

THE CAREER OF FITZENHAGEN (AND THE ROCOCO VARIATIONS)

written by David Johnstone

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FITZENHAGEN, Karl Friedrich Wilhelm

Born: 1848, 15th September (Seesen, Brunswick, Germany)

Died: 1890, 14th February (Moscow)

Fitzenhagen was born in Seesen in the Duchy of Brunswick (Germany), where his father was the music director. At age five he started the piano, and then also received classes in cello (at 8) and violin (from age 11). However, by 11 years old it seems that he was also proficient up to a point in various wind instruments, because he was seen deputizing for wind players when emergencies arose. He began to give solo performances on what had soon become his first instrument, the cello. His more advanced studies began at 14 (October 1862), when he became a pupil of Theodore Müller (1802-1875), the cellist of the quartet with the same name. He was by nature an organized fellow, which allowed his head to cope with many things at the same time, and surely helping his maturity on the cello once he had decided that this was the path he wished to pursue. Fitzenhagen was heard by the Duke of Brunswick three years later in the Theatre Royal. The trial performance was so satisfactory that the Duke, anxious to help him in his artistic career, released him entirely from the duty of military service. On top of that, in 1867 some noble patronage enabled him to study for a year with Friedrich Grützmacher (1832-1903), in Dresden. This occurred in May, 1867, and whilst with Grützmacher he was to quickly shine as a violoncello virtuoso of eminent rank; only one year later, despite his youth, he was appointed to the Dresden Hofkapelle as a principal cello, where he was consequently able to start his career as soloist.

From that time he was able to forge a career as a solo player. In 1869, for example, he took part in the general musical gathering in Leipzig, and the following year at the Beethoven Festival. In this festival Franz Liszt was present, and attempted to convince Fitzenhagen to join the court orchestra at Weimar. But Fitzenhagen had already accepted an important professorship at the Moscow Imperial Conservatory. He was to centre the rest of his life in Moscow. Fitzenhagen died in Moscow on February 14, 1890, aged just 51. During this twenty-year period he was not only known as the foremost cello teacher in Russia; he was also involved in the direction of the Moscow Music and Orchestral Union. He was, of course, very active as a soloist with successful artistic capability as a concert player.



Das erste Streichquartett des Moskauer Konservatoriums, gegründet auf Initiative von Wilhelm Fitzenhagen und von ihm bis zu seinem Tod geleitet.

The first string quartet of the Moscow Conservatory, founded on the initiative of Wilhelm Fitzenhagen, who also remained its artistic director until his death.

Fitzenhagen's playing at the 1870 Beethoven Festival in Weimar had attracted the attention of Franz Liszt, who had formerly served as music director there. He possessed a virtuoso streak, not afraid to take advantage of the opportunities that were presented to him, but he was also a solid, and respected, chamber-music musician. We know that he was famed for thumb position playing; such agility in the high positions had only very rarely been seen previously.

