here unexpectedly—it seems that everyone in Petersburg is holding me back, when I had stupidly imagined that it would be possible to take advantage of the holidays to work.” When he was finally able to finish a first draft of the work, he sent it to Fitzenhagen, who proceeded to make quite major changes to the solo cello part. Maybe because he was pressed for time Tchaikovsky was quite gracious in accepting these revisions and proceeded to orchestrate the piece. Perhaps this emboldened Fitzenhagen, because when the work premiered in Moscow under the direction of Nikolai Rubinstein, Fitzenhagen took yet further liberties and, without Tchaikovsky’s permission, rearranged the order of the variations and left out another variation altogether. Nevertheless, Fitzenhagen’s version was a huge success (conveniently, Tchaikovsky was out of town). Considerably later, when the work was to be published, Fitzenhagen continued to assert himself. Tchaikovsky’s publisher wrote to the composer: “Loathsome Fitzenhagen! He is most insistent on making changes to your cello piece, and he says that you have given him full authority to do so.” For his part, Tchaikovsky seems to have thrown in the towel. In showing another cellist, Anatoliy Brandukov, drafts for publication, he said “That idiot Fitzenhagen’s been here. Look what he’s done to my piece—he’s altered everything!” The cellist asked what he was going to do about it, and Tchaikovsky responded: “The devil take it! Let it stand as it is!” And so it stands today. While Tchaikovsky’s original conception for the variations has been performed and recorded, it’s Fitzenhagen’s version that has endeared itself to soloists and audiences alike.