

Program Notes: “Revisions” – March 24, 2012

by

BENJAMIN KLEMME

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847)

The Hebrides (Fingal’s Cave), Op. 26

The Hebrides, Op. 26, was composed in 1830 and is scored for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns, trumpets, timpani and strings. Its performance duration is approximately 10 minutes.

During a summer tour through the Western Highlands, twenty-year-old Felix Mendelssohn and his friend Karl Klingemann visited the Hebrides, a group of islands off the west coast of Scotland. By boat, they encountered the uninhabited island of Staffa and were carried by the sea into its famous Fingal’s Cave, a water-filled cavern walled by thousands of volcanically formed basalt columns. The cave is thirty-three feet in width, nearly twice as tall, and more than two hundred feet in length. Klingemann wrote of the experience, “We were put out in boats, and lifted by the hissing sea up the pillar stumps to the celebrated Fingal’s Cave. A greener roar of waves surely never rushed into a stranger cavern – its many pillars making it look like the inside of an immense organ, black and resounding, and absolutely without purpose, and quite alone, the wide gray sea within and without.” Mendelssohn, too, wrote of their visit in a letter to his sister Fanny, dated “From one of the Hebrides - August 7, 1829”. He wrote, “In order to make you understand how extraordinarily the Hebrides affected me, the following came into my mind there.” What follows in the letter is a musical sketch of the opening passage of what would become his *Fingal’s Cave* or *Die Hebriden*. These twenty-one measures of music, which include tempo, dynamics, and notes regarding orchestration, went nearly unchanged from the moment he visited Staffa until the piece was published.



Letter to his family: August 7, 1829

Felix Mendelssohn

Photo Credit: Music Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

Additionally, Mendelssohn’s Hebrides visit inspired a sketch of the Scottish mainland, as viewed from Olan (another Hebrides island), in his travel sketchbook. The sketch (displayed on following the page) is dated the same day as his letter to Fanny: August 7, 1829.

Though the inspiration for the concert overture came suddenly to Mendelssohn upon visiting the Hebrides, completion of the work was not achieved until more than a year later on December 16, 1830 in Rome. And despite autographing the manuscript as complete, Mendelssohn seemed far from convinced that its overall effect was what he had initially intended. In a letter dated January 21, 1832, he wrote to Fanny that, “the middle part in D major marked *forte* is very ridiculous, and the would-be working-out of the movement tastes more of counterpoint than of train oil, sea gulls, and salted cod – it should be just the other way around.”

Indeed, the piece underwent tremendous revisions at the hand of the composer until he published it in 1835. Mendelssohn autographed four complete versions under four different titles: *Die Hebriden* (1830), *Die einsame Insel* (1830), *The Isles of Final* (1832), and *Fingalshöhle* (1835). The overture received its premiere performance by the London Philharmonic Society, under the direction of Thomas

Atwood, at Covent Garden on May 14, 1832, and though Mendelssohn continued revising the piece after hearing this performance, he seemed pleased with his work. He wrote, “It went splendidly, and sounded so droll amongst all the Rossini things.”



Ein Blick auf die Hebriden und Morven (A View of the Hebrides and Morven): August 7, 1829
Graphite, pen, and ink on paper: Felix Mendelssohn
Photo Credit: Bodleian Library, University of Oxford

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)

Variations on a Rococo Theme, Op. 33

Tchaikovsky's Variations on a Rococo Theme, Op. 33, was composed in 1876. It is scored for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns and strings. Its performance duration is approximately 20 minutes.

As professor of music theory at the Moscow Conservatory, Tchaikovsky developed a strong personal relationship with Wilhelm Fitzenhagen following his appointment to the conservatory (at the age of twenty-two) as professor of cello. Fitzenhagen, known equally for his brilliant talent as he was for his precociousness, was the one who commissioned Tchaikovsky in 1876 to compose *Variations on a Rococo Theme* for cello and orchestra. Commissioning the piece was only the beginning of his intense involvement with it. In the final weeks of 1876, Tchaikovsky composed an initial version of the piece for cello and piano, and then invited Fitzenhagen to examine and make revisions to the solo part. Tchaikovsky, presumably pleased to incorporate his colleague's revisions, subsequently scored the accompaniment for orchestra, and the variations received their premiere in Moscow on November 30, 1877. Fitzenhagen performed as soloist.

After spending the beginning of 1878 in Europe, Tchaikovsky returned to Russia just as his friend and publisher Pyotr Jurgenson suggested that he publish a cello and piano edition of the *Rococo Variations*. He learned from Jurgenson, however, that in the time since the premiere, Fitzenhagen had made considerable changes to the piece, namely discarding Tchaikovsky's original closing variation, and changing the sequence of the others. It is difficult to know, based on Tchaikovsky's actions in 1878, whether he considered Fitzenhagen's changes intrusive, because he allowed Jurgenson's publication of the cello and piano edition of November 1878 to reflect them. Tchaikovsky had another opportunity to address the changes when the orchestral score for the variations was to be published in 1889, but again allowed the publication to be printed with Fitzenhagen's revisions incorporated. It is the

reworked version that listeners are now accustomed to hearing, and it was not until 1941 that Tchaikovsky's original version of the *Rococo Variations* was performed publicly, when cellist Daniil Shafran and conductor Alexander Melik-Pashayev revived them in Moscow.

