

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: THE SOLO KEYBOARD VARIATION REPERTOIRE:
A RECORDING PROJECT AND DOCUMENT
EXPLORING THE NUMEROUS METHODS
COMPOSERS HAVE ADOPTED TO MOLD
VARIATION FORM ACCORDING TO THEIR
OWN MUSICAL STYLE AND HISTORICAL
REFERENCE

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In music, the term “variation” describes both a technique and a form. The technique of variation, the alteration of a musical idea, pervades every form, style and period of music from Gregorian chant to Serialism. Variation is fundamental. When this fundamental technique becomes the overriding principle that lends structure to a musical composition, variation is elevated from technique to form. If variation technique is the process, then variation form is the result. Accordingly, variation form derives from continuous and systematic variation technique.

Variation form is governed by the idea of retention and alteration. With each variation, a composer chooses to retain some elements of the theme while altering others.

In doing so, he realizes that each variation promises new combinations of constants and changes. The balancing of innovation and continuity and its limitless possibilities account for the form's universal appeal.

This dissertation explores the numerous methods that composers have adopted to mold the Variation form according to their own musical style and historical reference. The repertoire discussed and recorded focuses on independent strophic variation sets written for the keyboard. A survey of this repertoire produces the following categorizations: Harmonic Variations (basso ostinato and constant-harmony), Melodic Variations (constant-melody and melodic-outline), Character Variations (formal-outline and fantasy/free), Serial Variations, and Hybrid Variations.

Certain variation types, namely constant-melody, serial, and fantasy/free, are synonymous with a particular time and repertoire because they wholly identify with the aesthetics of a given historical period or style. Constant-harmony, melodic-outline, formal-outline and hybrid types are more pliable and thus produce a more diverse repertoire from multiple historical periods. The remaining form, basso ostinato, engenders a keyboard variation repertoire that spans six centuries; it is truly a universal form. While these conclusions are legitimate, they do not accurately convey the diversity of the variation repertoire. In the end, composers of all periods make individual choices in selecting which form or combination of forms best expresses their creative impulse.

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by

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Chapter I INTRODUCTION

“Variations are to free composition what counterpoint is to technique—the master-key of the whole building.”¹

Variation: Form and Technique

In music, the term “variation” describes both a technique and a form. The technique of variation, the alteration of a musical idea, pervades every form, style and period of music from Gregorian chant to Serialism. Variation is fundamental. When this fundamental technique becomes the overriding principle that lends structure to a musical composition, variation is elevated from technique to form. If variation technique is the process, then variation form is the result. Accordingly, variation form derives from continuous and systematic variation technique.

Though variation form depends on variation technique, the opposite does not hold true; variation technique does not always result in large-scale variation form. Variation technique has long been recognized as an underlying principle that shapes many large-scale musical forms. For this reason, many composers, teachers and theorists have advocated the study and composition of variations to further instruct and enlighten the composition of other musical forms.² Brahms insisted that his composition student,

¹Charles Villiers Stanford, *Musical Composition*, 7th ed. (London: MacMillan, 1949), 51.

²

In 1868, Adolf Bernhard Marx advocated that students familiarize themselves with variations believing that most forms rely on and require variation technique. See Adolf Bernhard Marx, *Die Lehre von der*

Gustav Jenner, start with the variation form because he considered variations a first step in compositional training.³ Charles Villiers Stanford also subscribed to this view with the following words:

...they (variations) are of still greater service in training the mind to deal easily with the most difficult problems in works of larger proportions. Sections of sonata form, such as the episodes between the statements of themes, the development, and the coda, all depend upon the knowledge of writing variations; and the repetitions of the main themes themselves become far more intrinsically interesting in the hands of a composer who is well practiced in variation writing.⁴

Stanford further believed the caliber of a composer could be measured by the success of his variations. Essentially, a composer had not mastered his craft until he had mastered the art of variation.⁵

Large-Scale Forms Using Variation Technique

The most obvious large-scale form that relies on variation technique is the Theme and Variation. While it is the most common variation form in music, it cannot be considered the only type, and in some historical contexts it cannot be considered even the primary type. Indeed, the title *Theme and Variation* did not enter the mainstream lexicon until 1782, with the publication of Heinrich Christoph Koch's *Versuch einer Anleitung zur Composition*. To exclude all other types of variation forms would be to assert that no

musikalischen Komposition, 4th ed., 4 vols. (Leipzig, 1868), III, 53.

³*New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Variations," by Elaine Sisman, 285.

⁴Stanford, *Musical Composition*, 51.

⁵*Ibid.*

variation forms were written before 1793. Intuitively one realizes that the scope must be widened beyond Theme and Variations but must retain the precision necessary to distinguish between variation forms and other forms that use variation technique. The criteria to be used in this document will focus on three categorical dichotomies: continuous/sectional, strophic/hybrid and independent set/variation movement.⁶

For variations to be labeled continuous, the theme, or musical subject, must be linked without pause or separation to its subsequent variations, or altered restatements. Oftentimes, the theme concludes with a half cadence on the dominant whose resolution seamlessly bridges the subsequent restatements, creating a continuous whole. The few themes of this type that do end with a final cadence (V-I) must ensure that the unavoidable punctuation caused by the cadence does not disrupt the continuity of the subsequent phrases. In contrast to the continuous type, sectional variations rely on final cadences, often perfect authentic cadences, to create a sense of finality and closure at the end of each variation. In some respects, each variation of the sectional type could be mistaken for a short, self-contained piece.

Both continuous and sectional variation types belong to the larger strophic category. Multiple repetitions of a continually altered theme (AA`A``A`` etc...) or double theme (ABA`B`A``B`` etc...) characterize the strophic variation form. Historically, continuous strophic variations have been titled *Ground*, *Romanesca*, *Passacaglia*, or

⁶*New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 1986 ed., s.v. "Variation."

Chaconne, to name a few, while those of the sectional strophic type have been called *Diferencia*, *Chorale Variations* or *Theme and Variations*. Occasionally, a composer disregards the common titles in favor of descriptive titles that cite the pre-existing tune of the theme or evoke the set's character and mood.

Hybrid variation types retain some characteristics of the strophic type but disregard others. For example, the form ABA`CA`` or ABA`CA``B`A`` features independent sections (B and C) interwoven between altered repetitions of the theme (A). This form, usually considered a rondo with varied refrains, could be recast as a theme and variation interrupted by new and independent material. Another hybrid variation form, genre variation, relies on systematic variation technique similar to the strophic type but lacks the structural relationships between sections characteristic of the strophic form.⁷ Genre variations include *Variation Canzona*, *Variation Ricercar* and *Variation Suite*.

Both strophic and hybrid variation types can stand alone as independent works or become a subjugated movement contained within a larger work. During the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries, self-standing variation sets and rondos were primarily written to satisfy a composer's need for solo performance repertoire. With the rise of multi-movement forms during this period, composers often replaced sonata-allegro movements with rondo and theme and variation movements.

⁷Ibid.

For the purpose of this paper and recording project, I have limited my research to independent strophic keyboard variations and have excluded hybrid types and all types, whether strophic or hybrid, that are contained within a larger work. For rondo form to be considered a hybrid variation, one would have to characterize the contrasting B and C sections as trivial interruptions and disregard the feeling of return the repeated A section engenders. While the rondo form makes use of variation technique, I believe that a listener experiences the rondo differently from the strophic variation, and therefore I do not consider it a variation form. Likewise, I have not included the genre variations in my research because they more closely resemble the canzona, ricercar and suite forms rather than the variation form. Though they constitute an offshoot or deviation from these main forms, they do not rise to the level of an independent musical form. Lastly, I decided not to include individual strophic variation movements in my recording project because the composer intended them to be performed and experienced as a part of a whole, not broken off and isolated.

Since variation writing spans centuries, from the invention of the earliest keyboards to the present day piano, many works have been written for a variety of keyboard instruments, including organ, clavichord, harpsichord, fortepiano and piano. Due to the fact that I am a pianist, I have narrowed the field to include repertoire written for the piano and for instruments, namely harpsichord and pianoforte, whose repertoire is routinely played on the piano in accordance with common performance practice.

Unfortunately, this excludes most chorale variations and a large portion of the Baroque repertoire, as these pieces were written for the organ. Despite the above-mentioned exclusions, a wealth of keyboard repertoire remains that will illustrate the many historical styles, techniques and structures the variation form can accommodate.

Chapter II Classifications and Types of Strophic Forms

“Inspiration without methods and means at its disposal will no more enable a man to write a symphony than to build a ship or a cathedral.”¹

Characteristics of the Theme

If the theme is the parent, then her offspring are the variations. Every variation emanates from the theme. Occasionally, paltry themes have been transformed into sublime variations², but too often the resultant variations are themselves as inadequate as the theme. Selecting or composing a workable theme is paramount to the success of the variations and presents the first obstacle a composer must overcome. Stanford’s advice is eminently practical.

Whether the composer writes or chooses his theme he must bear in mind three essentials: firstly, that it should contain sufficient amount of material to vary; secondly, that it should have at least one striking feature; thirdly, that it should be simple.³

Stanford’s first point is straightforward and self-evident. His second admonition, to make certain the theme contains one striking feature, helps the listener to readily grasp the connection between each variation and its theme. Stanford expounds upon the third rule by saying, “an over-elaborated theme is at once a variation and robs a composer of one of his series”.⁴

¹C. Hubert H. Parry, *Evolution of the Art of Music* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1896), 249.

²Beethoven referred to the theme of his celebrated Diabelli variations as “a cobbler’s patch”.

³Stanford, *Musical Composition*, 53.

⁴*Ibid.*, 55.

Once a theme has been chosen or composed, the succeeding variations are governed by the idea of retention and alteration. Other theorists have expressed the same idea as preservation versus renewal⁵, repetition and change⁶, or changes with constants⁷. Implicit in all of these opposites is the fundamental premise that variations venture to new places while remaining at home in the theme. With each variation, a composer chooses to retain some elements of the theme while altering others. In doing so, he realizes that each variation promises new combinations of constants and changes. Since the variations preserve and renew the constructive elements of the theme, a careful study of a theme's characterizing elements will be necessary to identify the variation technique at work.

One such characterizing element, a theme's structure as defined by its length and phrasing, could consist for example of a one or two measure motivic idea or even a three-part song form. Between these extremes, a theme could be made up of a repeated phrase, period (8 measures), or double period (16 measures). To Percy Goetschius, author of *The Larger Forms of Musical Composition*, a theme's length determines its classification. He classifies all themes of eight measures or less 'Basso Ostinato', all double period themes 'Small Variation Form' and all themes in three-part song form (16-32 bars) 'Large Variation Form'.⁸ By limiting his analysis to the theme's structure, Goetschius disregards

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Willi Apel, *The History of Keyboard Music to 1700*, trans. and rev. Hans Tischler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 266.

⁶John Gillespie, *Five Centuries of Keyboard Music* (New York: Dover Pub., 1965), 43.

⁷Robert U. Nelson, *The Technique of Variation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1948), 8.

⁸Percy Goetschius, *The Larger Forms of Musical Composition* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1915), 2.

other characterizing elements of the theme and the variation technique, retention and alteration, brought to bear on the subsequent variations. While structure is fundamental to a theme, it is only one of many characterizing elements.

A theme can be further characterized by elements of its construction: melody, harmony, and structure, and expressive elements: rhythm, dynamics, meter, tempo, register, texture, and color. As discussed earlier, some thematic elements might be retained throughout the variations while others are altered with each successive variation. Usually, the preserved thematic element(s) becomes the common denominator throughout the variations; therefore, it is most useful to group variation types by their constant element(s).

Generally speaking, the preserved thematic elements are limited to a theme's constructive elements: namely, harmony, melody, and structure. Two of the theme's constant constructive elements, harmony and melody, spawned broad variation categories within which composers fashioned specific variation types to suit their needs and style. *Harmonic Variations*, those that retain the harmonic construction of the theme, include Basso Ostinato and Constant-Harmony types; likewise, *Melodic Variations*, those that retain the melodic construction of the theme, include Constant-Melody and Melodic-Outline types. Variations that preserve the structural plan are labeled Formal-Outline variations. With all of these specific variation types, composers vary the expressive elements of the theme for contrast and interest.

Two variation types are not categorized by constant constructive elements. The first type, Fantasy/Free variation, is defined by changes; it relies on extensively altered expressive elements to change the character or mood from variation to variation. The second variation type, Serial Variation, is the product of variation technique working within the twelve-tone system. At this time, I will explore in more detail the characteristics that distinguish each variation type and will provide the historical context in which these variations were conceived.

Variation Classifications

Harmonic Variations

Basso Ostinato

The constant element of the basso ostinato variation is its recurring bass-line. While the short bass motive, usually no more than eight bars, is continuously repeated without interruptions, the upper voices freely introduce new melodies, figuration or imitation. In his book, *The Technique of Variation*, Robert Nelson proposes that the ‘continuous design’ of the bass makes the basso ostinato variation the most cohesive of variation types. Paradoxically, Nelson believes its flexibility comes from the variations’ relative melodic freedom from the theme’s melody.⁹

⁹Nelson, *The Technique of Variation*, 78.

While Nelson recognizes the basso ostinato as the “most cohesive and at the same time the most flexible”¹⁰ variation form, he does not consider the basso ostinato a distinct type of variation. Rather, he labels the basso ostinato a harmonic variation, reasoning that the bass-line cannot be disjoined from the harmonies. He subscribes to the idea, propagated by Herbert Viecenzenz, that the bass line and its harmonies are linked by function and cannot be distinctly perceived. Viecenzenz concludes:

The individual tones of the bass line constitute the representatives of a definite, prescribed harmonic succession. The chord, as a harmonic compliment, usually stood as a self-contained but dependent unity in relation to the bass, so that in the absence of the real bass the harmony, ideally speaking, is nevertheless felt to be present, and vice versa...Whether the bass line, as a representative of the harmony, is present actually or only ideally in the variations, is completely unimportant.¹¹

While Nelson and Viecenzenz are correct that the function of the bass-line and harmonies intertwine, the continuous plan of the basso ostinato type is sufficiently distinguished from the sectional plan of the constant-harmony type to necessitate separate grouping. Others agree with this position, including Goetschius and Victor Luithlen.¹²

Regardless of its category or label, the basso ostinato was one of the first variation types composed¹³ and continued to enjoy popularity into the twenty-first century. Over

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹

Herbert Viecenzenz, “Über die allgemeinen Grundlagen der Variationskunst, mit besonderer Berücksichtigung Mozarts,” trans. Robert Nelson, *Mozart Jahrbuch* 2 (1924): 199.

¹²

Both provide their reasoning for categorizing the basso ostinato as a distinct variation type in Goetschius, *The Larger Forms of Musical Composition*, 18-58 and Victor Luithlen, “Studie zu Johannes Brahms’ Werken in Variationenform,” *Studien zur Musikwissenschaft* 14 (1927): 286-320.

