

Program Notes for VSO Concert – Tchaikovsky Variations on a Rococo Theme (for Cello) and Bruckner Symphony #6 – November 22-23, 2024

By Jonathan Berkowitz

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840 to 1893)

Who are the best-known composers in the history of classical music? Bach, Mozart and Beethoven are at or near the top of the list, but Tchaikovsky must be considered for scope of musical forms and breadth of listening audiences. He is widely considered the most popular Russian composer in history. His ballets, *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker* attract audiences of all ages. *Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat Minor* is among the best-known of all piano concertos, and his *Violin Concerto* one of the greatest ever composed. Tchaikovsky's symphonies are staples of the orchestral repertoire.

Because *Symphony No. 6, the Pathétique* will be performed by the VSO on January 31 and February 1, 2025, you will need to wait for Tchaikovsky's detailed biography until then. To whet your appetite, here are some brief snippets about his life.

Although Tchaikovsky showed an early passion for music, his parents wanted him to work in the civil service. Accordingly, he entered the Imperial School of Jurisprudence in Saint Petersburg at the age of 10. Nine years later, Tchaikovsky honoured his parents by taking a clerkship with the Ministry of Justice where he stayed for four years.

When he was 21, Tchaikovsky restarted music lessons and enrolled at the newly founded Saint Petersburg Conservatory. There, he became one of the school's first composition students. He then joined the Moscow Conservatory as a professor of harmony but resigned in 1878 to focus entirely on composing. His prolific body of work constitutes 169 pieces, including symphonies, operas, ballets, concertos, cantatas, and songs.

- *Swan Lake* and *The Nutcracker* were both considered failures at their premieres. But they went on to become two of the most beloved and frequently performed ballets in the world.
- He was heavily influenced by Russian folk melodies, which can be heard in many of his compositions.
- A perfectionist when it came to his compositions, he often revised and rearranged his works multiple times before considering them ready for performance.
- Despite his incredible success as a composer, Tchaikovsky struggled with self-doubt, anxiety, and depression throughout his life. His homosexuality was a significant source of personal struggle, at a time when being openly gay was not accepted.
- Tchaikovsky had a unique relationship with his patron, Nadezhda von Meck, in that they communicated solely through letters and never met in person. Von Meck supported Tchaikovsky financially which allowed him the freedom to focus on his music.
- His works are known for their intense melodies and dramatic flair. Their themes of love, fate, and struggle resonate deeply with audiences all over the world.
- Tchaikovsky's life ended tragically in 1893, at the age of 53. The cause of his death remains a topic of speculation, with theories ranging from cholera to suicide. History has not provided an answer to this mystery.

Tchaikovsky's music continues to be cherished and performed worldwide, solidifying his legacy as one of the greatest composers of all time.

Variations on a Rococo Theme, Op. 33 – Tchaikovsky

Orchestration: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, strings, and solo cello

The piece was written in late 1876, just after Tchaikovsky completed the passionate symphonic fantasia *Francesca da Rimini*. It uses a reduced orchestra, typical for the late 18th century but without trumpets or percussion. The piece clocks in at under 20 minutes.

Tchaikovsky wrote four concertos, three for piano and one for violin, but the *Variations on a Rococo Theme* was as close as he got to writing a full concerto for cello and orchestra. This piece reflects the elegance and grace of the Classical era while still incorporating the Romantic style. This music pays particular tribute to Mozart whom Tchaikovsky described as “a sunny genius” whose music “moves me to tears.” The name of this piece is slightly misleading. It was not Rococo in origin, but rather the composer’s own original theme in Rococo style. It showcases the composer's mastery of melody, form, and orchestration.

Tchaikovsky wrote this piece for, and in collaboration with, Wilhelm Fitzenhagen, a German cellist and colleague at the Moscow Conservatory. Following its premiere in 1877, it was then always performed with Fitzenhagen’s alterations. His changes were significant and controversial, designed to showcase the cello. He rearranged the order of the original eight variations and eliminated the final one. Tchaikovsky accepted the revisions when the piece was published with a piano reduction of the orchestral part. But when the full score was published, still with the alterations, Tchaikovsky is said to have commented, “Look what that idiot Fitzenhagen did to my piece, he altered everything!” In 1954, Soviet editors restored the work to its original form. Cellists now have the option of playing either version, but Fitzenhagen’s version remains the standard performing edition.

