



CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Variations on a Rococo theme

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky



1840-1893

Tchaikovsky is one of the most famous composers ever to have lived. The ballets for which he wrote the music- Swan Lake, The Nutcracker and Sleeping Beauty- are performed by ballet companies all over the world, and his music for Romeo and Juliet and his 1812 Overture are heard daily in programmes and on adverts.



Sheku Kanneh-Mason- cellist

Sheku won the BBC Young Musician of the Year competition in 2016 and was the first black winner in its 38 year history. He most recently came into the wider public eye by performing at the wedding of the Prince and Princess of Sussex (aka Harry and Meghan!) earlier in 2018. Here he is performing during the signing of the register:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B6CH8eI3-IY>



Listening to 'Variations on a Rococo Theme'

Question- What are musical 'variations'?

Here's a set of visual variations by artist Andy Warhol:



The subject, or to use a musical term 'theme', is Mick Jagger, the lead singer of the Rolling Stones. Each picture represents a different version (made different here with varied colours, poses and expressions) of the first, plainest picture.



In a similar way musical variations are based on a theme, and as the theme is repeated it is modified and changed, though always linked in some way to the original theme.

Many composers before and after Tchaikovsky have composed sets of variations:

Handel- The Harmonious Blacksmith

Bach- The Goldberg Variations

Corelli- La Follia

Mozart- Ah, vous-je dirai maman

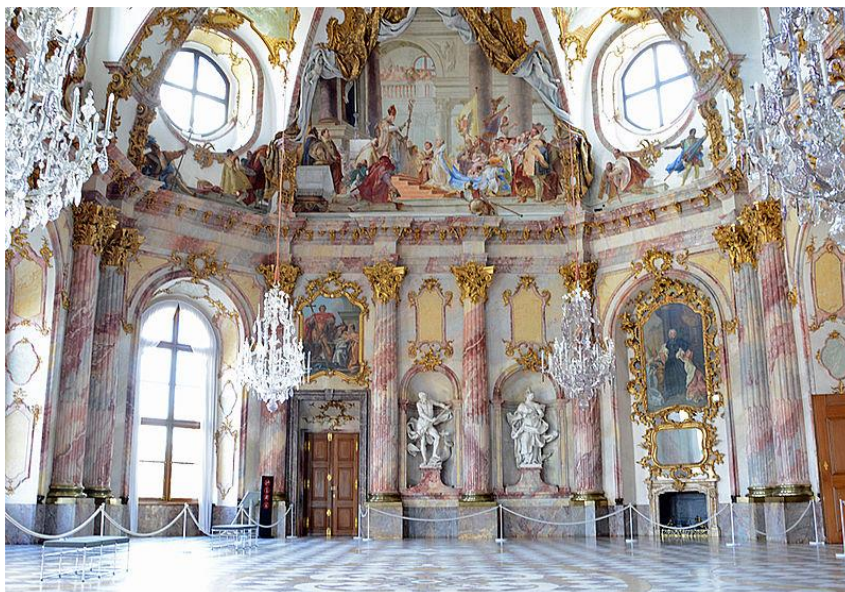
Beethoven- Diabelli variations

Benjamin Britten- Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra

Unlike all of these composers, Tchaikovsky actually composed his own theme, which he tried to make sound as Rococo in style (Rococo-ey? Rococo-esque?) as possible.

Question- What does 'Rococo' mean?

Rococo is the artistic style that swept Europe in the late Baroque period (the early to mid 1700's). In architecture it is defined by its over-the-top ornateness. Have a look at this:



"It [the Rococo style] pushed to the extreme the principles of illusion and theatricality, an effect achieved by dense ornament, asymmetry, fluid curves, and the use of white and pastel colours combined with gilding, drawing the eye in all directions" (Wikipedia)



In music it referred more specifically to the *style gallante*- the gallant style- of the late Baroque period and “it can be characterized as light, intimate music with extremely elaborate and refined forms of ornamentation.” (Wikipedia)



Jeremy Corbyn- a variation on Tchaikovsky??

In all, Tchaikovsky wrote 8 variations on his Rococo theme, and each variation lasts for about two minutes.

Classroom Activities

1. As you listen to the piece draw your own set of variations by supplying Tchaikovsky with a hairstyle suitable for each section of the piece! You can also add colour- think Andy Warhol!





Variation 1



Variation 2



Variation 3



Variation 4





Variation 5



Variation 6



Variation 7



Variation 8





2. Twinkle, twinkle, little star

Mozart's *Ah, vous-je dirai maman* is actually the same tune as 'Twinkle, twinkle'.

Create a set of variations by splitting your class into pairs, whose job it is to 'vary' the way they sing or play 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star'.

Start by discussing how it would be possible to create a variation. You could change the tempo (slower or faster), repeat notes, change the tonality (perform it in the minor key) fill the gaps between 'twinkle' and 'little' with a scale, or anything else that comes into your head. For inspiration you could always have a listen to Mozart's variations:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyhxeo6zLAM>

Ah! vous dirai-je, maman

anon. (France)

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