

ROYAL CONCERTGEBOUW ORCHESTRA

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

1861–1906

Variations on a Theme by Tchaikovsky, Op. 35a

15 minutes

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 combination 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.

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

18 minutes

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 inven-

tion in the Classical manner, a graceful, courtly tune that he then decorates through a series of increasingly brilliant variations.

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

1756–1791

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

30 minutes

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.

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.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

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

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