



Program Notes

CLASSICS 1

Vibrant Variations

Elegance and Wit

Sometimes, when the realities of the present become too much to deal with, we all like to escape into the past. Tchaikovsky was no different: prone to depression and a repressed homosexual, he loved to take refuge in a world of dreams, conjuring up the far-away and the long-ago. His "Rococo Variations" for cello and orchestra (1876) evoke the 18th century. The term "rococo" belongs to the vocabulary of French art history, where it refers to a specific style of architectural decoration. The word comes from *rocaille*, French for "shell"—the shell was an ornamental motif frequently encountered on Rococo artworks. The style was characterized by winsome and elegant arabesques, sometimes with a touch of frivolity. In music, works by both Haydn and Mozart have all, at one point or another, been described as "rococo," but to our ears, the word sounds a bit too "fluffy" for these musical giants and therefore, we hardly ever speak of "rococo music" any more. All Tchaikovsky really meant by the word was a little "diversion" (in the sense of *divertimento*, a beloved genre at the time). He kept his orchestra small, as it had been in the 18th century, and devised a theme for his variations that respected certain Classical conventions—though this melody is not really typical of Haydn or Mozart. It is, rather, exactly what Tchaikovsky wanted it to be: a nostalgic look at the past from a hundred year later.

The work opens with a short orchestral introduction followed by the first presentation of the theme. Before and between the variations, we hear some interesting transition passages, containing some harmonies that definitely belong to the year 1876 rather than to the 18th century. Each of these transition passages closes on the dominant—that is, with the equivalent of a musical question mark, after which the new variation arrives like an answer.

Some of the variations make use of the cello's ability to sing long lyrical melodies, while others are extremely virtuosic in character. On several occasions, the cello launches into grandiose cadenzas. There is no shortage of spectacular trills, double stops, and other technical stunts, yet they never cover up the ingratiating melody.

The version in which the "Rococo Variations" became famous is not the original form. The cellist for whom the work was written—Wilhelm Fitzenhagen, Tchaikovsky's colleague at the Moscow Conservatory—rearranged the order of the variations, and even cut one that Tchaikovsky had written, despite the composer's vehement protests. Although the original version has now been published in Russia, it has yet to gain universal acceptance. Most cellists still use the Fitzenhagen score, which is what we will be hearing at this week's performances.

The what of the dance?

I can distinctly remember the day I heard Beethoven's Seventh Symphony for the first time. I was about 5 or 6 years old, and a recording with Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Symphony was playing on the radio. I was completely mesmerized by the performance, and when the fourth movement began, I jumped to my feet and started to dance.

About a dozen years later, I learned about Richard Wagner's description of the symphony as the "apotheosis of the dance," and although I wasn't sure what an apotheosis was, I could certainly agree that dance was at the center of what this symphony was all about. Even later, I

became acquainted with other attempts by 19th-century writers to capture the work's essence, invoking political revolutions, military parades, masquerade balls, Bacchic orgies, and more. Finally, about 25 years after my first encounter with the symphony, I read Maynard Solomon's excellent book on Beethoven, in which the author shows how all these fanciful interpretations were really variations on a single theme, that of the "carnival or festival, which, from time immemorial, has temporarily lifted the burden of perpetual subjugation to the prevailing social and natural order by periodically suspending all customary privileges, norms and imperatives."

In other words, generations of listeners have felt that Beethoven's Seventh Symphony (1812) is a wild celebration of life and freedom. While the Ninth Symphony is a fierce struggle with fate that is won only when the "Ode to Joy" is intoned, from the start the Seventh radiates joy and happiness that not even the second movement (to some, a funeral march) can seriously compromise.

The dance feelings associated with the work find their explanation in the fact that each of the four movements is based on a single rhythmic figure that is present almost without interruption.

Anyone who has heard rock music knows how intoxicating the constant repetition of simple rhythmic patterns can be. That's part of what Beethoven did here, but he did much more: against a backdrop of continually repeated dance rhythms, he created an endless melodic diversity. There is a strong sense of cohesion as the melodies flow from one another with inimitable spontaneity. At the same time, harmony, melody, and orchestration are all full of the most delightful surprises. It is somewhat like riding in a car at a constant (and rather high) speed while watching an ever-changing, beautiful landscape pass by.

The first movement starts with the most extended slow introduction Beethoven ever wrote for a symphony. It presents and develops its own themes, linked to the main theme of the fast section in a passage consisting of multiple repeats of a single note in the flute, oboe, and violins. Among the many unforgettable moments of this movement, I would single out two: the oboe solo about two thirds into the movement and the irresistible, gradual crescendo at the that culminates as the main theme of the movement returns in a loud volume.