¹³First known examples date back to the early sixteenth century.

time the basso ostinato has been titled *Ground*, *Folia*, *Bergamasca*, *Passacaglia* or *Chaconne*. Except for the English ground, all are stylized renderings of popular dances. The ground, folia and bergamask enjoyed popularity only through the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, while the passacaglia and chaconne peaked in popularity during the Baroque period and reemerged during the early twentieth century.

The basso ostinato flourished in Elizabethan England with the major composers of the day, Byrd, Bull and Gibbons, composing grounds. All grounds were written in 3/2 time (now translated into 3/4) and were characterized in the early sixteenth century by a two-note, I-V ostinato and in the later part of the century by a longer ostinato pattern, a one to eight measure tonic-producing phrase. Continuity of phrasing was achieved with half cadences in the tonic-requiring type or with upbeats in the tonic-producing type. Despite the continuous plan, distinct sections formed from the appearance of new melodies in the upper voices.

The remaining basso ostinato types are derived from early dance forms: the folia from a Portuguese dance, the bergamasca from an Italian dance, and the passacaglia and chaconne from a mixed Spanish and Italian heritage. While these types can be traced back to early dances, they soon transformed into an instrumental form far removed from the dance. By the sixteenth century, the stock bass lines used for the dance refrains became the 'theme' for a series of variations for guitar, voice or keyboard. By the middle of the Baroque period, the folia and bergamasca had fallen from view, and the passacaglia or

chaconne were the dominate basso ostinato type.

Originally, the Passacaglia and Chaconne were distinct dances; the Passacaglia was written in minor mode and the Chaconne in major mode; the Passacaglia used the harmonic progression i-iv-V, while the chaconne featured a I-V-IV-V progression with a possible vi or iii chord placed before the IV chord. Over time these distinctions blurred to such a degree that during the lifetime of J.S. Bach the titles were interchangeable.¹⁴ What remained was a continuous variation type written in triple meter (usually 3/4) and minor mode¹⁵ with a recurring eight-measure bass-line melody that descended from tonic to dominant.

While most theorists view the Passacaglia and Chaconne as synonymous, Goetschius perceives two marked traits that necessitate distinct categorization. First, Goetschius believes that out of the ostinato chord successions of the Chaconne “emerges a melody, the air or tune of the dance...which in many cases is so definite and lyric as to appear to be the real thematic thread.”¹⁶ This contrasts with the Passacaglia, whose “thematic thread” is found in the bass-line. Secondly, he differentiates between the polyphonic treatment of the Passacaglia and the homophonic treatment of the Chaconne

¹⁴J.S. Bach wrote the *Passacaglia in c minor* for organ and the *Chaconne in d minor* for solo violin.

¹⁵

While the chaconne was written primarily in the minor mode, it was customary for the composer to change to the major mode mid-way through the piece for contrast and then return to the minor mode by the end.

¹⁶Goetschius, *The Larger Forms of Musical Composition*, 40.

with the following words:

It is, however, the polyphonic character of the Passacaglia that distinguishes it from the Chaconne...This distinction in the methods of treatment is the natural consequence of the location of the chief thematic thread: In the Passacaglia it is in the bass, as single tone-line, to which other lines are added, in contrapuntal texture: In the Chaconne it is the soprano, as lyric product of the chords, which induce harmonic manipulation. The Passacaglia is built chiefly from the bottom upward; the Chaconne, from the melody downward.¹⁷

For Goetschius, the contrasts are so marked that he labels the Passacaglia a basso ostinato variation and the Chaconne the “first or lowest grade of the Variation-form”.¹⁸

Goetschius’s assertions will be better addressed during the discussion of the constant-harmony variation.

By the late nineteenth century, composers made less use of stock bass-lines in favor of baroque vocal ostinato. Consequently, variations of this time period were not titled Passacaglia or Chaconne; rather, they were identified by the borrowed basso ostinato.¹⁹ In addition, the late nineteenth-century basso ostinato featured a greater degree of chromaticism in the bass line and harmonies and often placed the ostinato outside of the bass-line. These modifications lent the form the freedom and flexibility lacking in the Baroque model and appealed to the Romantic aesthetic of expression over form.

¹⁷Ibid., 30, 41.

¹⁸Ibid., 41.

¹⁹For example, Liszt’s *Variations and Prelude on J.S. Bach’s “Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen”*.

Constant-Harmony Variations

In this type of variation, the harmonic succession becomes the thematic subject retained throughout the variations. The harmonic subject can be loosely defined as “the salient outline (of the harmonies)...not its literal form.”²⁰ Because they are not literally quoted throughout the variations, the harmonies can be varied with occasional chord substitutions and changes of mode. While the basic harmonic progression is preserved, the melody is altered and/or freely composed. By ceding the constant constructive element to the harmonies and “escaping the melodic control of the theme, the plan becomes a vehicle for variations of unusual flexibility.”²¹

The constant-harmony variation is closely related and often linked to a previously discussed variation type, the basso ostinato variation. In broad terms, both the constant-harmony and basso ostinato variations are *Harmonic Variations*. During the Baroque Period, when the basso ostinato was the favored harmonic variation, the bass-line governed the harmonies as exemplified by the figured bass of the continuo part. With the decline of thoroughbass textures in favor of the homophonic texture prevalent during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, harmony became defined as the chords that accompanied the melody and provided cadential punctuation to delineate phrases. This period produced constant-harmony variations. J.S. Bach’s masterwork, *The Goldberg*

²⁰Nelson, *The Technique of Variation*, 22.

²¹Ibid., 19.

Variations, breaks the mold by being a constant-harmony variation work, written during the Baroque period, that features contrapuntal and imitative (canonic and fugal) writing.

The Chaconne also muddies the water when labeling basso ostinato and constant-harmony variations. Because the Chaconne relies on a series of harmonies and not a bass line, thus suggesting a largely homophonic texture, Goetschius does not classify the Chaconne as a Basso Ostinato, but instead labels it a *Small Variation Form* along with other constant-harmony types. He justifies his classification with Beethoven's 32 *Variations in C minor*. This Beethoven theme and variation features a recurring harmonic progression complete with chaconne dance inflections on the second beat. Since Beethoven titles this a Variation work and not a Chaconne, Goetschius believes that all Chaconnes should be labeled a variation and not a basso ostinato. Goetschius fails to recognize that the sectional construction of the Beethoven variations cannot be reconciled with the normally continuous construction of the basso ostinato type. To label a sectional variation work Chaconne would be to break with tradition. Bach's *Chaconne in D minor for solo violin* is titled Chaconne and categorized as a basso ostinato because of its continuous structure; Beethoven's 32 *Variations in C minor* are called Variations and labeled a constant-harmony type because they follow a sectional plan.

Melodic Variations

Constant-Melody Variations

The constant-melody variation retains the melody in at least one voice while the other voices engage in contrapuntal figuration. Charles Van den Borren describes this technique in the following manner:

The melodic subject submitted to variation maintains its simplicity from one end to the other of the piece; from variation to variation it passes from one voice to another, and each time it is surrounded with fresh figural counterpoints.²²

Though the melody remains relatively unaltered, it is subjected to occasional embellishments and figuration throughout the variations. The most florid figuration and imitation is displayed in the other voices, encouraging a free-harmonic plan throughout the variations.

The polyphonic texture is so compelling that many label this variation type *Polyphonic Variation* or *Cantus Firmus Treatment* as a way of linking it to the broader polyphonic texture and specific cantus firmus technique of the thirteenth and fourteenth century motet and fifteenth century mass.²³ Yet, to label this variation type ‘cantus firmus treatment’ is to pigeon-hole the type to a specific historical instance and to assert that cantus firmus technique and variation technique are synonymous. Further, while great

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Charles Van den Borren, *The Sources of Keyboard Music in England* (London: Novello and Co., Ltd., n.d.), 206.

²³

For an accounting of the term ‘polyphonic technique’ see Ibid. For a definition of the label ‘cantus firmus treatment’ see Nelson, *The Technique of Variation*, 11.

interest lies in the outer figuration, the melody commands the listener's primary attention, especially when placed in the soprano, to an extent that the cantus firmus of previous genres does not. For these reasons, the term *Constant-Melody* will be used to denote variations of this type.

The four-part, polyphonic *Diferencias* (1578) of Antonio de Cabezón are the first known examples of constant-melody variations. Cabezón influenced the English Virginal School, most notably William Byrd, who in turn probably influenced the continental composers J.P Sweelinck and Samuel Scheidt.²⁴ Except for Sweelinck and Scheidt, who wrote both secular variations and liturgical chorale variations, most composers limited their themes to popular, secular songs and dance tunes. All favored a progressive plan of diminution and figuration for the variations. With the rise of the style galant and the decline of polyphony and counterpoint, the constant-melody variation fell from favor.

Melodico-Harmonic Variations

This variation type preserves the melodic, harmonic and structural outline of the theme throughout the variations. It relies heavily on melodic figuration and

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It is well established that Cabezón traveled to England for the marriage of Felipe II of Spain and Mary I of England in 1554. His music and ideas were recognized and celebrated by the English court and public. For an accounting of Byrd's influence and the influence of the English Virginal School on the music of Sweelinck, see Apel, *The History of Keyboard Music to 1700*, 335-337. Sweelinck's variation technique and philosophy were transcribed to the North German School through his student Scheidt. This connection and an elaborate 'family tree' of variation composers is discussed in Nelson, *The Technique of Variation*, 30-31.

ornamentation, and rhythmic development. In most cases, the ordering and development of the variations follow a conventional plan; the variations unfold with progressive rhythmic diminution and animation; since major-key themes are used in most cases, one variation moves to the parallel minor for contrast; an adagio-allegro pair of variations approximates the slow-fast tempo scheme of the second and third movements of classical sonata form; finally, the set often concludes with a cadenza followed by a simple restatement of the theme. The generic plan and melodic figuration characteristic of this variation type account for the large number of improvised Melodico-Harmonic variations.²⁵

Over the years, this variation type has engendered many labels. The labels themselves reflect the importance given to certain constructive elements and reflect the overriding variation technique at work. Among the labels that speak to the constant constructive elements maintained throughout the variations, *Melodic-Outline* and *Melodico-Harmonic* are the most useful.²⁶ While all of the theme's constructive elements, melody, harmony and structure, are maintained throughout the variations, those that prefer the Melodic-Outline designation give more weight to the melody's role, while those who prefer the Melodico-Harmonic label view the melody and harmony as equal in

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The practice of improvising variations will be discussed in more detail in the fifth chapter which covers the Classical Period.

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For a description of the Melodic-Outline label, see Elaine Sisman, *Haydn and the Classical Variation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 66. For a rationale of the Melodico-Harmonic designation, see Nelson, *The Technique of Variation*, 16.

importance. Both assertions are correct; the melodic outline is certainly conspicuous, but the retention of the harmonies differentiates this type from other melodic variations. In order to acknowledge all of the constant elements, the most accurate label would be *Melodic-Harmonic-Structural Outline*. Since this label borders on the absurd, I will refer to this type as Melodico-Harmonic Variations.

The other labels describe the variation technique at work in this variation type. D'Indy's term *Decorative Variation*²⁷, Leichtentritt's *Ornamenting Variation*²⁸ label and Blessinger's *Figural Variation*²⁹ designation all refer to the melodic figuration and ornamentation at work in the variations. Unfortunately, these labels feed into a general criticism leveled at variations of this type. According to Sisman, the prevailing wisdom characterizes ornamental and decorative techniques as “ ‘surface’ features, failing to penetrate and transform the thematic model like ‘deeper’ contrapuntal, characteristic, developmental, or transformational techniques.”³⁰ To embrace these labels would be to judge the variation type superficial since it relies so heavily on these techniques.

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Vincent D'Indy, *Cours de composition musicale*, II., trans. Robert Nelson (Paris: A. Durand et Fils, 1909), 459-462.

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Hugo Leichtentritt, *Musikalische Formenlehre*, III Auflage, trans. Robert Nelson (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1927), 100.

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Karl Blessinger, *Grundzüge der musikalischen Formenlehre*, trans. Robert Nelson (Stuttgart: J. Engelhorn's Nach., n.d.), 137-142.

³⁰Sisman, *Haydn and the Classical Variation*, 1-2.

Just as the labels help to describe this variation type, the style of the variations themselves helps to pinpoint the historical period that idealized this variation type. The variation's stylistic qualities epitomized the Classical aesthetic: a homophonic texture in which the harmony is subordinate to the melody and the phrase structure is symmetrical and periodic. In fact, the Melodico-Harmonic variation was the dominant variation type written from the Classical Period through the early nineteenth century, with all of the major composers of the time, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Weber and Mendelssohn writing Melodico-Harmonic variations.

Unfortunately, between 1790 and 1840, too many lesser composers, virtuosos and amateurs also wrote Melodico-Harmonic variations, causing a reaction against these "brilliant but shallow variations"³¹ that Momigny called "much speech but little sense."³² M. de Fontenelle aptly described the variation-malaise:

Augmenting in number every day, not a theme is suffered to escape which offers the slightest appearance of a melody; it is seized upon with eagerness by composers of every description, and not an air from "*God Save the King*" down to the newest French quadrille can now aspire to be unvaried...³³

Leichtentritt agrees with the sentiment behind Fontenelle's lament and admonishes:

There is danger that this variation method, if not employed with outstanding taste and skill, will degenerate into a superficial tinkling, a virtuoso display of brilliant fireworks, without content. Actually, this tendency finally led to the fashionable salon variations of the nineteenth century (Herz, Hunten, Kalkbrenner, and others), to a low watermark, which scarcely bears

³¹Nelson, *Technique of Variation*, 18.

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Jerome-Joseph de Momigny, *Encyclopédie méthodique: musique*, II (Paris: 1818; rpt. New York, 1971), s.v. "Variations."

³³

The Monthly Magazine of Music, I January 1823, quoted in Arthur Loesser, *Men, Women, and Pianos: A Social History* (New York: Dover, 1990), 290.

relation to true art.³⁴

Despite the uneven quality of some variations of this time, in the hands of great composers this variation type rightly deserves praise.

Nineteenth-Century Character Variations

To some, the label *Nineteenth-Century Character Variation* denotes a specific type.³⁵ For most, it is a broad term that encompasses many variation types that share the same aesthetic goal: character change.³⁶ Though these variation types are bound by the same aesthetic, they are distinguished by the specific technique used to create the subsequent degree of character change in the variations. A brief discussion of these means and the resultant character change will elucidate the specific types that are grouped under the larger *Nineteenth-Century Character Variation* umbrella.

All types of character variations alter the expressive constructs of the theme (rhythm, dynamics, meter, tempo, register and color) to create new characters in the variations. The more conservative type of character variation, *Formal-Outline Variation*, relies on motivic development and the preservation of the barest structural constructs to

³⁴Leichtentritt, *Musikalische Formenlehre*, 100.

³⁵Nelson, *The Technique of Variation*, 90-93.