The theme and variation form allowed Tchaikovsky to write with 18th-century detachment and finesse, avoiding the drama of the traditional concerto format. In each variation he easily keeps the melody and harmony of the initial theme. In the hands of lesser composers, the lack of variety among variations would have doomed the piece; Tchaikovsky, however, brilliantly assembled variations where each is subtly different from the previous ones. They have both different phrasing and proportions, and are joined by bridge passages between the variations. The challenge of this format is that it does not allow any periods of rest for the soloist. As well, the soloist plays mostly with the thumb positioned in the upper register.

The opening theme is followed by seven variations that display a range of emotions and moods, each of which focuses on a different characteristic of the cello. The theme itself is elegant and lyrical. Listen for the closing orchestral coda; listen again for the coda at the end of each variation.

Variation 1 is lively and playful, with passages that highlight the technical skill of the performer. It introduces the cello’s agility and dexterity and shows Tchaikovsky’s ability to create memorable and engaging melodies.

Variation 2 is more introspective and lyrical and displays emotional depth and a sense of longing.

Variation 3, longer than the first two, is an expressive waltz. The cello dances lightheartedly over the orchestra's lively accompaniment.

Variation 4 returns to introspection, with poignant melodies that evoke a sense of contemplation.

Variation 5 begins with the flute, followed by the soloist's stream of brilliantly intricate passages. This variation displays tremendous virtuosity and requires great agility and technical precision.

Variation 6 is tender and lyrical, written in a minor key which gives the melody a more romantic feel.

Variation 7, the final one, manifests a triumphant and exultant grand finale in which the cello and orchestra combine to showcase the cello's full range.

The *Rococo Variations* represents a masterpiece of the cello repertoire. It is testament to Tchaikovsky's genius as a composer and his ability to create music that is both technically challenging and emotionally compelling.

ANTON BRUCKNER (1824 to 1896)

"They want me to write differently. Certainly, I could, but I must not. God has chosen me from thousands and given me, of all people, this talent. It is to Him that I must give account." ~ Anton Bruckner

When one hears the name Anton Bruckner it is usually in the same sentence as Gustav Mahler. They were two of the most prominent composers of symphonies and vocal music of the late Romantic era. During their lifetimes they were largely eclipsed by Richard Strauss. But the 1960s saw a remarkable renaissance of their music. They are often lumped together because of the size, length, power, and orchestration of their symphonies. They also each wrote nine symphonies—the magic number thanks to Beethoven—as well as their use of Austrian folk songs, and Vienna's importance in their lives. Both were influenced by Wagner and Beethoven and fixated on Beethoven's Ninth.

But the two composers couldn't have been more different. Their music represents the opposing social and philosophical polarities of a period. Here are a few descriptors, courtesy of musicologist Harold Schonberg, to highlight their differences. Bruckner stood for repose, certitude, naïveté, and provincialism, while Mahler represented unrest, doubt, sophistication, and internationalism.

Mahler, a man of doubt and anxiety, unsuccessfully sought answers to the great questions: Where do we come from? Where does our road take us? Bruckner, in contrast, wrote symphonies to try to honour God. He was a devout man with a simplistic view of the world and the hereafter. Not a man of doubts, he was guided by the principle that everything man does should reflect the glory of God.

We'll save a detailed discussion of Mahler, and more about how Bruckner and Mahler differed, for a concert featuring Mahler's music.

Bruckner was born in a small Austrian village and grew up in a musical household. His schoolmaster and organist father nurtured Anton's early passion for music. At a young age Bruckner already displayed remarkable talent for the organ and violin. He had a mostly informal music

education, receiving lessons from local musicians and church organists in his village. At 13, Bruckner enrolled at the St. Florian Monastery in Linz, where he honed his skills in composition and organ performance, laying the groundwork for his future symphonic works.

After completing his studies, Bruckner began his professional career. Playing the organ and teaching music in churches and schools throughout Austria, he was also a beloved teacher of organ, harmony, and counterpoint at the Vienna Conservatory. Eventually, he surrendered the security of a teaching career to take the post of organist at Linz Cathedral. At the same time, he studied advanced harmony and counterpoint. Rigorous, self-imposed training meant that, as a composer, he was a late bloomer. All his major works were composed after the age of 39, beginning with three choral-orchestral masses and his first symphony.