The second-movement "Allegretto" was the section in the symphony that became the most popular from the day of the premiere. (It had to be repeated already at the first performance.) The main rhythmic pattern of this movement was used in Austro-German church litanies of the 18th and 19th centuries. The same pattern is so frequent in the music of Franz Schubert that it is sometimes referred to as the "Schubert rhythm." Beethoven's Seventh combines this rhythm with a melody of a rare expressive power. The rhythm persists in the bass throughout the entire movement.

We know this movement has a secret because of a passage in one of Beethoven's conversation books, which contain remarks addressed to the deaf composer. The composer's secretary, Anton Schindler, wrote: "We have to show all this in the complete edition, because nobody would be looking for these things." The secret may have to do with the mysterious wind chord that opens and closes the movement. Since the conversation books did not record Beethoven's replies, we may never know exactly what the secret was or even if it was in any way connected to that chord.

The third-movement "Scherzo" is the only one of the symphony's movements where the basic rhythmic patterns are grouped in an unpredictable, asymmetrical way. The joke (which is what the word Scherzo means) lies in the fact that the listener may never know what will happen in the next moment. In another innovative move, Beethoven expands the traditional Scherzo-Trio-Scherzo structure by repeating the Trio a second time, followed by a third appearance of the Scherzo. At the end, Beethoven leads us to believe that he is going to start the Trio over yet another time. But we are about to be doubly surprised: first when the by-now familiar Trio melody is suddenly transformed from major to minor; and second when, with five quick tutti strokes, the movement abruptly ends, as if cut off in the middle.

In the fourth movement "Allegro con brio," the exuberant feelings reach their peak as one glorious theme follows another over an unchanging rhythmic pulsation. The dance reaches an almost superhuman intensity (and that, incidentally, is the meaning of the Greek word "apotheosis," literally, "becoming God-like"). This is a movement of which even Sir Donald Francis Tovey, the most celebrated British musical essayist of the first half of the 20th century, had to admit: "I can attempt nothing here by way of description." Fortunately, the music speaks for itself.

Recycled Goods

If you have to write a whole opera in eighteen days, you'll probably have to cut some corners here and there. It is not surprising, then, that Gioachino Rossini had no time to compose an orchestral introduction for *Il barbiere di Siviglia* ("The Barber of Seville") but rather "recycled" an earlier overture that had already served in two other operas. At the ripe old age of 24, Rossini produced his seventeenth stage work with the Barber. The piece was booed at the premiere because it was openly competing with another opera on the same subject by an older composer, Giovanni Paisiello, who had a strong following. Yet it took off shortly afterward, and soon it was universally acclaimed as the greatest Italian comic opera of the 19th century.

Based on the celebrated comedy of the same name by French playwright Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais (1732-1799), the opera tells the story of Figaro, the ingenious barber, who helps a young aristocrat win the hand of his beloved, outwitting her old guardian who was hoping to marry her himself.

The opera was written in such a hurry that Rossini literally didn't have the time to compose an overture. He therefore "recycled" an earlier overture that had already served in two other operas. Rossini was apparently indifferent to recent dramatic theories that demanded that overtures anticipate the specific actions and emotions, if not the actual musical material, found in the pieces to which they belonged. The main function of a Rossini overture was—in addition to giving the audience a chance to settle down—to create an atmosphere of joyous expectation.

Musically speaking, the overture consists of a slow introduction and a fast section that follows the scheme of sonata form without development. Translated into plain English, this means that the same string of glorious melodies is repeated without any elaborate transformations or other technical stunts. At the end, we hear an example of the famous "Rossini crescendo," in which a simple melodic motif is played louder and louder until it reaches fortissimo. In this case, there may be a connection with the opera after all, since, as Don Basilio explains in his famous aria, this is exactly how rumors spread, growing from a tiny whisper to a monumental explosion.

About the Program Notes Author

Peter Laki was born in Budapest, Hungary, where he studied violin, piano, voice, composition, and musicology. He earned a Ph.D. in musicology from the University of Pennsylvania in 1989, and has been writing program notes for The Cleveland Orchestra since 1990. He has also taught at Case Western Reserve University and Oberlin College, and currently serves as Visiting Associate Professor at Bard College. He has published numerous articles on musical subjects, and has lectured in Hungary, Switzerland, France, Great Britain, Canada, and the United States. He is still active as a singer and has recently performed Schubert's song cycle "Die schone Mullerin." He is married to composer and violist Adrienne Elisha.