³⁶

For a discussion of the broad label 'character variation', see *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, s.v. "Variations", 288-289 and Sisman, *Haydn and the Classical Variation*, 67. For a distinction between formal and character variations, see Adolph Bernhard Marx, *Die Lehre von der musikalischen Composition*, 4 vols. (Leipzig, 1837-1847), III, 2nd ed. (1848), 59-93.

create ‘characteristic variations’: for example, alla marcia, menuetto, gigue, siciliana, or scherzo. The more experimental type of character variation, *Fantasy/Free Variation*, ignores the formal constructs of the theme and uses thematic transformation and leitmotifs to depict a program.

Though the discussion of character is usually limited to pieces of the nineteenth century, it does not follow logically that seventeenth and eighteenth century composers were unconcerned with creating character in their works. In fact, composers of these eras strove for contrast and character in their variations but did so as a secondary consideration. Their primary concern was the retention and alteration of the more formal constructions of the theme: melody, harmony and form. Despite this, Schoenberg contends that “there is no reason to suppose that formal variations can be so formal as not to possess character.”³⁷

With this in mind, Baroque and Classical composers altered the expressive constructs that were in keeping with the aesthetic of their respective historical periods. Baroque composers achieved character change primarily through the localized alteration of rhythm and tempo. Classical composers continued to rely on contrasting tempi (the adagio-allegro variation pair) and rhythmic figuration and added changes of color (the minor variation) and dynamics to their arsenal. Romantic composers utilized these same

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Arnold Schoenberg, *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*, ed. Gerald Strang (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1967), 172.

techniques but did so on a larger scale. To these techniques they added change of register, tone color, texture (homophony versus polyphony), and harmonic color (diatonic versus chromatic). With such a wide array of character-altering devices at their disposal, it seems logical for nineteenth century composers to choose one of the Character Variation models as their vehicle for variation writing.

Formal-Outline Variations

Variation types have been defined previously by their constants. Unlike previous types, ‘Character Variations’ are labeled as such for their altered expressive constructs, since very few, if any, constructive elements are retained. The Formal-Outline, a type of ‘Character Variation’, distinguishes itself among other variations of this type by retaining some structural aspects of the theme: namely, the head motives and ending cadences. Other constructive elements of the theme, its melody and harmony, are subject to variation and motivic development that, depending on the degree of alteration, can render them unrecognizable.

Prior to the nineteenth century, composers limited variation technique to either the contrapuntal and imitative techniques associated with the Baroque period or the decorative and ornamental figuration common during the Classical period. Nineteenth century Romantic composers paved a third way, “*thematische Arbeit*,” wherein small motives of the theme were developed and reshaped from within rather than embellished

and varied on the surface.³⁸ The most common type of motivic development, embellishment, is a standard variation technique common to all previous variation types. Formal-Outline variations rely on the more complex forms of motivic development that are achieved through rhythmic transformation: simplification, reduction, expansion and change of meter.³⁹

Fantasy/Free Variations

Fantasy, or Free Variations alter everything: expressive constructs, melody, harmony, and even structure. In fact, this type inherited its name from the free form of the fantasy genre, where “the imagination of the composer takes precedence over conventional styles and forms.”⁴⁰ In variation form, this freedom manifests itself in loosely formed, often continuous variations where “there are few easily recognized indications of where one variation ends and another begins.”⁴¹ H.C. Colles used the term “rhapsodic” to characterize the lack of form.⁴²

Since the variations are not governed by the theme’s constructions or form, the

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For a definition of ‘thematische Arbeit’, see Nelson, *The Technique of Variation*, 96. For a comparison of embellishment and motivic development, see Sisman, *Haydn and the Classical Variation*, 1-2.

³⁹Nelson, *The Technique of Variation*, 96-102.

⁴⁰*Norton/Grove Concise Encyclopedia of Music*, 1988 ed., s.v. “Fantasia.”

⁴¹Nelson, *The Technique of Variation*, 112.

⁴²*Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 4th ed., s.v. “Variations,” by H.C. Colles.

program and ‘characters’, sometimes depicted by leitmotif, become the formative basis of the variations. A composer’s primary tool in creating and sustaining programmatic works and leitmotif is thematic transformation. Just like the *idée fixe* of Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique* and the leitmotif of Wagner’s operas and Strauss’ symphonic poems, this programmatic variation type relies on transforming the theme “so that in a new context it is different and yet manifestly made of the same elements.”⁴³ Thematic transformation has no real precedent in variation writing up until this time. Composers of this type, Franck, d’Indy, Strauss and Elgar, did not look back to previous variation types for their model but looked to the symphonic works of Berlioz and Liszt for inspiration. It is no surprise then, that the majority of fantasy/free variations were written for orchestra and not for the piano.⁴⁴ Examples of fantasy/free variations written for piano include Anton Dvorak’s *Pianoforte Variations*, Op. 36; Alexander Glazounov’s *Pianoforte Variations*, Op. 72; and Sergei Rachmaminoff’s *Variations on a Theme of Chopin*, Op. 42.

The Fantasy/Free variation stretches the idea of character and expression to the level of program. In doing so, the theme’s form and structure are abandoned in favor of drama, color, virtuosity, and an “untrammelled development of the theme material.”⁴⁵

⁴³Norton/Grove *Concise Encyclopedia of Music*, s.v. “Transformation, Thematic.”

⁴⁴

Previously, independent variation sets were confined to the solo instrumental repertoire. Variations written for orchestra were almost always part of a large multi-movement work. The most famous and still regularly programmed orchestral free variations include Cesar Franck’s *Variations symphoniques*, Edward Elgar’s *Enigma Variations*, and Richard Strauss’ *Don Quixote*. See Nelson, *The Technique of Variation*, 112-116.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 120.

Serial Variations

Generally speaking, *Serial Variations* manipulate a twelve-tone theme whose structure remains intact. Most serial pieces could be classified as Melodic and Harmonic Variations since the 12-tone row can be melodically and harmonically varied and manipulated. However, Serial Variations are distinguished from other serial pieces by their constant structural reference to the theme. Thus serial variations manipulate and vary a theme (based on a twelve-tone row), while serial pieces manipulate and vary a row.

Despite this important distinction, variation techniques are congruous with serial techniques. In essence, variation technique is the altering of a musical idea. In the case of serial techniques, the musical idea being altered is a twelve-tone row or other series with specific rules governing its manipulation. (The sequence of the row must be maintained, though repeated notes and octave displacement are permitted.) Serial techniques include retrograde, inversion, transposition and combinatoriality. Though many of these techniques are specific to twelve-tone music, they are similar to more traditional variation techniques previously discussed: namely, motivic development and thematic transformation.

In fact, Schoenberg coined the term *Developing Variation* in his work to mean “the endless shaping of a basic shape by thematic regeneration.”⁴⁶ Webern elaborated on

⁴⁶*New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, s.v. “Variations,” by Elaine Sisman, 288.

Schoenberg's concept of basic shape renaming it *Gestalt*. Webern argues:

Musical variation assumes a pre-formed Gestalt that is varied. This Gestalt bears its own fixed ordering of tones. It is complete, not arising as the inevitable outcome of an idea for a specific arrangement of tones...In the 'variation', however, it is not a question of the to-be-varied (*das Variierende*), but rather of the varying (*das Variieren*).⁴⁷

Though these principles are applied to serial music in general, they still bear a tangible connection to variation forms of previous generations.

Since Serial Variations are governed by the strictures of twelve-tone music, it follows that the majority of serial variations would be written by composers who subscribed to this methodology. This includes, of course, the Second Viennese School (Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern) and their followers, Babbitt, Boulez and Stockhausen. At this juncture, the terms *serial*, *twelve-tone* and *serialism* must be clarified. The term serial refers to the ordering of a fixed series. Twelve-tone music arranges the twelve semi-tones of an octave into a fixed series, or row. The term serialism refers to a method "in which the order of occurrences in several dimensions of a work are controlled or coordinated by predetermined series."⁴⁸ Schoenberg, Berg and Webern limited their attention to pitch (twelve-tone); later composers, inspired by Messiaen,⁴⁹ broadened the serial elements of a piece to include duration, dynamics and attack as well as pitch (serialism). For the purposes of this discussion, both types of variations, twelve-tone and serial, are considered serial variation.

⁴⁷Ibid., 321.

⁴⁸Bryan R. Simms, *Music of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1986), 239.

⁴⁹Many were influenced by Messiaen's piano work *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités* (1949).

Other Variation Classifications

That concludes the list of specific variation types and the discussion of their formal plan, distinguishing characteristics and historical context. Of course, intuitively one knows that the classification of music is not an exact science, and as a result, some compositions will not easily conform to a specific variation type because they may not adhere to a single plan. Nelson asks this question: “Did the composers of the past, as they prepared to write variations, resolve to build a set entirely upon a single plan or did they rather decide to construct variation I according to one plan, variation II according to another plan, and variation III according to a third?”⁵⁰ After reviewing the vast variation repertoire, Nelson concludes that the preponderance of variation sets conform to an overriding plan, though some individual variations within a set branch out from the others and are guided by a different plan.⁵¹ Despite the occasional detours, these variation sets can still be classified by the overriding plan used.

Hybrid Variations

A small group of variation sets do not adhere to an overriding plan, and instead draw from multiple plans for each variation. These sets are called *Hybrid Variations*. Hybrid Variations are not characterized by a lack of organization, as with Fantasy/Free

⁵⁰Nelson, *The Technique of Variation*, 12.

⁵¹*Ibid.*

Variations, but by the presence of many organizing principles. No overriding plan emerges from the individual plans of the variations. Examples from the piano repertoire of Hybrid Variations include Haydn's *Variations in F minor* and Copland's *Piano Variations*. With variations of this type, it is most useful to analyze each variation separately and speak of the variation type at work in the individual variations. Thus, the aforementioned variation types are still relevant to a variation by variation analysis of Hybrid Variation sets.

Chapter III Variation Writing for Keyboard during the Renaissance (1500-1620)

“If all other remains of the period were destroyed, it would be possible to rewrite the history of music from 1550-1620 on the material which we have in the Fitzwilliam Book alone.”¹

In the previous chapter, I categorized the different variation types according to the governing principles of retention and alteration. Although some historical context was offered in the previous chapter, I believe the history of variation writing merits greater attention and consideration. In the following chapters, I will provide an historical overview of variation form through the analysis of selected keyboard works, in order to illustrate the myriad of compositional techniques used by composers of the Renaissance, Baroque, Classical, Romantic, and Contemporary periods.

I will begin with the later part of the Renaissance period, from 1500-1620. During this period of time, instrumental writing and keyboard writing in particular grew exponentially. An increase in keyboard writing fostered the development of new instrumental forms, among them variation form. In Spain, England, and to a lesser extent Italy, variation form was cultivated and elevated to a high level of artistry. Although many first-rate Italian composers wrote variations, the form did not engender a school of writing to the extent present in Spain and England. For this reason, I will discuss variation form in Italy as it pertains to the overall lineage of the form in the next chapter. In this chapter, I will explore the origins of variation form in Spain and trace its

¹E.W. Naylor, *An Elizabethan Virginal Book* (New York: J.M. Dent and Co., 1905), 4.

development and eventual flowering in England.

Spanish *Diferencias*

Less is known about the origins of variation form than about any other form in music.² The Spanish keyboard and lute pieces titled *diferencias* are the earliest known examples of variation form. The earliest surviving examples date back to the 1500's. While these pieces serve as the first historically documented examples of variation form, a persuasive argument can be made that these pieces were not the Spanish composers' first attempts at variation writing. Willi Apel argues that these early pieces already exhibit the characteristics of a full-fledged genre. Rarely in music do composers perfect and codify an entirely new genre in the first few attempts. The fact that these pieces exhibit such a high degree of artistry and originality suggests that earlier attempts were made. With no earlier examples available for study, one can only speculate as to the variation form's "early evolution."³

What is known about the Spanish variation form has been extrapolated from the works of Antonio de Cabezón (1510-1566). Cabezón was appointed to the position of court organist during the reign of Philip II. His works were published by his son in a collection titled *Obras de Música*. His best works, and thus most often performed, are

²Apel, *The History of Keyboard Music to 1700*, 262.

³Ibid.

Diferencias sobre la pavana italiana, Diferencias sobre la dama le damanda, and *Diferencias sobre el canto llano del caballero*. According to Apel, these works prove their musical worth “...because of their wealth of invention, their mastery of form, and a spiritual beauty yielded by consummate clarity and seriousness of purpose.”⁴

Upon studying Cabezón’s works published in the *Obras de Música*, one finds certain characteristics. For example, most of his *diferencias* made use of popular tunes such as *las vacas*, *conde claros*, and a pavane tune that resembled the seventeenth-century *folia*. Since it was assumed that the tune being varied was well known, Cabezón left out an initial statement of the theme and started the piece with the first variation. Variations were often connected by transitions resulting in a seamless, unified whole. Cabezón’s variations were distinguished by their noble, austere, and reserved character.

In addition to establishing him as “father” of the variation genre, Cabezón’s works comment on the status and use of keyboard instruments during this period. In his lifetime, stringed keyboard instruments were not viewed as a separate class of instrument. Reflecting this reality, Cabezón included the words *tecla* (keyboard), *arpa* (harp), and *vihuela* (guitar) in his title pages, though he gave no indication as to which instrument was most appropriate for a given piece. A performer of the time was left to ruminate over which instrument was most appropriate. Easier pieces that avoid overtly technical writing could be played on the lute, harp, or guitar, while those works that demand virtuosity

⁴Willi Apel, *Early European Keyboard Music*, vol. 3 (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1989), 56.

would be feasible on the harpsichord. The ascendancy of keyboard instruments, and the harpsichord in particular, as the primary solo instruments would be established by later composers.

From Spain and Antonio Cabezón, the variation form migrated to England. As discussed in the previous chapter, Cabezón traveled to England for the marriage of Philip II and Mary I in 1554. As a musician of the royal court, Cabezón accompanied the entourage and no doubt performed his compositions for Mary's court. Perhaps as a result of Cabezón's direct contact with English society, the musical style of the two countries followed a similar path. For instance, both Spanish and English music stressed an instrumental character over the vocal model preferred in the Italian, French and German styles. In addition, both countries preferred solo instrumental writing as opposed to chamber writing, and both elevated the variation form to a high level of artistry. While many similarities can be drawn between Spanish and English music of this period, a fundamental difference existed between the noble and austere character of Spanish music and the effervescent, gay character of English music.