In 1875, at age 51, he joined the teaching faculty at the University of Vienna. Several important conductors began to take an interest in his music. But the establishment critics in Vienna tore his music apart. They didn't understand or appreciate the boldness and originality of his music. In the wildly partisan Vienna of the time, there were the Brahmsians and the Wagnerians. The press, dominated by the Brahmsians, classified Bruckner as a Wagnerian. Bruckner's career suffered from his unwitting involvement in this fierce battle.

Over the last 25 years of his life, he composed most of his greatest works. However, he struggled to get his orchestral music performed, especially after a disastrous premiere of his Third Symphony. It wasn't until the 1884 premiere of the Seventh Symphony that he received the acclaim he deserved. The monumental Eighth and Ninth Symphonies further established his legacy as a master symphonist. Throughout his life, Bruckner experienced financial difficulties. By the early 1890s, he had become a famous and honoured figure. When the Emperor granted him a pension, he was able to resign from the Conservatory and the University. He died in 1896 and was buried in the crypt of St. Florian.

Bruckner remained a humble and devout man throughout his life. He never lost his simple character, his rural accent and dress, his social naïveté, or his unquestioning deference to authority. He was an odd figure among the sophisticated Romantic composers who were his contemporaries. He had profound spiritual beliefs and a deep connection to the Divine which he expressed through his music. Musicologist Deryck Cooke writes, "[Bruckner's symphonies offer] a sense of the awe-inspiring, born of the naked wonder, fear and delight of elemental humanity confronted by the mysterious beauty and power of nature and the vast riddle of the cosmos."

The last words go to Harold Schonberg, "Bruckner's music, with its Gothic arch, its tremendous spans, its organlike sonorities, its bigness in time and space, is essentially cathedral-like music of belief, and one probably has to be a believer to identify fully with it." Whether one is attracted by or irritated by Bruckner's works, one cannot help but be attracted by their repose and unhurried serenity, the perfect antidote to the frenetic pace of modern life.

Symphony No. 6 in A major – Anton Bruckner

Orchestration: Two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, one bass tuba, timpani, and strings.

Bruckner wrote nine symphonies (the Ninth was unfinished) encompassing many techniques, but all had the same symphonic conception and formal pattern. Some critics said he composed only one symphony but wrote it nine times! All have four extended movements reminiscent of Beethoven's late works. The key to his symphonies is his use of tonality over a long time span, up to 30 minutes in some of his slow movements. The first movements open quietly and involve three contrasting themes instead of the usual two. Climaxes build like a staircase, with sequences of repetitions. The slow second movements (adagios) have long drawn-out alternations of two themes that build to massive climaxes. The third movements (scherzos) are based on dance rhythms but somehow manage to achieve a primeval quality. The trio sections of the scherzos usually have a gentle peasant dance, taken from Bruckner's childhood. The final movements also have three-theme forms and quote passages from the previous three movements. Both the first and last movements usually have greatly expanded codas. His orchestration is economical. He alternates families of instruments, such as brasses against woodwinds, to achieve a sound out of proportion to the modest number and type of instruments he uses.

Bruckner made many revisions to his symphonic scores. He was so anxious to get the music played that he would let conductors do anything with it—cut, alter, reorchestrate, smooth out rough harmonies. He said more than once that the correct performance of his music could await future generations. So, the “Bruckner problem” is which version is best in performance. Generally, it is the first one. His Sixth is the only one he did not revise, likely because it was written during a time of great confidence in his compositions.

Symphony No. 6 differs a little from the rest of his symphonic repertory. Robert Simpson notes that it is not commonly performed, but has beautiful themes, both bold and subtle harmonies, and imaginative instrumentation. It shows a mastery of classical form. As with most of his work, his Sixth Symphony received harsh critical reception, in large part because of the critical reception of Bruckner as a person. His religious fervour often had a negative effect on those he met. But others found beauty in the piece. Donald Tovey wrote, “...if one clears their mind, not only of prejudice but of wrong points of view, and treats Bruckner's Sixth Symphony as a kind of music we have never heard before, there is no doubt that its high quality will strike us at every moment.”

Instead of a detailed analysis of each of the four movements—I. Majestoso, II. Adagio, III. Scherzo and Trio, IV. Finale—listeners may find it more enjoyable to let the sound wash over them and appreciate the emotional depth and honesty of the work. Bruckner's symphonies have been nicknamed “cathedrals of sound.” Enjoy this epic adventure.