Fitzenhagen was very interested in composition too. He wrote more than 60 works for the cello, but unfortunately few are programmed today – a great shame because he displayed elegance and virtuoso writing by turns. These works included some four Cello Concertos, of which, although hardly known today, formerly the most well-known would seem to be the second Cello Concerto in A minor, Op.4. This concerto was quite obviously written under the influence of Robert Schumann's cello concerto. Fitzenhagen would have known the Schumann work extremely well, and his teacher Grützmacher was highly valued for performances of it (he was one of the first cellists to perform regularly the work). Other notable works from Fitzenhagen's pen were a Suite for cello and orchestra, and a Fantasia on motifs from Rubinstein's "Dimon" also with orchestra. He wrote many salon pieces including '8 Pieces for Cello and Piano', Twelve Little Pieces, and a Ballade with orchestra. The 'Concert Waltzes', for four celli, is a magnificent piece – well developed structurally, with interesting parts for all four cellists, and containing both a melodic content and virtuosism of which Tchaikovsky himself would have been proud! He also wrote in other fields - a String Quartet gained the prize of the St. Petersburg Chamber Musical Union. He also wrote a book containing technical Cello Studies. It is today very difficult to find any of these in print. Fitzenhagen – despite all the virtuosity – always remains serious. His musical language shows similarities to Tchaikovsky (Elegie op. 21) and sometimes to Mendelssohn (Impromptu op. 43) as well. The Capriccio op. 40 is dedicated to another significant cellist of the late 19th century, namely Robert Hausmann, cellist of the Joachim Quartet and professor at the Berlin Academy of Music. Hausmann was one of Fitzenhagen's childhood friends; just as the latter, Hausmann had also studied cello with Theodor Müller in Braunschweig. The "Dämonfantasie" op. 34 is Fitzenhagen's reverential gesture to Anton Rubinstein, brother of his mentor Nikolai Rubinstein, who had brought him to Moscow. The opera "Der Dämon" was among Anton Rubinstein's most successful works. But Fitzenhagen does not compose a simple potpourri, but incorporates two variations in which echoes of Tchaikovsky's Rococo Variations are easy to spot. In the Finale, Fitzenhagen uses ballet music from the opera's second act, a wedding dance: at first, the men dance exuberantly, followed in the middle section by a woman who apparently comes from the Orient... In his "Ave Maria" op. 41, Fitzenhagen gives the interpreter a choice between piano and harmonium as accompanying instrument. The harmonium underscores the music's spiritual character, which fits well: Fitzenhagen participated regularly in church concerts of the Lutheran community in Moscow and wrote some works specially for these occasions, including the "Ave Maria".

FITZENHAGEN AND THE ROCOCO VARIATIONS

Unfortunately for the cause of Fitzenhagen, his name will be eternally known as the man who decided to re-arrange the Tchaikovsky 'Rococo Variations'. I rather feel sorry for him; in historical perspective and with hindsight it is easy to criticize, but I believe that he did act to the best of his convictions at the time – please see my article on Friedrich Grutzmacher for a fuller appreciation of performing styles and compositional awareness in the second half of the nineteenth century. However, without trying to defend him either, I wish to outlay all the compositional process of the Rococo Variations from the beginnings to its published form.

Firstly, one should remember that Fitzenhagen had formed a firm friendship with Tchaikovsky. He was a member of the Russian Music Society's quartet, and this quartet gave the first performances of all three of Tchaikovsky's string quartets (from 1871 to 1876) as well as this composer's Piano Trio, Op. 52 in 1882 – this trio performance coming *after* all the supposed hysteric happenings surrounding the Rococo Variations! And secondly, one should remember that the *Variations on a Rococo Theme*, op. 33, were of course dedicated to Fitzenhagen himself in 1877, and Tchaikovsky never ever contemplated removing the name of the dedicatee to the work (as other composers have frequently done after bitter quarrels and the such) – but do please read on!

The composition may have been a gentle escape for Tchaikovsky, coming between his emotionally charged works 'Swan Lake' and the Fourth Symphony. He was also able to remember fondly the older masters, in a special manner rekindling his affection, above all, for Mozart. He was working on the variations during Christmas of 1876, and gently moaning that he had so many interruptions by unexpected visits to the house that his time schedule was falling behind. He worked on two manuscripts - the full score, and the arrangement for cello and piano. After completing the basic sketches he passed them over to Fitzenhagen, who made some changes, mainly to the cello part, inserting them on Tchaikovsky's manuscript, and pasting over parts of the original autograph. The changes at this point were indeed accepted by the composer, and it would therefore appear that Tchaikovsky orchestrated the work from the amended piano score. This is more or less the last we know about the creational process until the time of the premiere.