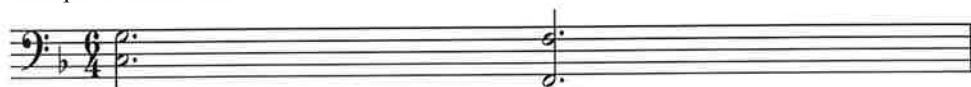
Hugh Aston's *Hornepype*

While there is no doubt that the Spanish lute and keyboard music of Cabezón influenced the burgeoning English music scene, William Byrd, Thomas Tallis, and Thomas Tomkins, the first generation of English Vignalists, could also look to Hugh

Aston, one of their own, to see the possibilities this new form could offer. While little is known about the life and music of the English composer Hugh Aston, his ground *Hornepype*, which dates back to 1525⁵, is the earliest known example of English harpsichord music. Apel ranks the piece with the best of the keyboard literature saying it “...is one of the most extraordinary pieces in the entire literature of keyboard music.”⁶ Apel attributes the success of the variation to its simple harmonic scheme, rich melodies, and structural arch.

The simple harmonic scheme used in *Hornepype* is actually a ground bass whose harmonic progression oscillates between the dominant and tonic. (Ex. 1)

Example I: Ground Bass



This one-measure harmonic progression becomes the “theme”, or constant, that is continuously regenerated throughout the subsequent “variations.” Since variation types are defined by their constants, *Hornepype* is classified a *Basso Ostinato* variation type.

In addition to its recurring bass harmonies and continuous form, the melodic plan

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The actual date of the composition is unknown. The British Museum where it is stored, dates the composition *circa* 1525.

⁶Willi Apel, *Masters of the Keyboard* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947), 57.

of this piece is in keeping with other basso ostinato variations. As discussed in the previous chapter, the melodic plan of the basso ostinato variation is allowed considerable freedom to develop and introduce new material throughout the variations because the constant bass, not the melody, unifies the variations. Aston takes full advantage of the melodic freedom afforded this variation type by introducing no less than five new and contrasting melodies. Some are lyrical and vocal in quality; some are dance-like in character; while others are purely instrumental in conception with broken chord arpeggiation and wide leaps. (Ex. 2)

Example 2a: vocal melody

Example 2b: dance melody

Example 2c: instrumental

Despite the continuous nature of the ground bass, the distinct character and make-up of the individual melodies separate the piece into distinct sections. Though Aston did not indicate a starting tempo, nor any tempo disparities between the melodically articulated sections, Apel includes editorialized tempo markings that logically fit the character and mood implied by each melody. When followed, these tempo markings help create a meaningful connection between the sections that results in an over-arching structure.

The opening Lento tempo marking suits the idyllic, lyrical melody and serves as a gentle introduction to the rambunctiousness that follows. After the slow introduction, the lively dance begins at an Allegro molto moderato pace (m. 12) only to be urged on in a poco piu mosso transition (m. 24) till it arrives at its full Allegro speed. (m. 36) The climax, with its hemiola figures and progressively larger leaps that eventually reach an interval of a thirteenth, resembles a “pyrotechnical display.”⁷ After reaching the summit, the melody surges downward in a cascade of running sixteenth notes that froth with sudden changes in direction. When the passage work has run its course, Apel indicates a gradual slowing of the pace with meno allegro and moderato tempo marks. For a brief moment, approximately five measures, the piece ends with the opening melodic languor found in the introduction.

When tallied up, the *Hornepype* lasts one hundred and eighteen measures, an

⁷Ibid., 61.

unheard of length for an early sixteenth-century instrumental work.⁸ What is more astonishing is the fact that its length is the result of organic growth rather than restatement. Going beyond mere restatement, Aston achieves organic growth through rhythmic and motivic development. For example, two seemingly unimportant motivic ideas that are introduced in the opening eleven bars recur in multiple new guises. The dotted quartet-note motive (Ex. 3) first appears as the tapered ending of phrases. Later in the piece, it becomes the dance's primary rhythmic motive expressed as a dotted quarter-note and a dotted eighth-note figure.



Likewise, a seemingly trivial embellishment (Ex. 4) is later both inverted and transformed into the hemiola sequence that propels the piece to its climactic release.



⁸Ibid., 60.

From such a simple foundation, a one-measure ground bass, Aston erects a cathedral, complete with soaring, dancing and leaping melodies that organically build to a fevered pitch and calm down only after the adrenaline has run its course. Such a piece is rare in any century.

English Virginal School

With the passing of time comes perspective. Four hundred years after the fact, it is clear that the apex of English keyboard writing known as the English Virginal School owed its success to four factors that converged upon Elizabethan England. Two have already been discussed: the influence of the Spanish lute and keyboard works of Cabezón and the presence of a “home-grown” musical mentor, Aston. The remaining ingredients that account for the flowering of English music during the Renaissance are the wealth of popular folk tunes that pervaded English society and the singular genius of William Byrd.

The prevalence of popular folk tunes in English society was not incidental. Instead, it resulted from a conscious effort on the part of the royal Tudors and their courtiers to finance and encourage music on a large scale. This philanthropic attitude was started by Henry the VI and VIII, who performed and composed music with reported competency. Henry VIII encouraged both of his daughters, Mary and Elizabeth, in their musical studies and employed sixty to seventy musicians to entertain his court⁹. In a

⁹Bruce Pattison, *Music and Poetry of the English Renaissance* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 3.

society where the king set the standard, the nobility followed suit and employed musicians as a part of their household and took a great interest in music. Society's interest in music had reached such a critical mass that the ability to sing and play an instrument was a requisite skill of young ladies, and gentlemen were expected to be fluent in music and literature so as to "...demonstrate good taste".¹⁰

While the patronage of music and musicians was seen as the primary role and obligation of the nobility, the general populace supplied the upper classes with the popular tunes and "ditties" that eventually made their way into "serious" music. Most of the popular tunes were connected in some way to labor or trade. For example, the watchman called the hours with a tune; horses responded to the carman's whistle; and the milkmaids cajoled milk from the cows with a "rhythmical ditty."¹¹ These tunes became the basis for such variations as "The Carman's Whistle," "A Belman's Song" and the "Farmer's Pavan." Popular tunes had pervaded English society to such a degree that many were alluded to or directly quoted in the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.¹² This was the musical heritage that William Byrd inherited.

William Byrd (1542-1623) studied with Thomas Tallis, the musical leader of the

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., 13.

¹²

Many popular songs were directly referenced in plays of Shakespeare, including Walsingham (*Hamlet*), Fortune (*Merry Wives*), Robin (*Hamlet*), O Mistress Mine (*Twelfth Night*), and Callino Casturame (*Henry V*). For a discussion of the songs referenced in these plays, see Naylor, *An Elizabethan Virginal Book*, 87-89.

Reformation Church. His many talents as a composer and performer led to a position as organist of the Chapel Royal. He channeled his harpsichord writing into variations based on popular songs and dances like the pavane and galliard. A prolific composer, he wrote one hundred and thirty variations, forty of which were compiled in *My Lady Nevell's Book* (1591) and twenty-six of which were collected in the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book* (1600-1620). Commenting on Byrd's contribution to the English Virginal School, Apel stated that he "...transformed the tradition from the depths of his own creative power, and created such a new life for it that the historical context is without significance and only the creative process is essential."¹³

Through the composition of these works, Byrd established an idiomatic harpsichord style separate from organ and vocal models. His compositions featured rapid scales, broken chord figures, repeated notes, florid bass passages, and parallel thirds and sixths. "Modern" traits such as diatonic writing (in lieu of modes and hexachords), primary triads (such as tonic, dominant and subdominant), periodic structure, and binary form characterized his music. For his variation sets, Byrd favored a constant-melody variation technique surrounded by figural counterpoint and imitation. The unfolding of his variations followed a generic plan of progressive animation that unified and gave direction to the variations. Byrd's variation set, *The Carman's Whistle*, exemplified his idiomatic harpsichord style and variation technique.

¹³Apel, *The History of Keyboard Music to 1700*, 278.

The Carman's Whistle is a constant-melody variation type resplendent with figuration, motivic imitation, and florid bass lines. The degree of figuration present in the variations is staggering. Ornamentation, the primary method of figuration, abounds. At first glance, not a melody note is left that is not ornamented in some way. The two most common ornaments indicate a slide upward of a third and either a pralltiller or mordent. Since the overwhelming majority of ornaments in *The Carman's Whistle* are of the second variety, the choice of pralltriller or mordent depends on the melodic context and the interpretation of the performer.

When playing this work on the piano¹⁴, the seemingly excessive ornamentation becomes one of the major technical obstacles a performer must overcome. The slower and heavier action of the piano does not facilitate quick trills like the light, quick action of the harpsichord. Additionally, the pianist must go to great length to ensure that the ornaments do not disrupt the melodic line and contour of the phrase. Though some of the sparkling quality of the harpsichord is lost on the piano, the singing, rich quality of the piano's sound makes transplanting these pieces to the piano worthwhile.

The other forms of figuration, passing tones, scale fragments and broken triads, are less noticeable than the ornamentation but nonetheless play a crucial role embellishing the melody and filling out the texture. For example, Byrd fills in the leaping

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The Carman's Whistle and all other variations written during the period from the 1500's to the 1620's were intended to be played on the virginal, an English harpsichord.

third motive of the theme in variation two with passing notes. (Ex. 5)



To inject more interest into the inner voices, Byrd often intersperses short bursts of scale fragments, transforming the otherwise mundane accompaniment role of the inner voice parts. Variation five offers the best example of this technique. (Ex. 6)



Broken triad figuration provides rhythmic support and adds complexity to the harmony.

In addition, broken triad figuration sustains the short-lived sound of the harpsichord while the sound of blocked chords decays immediately after being struck. Examples of this technique are found in variation three and four. (Ex. 7)

Example 7:



One form of figuration, motivic imitation, goes beyond mere embellishment to add depth and substance to the contrapuntal texture. Apel distinguishes between the paired imitation among two voices, labeled “complementary motifs,” and the free and irregular imitation in all voice parts, labeled “imitative motifs.”¹⁵ This distinction clarifies any analysis and discussion of the contrapuntal techniques at work in a composition and will be used in the discussion of *The Carman’s Whistle*. The following examples, taken from the theme and third variation, are complementary motifs and illustrate paired imitation. (Ex. 8)

Example 8: theme



While imitative motifs appear frequently in all of the variations, Byrd’s systematic use of the technique in the sixth variation goes beyond casual or incidental imitation. (Ex. 9)

¹⁵Ibid., 282.

Example 9:
Var. 6 1

The imitative entrances are so compelling that the main tune of the set, though still present, is relegated to the background.

Another contrapuntal technique found in *The Carman's Whistle* is florid bass. In Byrd's capable hands, the bass is transformed into an independent melodic line that at times rivals the main tune in terms of the interest it garners. In variations five and eight, the fast-changing harmonies of the florid bass replace the slower moving harmonies and "filler" notes of the previous variations creating a sense of animation and activity. (Ex. 10)

Example 10:
Var. 8 1

In addition, the omission of "filler notes" pares the texture down to two voices: melody and florid bass. Though the texture is somewhat sparse, the change in texture infuses variety into the set by recasting the theme in a new and different light.

Upon sifting through the numerous variation sets written by Byrd, a general plan for the unfolding of the variations emerges. Since it was assumed that the tune being varied was familiar to his audience, Byrd skips a straightforward presentation of the theme and begins with the first variation. Generally speaking, the first three or four variations are meant to “...serve as a quiet introduction.”¹⁶ To this end, Byrd endeavors to maintain the same character and feel among the early variations by limiting how much of the theme is varied. His mantra in these early variations seems to be “keep it simple and keep it similar.” After the audience has been gently introduced and is at ease with his variations, Byrd opens the floodgates, constantly altering the character of the variations through “color play”¹⁷, imitation, and florid bass. Byrd saves the fireworks for the last variation, often favoring a full chordal texture with the theme tucked away in a lower voice. *The Carman’s Whistle* follows Byrd’s general plan to the letter, including the vibrant, gay, and festive romp of the final variation. (Ex. 11)



¹⁶Ibid., 283.

¹⁷Ibid.

The success of *The Carman's Whistle* and other variation sets written by Byrd, Bull Gibbons and Farnaby can be attributed to their addicting folk tunes and brilliant figuration. I do not use the term “addicting” lightly; after sight-reading *The Carman's Whistle* I found myself humming the tune for days. The folk tunes of the English Renaissance are infused with a carefree and optimistic spirit that strikes a chord with my emotions. Recognizing that a light-hearted tune is only the starting point for a successful variation set, Byrd and his contemporaries surround their tunes with brilliant figuration and inventive and clever counterpoint. With all of the imitation and figuration spread throughout the voice parts, my hands feel as if they are conducting a small chamber ensemble, not playing a keyboard variation. The variations written by the English Virginal School satisfy the emotions and the intellect; the light-hearted tunes speak to the sensibilities while the counterpoint gratifies the mind.

Chapter IV Variation Writing for Keyboard during the Baroque Period (1600-1750)

“The repeated bass formula represents...a moment that is timeless...never changing, yet extending to infinity like parallel reflecting mirrors.”¹

The keyboard variation thrived during the Baroque period. Every major composer of this period took up variation writing. Along with the suite and the fugue, the variation was the most universally used keyboard genre of the period.² While the suite glorified Baroque dance, and the fugue represented the culmination of imitative technique, variation form united two disparate principles, repetition and change, and allowed the composer infinite freedom to express himself within defined parameters. During the course of this chapter, I will trace the diffusion of variation form during this period, categorize its repertoire, and illustrate Baroque style and variation technique through the analysis of François Couperin’s basso ostinato work *Les Folies Françaises, ou les Dominos*.

Lineage of the Baroque Variation

The diffusion of variation form throughout Europe during the seventeenth century resembles a complicated family tree. From its nascent beginnings in Spain, the form was exported to England and Italy during the late Renaissance. By the 1650s, composers from

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Alexander Silbiger, *The Keyboard in Baroque Europe*, ed. Christopher Hogwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 18.

²See Gillespie, *Five Centuries of Keyboard Music*, p. 45.

every nation in Continental Europe were writing variations, making the form one of the most widely written genres of the period. Variation form's transformation from its relatively isolated use in Spain and England to its widespread use throughout Europe can be traced to two key figures: J.P. Sweelinck (1562-1621) and Girolamo Frescobaldi (1583-1644).

The first branch of the “family tree” can be traced from Spain to England, from England to the Netherlands, and from the Netherlands to Northern Germany. As discussed in the previous chapter, the *diferencias* of Cabezón and other Spanish composers paved the way for the English Virginal School and the variations of Byrd, Gibbons and Farnaby. J.P. Sweelinck, impressed by the florid figuration and imitation of the English Virginal music, introduced the English style of variation writing to his native Netherlands and later to Northern Germany through his pupil Samuel Scheidt (1587-1654). Through Scheidt, Sweelinck influenced a new generation of German composers and helped firmly establish a Northern German School of composition that was eventually inherited by C.P.E. Bach during the second half of the eighteenth century.

