

Gabetta's Rococo Variations and Mozart's 39th

Wednesday, December 23, 2026 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw

Klaus Mäkelä, conductor · Sol Gabetta, cello

	TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME	MIN
1	ARENSKY 1861–1906 <i>Variations on a Theme by Tchaikovsky, Op. 35a</i>	15'
2	TCHAIKOVSKY 1840–1893 <i>Variations on a Rococo Theme, Op. 33</i>	18'
3	MOZART 1756–1791 <i>Symphony No. 39 in E-flat major, K. 543</i>	30'
	TOTAL MUSIC	63'

Anton Arensky

15 minutes

1861–1906

Variations on a Theme by Tchaikovsky, Op. 35a

THE COMPOSER

Anton Arensky (1861–1906) was a Russian composer, pianist and teacher whose music, long overshadowed, has enjoyed a steady revival. A pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov at the St Petersburg Conservatory, he went on to teach at the Moscow Conservatory, where his own students included Rachmaninoff, Scriabin and Glière. His style sits attractively between the cosmopolitan lyricism of his idol Tchaikovsky and the nationalist colour of the Russian school, and at its best (in the Piano Trio in D minor, the Second String Quartet and the famous Variations drawn from it) it has a melodic warmth and elegance all its own. Rimsky-Korsakov rather cruelly predicted that Arensky would be quickly forgotten, and blamed gambling and drink for his failing health; he died of tuberculosis at only forty-four. But the finest of his music has outlasted that gloomy forecast and holds a secure place in the repertoire.

ABOUT THE WORK

This is music written in mourning and in love. When Tchaikovsky died in 1893, the younger Anton Arensky, who revered him, paid tribute the following year in the slow movement of his String Quartet No. 2, building it as a set of variations on one of Tchaikovsky's own melodies. The quartet itself is a curiosity, scored for the unusual com-

bination of violin, viola and two cellos, which gives it a dark, rich, elegiac sonority. It was this central variations movement that proved the most popular, and Arensky arranged it for full string orchestra as his Opus 35a, the form in which it has become his most beloved work.

The theme he chose is itself touching: ‘Legend’ (known in some English sources as ‘The Crown of Roses’), the fifth of Tchaikovsky’s Sixteen Songs for Children, Op. 54: a simple, hymn-like little song about the child Jesus tending a garden of roses. Around this gentle, devout melody Arensky spins a sequence of variations of great tenderness and craft, by turns songful, playful and grave, exploiting the warm, blended sound of a string orchestra to the full. It is a perfect curtain-raiser for tonight’s programme of musical homages, itself a homage from one Russian master to another, and it leads naturally into Tchaikovsky’s own great set of variations that follows.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

First, fix the theme in your ear: after a brief introduction, the strings present Tchaikovsky’s ‘Legend’ melody (simple, hymn-like and a little melancholy), which will underlie everything that follows. Then enjoy how Arensky transforms it across the variations.

Listen for the changing characters: hushed and prayerful in some variations, light and dancing in others, with passages of rich, warm harmony that show off the velvety sound of a good string orchestra. Notice how he varies the mood and texture as well as the melody: now a delicate filigree above the tune, now a darker, more impassioned treatment, now a return to the theme’s original serenity. The whole is short, beautifully proportioned and deeply felt, ending as gently as it began, a quiet act of remembrance before the programme’s brighter music.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

1840–1893

Variations on a Rococo Theme, Op. 33

THE COMPOSER

Tchaikovsky was Russia’s first truly international composer and, in his own lifetime, one of the most beloved figures in European music. Born in 1840 in Votkinsk, he trained as a civil servant before turning to music in his early twenties, studying composition at the newly founded St. Petersburg Conservatory. He began teaching harmony at the newly opened Moscow Conservatory in 1866, and over the following twenty-five years produced six symphon-

18 minutes

ies, three ballets (*Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Nutcracker*), a string of operas, numerous concertos, and a wealth of chamber and song repertoire that has never left the international stage.

Tchaikovsky was a man of intense feeling, much of it conflicted. Homosexual in an unforgiving Russian society, often paralysed by depression and self-doubt, he poured the full weight of his emotional life into his music. He died in St. Petersburg in 1893, days after conducting the premiere of his Sixth Symphony. The official cause was cholera, though the precise circumstances of his death have been debated ever since.

