

Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges (December 25, 1745 – June 12, 1799)  
**Symphony no. 1 in G Major** (op. 11, no. 1; unknown composition date, premiered in 1779)

*Allegro*

*Andante*

*Allegro assai*

Instrumentation: 2 oboes, 2 horns, and strings

Joseph Bologne, later dubbed the Chevalier de Saint-Georges, was a jack of all trades, and master of several. The circumstances of his birth and much of his childhood are clouded by a fictitious account of his early life written by one of Joseph's many admirers. Even the actual date of his birth is questionable, due not only to such fanciful accounts, but also Joseph himself misrepresenting his age to his military superiors. If not for excellent records kept by the French military, and his esteem as a champion fencer and boxer, we would likely know very little about the early years of this truly remarkable figure.

We know Joseph was born on the island of Guadeloupe, the child of an enslaved Senegalese woman named Nanon and a French plantation owner by the name of Georges de Bologne Saint-Georges. No records exist of the child's time in Guadeloupe, but by the age of ten, he made his way to France with his father, to receive an education and become part of high Parisian society. Though it wasn't necessarily common for a child born from an affair with a slave in a French colony to travel back to France and be incorporated into society, it also wasn't unheard of either. Joseph's father may have helped set a trend for this to become fairly normal in Europe, but that is somewhat speculative.

In France, Joseph thrived as he learned the ins and outs of French social interactions. He practiced horseback riding, dancing, swimming, and other basics of an education at the time, but particularly excelled in athletic pursuits, and even more particularly, fencing. He was described by the great master of the epee La Boessiere as "perhaps the most extraordinary man to appear in the history of fencing." One of the most accurate accounts of the Chevalier's life comes from his expertise in fencing, written by La Boessiere's son, which even covers the prodigious musical talent of Saint-Georges. However, this account was written well after Saint-Georges passed away, and outside of some violin works dedicated to him in the mid-1760s, we have very little extant documentation of his early musical studies. One doesn't just pickup the violin at age 15 or so and suddenly become a virtuoso (though if the fanciful accounts of Saint-Georges are to be believed, he was playing Tartini's difficult "Devil's Trill" sonata before he even came to France, but I digress...), so he must have begun studies promptly after arriving in Europe.

The composer François-Joseph Gossec dedicated a number of works to Saint Georges, leading most to believe that Gossec was Saint Georges's composition teacher. No real documentary evidence exists that this was the case, but it does stand to reason, given Gossec's apparent admiration. By 1769, Gossec had founded the *Concert des Amateurs* (don't let the name fool you, this was one of the premier orchestras in France at the time), and invited Saint Georges to

perform with the group on violin, and eventually was promoted to concertmaster. After Gossec took another job in 1773, the directorship of the *Concert des Amateurs* fell to Saint Georges. This provided him with the motivation to turn his full attention to his musical career. He achieved great fame in this position, and was even put forth as a candidate for one of the most prestigious directorships in France at the time. In 1775, he applied to become the director of the Académie Royal de Musique, only to have his candidacy thwarted by a trio of performers who refused to take orders from a black man. He continued in his role with the *Concert des Amateurs*, but by 1781, the ensemble dissolved. Many of the musicians and Saint Georges himself started a new group, the *Concert de la Loge Olympique*. Saint Georges oversaw this ensemble's commission of Haydn's *Paris* symphonies, and achieved a status many considered to be the best orchestra in Europe.

Mozart spent much of the year 1778 in Paris, at which time he more than likely would have at least heard Saint Georges's music. In fact, one of Mozart's first works he completed after his time in France (K. 364) lifts an excerpt from a Saint Georges work (his Op. 7 No. 2 violin concerto) that premiered while Mozart stayed in Paris. Coincidence? Probably not. As history looked back on Saint Georges, it dubbed him with a rather unfortunate nickname: "Black Mozart." To quote composer Marcus Balter: "Presumably intended as a compliment, this erasure of Boulogne's name not only subjugates him to an arbitrary white standard, but also diminishes his truly unique place in Western classical music history." If anything, the reverse is probably more accurate, so perhaps Mozart should be nicknamed the "White Saint Georges".

After some unsuccessful forays into opera, and increasing involvement in the French Revolution and the abolition movement in Europe, Bologne decreased his musical activities. He achieved a mythic status as not only a fine musician, but also as a fencer, athlete, and military commander during his lifetime. His story, though oddly missing from many historical textbooks, will be celebrated in the coming years in a new Hollywood biopic.