A second branch of the variation “family tree” can be traced from Spain to Italy and from Italy to Southern Germany and France. Much of the previous chapter was spent discussing the connection between Spain and the English Virginal School with only a cursory mention of the Spanish-Italian connection. This was in part due to the fact that no extensive school of variation writing emerged in Italy. Italian composers who wrote

keyboard variations (titled *partite*) on secular songs and dances were limited to a few isolated and obscure figures: namely, Antonio Valente (late 16th century), G.M. Trabaci (early 17th century) and Ascanio Mayone (early 17th century). The development of the Italian variation would have to wait for the next generation of composers, including Frescobaldi and his students, to realize the full potential of this new genre.

Frescobaldi infused his *partite* with the “...greater complexity and elaborateness” of the emerging *stile moderno*.³ His keyboard variations emphasized complex figuration, irregular rhythms with sudden changes and syncopations, and a major/minor tonality liberally sprinkled with chromaticism. In comparing Frescobaldi’s variations to those of the English school, Robert Nelson comments: “For the folk spirit of the English pieces, they (his pieces) substitute a refined complexity which, although bordering at times upon the bizarre, is always polished and suave.”⁴

Although the importance and quality of his works in and of itself should establish Frescobaldi’s place in variation history, he is more often remembered for his student J.J. Froberger (1616-1667) who brought the variation form to Southern Germany. By way of Frescobaldi and his student Froberger, a long line of German variation composers can be linked: H.F. Biber (1644-1704), Johann Krieger (1649-1725), Johann Pachelbel (1653-1706), G.F. Handel (1685-1759) and J.S. Bach (1685-1750). These later generations of

³Nelson, *The Technique of Variation*, p. 30.

⁴Ibid.

German composers advanced variation writing beyond what the Spanish and English ever conceived and in effect shifted the center of variation writing during the Baroque period from Spain and England to Germany.

Although Germany benefited most from the exportation of the Italian variation, France was also influenced by the Italian models. During the Baroque period, the French limited their variation writing mostly to basso ostinato types whose stock bass lines were borrowed from the Italian dances and compositions of Frescobaldi and Arcangelo Corelli (1653-1713). Louis Couperin (1626-1661), Jean-Henry d'Anglebert (1628-1691) and François Couperin *le Grand* (1668-1733) were responsible for the majority of French variations written during the Baroque period, though this genre made up only a small fraction of their total compositional output. Throughout this period, the French were the least interested of all the Europeans in the variation genre. Since their musical and cultural aesthetic was determined by the French king, Louis XIV, few “foreign” innovations penetrated musical society. Instead, the “sun king” encouraged a French view of arts and music that centered around the ballet, opera (tragédie lyrique), the rondeau and other dances.

Variation Categories

Regardless of nationality, Baroque composers limited their variation writing to three broad types: namely, the song variation, chorale variation and basso ostinato. The

distinctions in type were based on the thematic material, its derivation and its form. The *Song Variation* loosely describes all variations whose themes were derived from a secular song, whether borrowed or originally conceived. *Chorale Variations* used sacred plain-song hymns or Protestant Chorales as the basis for the theme. *Basso Ostinato* variations, a type discussed in the second chapter, featured a recurring bass-line theme. Each type allowed for varying degrees of flexibility, giving composers the leeway to mold the variation form so as to express their personal style and national aesthetic.

Of the three types, the song variation and the basso ostinato variation were the most widely written during this period. The song variation was the most flexible type, requiring a composer only to use a secular song for the theme. What type of song or what variation technique used was left up to the composer. If the flexibility inherent to the song variation accounted for its popularity, then it was paradoxically the basso ostinato's rigid eight-bar thematic structure that appealed to many baroque composers. Perhaps composers of the time were challenged by the discipline required to "grow" a piece from an eight-measure recycled bass line. Whatever their reasons, composers of all nationalities composed basso ostinato variations.

Unlike the broad-based popularity of the basso ostinato form, the chorale variation's use was limited mostly to Germany. Since many German composers earned their living as organists for Protestant churches, they wrote chorale variations on a regular basis to use as service music. The Protestant element of this type forestalled any Roman

Catholic French, Italian, or Flemish composers from writing chorale variations. Although the chorale variations were the least prevalent of the three types during the Baroque period, they constituted a considerable portion of the baroque organ repertoire and held a prominent place in the output of many German composers.

At this time, I will discuss in depth each variation type, shedding light on the regional distinctions of aesthetic and style and listing the composers and their works that best exemplify each type.

Song Variations

To be classified a song variation, a secular song must be used as the theme. Since that was the only prerequisite, this variation type offered composers the most freedom to choose their theme and the appropriate variation technique to vary it. As a result, the pieces of this type demonstrate the breadth of variation writing during the Baroque period.

Although composers were free to choose a song theme of their liking, they still trended toward specific song types. Before 1650, the majority of songs varied were taken from popular society and culture. Popular songs most often dealt with love, nature, labor, or humor. The popular song accounted for the majority of variations written by the English Virginalists, Frescobaldi and Scheidt. After 1650, composers tended to title their

works “aria” or “air.” These themes could still be taken from popular songs, but more often than not, they were tunes written by other composers or originally conceived. It should be mentioned that during this period the term “aria” did not refer to an operatic song but was used as a generic word for song. Later, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, operatic arias would be used as the themes for variations, but composers of the Baroque period refrained from the practice.

After choosing the theme, the composer set out to vary it. Three basic variation techniques were at their disposal: constant-melody, melodico-harmonic, and constant-harmony. In theory, composers were free to choose the technique that best served the theme. In reality, they chose the technique that reflected the prevailing style of the times. For instance, the constant-melody technique demanded considerable figuration, counterpoint and imitation. This style was better suited to composers of the late Renaissance and early Baroque periods. Subsequently, pivotal composers⁵ such as Orlando Gibbons (1583-1625), Thomas Tomkins (1572-1656), J.P. Sweelinck (1562-1621) and Samuel Scheidt (1587-1654) continued to vary their themes using the constant melody techniques of the late Renaissance and the English Virginal School.

As music became more homophonic in the Baroque period, use of the constant melody type declined in favor of the melodico-harmonic type. Homophony in the

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In this context, “pivotal composers” describes those composers writing during the late Renaissance and early Baroque periods.

Baroque period was relative to what had come before; compared to the linear polyphony of the Renaissance, the vocal monody and figured bass texture of the Baroque seemed comparatively homophonic. The melodico-harmonic technique was compatible with this more homophonic texture and was widely used by most of the well-known composers of the period. Pachelbel's *Hexachordum Apollinis* (1699)⁶, J.P. Krieger's *Aria con 24 variazioni in Bb* and Handel's *Harmonious Blacksmith*⁷ and *Aria with variations in Bb*⁸ were all written using this technique.

It should be noted that the melodico-harmonic variations of the Baroque period were quite different from their Classical period counterparts. Just as the definition of homophony changed from the Renaissance to the Baroque, the Classical composer's conception of homophony shifted to mean a solo melody accompanied by slow moving harmonies. The application of the melodico-harmonic technique to variations of the Classical period, often termed "ornamental variations," will be discussed in the next chapter. The melodico-harmonic song variations of Pachelbel, Handel and others can be viewed as a precursor of the ornamental type that typified the Classical period.

The least common technique used to realize song variations during the Baroque

⁶This work contains six variation sets based on aria themes.

⁷Handel's *Harmonious Blacksmith* is contained in the *Suite No. 5*.

⁸

Brahms later used this Handel theme as the theme for his masterwork *25 Variations and Fugue on a theme by Handel*. This work will be discussed in the sixth chapter.

period was constant-harmony. As mentioned in the second chapter, the constant-harmony variation was better suited to the slow moving, primary chord accompaniments of the Classical period than the fast moving figured bass of the Baroque period. As a result, few Baroque composers chose this model. The great exception of course, was J.S. Bach's masterpiece *The Goldberg Variations*.

Often, the great pieces of a given period become the standard to which all others are compared, and they inflate the perceived idea of how other pieces from the same period were constructed. Because the *Goldberg Variations* represents the culmination of baroque variation technique, the reality that few Baroque composers wrote constant-harmony variations or meshed their works with such dense counterpoint, canon and fugue is often eclipsed. The fact that Bach demonstrated such mastery of these imitative techniques and still produced a work of deep emotion and artistry, justifies ranking his *Goldberg Variations* as one of the pinnacle variation works of music history.

Chorale Variations

Since chorale variations featured a Protestant chorale as the theme and were an integral part of the Protestant religious service, it followed that the majority of chorale variations of this period were written by German composers for the organ. Contemporaries of Sweelinck and Scheidt followed a constant-melody plan while later composers, Pachelbel, Böhm, Walther, Buxtehude and J.S. Bach chose the melodico-

harmonic format. Regardless of the variation type used, the variations themselves were separated by distinct cadences and bore little resemblance to each other. The musically distinct variations mimicked the varying sentiments of each verse of text. Examples from the early literature include Scheidt's *Tabulatura Nova* (1624), a collection of chorale and plain-song variations. Later examples from the literature include Pachelbel's *Musikalische Sterbensgedanken*⁹, Walther's *Ach Gott und Herr*, and J.S. Bach's *O Gott, du frommer Gott* and *Vom Himmel hoch, da komm'ich her*.

Although chorale variations account for a vast number of variations written during the Baroque period, I have limited my comments on the genre because these works were intended specifically for the organ.¹⁰ I have included a brief sketch of the chorale variation's characteristics and have listed the best known examples from its literature because the chorale variation holds a prominent place in variation history and constitutes a sizeable portion of many major Baroque figures' compositional output.

Basso Ostinato

The basso ostinato, characterized by a recurring bass line, originated from the stock bass lines of such dances as the folia, bergamask, passacaglia and chaconne. In

⁹This collection contains four chorale variations.

¹⁰

As discussed in the first chapter, I am limiting the scope of this paper to variations written for or regularly performed on the piano.

order to lengthen the dance, these bass lines endured endless repetitions while new melodic material was improvised above. One type of basso ostinato, the ground, was an English phenomenon¹¹ that did not originate from the dance. It enjoyed brief popularity in England during the sixteenth century. Its development as a variation form is separate and removed from the other basso ostinato types.

Besides the English ground, the other ostinato bass lines made the leap from dance music to keyboard variations in Italy during the early seventeenth century. The forerunners of the type were written by Frescobaldi (1583-1644), Andrea Falconiero (b. latter 16th century), Biagio Marini (d. 1660), and Arcangelo Corelli (1653-1713). Their works were characterized by distinct chord progressions and a more or less homophonic texture whose variations were linked without pause. These characteristics became standardized so that by the mid-seventeenth century, this basso ostinato format was picked up by French and German composers and incorporated into their keyboard works.

It has been mentioned previously that the French were the least interested in the variation form. The French notion of variation writing was limited to the rondeau form (ABA`CA`) with its varied reprises of the A section and doubles of dances movements loosely organized into *ordres*. The Italian style basso ostinato variation was taken up by a few French composers, though they limited themselves primarily to the folia, passacaglia and chaconne. Although French composers borrowed from the Italian basso ostinato

¹¹In the previous chapter, I discussed and analyzed the English ground *Hornepype* by Hugh Aston.

format, they infused it with such thoroughly French nuances as *agréments* and *notes inégales*. Examples from the literature include François Couperin's *La Passacaille in B minor* and *Les Folies Françaises, ou les Dominos* and Jean-Henry d'Anglebert's *Folies d'Espagne*. Louis Couperin wrote the most basso ostinato variations of any French composer. His most famous works are his *Passacaglia in G minor*, and *Chaconne in D minor*.

The German version of the basso ostinato variation borrowed from the Italian and the French models, yet managed to merge these traits with the German concept of thematic argument to forge a new, highly sophisticated variation form. From the Italians, the Germans adopted a loosely homophonic texture; from the French, the Germans incorporated ornamentation, though not on the same scale. To this, German composers added more counterpoint and linear complexity that lent their variations a more learned air. The most famous examples of basso ostinato works by German composers include Handel's *Prelude and Chaconne with 62 variations in G major*, and J.S. Bach's *Passacaglia in C minor for organ* and *Chaconne in D minor for violin*.¹²

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Although this work was intended for solo violin, Ferruccio Busoni transcribed a version for solo piano. This arrangement is very popular among pianists and is regularly played and performed.

François Couperin's *Les Folies Françaises, ou les Dominos*

It may seem odd that out of all the variation sets written during the Baroque period, I chose to play and analyze a relatively unknown piece written by a French composer not known for his variation writing. In retrospect, I do think it is odd. Yet, I think a persuasive argument can be made to defend my choice.

First, I wanted to include a Baroque basso ostinato variation in the recording portion of the dissertation because I wanted to demonstrate the evolution of this type by playing examples from the Renaissance, Baroque, Romantic era and 20th century. As a separate consideration, I wanted to include a French work among the pieces I would record because I felt that I had over-represented the German variation. Unfortunately, few variations included in pianists' standard repertoire were written by French composers. Through research I found the answer to both problems; Couperin's *Les Folies Françaises, ou les Dominos* epitomizes French style, demonstrates Baroque basso ostinato techniques and is a fabulous piece. In the end, I think the project has benefited from its inclusion.

Drawing from both the passacaglia and folia tradition, Couperin's work exemplifies many characteristics of the Baroque basso ostinato. Its bass line theme (Ex. 1) exhibits many stereotypical characteristics of the passacaglia: its eight bar length, its minor mode and its descending line to the dominant.

Example 1: bass ostinato



The work's link to the folia dance comes from its title, *Les Folies Françaises, ou les Dominos*. Initially, "les folies"¹³ was a masquerade performed on feast-days in Portugal. According to Philippe Beaussant, "...dancers in fancy dress and accompanied by guitar performed all manner of sung and mimed improvisations."¹⁴ Baroque composers tamed the dance, transforming it into a more stylized, formal version of the original. "Folies d'Espagne" was by far the most popular type; Corelli, Lully and d'Anglebert wrote Spanish versions of "les folies." Although Couperin was influenced by these earlier Spanish examples, he infused his folia with the charm and grace of French musical style, introducing the world to "les folies Françaises."

While much of Couperin's Folies follows the standard format of the passacaglia and folia, in many ways it is atypical of the majority of Baroque basso ostinato variations. Standard procedure in the Baroque period dictates that the bass continue its repetitions uninterrupted. Couperin rejects this premise entirely and divides each variation into "mini-movements." He achieves this effect with distinct cadences, double bars, pauses

¹³The folies belong to the *fêtes galantes* tradition that flourished from 1700-1730.

¹⁴Philippe Beaussant, *François Couperin*, trans. Alexandra Land (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1980), 291.

and tempo changes. Rather than build on the continuous, uninterrupted repetitions of the bass line, Couperin seems content to depict one mood or character for each variation. Couperin encourages a character-driven interpretation of the work by including descriptive titles for each variation. By creating individual “character vignettes,” Couperin eschews the more common, organic approach of growing the basso ostinato into an arching structure. Despite this, the individual portraits, taken together, add up to a satisfying whole.