ABOUT THE WORK

Tchaikovsky adored Mozart, ‘a sunny genius’ whose music, he said, ‘moves me to tears’, and he regarded the Classical era as a lost paradise of grace and proportion. The Variations on a Rococo Theme, written between December 1876 and March 1877, are his loving homage to that world: a piece that deliberately turns away from his own lush Romanticism toward the elegance, transparency and wit of the eighteenth century. It is the closest he came to writing a cello concerto. The ‘Rococo’ theme is not a genuine antique but Tchaikovsky’s own invention in the Classical manner, a graceful, courtly tune that he then decorates through a series of increasingly brilliant variations.

He wrote the piece for, and with the help of, Wilhelm Fitzenhagen, a German cellist and his colleague at the Moscow Conservatory, who gave the premiere in Moscow on 30 November 1877 under Nikolai Rubinstein. Here lies the work’s famous controversy. Fitzenhagen, exercising the privileges of a virtuoso, extensively reworked the solo part, reordered the variations and cut one of them entirely, and it was his altered version, not Tchaikovsky’s original, that was published and became standard for generations. Tchaikovsky, characteristically, let it stand, though he grumbled. Whichever version is played, the result is one of the most delightful and demanding works in the cello repertoire: a sparkling showpiece that asks for both flawless technique and Classical poise.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

After a brief orchestral introduction, the cello presents the elegant ‘Rococo’ theme, poised, courtly and Mozartean, and from it the variations unfold, each a different character study. Listen for the way Tchaikovsky (and his cellist-collaborator) make ever greater demands on the soloist: rippling runs, high lyrical singing, rapid passagework, and graceful ornamentation, all wrapped in light, transparent orchestration that never covers the solo line.

Keep your ear out for the contrasts between variations, some brisk and brilliant, others tender and songful. The slow, minor-key variation near the heart of the work is especially beautiful, a moment of real Tchaikovskian melancholy amid the Classical sparkle. And listen for the dazzling final variation and coda, where the cello takes off in a display of virtuosity that brings the piece to an exhilarating close. Throughout, this is Tchaikovsky on his best behaviour, charm and brilliance in perfect balance: a Romantic composer's heartfelt bow to the age of Mozart.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

30 minutes

1756–1791

Symphony No. 39 in E-flat major, K. 543

THE COMPOSER

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart needs little introduction. Born in Salzburg in 1756, he was a prodigy whose talents were cultivated and exhibited across Europe by his father Leopold. By the time he composed this concerto in 1779, the twenty-three-year-old Mozart was restless in provincial Salzburg, dreaming of Vienna and larger stages. Within two years he would make the move that defined his mature career.

Less well known is his sister Maria Anna, called “Nannerl,” five years his senior. She was an equally brilliant pianist as a child, and the siblings toured together as wonders of nature until Nannerl's touring career ended when she was about seventeen. Following the customs of the time, she stayed at home while Wolfgang continued traveling with their father. The brother and sister remained close, and this concerto was written for the two of them to play.

ABOUT THE WORK

In the summer of 1788, in a burst of activity that remains one of the wonders of musical history, Mozart wrote his last three symphonies, Nos. 39, 40 and 41, in the space of a few weeks. Nobody knows for certain what they were for (perhaps a series of subscription concerts that seems never to have taken place), yet he produced three masterpieces of utterly distinct character. The E-flat Symphony, completed on 26 June 1788, is the first and the most genial of the three: warm, lyrical and autumnal, lacking the tragic urgency of the G-minor Fortieth and the contrapuntal grandeur of the ‘Jupiter’, but radiating a mellow, golden serenity all its own.

Part of that distinctive sound comes from an unusual choice of instruments. In the Thirty-Ninth Mozart uses clarinets instead of oboes, giving the clarinets, still relatively new and beloved by Mozart, unusual prominence. The result is a softer, rounder woodwind colour

perfectly suited to the work's lyrical warmth. The symphony also opens with a grand, slow introduction full of dotted rhythms and bold dissonance, a feature common in symphonies of the day but rare in Mozart's own, lending the work a ceremonial, almost Olympian weight before the sunlight breaks through.