On the 30th November 1877, the first performance of the 'Variations on a Rococo Theme' took place at the third symphony concert of the Russian Musical Society in Moscow, conducted by Nikolai Rubinstein. Nadezhda von meck mentioned this to Tchaikovsky: "*At today's symphony concert, Fitzenhagen is playing your Variations*". The press comment was largely favourable, indeed one might say very favourable indeed. Tchaikovsky missed the performance of the Variations, as he was abroad at the time. Would he have been pleased with the compositional result at that point? What I mean to ask is: did Fitzenhagen then make further changes to the score as previously 'agreed' and 'accepted' by Tchaikovsky? Unfortunately we do not have the benefit of live recordings to help us conclusively, but what does now seem clear is that the performance at the premiere was *not* that what is now generally published as the 'Rococo Variations'! It is almost that certain further editing and 'improvements' were carried out *after* the first performance, as I will now explain ...

The original idea was to quickly publish the work; however the publication of the Variations was delayed, and early in 1878 Tchaikovsky asked Iosif Kotek to retrieve the manuscript from Leichart (the publishers recommended to Tchaikovsky by Fitzenhagen to publish the composition along with another original violin work), and deliver it to his own principal publisher Petr Jurgenson.. In March 1878, therefore, Jurgenson began engraving the Variations, but it seems that this work was held up once again by Wilhelm Fitzenhagen, who took it upon himself to edit it, on the pretext of making further improvements to the cello part, without consulting the composer. He claimed to the publisher that he had Tchaikovsky's blessing in this. Therefore the final published version would not have been accurately what Fitzenhagen played in the premiere ...

We know that Petr Jurgenson protested against these further changes, and in a letter to Tchaikovsky of 15 February 1878 he was to write: "*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. Heavens! Tchaikovsky revu et corrigé par Fitzenhagen!!!*" But at this point it is crucial to point out that Tchaikovsky did not blatantly prevent Wilhelm Fitzenhagen from making changes (as Dvorak later did in his Cello Concerto with Hans Wihan), so, in October–November 1878 the arrangement for cello and piano appeared in print in Fitzenhagen's new version, which therefore was not exactly like Tchaikovsky's original.

Basically Fitzenhagen had chosen to stun the audiences by switching the third variation and the seventh, and doing away with the eighth altogether. This way the more 'classical' variations came first, followed by a long slow variation in C Major, and then an increase in stormy, virtuosic music up to a full-blown solo cadenza. Following this a most tender slow D minor variation is heard before the last A major variation arrives as a brilliant finale. Fitzenhagen's ex-pupil Brandukov, also a friend of Tchaikovsky, recalled that the composer viewed the changes most unfavourably – and according to popular legend the words were something like *"That idiot Fitzenhagen's been here. Look what he's done to my piece—he's altered everything!"*. Brandoukov then asked Tchaikovsky what he was going to do about it, and the composer supposedly replied, *"The devil take it! Let it stand as it is!"*.

But did Tchaikovsky bear a grudge? It seems not, for it was not the end of their friendship or of feeling as close colleagues. As already stated, Fitzenhagen was the cellist entrusted to perform in the world premiere of Tchaikovsky's piano trio in 1882, one of the greatest works ever for piano trio. Fitzenhagen may perhaps have felt justified by giving his 'help' after the incredible audience reaction after a performance at the Wiesbaden Festival in June 1879 (which also happened to be the first performance outside Russia); he wrote to Tchaikovsky, *"I produced a furore with your variations. I pleased so greatly that I was recalled three times, and after the Andante variation (D minor) there was stormy applause"*. Franz Liszt even said to him, *'You carried me away! You played splendidly,'* and regarding the work he observed: *'Now there, at least, is real music.'* Perhaps for these reasons Tchaikovsky let 'sleeping dogs lie' – after all, he was hyper-sensitive with his works that were badly received, to the point of nervous breakdowns, so why not for once was he not to put trust in the very positive public reaction?

The variations are still generally played in Fitzenhagen's sequence to the present day, so Fitzenhagen's order was retained, and despite the subsequent discovery and restoration of the composer's original order, the Fitzenhagen version became part of the standard repertoire. The full score and orchestral parts of the Variations on a Rococo Theme were finally published by Petr Jurgenson, in Wilhelm Fitzenhagen's version, in November 1889.