Tonight's work, his First Symphony, predates the standard model of the symphonies we're used to from the likes of Mozart and Haydn. The French model of the symphony at the time was a three-movement structure, usually a bright, fast opener, a song-like middle movement, and an even brighter, faster closing movement. Saint Georges's work follows this model very closely. The *Allegro* first movement bears the trappings of a simple sonata form, and shows a clear grasp of the colors of the different string instruments, punctuated with oboes and horns. The simple textures of the *Andante* support a charming and typically French style of refined melodic writing, serving as a respite prior to the raucous (by these standards, at least) final *Allegro assai*, adopting a compound meter that gives the sense of something resembling a jig. One hears the virtuosity and command of the orchestra's color palette, making clear this is the work of not just a remarkable musician, but a man that history should never have forgotten.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (May 7, 1840 - November 6, 1893)

**Variations on a Rococo Theme** (op. 33; composed 1876/1877, premiered November 30, 1877)

*Moderato quasi Andante – Thema: Moderato semplice*

*Var. I: Tempo della Thema*

*Var. II: Tempo della Thema*

*Var. III: Andante sostenuto*

*Var. IV: Andante grazioso*

*Var. V: Allegro moderato*

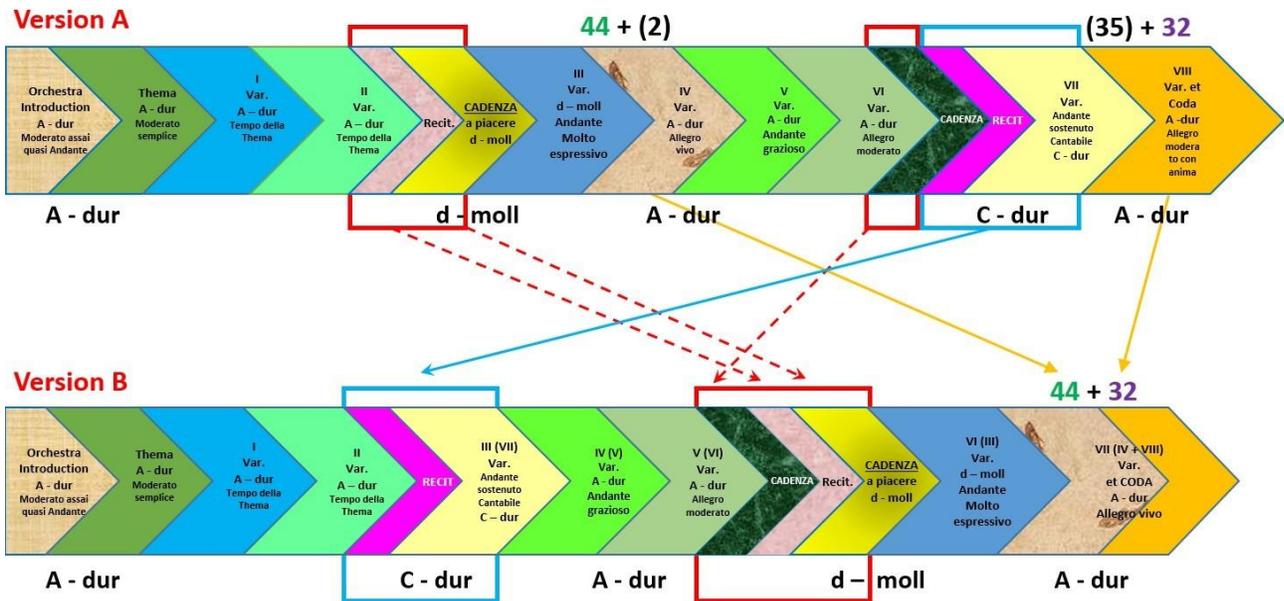
*Var. VI: Andante*

*Var. VII e Coda: Allegro vivo*

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, strings, and cello soloist

Tchaikovsky's place among the finest composers of his era was not quite secure yet when he took on composing this set of variations in 1876. He had enjoyed limited successes in some works, such as his *Romeo and Juliet* fantasy overture, and had started to gain a reputation in Russia. However, he had yet to turn his full attention to composition and gain the kind of international attention he would eventually achieve. About a year after the Rococo Variations were completed and premiered, he composed both his Violin Concerto and his Fourth Symphony, two works that solidified his standing as a true master. This also coincided with Tchaikovsky's ill-fated marriage, and his relationship with Nadezhda von Meck, who became his main patron around 1877. Thus, these variations serve as an interesting bridge to Tchaikovsky realizing his full potential and finding his voice as the Russian master we know today.

Though the name implies a theme from an external source, Tchaikovsky actually composed the theme, mimicking a Rococo style that he admired in Classical works of previous composers such as Mozart. Tchaikovsky wrote the piece for cellist Wilhelm Fitzenhagen; the two worked closely together to ensure the cello part was both playable and satisfactorily virtuosic. Fitzenhagen took great pride and ownership in the composing and publication process, so much so that he actually made numerous editorial changes to the original composition, including reordering the movements, leaving out certain measures, and shuffling musical materials between movements. The version most commonly heard to this day includes Fitzenhagen's edits to the piece, which does a better job of showcasing and centering the soloist in the action. The below chart shows how Tchaikovsky's original version (Version A) differs from the edits by Fitzenhagen (Version B).