It was claimed by a close acquaintance of Tchaikovsky that before writing the variations he asked Fitzenhagen, "Do you know what *Rococo* means?" Fitzenhagen is alleged to have replied, "It is a carefree feeling of well-being." Tchaikovsky was a great admirer of the music of the Rococo (in its most broad musicological definition), especially the music of Mozart. In a journal entry of October 2, 1886, Tchaikovsky wrote, "I do not claim that each and every one of [Mozart's]...works is a masterpiece...and yet I love each one, because they are his, because he has engraved each one with his sacred hand." It is known through his correspondence that in various pieces (like the *Mozartiana* orchestral suite, the vocal quartet *Night*, and *Preghiera*), Tchaikovsky paid conspicuous musical tribute to the composer he once described as "the Messiah of music". But many agree that it is in pieces like *Variations on a Rococo Theme*, when Tchaikovsky organically incorporates ideals of the Rococo period into his own compositional style, that he pays most brilliant homage to the style he himself loved so deeply.

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)

Symphony No. 35 in D Major, K. 385, "Haffner" Symphony

Mozart composed the music for what would become his thirty-fifth symphony, K. 385, in 1782. It is scored for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns, trumpets, timpani and strings, and is approximately 20 minutes in length.

In the summer of 1782, Sigmund Haffner – a childhood acquaintance of Mozart – was to be ennobled, in recognition of his gifts to the city of Salzburg and its province. Mozart, who had been living in Vienna since March 1781, learned of the occasion upon receipt of a pressing written plea from his father in July 1782. On behalf of the Haffner family, Leopold Mozart wrote to Wolfgang (ending a three-month silence in their correspondence) to request that he compose a symphony to celebrate the occasion of Sigmund's elevation. That, before receiving this request for music, Mozart had failed to hear from his father for three months, was in large part due to Leopold's unwillingness to bless his impending wedding to Constanze Weber, scheduled to take place on August 4 in Vienna. In his landmark biography of the composer, Maynard Solomon suggests that Mozart may have been motivated, at least in part, to accept the Haffner commission in order to restore communication with his father, and to again request his consent to wed Constanze.

Mozart had on a previous occasion written a serenade to celebrate the wedding of Sigmund Haffner's younger sister, and agreed to this subsequent commission from the family in spite of tremendous professional and personal pressures in Vienna. He responded to Leopold, "I am up to my eyes in work, for by Sunday week I have to arrange my opera [*Die Entführung aus dem Serail*] for wind instruments. If I don't do it someone else will, and reap the profits, and now you ask me to write a new symphony! How on earth can I do so?" Nevertheless, he went on to conclude, "You may rely on having something from me by every post. I shall work as fast as possible and, as far as haste permits, I shall turn out good work." The next two weeks of Mozart's work would be marked, indeed, by tremendous haste, but also by extraordinarily "good work", especially in light of the anxiety surrounding his upcoming marriage and the pressures of his simultaneous professional responsibilities. In all, Mozart would send his father six movements; in addition to the four movements that would later comprise his thirty-fifth symphony, there was an introductory March and an additional Minuet. In a letter accompanying the last package of music to Leopold, Mozart wrote, "I hope all will reach you in good time, and be to your taste. The first *Allegro* must be played with great fire, the last – as fast as possible."

As 1782 came to a close, Mozart wrote to his father, in a letter dated December 21, requesting that the Haffner music be returned, as he intended to revise and perform it in Vienna on a Lenten concert

in the new year. After sending no fewer than three requests to Leopold that the score be sent by post, the autograph manuscript arrived and Mozart went about making revisions. Upon receipt of the score, Mozart replied to his father, “my new Haffner Symphony has positively amazed me, for I had forgotten every single note of it.” Of the six movements that were composed for Haffner’s elevation ceremony, Mozart discarded two, leaving four movements for what would now become his *Haffner* symphony, or Symphony No. 35 in D, K. 385. To the *Allegro con spirito* and *Presto* movements, he added flute and clarinet parts, and removed the exposition repeat from the opening movement. The reworked symphony received its first hearing on March 23, 1783, when Mozart performed it as part of his lengthy Lenten concert at the Burgtheater in Vienna. The first three movements opened the program, and the last movement was reserved as a finale for the very end of the concert.

Bibliography

Art and Music in Britain: Four Encounters, 1730-1900. Yale University, 2006. Website. March 1, 2012.

Beck, Sydney. Introduction. *Symphony No. 35 in D, K. 385, “Haffner” Symphony: Facsimile of the original manuscript*. By W.A. Mozart. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968.

Brown, David. “Chop and Change.” *Strad* June 2004: 616-619.

Brown, Svend-Einar. “Variation on a Rococo Theme, Op. 33.” Program notes. *The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra*. May 5-8, 2011.

Grove, George. “Mendelssohn’s ‘Hebrides’ Overture.” *The Musical Times* 46.750 (1905): 531-533.

Gutman, Robert W. *Mozart: A Cultural Biography*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1999.

Norris, Geoffrey. “Tchaikovsky and the 18th Century.” *The Musical Times* 118.1615 (1977): 715-716.

Roy, Klaus G. “Die Hebriden.” Program notes. *The Cleveland Orchestra*. Severance Hall, Cleveland. February 23-25, 1984.

Solomon, Maynard. *Mozart*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995.

Todd, R. Larry. “Of Seagulls and Counterpoint: The Early Versions of Mendelssohn’s Hebrides Overture.” *19th-Century Music* 2.3 (1979): 197-213.