Many of the irregular characteristics of Couperin’s French folies are in agreement with French musical taste and style. Since most French keyboard works of this period are short movements with descriptive, fanciful titles, Couperin’s work seems less of a departure from basso ostinato form and more of a concession to his French heritage. Additionally, the discontinuous nature of *Les Folies Françaises, ou les Dominos* seems less of a departure from variation format and more like a compromise between the basso ostinato and suite traditions. In the French keyboard tradition, it is customary to group dance movements, rondeaus, and other miscellaneous movements into an *Ordre*, just as the German tradition grouped dance movements into suites. *Les Folies Françaises, ou les Dominos*, included in Couperin’s *Troisième Ordre*, can be viewed as a hybrid between basso ostinato and suite form.

Although the multi-movement format and descriptive titles of *Les Folies Françaises* typify French keyboard writing during this period, the sub-text of the titles

reveals a theatrical and programmatic element running through this variation set that goes beyond most French works of the period. In keeping with the ancient customs of the folia, each variation represents a guest at a masked ball. The titles allude to the colored masks worn by each guest. The guests are twelve allegories for “...virtues, qualittes, temperaments or characters.”¹⁵ (Ex. 2)

Example 2	Variation Titles from <i>Les Folies Françaises, ou les Dominos</i>
La Virginité (Virginité)	a transparent mask
La Pudeur (Modesty)	a pink-colored mask
L’Ardeur (Ardor)	a crimson mask
L’Espérance (Hope)	a green mask
La Fidélité (Fidelity)	a blue mask
La Persévérance (Perseverance)	a flax-gray mask
La Languueur (Languor)	a violet mask
La Coquetterie (Coquettishness)	masks of different colors
Les Vieux Galants et les Trésorières surannées (Aging Suitors and Fading Charms)	purple masks and dead leaves
Les Cucous bénévoles (Complacent Cuckolds)	a yellow mask
La Jalousie tactiturne (Sullen Jealousy)	a Moorish-gray mask
La Frénésie, ou Le Désespoir (Frenzy, or Despair)	a black mask

Usually the programmatic elements are secondary to the musical ideas. In this work, the music and the program are interdependent. Beaussant likens this paring to the theater and dance with the following words:

This music has become more a dramatic work than a mere series of images - or rather, a genre midway between dance or theater and real life. In this vaguely theatrical setting, the only subject or preoccupation is love - love performed and conceived as a comedy of character or sentiment, a caprice of the mind or a fantasy of the heart. *Les Folies Françaises* is rather like a feast of characters assembled before the actual performance.¹⁶

Les Folies Françaises must be played as theater; each variation is a new scene with actors in character telling their story.

¹⁵David Tunley, *Couperin* (London: BBC, 1982), 81.

¹⁶Beaussant, *François Couperin*, 293-294.

Previously, I have focused on the extra-musical attributes of this work that exemplify both the basso ostinato and French musical tradition. Now, I would like briefly to discuss French keyboard performance practice, and how this work reflects this tradition. For better or for worse¹⁷, French society valued arts that were ‘pleasing and refined.’ Musical gesture and clarity were prized over “thematic argument”¹⁸ and counterpoint. The result was a musical style replete with ornaments called *agréments* (Ex. 3), rhythmic subtleties referred to as *notes inégales*¹⁹ (Ex. 4), and a sparse two-voice texture (Ex. 5) that epitomized clarity and refinement.

Example 3: agréments



Example 4: notes inégales



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Many figures, such as Charles Burney and Hubert Parry, feel that the French use of ornamentation is excessive and disfigures the melody. See Charles Burney, *A General History of Music* (New York: Dover, 1957) and C. Hubert H. Parry, *Evolution of the Art of Music*.

¹⁸This is a term used by Tunley to describe contrapuntal and motivic writing. See Tunley, *Couperin*, 19.

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“Notes inégales” refers to the French practice of playing melodic eighth notes or sixteenth notes unevenly. For a description and rules regarding the practice see Howard Ferguson, *Keyboard Interpretation from the 14th to the 19th Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 98-104.



Much of the past few pages have been devoted to discussing the Baroque variation and French stylistic traditions that this piece exemplifies. While all of these connections and differences are important to point out, in the end, the piece has to stand on its own. The ultimate question becomes, “Is this piece worth playing?” In the case of Couperin’s *Les Folies Françaises, ou les Dominos*, the answer is a resounding yes! It is often said jokingly of great movies, “It made me laugh; it made me cry; I’d see it again.” As trite as that saying has become, it applies whole-heartedly to this piece. This piece made me laugh; it made me cry, and I will play it again in the future. I’ve included three examples taken whole from the work to illustrate the humor, love, pain and frenzy this work captures.

La Coquetterie

Example 6: changing meters and tempo as a metaphor for coquettishness

The musical score for 'La Coquetterie' Example 6 is written for piano in G major. It consists of 15 measures across three systems. The tempo and meter change frequently to create a coquettish effect:

- Measures 1-2:** Tempo: *Gayement*, Meter: 6/8. Measure 1 has a first ending bracket.
- Measure 3:** Tempo: *Modere*, Meter: 3/8. Measure 3 has a first ending bracket.
- Measures 4-5:** Tempo: *Legerement*, Meter: 2/4. Measure 4 has a first ending bracket.
- Measures 6-8:** Tempo: *Gayement*, Meter: 6/8. Measure 6 has a first ending bracket.
- Measures 9-11:** Tempo: *Modere*, Meter: 3/8. Measure 9 has a first ending bracket.
- Measures 12-13:** Tempo: *Legerement*, Meter: 2/4. Measure 12 has a first ending bracket.
- Measures 14-15:** Tempo: *Legerement*, Meter: 2/4. Measure 14 has a first ending bracket.

La Persévérance

Example 7: gentle sighs and expressive leaps tenderly sing of love and pain

The musical score for 'La Persévérance' Example 7 is written for piano in G major. It consists of 16 measures across two systems. The tempo is *Andante* and the meter is 3/4. The score features gentle sighs and expressive leaps:

- Measures 1-16:** The melody is characterized by gentle sighs (half notes with slurs) and expressive leaps (quarter notes with slurs). Measure 1 has a first ending bracket.

La Frénésie, ou Le Désespoir

Example 8: rapid 16th notes in imitation depict frenzy and despair

The musical score is written for two staves, Treble and Bass, in the key of D major (two sharps) and 3/4 time. It consists of 16 measures, numbered 1 through 16. Measures 1 through 12 feature rapid 16th-note passages in both staves, often with trills (tr) in the Treble staff. Measures 13 through 16 show a transition to a more sustained, chordal texture, with the Treble staff holding chords and the Bass staff providing a steady bass line. The overall mood is one of intense emotion, as suggested by the title and the rapid, imitative 16th-note passages.

Sometimes it is best to let the music speak for itself.

Chapter V Variation Writing for Keyboard during the Classical Period

“There are in music few things more obviously intellectual than variation form. This does not prevent variations from being...the most misunderstood and mishandled form in music. The form has been derived...not from the few masterpieces but from the enormous majority of plausible works on false lines.”¹

The Baroque period witnessed the institution and dissemination of variation form. What grew into a universally used keyboard genre during the Baroque period, continued during the Classical era on a somewhat marginal scale. If the suite, fugue and variation summed up Baroque composition, then sonata form defined Classical composition. In the Classical period, sonata form trumped all other forms. As a result, variations were often relegated to an individual movement within a sonata. When independent variation sets were written, they were widely viewed as amusements or diversions from more serious pursuits that used sonata form.

Much of this conception had to do with the ‘rounded’ and ‘developed’ nature of sonata form and the perceived ‘episodic’ and ‘paratactic’ structure of variation form. According to Sisman, Classical period aesthetics valued “original thematic invention”² and “sustained organic structures.”³ The most widely used variation type of the period, melodico-harmonic, did not possess these characteristics. Instead, the melodico-harmonic

¹Donald Francis Tovey, *Essays in Musical Analysis* (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), 2:139.

²Sisman, *Haydn and the Classical Variations*, 1.

³Ibid.

variation often borrowed themes from other works, relied on decoration instead of development, and added up to a “series of frozen moments”⁴ rather than an organic whole. A flood of this type of variation written by virtuosos and second-tier composers led Momigny to comment that these pieces exhibit “...much speech, but little sense.”⁵

With the passing of time, history has judged the free-standing Classical variation as superficial, with little value beyond mere decoration. According to Sisman, a ‘narrative’ for the eighteenth century variation has developed from this judgement. The narrative goes something like this: composers of the Baroque period explored several variation forms including the melodic, harmonic and ostinato types; by the 1750s the melodic type reigned supreme, strangling Haydn and Mozart’s creative genius and producing only a few stereotyped schemes; Beethoven rescued the form from the banal and trivial with his variations written in an “entirely new manner.”⁶

Many hold the view that the ornamental variation of the eighteenth century was the valley between two great peaks, Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* and Beethoven’s *Diabelli Variations*. Some further assert that Beethoven saved variation writing from decorative oblivion. While these two pieces rightly stand as the pinnacles of variation writing, to judge all other works as inferior and dismiss them from discussion seems

⁴Ibid., 3.

⁵Momigny, *Encyclopédie méthodique: musique*, s.v. “Variations.”

⁶Beethoven included this description of his Op. 34 and Op. 35 variations in the preface of original edition.

extreme. Composers of this period did not choose to write mediocre or trivial variations. In their minds, they were composing variations that exuded charm and beauty, two characteristics of the prevailing *style galant*. Likewise, melodico-harmonic form, the favored vehicle for *style galant* variations, did not condemn all variations of this type to empty displays of technique or ornament. Many variations from this period merit scholarship and deserve praise. With this in mind, I will frame this often maligned period of variation writing within a broader context by exploring the external forces, both societal and musical, that brought about the rise of the melodico-harmonic format and the ornamental variation.

Melodico-Harmonic Variations

Two social movements, the Enlightenment and the rise of the middle class, intersected during the eighteenth century to exert external pressure on composers and their music. In essence, these movements worked in tandem to bring music closer to the general populace. The ideals of the Enlightenment movement extolled the achievements and possibilities of the common man and questioned the divine rights of the nobility. An economically powerful middle class asserted their rights with their pocketbooks. In music, these external forces generated a robust music publishing industry and a society clamoring for public concerts. With their disposable income, more and more middle class families were investing in musical instruments, like the pianoforte, and music lessons. Music publishers rushed to meet the demands of these musical consumers by printing

music suitable for the amateur.⁷ Armed with musical knowledge, the middle class went in droves to hear public concerts. For the first time, concerts could be financed by ticket sales. Musicians were no longer dependent exclusively on the patronage of wealthy noblemen.

In musical terms, these external social pressures steered composers to write more marketable variations. Since the amateur musician wanted to be able to recognize the tune of a variation set, composers of the Classical period more often than not used well-known songs, arias, or minuets for the theme.⁸ By using a familiar tune and limiting the variations to melodic elaboration, composers acquiesced to the amateur and the concert-goer who wanted to follow along and hear the tune being varied. In general, ornamentation and elaboration led to technical display, something an audience could readily appreciate.

These broad social movements also directed music away from the elaborate Baroque style toward the simpler, more accessible *style galant*, which in turn influenced composers' choice of variation type. The emerging *style galant* featured a single melody over subordinate, slow moving primary triads and a symmetrical and periodic phrase

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For a description of the rise of the middle class during the mid 18th century and their participation in music see, Mario R. Mercado, *The Evolution of Mozart's Pianistic Style* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), 22.

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Mozart's keyboard variations typified the melodico-harmonic formula of using preexisting tunes as themes. He wrote variations on popular tunes (*Ah, vous dirai-je maman*), arias (*Lison dormait* and *La Belle Françaises*) and minuets (*Minuet* by Duport).

structure. The melodico-harmonic variation type was the perfect vehicle to realize this style; the melodic, harmonic and structural outline was preserved amidst elaborate melodic decoration and ornamentation. Constant-melody variations required contrapuntal figuration, and basso ostinato variations relied on an independent, repetitive bass line. Neither of these variation types produced the desired homophonic texture. Viewed in this light, it made perfect sense for composers of the Classical period to write melodico-harmonic variations.

Although the social context and musical aesthetic of the *style galant* accounted for the preponderance of melodico-harmonic variations written during this period, they did not dictate the succession of formulaic variations that this variation type came to be known for. While there was no Classical “handbook” for writing melodico-harmonic variations, the majority of variations of this period followed the generic ‘Parisian’⁹ plan: increased rhythmic animation (eighth notes - triplets - sixteenth notes) presented in pairs (right hand then left hand), one variation in minor, a slow-movement variation, and a fast final variation in a different time signature. Why did so many of these Classical variations follow such a stereotypical plan?

I believe that the common eighteenth-century practice of improvising variations is the most plausible explanation. Although the art of improvisation demands spontaneity

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Melodico-Harmonic variations were wildly popular in Paris during the last decades of the 18th century. Many of the themes of Mozart’s variations are French tunes: for example, “Je suis Lindor” and “Lison dormait.”

and immediate creativity, formulas and patterns are necessary to hold an improvised piece together. If a composer were called on to improvise a large-scale form such as the theme and variation, it would help if he could rely on a standard format. A standard format would act like an empty shell waiting to be filled. Since there is a great deal of evidence¹⁰ that composers of the period routinely improvised variations, I think it is highly likely that the standardized plan of the melodico-harmonic variations grew out of a need for a template that composers could then fill in with improvisation.

Several external factors converged in the eighteenth century: the Enlightenment, a burgeoning middle class, and an emerging *style galant* that prized improvisation. These forces steered composers to the melodico-harmonic format and the ornamental variation. While this form typified Classical variation, it was not the only variation type written during this period. Modifications and experimentation led to new variation forms. Using the keyboard repertoire of Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven, I will discuss how these classical masters perfected, modified or completely abandoned the melodico-harmonic format to realize their conception of the Classical variation.

Classical Variation Repertoire

When discussing Classical keyboard repertoire, one naturally gravitates towards

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Much of the evidence comes from performance practice treatises and manuals, first-hand accounts and letters. For a discussion of the evidence see, Sisman, *Haydn and the Classical Variation*, 64-65.

the works of the three main composers of the period: Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven. Although J.S. Bach's sons Johann Christian and Carl Philipp Emanuel, Muzio Clementi, Johann Nepomuk Hummel and many others were celebrated composers and pianists in their day, their work receives very little attention today in terms of scholarship and performances. They are remembered mostly for their teaching pieces, easy sonatinas and minuets, not their large-scale sonata, concerto and variation works. While this may seem to some like a loss of potentially great repertoire, others, like Charles Rosen, do not apologize for limiting their focus exclusively to the works of Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven.¹¹

In many respects, Rosen makes a compelling case for interpreting the larger stylistic period in terms of the works of a small group of composers. He reasons that, "...group-style often appears to realize the imperfectly formed aspirations of the age."¹² To classify the style of a period, Rosen suggests that some sifting through of repertoire is required. He concludes:

(The style of a group)...enables us to interpret the change in the musical language without being totally bewildered by the mass of minor composers, many of them very fine, who understood only imperfectly the direction in which they were going, holding on to habits of the past which no longer made complete sense in the new context, experimenting with ideas they had not quite the power to render coherent.¹³

For these reasons, I have decided to limit my discussion of Classical variation repertoire

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Charles Rosen makes a case for the exclusion of minor composers when discussing Classical period style in his book, *The Classical Style* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 20-22.