Often called the most relaxed and good-humoured of the final trilogy, the E-flat Symphony has been described as the crowning lyrical achievement of Mozart's symphonic output: music of effortless grace that conceals, as ever with Mozart, the most consummate craftsmanship.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen first to the grand slow introduction (Adagio): stately dotted rhythms and sweeping scales, shadowed by surprising dissonances, that create a sense of expectation before the music relaxes into the flowing, graceful main Allegro, with its gently rocking themes and the warm glow of the oboe-less woodwind.

The second movement (Andante con moto) is serene and songful, but listen for the sudden, dramatic clouding-over in its middle, where the music turns briefly stormy and minor before the calm returns. The third-movement Minuet is robust and genial, and its trio is one of Mozart's most famous passages: a rustic, Ländler-like dance led by the clarinets, evoking village music-making. The finale (Allegro) is a sparkling, Haydnesque romp built almost entirely from a single quicksilver theme announced at the start; listen for how Mozart spins the whole movement from this one idea, full of wit and headlong energy, ending the symphony, and our programme, with irrepressible high spirits.

Tonight's artists

Sol Gabetta *cello*

Tchaikovsky's Rococo Variations are a perfect showcase for Sol Gabetta's gifts: they demand dazzling virtuosity (the rapid runs, the soaring high register, the brilliant final flourish) and also the Classical grace and singing line that her warm, vivid tone supplies so naturally. A cellist celebrated for the sheer joy and communicativeness of her playing, she brings exactly the blend of sparkle and songfulness this homage to Mozart needs, making it the radiant centrepiece of an evening of musical tributes.

Sol Gabetta, born in Argentina in 1981 to a family of French, Argentine and Russian heritage, is one of the most charismatic cellists before the public today. A prodigy who began on the violin before settling on the cello, she won her first competition at ten and rose to international prominence after taking the Crédit Suisse Young Artist Award in 2004. Since then she has appeared with the world's leading orchestras and conductors, recorded extensively for Sony and Deutsche Grammophon, and founded her own acclaimed chamber-music festival, Solsberg, in Switzerland, where she lives and teaches. Admired for the warmth, intensity and communicative joy of her playing, she is also a noted champion of contemporary music, with concertos written for her by composers including Pēteris Vasks. She performs on a 1730 Venetian cello by Matteo Goffriller.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Mozart: A Life**

Maynard Solomon, Harper Perennial 2005

Solomon's psychological biography of Mozart, good on the difficult Vienna years of the late 1780s when he wrote Symphony No. 39.

ACCESSIBLE **Tchaikovsky: The Man and His Music**

David Brown, Faber and Faber 2007

A compact life of Tchaikovsky, including the mid-1870s, when he wrote the Rococo Variations for the cellist Wilhelm Fitzenhagen.

DEEPER **Mozart: The 'Jupiter' Symphony**

Elaine R. Sisman, Cambridge University Press 1993

A Cambridge Music Handbook on the Jupiter that also covers the summer of 1788, when Mozart wrote his last three symphonies, No. 39 first among them.

SOURCES

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2. Concertgebouw Orchestra and Klaus Mäkelä: Mozart and Tchaikovsky, Het Concertgebouw. <https://www.concertgebouw.nl/en/concerts/45892416-concertgebouw-orchestra-and-klaus-makela-mozart-and-tchaikovsky>
3. String Quartet No. 2 (Arensky), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/String_Quartet_No._2_\(Arensky\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/String_Quartet_No._2_(Arensky))
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5. Anton Arensky, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anton_Arensky
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7. Tchaikovsky: Variations on a Rococo Theme (programme note), Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/tchaikovsky-variations-on-a-rococo-theme>
8. Variations on a Rococo Theme, Op. 33, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Hollywood Bowl. <https://www.hollywoodbowl.com/musicdb/pieces/4464/variations-on-a-rococo-theme>
9. Symphony No. 39 (Mozart), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._39_\(Mozart\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._39_(Mozart))
10. Mozart: Symphony No. 39 in E-flat, K.543 (programme note), Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/mozart-symphony-no-39-in-e-flat-k-543>
11. Sol Gabetta, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sol_Gabetta
12. About Sol Gabetta, Sol Gabetta (official site). <https://solgabetta.com/about/>
13. Mozart: A Life, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780060883447>
14. Tchaikovsky: The Man and His Music, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780571231959>
15. Mozart: The 'Jupiter' Symphony, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521409247>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2026-12-23-makela>

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