Source:

<https://www.musicandpractice.org/volume-4/the-history-of-tchaikovskys-variations-on-a-rococo-theme-and-the-collaboration-with-fitzenhagen/>

The change in the order of movements is especially notable, as Tchaikovsky's original form had something of an arch, with the final variation returning to something closely resembling the original theme. Fitzenhagen's edits, on the other hand, follow the more traditional theme and variations form, wherein the variations become increasingly difficult as the piece progresses, usually interrupted by a more expressive variation just prior to the final, generally most difficult one.

As one might expect, there is much debate in the scholarly community about whether the Fitzenhagen edits truly reflect the original intent of Tchaikovsky, and thus whether the edited version should still be performed. On the one hand, Tchaikovsky did allow the edited version to be published after he had seen it. However, Tchaikovsky was also notoriously absentminded about such matters, so perhaps he didn't notice the differences until it was too late. A third-hand source relayed a story someone else told, which quotes Tchaikovsky as saying, "Fitzenpupen (Fitzenhagen, we'll assume changing the later bit of Wilhelm's surname is meant to be derogatory) was here, look what he has done with my composition, he altered everything," but such a source is unreliable at best. This debate is laden with much in the way of assumption, and we all know what happens when one assumes too much. Additionally, Fitzenhagen wrote to Tchaikovsky following the second performance of the variations in 1879: "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. Liszt said to me: 'You carried me away! You played splendidly,' and regarding your piece he observed: 'Now there, at last, is real music!'" The Andante variation was third in Tchaikovsky's original, but Fitzenhagen placed it in the penultimate position in his edited version. The quote above hints that the reorganization of the piece actually made it better.

Regardless of which version one hears (we're performing Fitzehagen's edited version), one is left charmed by Tchaikovsky's penchant for both lyricism and stunning virtuosity. Some of his idiomatic scoring techniques come to the forefront in this marvelous and charming work, hinting at the greatness to come later in his output. This set of variations also stands out as something of a marathon for the cellist. Most such pieces include breaks for the soloist, but this one keeps the cellist occupied during most of the music.

Franz Joseph Haydn (March 31, 1732 - May 31, 1809)

**Symphony no. 94 in G Major, *Surprise*** (H. 1/94; composed 1791; premiered March 23, 1792)

*Adagio – Vivace assai*

*Andante*

*Menuetto: Allegro molto*

*Finale: Allegro molto*

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, and strings

Few composers have had as large an impact on the course of Western music as Haydn. His early days as a chorister at St. Stephens Cathedral, one of the centers of the European musical world at the time, certainly had an outsized influence on his development as a musician. Though he didn't receive much in the way of music theory and composition training as a chorister, he diligently studied counterpoint (via *Gradus ad Parnassum*, a counterpoint text by Johann Joseph Fux that is still used to this day) and works by composers he admired, such as CPE Bach. Haydn then freelanced as a performer and composer, which eventually led to an appointment as Vice-Kapellmeister at the Court of Esterházy in 1761. He spent the next 29 years here, somewhat in isolation from the rest of the musical world, and produced the bulk of his output while developing his trademark wit and style that we all know and love.

The year 1790 saw the passing of Prince Nikolaus Esterházy, and the reorganization of the court found Haydn out of his previous job. Though the Court still employed Haydn, the new Prince did not have the same enthusiasm for music, and thus granted Haydn permission to travel. By 1791, Haydn made his way to London, where his music dominated the concert scene. As early as 1765, Haydn's music began receiving performances in England, and interest in his works grew steadily over the years. When German impresario and violinist Johann Peter Salomon, who lived and worked in London in the 1780s, learned of Esterházy's death, he seems to have immediately devised a plan to bring Haydn to England for commissions and concerts. Salomon showed up at Haydn's door unannounced with an offer, and Haydn was off to London for his first of two trips. For this excursion, Haydn was to compose six new symphonies in two years, all to be premiered for the Haydn-loving English public. Including a subsequent trip to London three years later, Haydn composed symphonies 93 - 104 under these auspices; these works are regarded as his finest in his vast output, and include tonight's work, the G Major "Surprise" Symphony.

Though the Symphony no. 94 (spoiler alert) gets its subtitle from the famous surprise in the Andante movement, the work has many other surprises in store. A slow introduction gives way to a bright first movement, which surprisingly begins in the wrong key, but quickly makes its way to G major. One of Haydn's trademarks is his playful use of syncopation and cross-rhythms; these techniques are featured throughout this symphony, but are especially abundant in this first movement. The charming second movement is deceptively complex, in the form of a theme and variations that builds to a march-like ending, but not before several intriguing surprises. The third movement minuet has the makings of a lively peasant dance, with weighty emphasis on downbeats in a waltz feel. The blistering final movement shows Haydn at the height of his compositional prowess, with interchanging spells of humor, virtuosity, and songful melodic writing.