¹²Ibid., 20.

¹³Ibid., 22.

to the works of the three recognized masters of the period: Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven.

Mozart

Of the three Classical masters, Mozart followed the melodico-harmonic format most diligently and did much to perfect the type. All of the themes of his variations were based on pre-existing tunes taken from operas, songs, or minuets. He adopted a plan of “increasing technical brilliance”¹⁴ that featured contrasts in texture, mode, tempo and meter. He often paired variations according to their technical and/or accompaniment pattern and included an adagio/allegro pair of variations in most of his variations after 1773.¹⁵ Mozart’s only deviation from this general scheme occurred in his last variation set, *8 Variations in F major on “Ein Weib ist das herrlichste Ding,”* K. 613. In this work, Mozart used a three-part theme¹⁶, made liberal use of the minor mode, modulated to D-flat in the Allegro variation, and intertwined the thematic material of the first two sections in the coda. Viewed in terms of his other variations, this last variation set was an experimental departure.

Despite the experimental bent of his last variation, Mozart remained loyal to the

¹⁴Mercado, *The Evolution of Mozart’s Pianistic Style*, 49.

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The only exception to this practice occurs in Mozart’s *Six Variations in F on Salve tu, Domine*, K. 398. These variations were written in 1783-84.

¹⁶Except for his last variation, K. 613, Mozart adhered to the common practice of using two-part themes.

prescribed format of the Classical period variation. As previously suggested, the practice of improvising variations is probably what led to the development of a standardized format. Since Mozart's variations followed a standard format, it should hold true that he improvised variations. Indeed, he did. It is known that he improvised variations during his early childhood tours of Europe during 1763 and 1769. During one of these concert tours, Baron von Grimm had an opportunity to hear the young Mozart improvise. He commented:

...but what is really incredible is to see him improvise for an hour on end and in so doing give rein to the imagination of his genius and to a mass of enchanting ideas, which moreover he knows how to connect with taste and without confusion.¹⁷

His powers of improvisation meant that very few of his early variations were ever written down. Much later in his life, when he was known to write out his keyboard works, he still continued to improvise variations.

The two most famous instances of Mozart's improvisation skills came late in his life. The first occurred in 1781. At the request of Emperor Joseph II, Mozart and Clementi faced off in a famous contest where both composers were asked to perform, improvise and read at sight.¹⁸ The second instance occurred at a concert in 1783. During this concert, Mozart was known to have improvised variations on a theme from the opera *I Filosofi* by Giovanni Paisiello. In the same year, Mozart published his variations on the

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This account is quoted from a letter dated December 1, 1763. See, Mercado, *The Evolution of Mozart's Pianistic Style*, 26.

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For an account of the famous face-off between Clementi and Mozart, see Harold C. Schonberg, *The Great Pianists* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 51-52.

theme “Salve tu, Domine,” taken from the same opera.

Although much of Mozart’s variation writing parallels the common practice of the day (the reliance on melodico-harmonic techniques, a standard format, borrowed themes and improvisation), his variations are anything but common. Many of the adagio variations rival the better known and rightly acclaimed piano sonata slow movements. Mozart calls forth the same lyricism and quiet beauty of his second movements in these vocally inspired slow variations. Mozart’s gift for melody transcends the slow variation, endowing the other variations with fresh melodic invention, a trait that is lacking in variations of lesser composers. Michael Davidson, author of *Mozart and the Pianist*, points out this paradox of Mozart’s variations: despite their apparent lack of experimentation and acquiescence to tradition, they sound fresh and new.

The variations have often been dismissed as casual entertainments, making too many concessions to the musical fashions of the day. Yet even in these unassuming pieces, Mozart’s astonishing inventiveness and structural certainty are apparent.¹⁹

If one were looking for experimentation and development, Mozart’s variations would disappoint. Yet even in this somewhat stale form, Mozart’s variations demonstrate beauty, grace, humor and invention. They represent the best of the Classical melodico-harmonic variation.

To best illustrate Mozart’s variation writing, I have chosen to play and discuss his *Variations on a minuet by Duport*, K. 573 (1789). The Duport variations are Mozart’s

¹⁹Michael Davidson, *Mozart and the Pianist* (London: Kahn and Averill, 2001), 139.

second-to-last set of variations and belong to his last decade of composition, a period that includes ten sets of variations for solo piano. The theme is a minuet taken from Jean-Pierre Duport's²⁰ *Six Cello Sonatas*, Op. 4. In many respects, this variation set typifies both Mozart's output and the Classical melodico-harmonic variation. Besides its borrowed theme, this work elaborates and decorates the melodic outline while maintaining the harmonic and structural outline. In keeping with the melodico-harmonic format, this variation follows the standard collection of variations: eighth-note, triplets and sixteenth-note variations followed by a variation in minor and an adagio/allegro pair of variations to end the set. Though much of the Duport variations is typical of the period, Mozart's genius for variation writing elevates the form above the multitude of ornamental variations written during this time.

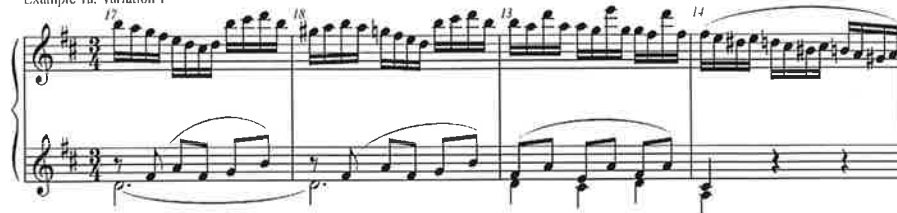
Mozart announces the variation technique that will be used throughout the set in the first variation. This variation immediately takes the theme's melody and subjects it to sixteenth-note elaboration. (Ex. 1)



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Jean-Pierre Duport was a cellist employed at the court of Friedrich Wilhelm II. Beethoven composed his op. 5 cello sonatas for Duport.

Example 1a: Variation I



In this excerpt, Mozart uses passing tones, upper and lower chromatic and diatonic neighboring tones, and escape tones to decorate Duport's simple minuet melody. Mozart uses the same techniques in variation seven. (Ex. 2)

Example 2: Variation VII



Broken octaves were a common ploy of variation writers, and Mozart utilized them regularly. In this instance, they energize the set with technical flair and contrast with the quiet lyricism of the previous minor-mode sixth variation.

Two character traits that run through Mozart's music are humor and lyricism.

History has judged Mozart's greatest contribution to music to be comic opera.²¹ He knew how to write for the voice, and he knew how to infuse wit and humor into music. His

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Mozart's success with *opera buffa* and *singspiel* is illustrated in his famous works *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, *Così fan tutte* and *Die Zauberflöte*. All of these operas are regularly performed to this day.

talent for lyricism and humor transcends opera and is prominent throughout all of his instrumental works. The variations on Duport's theme are no exception. Mozart conveys flashes of wit and playfulness in the fifth variation. (Ex. 3)

Example 3: Variation V



Through staccato notes, crushed ornaments and the back-and forth rhythm of measures three and seven, Mozart re-clothes Duport's gracious melody with character and humor. Understanding the role of contrast in variation sets, Mozart follows this frolicking variation with a sublime variation in minor. The sixth variation is pure poetry. (Ex. 4)

Example 4: Variation VI

The image shows measures 17 through 24 of Variation VI. The key signature changes to D minor. The right hand has a more complex, flowing melody with many slurs and ornaments. The left hand features a prominent, sustained bass line with long notes and some chordal textures.

This variation, even more than the adagio variation, best displays his gift for vocal lyricism. Mozart takes advantage of the change in mode by inserting the most daring harmonies of the set, including diminished chords and a Neapolitan chord (bII). The lyricism of this variation, combined with its minor mode and daring harmonies declares it the crowning variation of the set.

As the Duport variations illustrate, Mozart surpassed his contemporaries' attempts at variation writing by producing ornamental variations with style and superb taste. Instead of being strangled by the melodico-harmonic format, Mozart's creative genius thrived. This format was the perfect vehicle for Mozart: it highlighted his capacity for lyric and inventive melodies, technical bravura and wit.

Haydn

If Mozart idealized the melodico-harmonic format, then Haydn tinkered with it. Haydn's variation works consistently experimented with Classical notions of thematic structure and variation form and featured motivic development in addition to the usual melodic elaboration. The result was a hybrid form that combined constant-harmony and melodico-harmonic techniques.

In addition to these experiments, Haydn innovated the practice of including variation movements in multi-movement works. In fact, the majority of Haydn's

variations were individual movements contained within larger works for symphony, string trio, string quartet or solo piano. Of his 87 strophic variation sets, 81 were contained within larger works. Many were slow movements of symphonies and string quartets. Ironically, Haydn did not include any in his piano sonatas. His experimentation with variation form in his piano sonatas was limited to the first movement.

Another common thread that characterized many of Haydn's variations was his experimentation with thematic material and structure. Most of the themes used by his contemporaries were well-known two-part songs or minuets. In contrast, Haydn preferred to compose original material for his themes and often used double themes in contrasting styles and modes. In twenty-one variation movements and one independent piano set, Haydn explored the possibility of alternating variations on a major theme and a minor theme. (ABA`B`A`B`) Sisman pondered the appeal of such a format with the following words:

One element that might have appealed to Haydn is the often close relationship between the two themes; when they share melodic contour or rhythmic patterns, the second seems to be a reaction to or interpretation of the first. Thus, two themes of opposite character may find common ground by the end of the movement.²²

To Haydn, the double theme offered more possibilities for thematic and motivic development, and the contrast in mode offered an opportunity for deeper character change.

²²*New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Variations," by Elaine Sisman, 303.

Haydn's celebrated strophic variation work for keyboard, *The Variations in F minor*, Hob. XVII, illustrates many of these experimental techniques. The work features a double theme in F minor and F major, uses a hybrid of constant harmony and melodico-harmonic techniques and relies on motivic and thematic development in lieu of melodic elaboration. Haydn makes the most of the contrast between the two themes; the minor theme is made up of insistent dotted rhythms, motivic cells, and registral shifts, while the major theme presents a sweet melody that seems simplistic in contrast. The piece builds to a powerful climactic coda, with surprising amounts of chromaticism and virtuosity that foreshadow the variations of Mendelssohn and Weber. The work is a splendid example of Haydn's mature variation technique and is one of his masterpieces for the keyboard.

Beethoven

Beethoven forged a new kind of variation writing. If Mozart perfected the stereotype and Haydn experimented with the genre, then Beethoven redefined it. In Mozart's and even Haydn's variation works, the theme always remained in the foreground and was recognizable despite alterations. Not so with Beethoven. At times, only the barest thematic skeleton remained. Beethoven transformed the thematic material through a process of simplification, or as Kinderman would say, "a process of concentration and discrimination."²³ In effect, he reduced the theme to its essence and then veiled it with new guises. When compared to Beethoven's transformation

²³William Kinderman, *Beethoven's Diabelli Variations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 76.

techniques, Haydn's experimentation with double themes and contrasting modes seems superficial; though Haydn's double theme offered a fresh take on the melodico-harmonic format, in the end, the melody was left essentially intact and recognizable.

Beethoven's ideas about thematic transformation and variation technique did not appear full-blown in his writing. Instead, his conclusions developed over many years. His pieces charted an evolution of ideas about variation technique that started with the early melodico-harmonic works and culminated with the formal-outline work, the Diabelli variations. Along the way, Beethoven forged a new style of variation writing and in the process ushered in a new era in music.

His second variation set for piano, *Variations on a theme of Righini*, WoO 65 (1790-91), shows a remarkable similarity to the variation works of Mozart and the popular Parisian format. The variations are constructed using melodico-harmonic technique and follow the usual format, including a minor variation and an adagio/allegro finale. This variation set epitomizes Beethoven's early variation period and will be used as the starting point in charting his progression of ideas regarding variation technique and form.

His two variations of 1802, written "in a completely new manner" and in "a

separate and different way,”²⁴ set the next stage in Beethoven’s evolving variation writing. Up until this time, Beethoven had continued to write variations along the line of the Righini set. With his *F major Variations*, Op. 34 and *Eb major Variations*, Op. 35 (Eroica), Beethoven took his first concrete steps away from the ornamental variation toward the invention of a new variation form. With his Op. 34 variations, Beethoven challenged the notion of maintaining one tonal center throughout a set. Here, each variation modulated a descending third until Beethoven reached the dominant key, C major, at which point he returned to the tonic key, F major, creating a V-I final pair. The frequent changes in tempo and time signature, combined with the experimental changes of key created an entirely new variation experience. Although these changes went a long way in breaking the mold, the F major variations were still fashioned using primarily melodico-harmonic techniques. These modifications, though a crucial first step, effected change on only a superficial level. Rosen concurs with this view and suggests that the Op. 34 variations are, “purely an exterior attempt to break out of the decorative formula imposed by the variation form.”²⁵

While the Op. 34 variations superficially modified tempo, key signature and time signature, the Eroica variations Op. 35 experimented on a deeper level with form and structure. In these variations, Beethoven abandoned the melodico-harmonic principles

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Beethoven used these phrases to describe his Op. 34 and Op. 35 variation sets. His comments were included in the preface of the initial edition.

²⁵Rosen, *The Classical Style*, 437.

found in his early variation sets in favor of constant-harmony procedures. In addition, the set's sheer length (fifteen variations and a fugue) and technical difficulty distinguished it from previous variations. Finally, Beethoven replaced the usual adagio/allegro finale with a group of slow variations and a fugal finale. To end a classical work with a fugue was unprecedented. Not only did the fugal ending of the Eroica set establish a pattern that would repeat itself in later sets, it became a signature of Beethoven's third period style.

During Beethoven's middle period, perhaps his greatest departure from Classical variation tradition was the *32 Variations in C minor*, WoO 80 (1806). In essence, this work is a Handelian chaconne reworked in the Classical style. The chaconne, a popular variation form of the Baroque period, dropped out of circulation during the Classical period. Its bass-centric approach to variation writing did not conform to late eighteenth-century compositional practice. For Beethoven to resurrect the form for his C minor variations was quite a departure from Classical procedures.