In the mid-20th century, the author's original text of the Variations was completely *reconstructed*, and published in the composer's collected works under the editorship of Viktor Kubatskii. However, are we sure that Tchaikovsky would not himself have made further changes before a publication if he had held full control over matters? Of this we cannot be 100% sure. Also, are we sure that the composer's last thoughts had actually found itself on paper? And ... what if maybe he could have weighed up Fitzenhagen's suggestions and found a '*third way*'! Anyway, for history, the author's supposedly original version of the Variations was performed for the first time on 24 April 1941 in Moscow, played by Daniil Shafran, conducted by Aleksandr Melik-Pashaev, and later by S. Shirinskii. Other recordings of the 'original' have also been released, such as by Raphael Wallfisch and Steven Isserlis – these are of enormous interest, but give less of a virtuosic impression; possibly this is why Franz Liszt, a great proponent of virtuosity, enjoyed Fitzenhagen's version more. But, rather strangely, the Variations were played very rarely during the composer's lifetime; perhaps they were 'out of bounds' for all but the most virtuoso of cellists at that time. Since the turn of the twentieth-century they have gradually gained importance as the decades passed, but only arriving at their present state of 'glory' after 1945.

Variations on a Rococo Theme

For cello with small orchestra, A major, Op. 33.

Originally composed December 1876 – January 1877.

Scored for Violoncello solo; 2 Flutes; 2 Oboes; 2 Clarinets (A); 2 Bassoons; 2 Horns (F); Violins I; Violins II; Violas; Violoncellos; Double Basses.

Also arranged for Violoncello with Piano solo by Tchaikovsky.

Published by Petr Jurgenson, in Wilhem Fitzenhagen's version, in November 1889.

As previously stated, Fitzenhagen became the premiere cello instructor in Russia, famed for his conservatoire class and equally well-known as a soloist and chamber music performer.

Fitzenhagen trained a number of excellent cellists, including Joseph Adamowski, who went to America in 1889 to join the newly-formed Boston Symphony Orchestra and helped found the orchestra's pension program. Adamowski also formed a string quartet named after him and taught at the New England Conservatory in Boston.

At the conservatory Fitzenhagen also taught Anatoli Brandukov, who was to become another great exponent of Tchaikovsky's cello works. Tchaikovsky was, in 1887, to dedicate the *Pezzo Capriccioso* to him, and granted with a similar freedom of modification; but judging by the commotion of the previous 'Variations' and, of course, knowing the composer's disagreement with Fitzenhagen at first hand, Brandukov was much more careful and cautious in annotating suggestions. Incidentally, I have seen it written, but am unable to find evidence of it in this moment, that in the 2nd half of the *Pezzo Capriccioso*, and just before the last fast section, a short cadenza was played/invented/improvised by some cellists from the years before the first World War – so would this have been a suggestion of Brandukov, a freedom offered by Tchaikovsky himself to enterprising cellists, or was it seized upon independently as an interesting creativity by other cellists? I must say I do personally encourage its inclusion and add some 45 seconds extra, for only on account of the work's briefness – only some seven and a half minutes or so – would appear to be the reason that it is not programmed more frequently.

In summing up, I view as most unfortunate that still too many associate Fitzenhagen's name purely in an 'infamous' way related to the Rococo Variations story. Those unfortunate events, in retrospect, have *covered up* the career of an excellent solo cellist, an intelligent and worthy teacher, and a composer of some most delightful cello works. Maybe, now in the twenty-first century, it is time to rediscover much more of what this all-round musician can still offer us.

DAVID JOHNSTONE

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String Quartet (won an award from the St. Petersburg Chamber Musical Union)

Cello Concerto No.1

Cello Concerto No.2

Cello Concerto No.3

Cello Concerto No.4

Suite for Violoncello and Orchestra

Fantasia on motifs from Rubinstein's Dimon with orchestra

Concert-Waltzes, for Four Solo Cellos

Many drawing-room pieces

12 Little Pieces

Ballade with orchestra

Technical Studies for the cello, Op.28



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