The theme typifies the Baroque chaconne. (Ex. 5)

Example 5: Theme

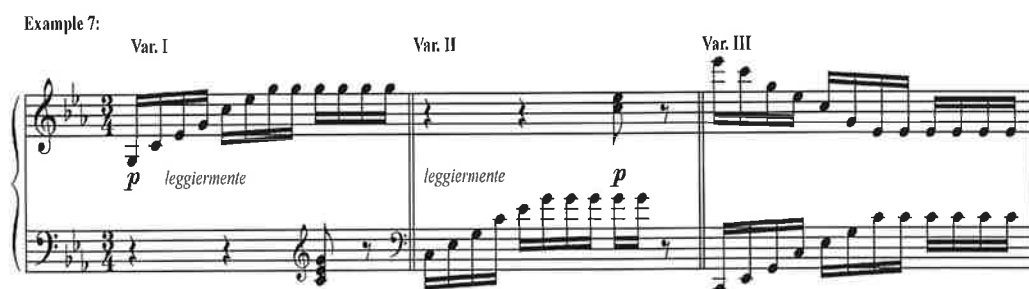
The musical score for the theme of the 32 Variations in C minor, WoO 80, is presented in 3/4 time, C minor. The melody is in the right hand, and the bass line is in the left hand. The dynamics are marked as *mf* (mezzo-forte) for measures 1-4, *sf* (sforzando) for measures 5-6, and *p* (piano) for measures 7-8. The melody features a descending chromatic line in measures 1-4, and the bass line features a descending chromatic line in measures 1-4.

It features a descending chromatic bass-line to the dominant, pronounced melodic

inflection on the second beat and baroque melodic flourishes on the third beat. In keeping with chaconne tradition, Beethoven moves to C major (parallel major) mid-way through the set (variations XII-XV). Later, in variation XVIII, he parodies the Baroque toccata. (Ex. 6)



In this variation, Beethoven fills in the harmonic framework with rapid scale passages. The irregular rhythmic groupings gives the impression of improvisation, another feature of the Baroque toccata. Finally, Beethoven takes a page from Handel's chaconne in G major by grouping variations according to their technical pattern. (Ex. 7)



Although the pairing of variations continued through the Classical period, its obvious and insistent use in this instance recalls an earlier time.

For all of its previously mentioned Baroque features, the C minor variations are firmly rooted in Classical style. For instance, Beethoven breaks with Baroque convention by separating each variation into a distinct unit with double bars, tempo changes and pauses. The Baroque model features a continuous form with few pauses and little change in tempo. Also, Beethoven imposes on the variations a Classical sense of phrasing, proportion and texture. (Ex. 8)

Example 8: Var. XVII

The musical score for Example 8: Var. XVII is presented in two systems. The first system is marked *dolce* and the second *cresc.*. The music is in C minor, 3/4 time, and features a symmetrical and periodic phrasing. The texture is primarily bass, with the right hand often playing chords or simple melodic lines, and the left hand providing a rhythmic foundation with eighth and sixteenth notes. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings like *sf* (sforzando).

In this variation, Beethoven demonstrates symmetrical and periodic phrasing and alberti bass texture. These attributes are synonymous with Classical style. Finally, the grandiose proportion and climactic release of the final variation, really multiple variations in one, foreshadows the Romantic variation rather than recalling past variations from the Baroque period.

While many, including Beethoven himself²⁶, did not appreciate the C minor variations, future generation used it as a model for their own variation writing. According to Rosen, these variations “...forecast the revival of Baroque rhythmic development and harmonic movement that was to produce Romanticism, or its musical form.”²⁷ At first, that might seem a rather grandiose statement. Yet, when one compares Beethoven’s C minor variations with Mendelssohn’s *Variations sérieuses*, the influence is unmistakable. Despite Beethoven’s criticism of these variations, they profoundly affected his own evolving ideas of variation form and shaped one trajectory of the Romantic variation. The work’s present popularity among pianists attests to its success as a composition.

Much time elapsed between the *32 Variations in C minor* (1806) and the completion of his *33 Variations on a Waltz by Diabelli*, Op. 120 (1819-23). In the interim, Beethoven wrote three variation sets for piano²⁸ and completed nine piano sonatas, including the experimental late-period sonatas. Soon after the Diabelli variations were published, Beethoven finished his ninth symphony and began his late string quartets. The fact that the Diabelli variations belonged to his late compositions cannot be stressed enough. In many ways, the variations realized characteristics of his late-period style. When viewed in the larger context of his other late compositions, the Diabelli variations

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Beethoven later admitted to being ashamed of the work. This could account for its WoO label. Beethoven did not feel it merited an opus number.

²⁷Rosen, *The Classical Style*, 400-01.

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The three variation sets written during the intervening years are Op. 76, 109 and 111. The Op. 76 set was independently conceived while the other two sets are movements within sonatas.

come to represent a synthesis of Beethoven's late-period style and the culmination of his evolving variation technique.

At base, all of Beethoven's late period works deal with transformation and transcendency. The music of this period goes beyond the musical idea and arrives at a higher truth. In the case of the Diabelli variations, transformation is both the technique and the goal. Little by little, the variations transfigure and cloak the theme in new guises until the transformed variations take on a deeper meaning than the theme, taken by itself, could ever convey. Solomon describes the work's arc in the following way:

(The Diabelli variations)...takes its point of departure in the familiar, which is then disassembled, chaoticized, deconstructed, and defamiliarized before it, in turn, rediscovers an ultimate state of concord.²⁹

Kinderman explains the shape of the Diabelli variations as, "...starting with the trivial but finally attaining the sublime."³⁰ Both of these sentiments characterize the variations as a journey whose destination is transformation.

The theme of Op. 120 was not originally conceived by Beethoven. Kinderman's adjective, 'trivial,' seems an apt description of the theme. Even Beethoven likened the ascending sequence, or *rosalias*³¹, of the theme to 'cobbler's patches.' If Beethoven felt

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Maynard Solomon, *Late Beethoven: Music, Thought, Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 16-17.

³⁰Kinderman, *Beethoven's Diabelli Variations*, 67.

³¹The term 'rosalias' indicates an ascending sequence that maintains exact transposition up one step.

this way, why did he spend three years writing approximately one hour's worth of variations on such an inconsequential theme? As with Bach's Goldberg variations,³² the Diabelli variations came about because of a seemingly simple request.

In 1819, Anton Diabelli set out to publish a collection of variations written by prominent Austrian composers of the day to benefit the widows and orphans of recent wars. For such a patriotic endeavor, Diabelli chose a German waltz as the theme. A total of 50 composers, including Czerny, Schubert, Kalkbrenner, Moscheles, and an eleven-year old Liszt, contributed one variation each to the project. For whatever reason, be it showmanship, pride, curiosity or inspiration, Beethoven contributed 33 variations. The collection was published in 1824 in two volumes, with Beethoven's 33 variations taking up an entire volume.

When viewed in the larger context of a patriotic gesture to benefit war widows and their children, Diabelli's theme does not seem so absurd. Since none of the fifty-one³³ variations of the second volume is ever played today, all that remains is Beethoven's monument to Classical variation writing built upon the most trivial of themes. Many view this as proof that Beethoven could write something out of nothing. Donald Francis Tovey,

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Bach wrote his *Goldberg Variations* at the request of Count Kaiserling. The Count suffered from insomnia and relied on his musician, Goldberg to play music to put him to sleep. *The Goldberg Variations* were written by Bach for Goldberg so that Goldberg would have enough music to play to put his master, the Count to sleep.

³³The volume contains 50 variations and a coda by Czerny.

an early twentieth-century music scholar, disagrees. He contends that Beethoven could not have written such an enormous work from a sublime theme like those of the late piano sonatas. He asserts:

Diabelli's theme is as prosaic as the hard-shell business-man who wrote it, but it does mean business, and a stronger structure has never been realized in reinforced concrete. It is a theme which sets the composer free to build recognizable variations in every conceivable way.³⁴

Essentially, Diabelli's waltz is foolish, but useful.

Whatever one's opinion of Diabelli's waltz, it is almost universally agreed that Beethoven's variations stands as one of the great examples of variation writing in the keyboard literature and is the clear successor to Bach's Goldberg variations. Much of the variation's success is due to its format. Rather than relying on a constant melodic-outline or harmony, these variations are built on the formal outline of the theme. Tovey describes the format in the following words:

The listener who wishes to understand Beethoven's variations had better begin at once by relieving his conscience of all responsibility for tracing the melody. Moreover, he need not worry about his capacity for tracing the harmony. Nor, indeed, is there any single musical category which will suffice for the basis of the Diabelli variations. Nothing short of the whole theme will answer the purpose.³⁵

Beethoven discovers the substance of the theme in the subsequent variations through a process of transformation.

The overriding variation technique at work in the Diabelli variations is thematic

³⁴Donald Francis Tovey, *Beethoven* (London: Oxford University Press, 1945), 127.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 125.

transformation. Kinderman likens this to a “process of concentration and discrimination.”³⁶ In effect, the theme is stripped down to its bare essentials and transformed into multiple new guises during the variations. The transformation can be accomplished through rhythmic development (simplification, reduction, expansion and change of meter) inversion or changes in register. In general, Beethoven limits this process to the most recognizable portion of the theme’s outline, its head motives, cadences and phrase structure.

To recognize the many examples of thematic transformation in the Diabelli variations, a careful analysis of the theme, its identifying characteristics and motives, is essential. (Ex. 9)

Example 9: Theme

The musical score for the Theme of the Diabelli Variations, Op. 90, by Ludwig van Beethoven, is presented in two systems. The first system contains measures 1 through 7, and the second system contains measures 8 through 16. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The melody is primarily in the right hand, with a supporting bass line in the left hand. Dynamics include piano (p), forte (f), and sforzando (sf). The piece ends with a double bar line and repeat dots in measure 16.

³⁶Kinderman, *Beethoven's Diabelli Variations*, 76.

In this example, I have bracketed the four main thematic ideas that Beethoven regularly reworks in the subsequent variations. The first idea is the opening turn; the second motive is the descending fourth in the right hand; the third is the repeated chords of the right hand; and the fourth musical idea is the modulating sequence. In any given variation, one or more of these thematic ideas might be in play. The degree of similarity to the theme varies with each variation.

As the head motive of the theme, the opening turn is conspicuous and immediately connects the variation to the theme. It is not surprising that Beethoven includes this motive in most of the variations. The following are a few examples of the thematic transformation of the opening turn. (Ex. 10)

Example 10

Variation 6 Variation 11 Variation 21

The image displays three musical staves, each representing a different variation of a theme. The first staff, labeled 'Variation 6', features a trill (tr) and a descending fourth (1 2) in the right hand, marked *ff*. The second staff, labeled 'Variation 11', shows a triplet (3) of eighth notes in the right hand, marked *p*. The third staff, labeled 'Variation 21', features a trill (tr) and a descending fourth (1 2) in the right hand, marked *ff*. The bass line is mostly empty in these variations.

In the sixth variation, Beethoven inverts the turn; in the eleventh variation, he rhythmically transforms the figure into a triplet; and in the twenty-first variation, he reinterprets the turn as a trill.

Beethoven brings back the exact turn of the theme in the ninth variation. (Ex. 11)



This is the only example in the entire set in which the turn motive is unaltered. Of course, the other conspicuous thing about this example is that Beethoven bases the entire variation on this one motive. The square quality of the four-four time signature, the first use of the parallel minor, and the forte dynamic marking combine to transform the character of the turn from playful to *pesante e risoluto*.

The second part of the theme's head motive, the descending fourth, plays a prominent role in many of the variations. Beethoven often alters the rhythm and adds passing tones or neighbor tones to fill in the interval. The most compelling transformation of this motive however, remains faithful to the theme. (Ex. 12)

Example 12: Variation XX

Andante

If it were not for the opening interval of a descending fourth, this variation would bear no resemblance to the theme. After the opening fourths, Beethoven digresses into a slow canon between two voices that slides into remarkable harmonies and colors for its C major key signature. The sublime quality of this variation is worlds removed from the triviality of Diabelli's waltz. Although the head motive is not transformed, it is the only recognizable remnant in a variation that has transcended the theme.

The third thematic motive, the repeated right-hand chords, is present in the variations less often than the two head motives. If the chords are not literally repeated, they are figuratively represented in the tonic and dominant harmonies of the first phrase. However, a few variations call on one hand to repeat the chords as illustrated in the theme. (Ex. 13)

Example 13:

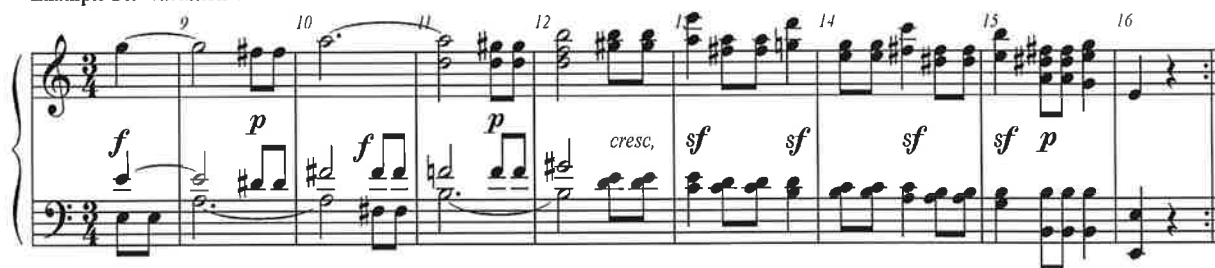
The image shows a musical score for two variations. Variation XIV is marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic and features a slow canon between two voices. Variation XXI is marked with a fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic and features repeated right-hand chords. Both variations are in 4/4 time.

The changes in register as well as the rhythmic transformations are immediately apparent. What is somewhat less obvious, but just as striking is the divergence of character and mood between the two variations. Although both examples are in four-four time

signature, C major and feature the repetitive chords in the same register, the two variations are diametrically opposite in emotion. The twenty-first variation recalls the opening of the Waldstein Sonata Op. 53 with its insistent forward energy; while the slow and soft repetitive chords of the fourteenth variation convey an almost meditative state.

The final thematic motive is really less of a motive and more of an event. The modulating sequence that Beethoven referred to as a ‘cobbler’s patch’ is one of the theme’s most recognizable features. The tonicization of other key areas, however short-lived, adds color to the predominately tonic-dominant harmony of the theme and gives Beethoven an opportunity to go further afield in the variations. In fact, Beethoven rarely maintains the exact shape and chords of the sequence. (Ex. 14)

Example 14: Variation V



Variation five is a perfect example of Beethoven exploiting the sequence in order to modulate, in this case to E minor. Besides the modulation to iii, Beethoven alters the original sequence with diminution and hemiola. What has remained constant is its placement within the phrase. Throughout the variations, Beethoven consistently places a sequence at the end of the first section. This is a perfect illustration of formal structure as

motive.

The previous examples illustrate thematic transformation as a variation technique. Yet, transformation is a goal as well as a technique in the Diabelli variations. One form of transformation manifests as the imitation of other musical styles, be it a composer's style or the style of an entire period. Parody, meant as both caricature and reflection, is one way that Beethoven transcends Diabelli's waltz theme.

With his usual sarcastic, and dry wit, Beethoven parodies the compositions and style of Mozart and J.B. Cramer. These parodies are pure caricature. Variation XXII sneaks in the melody of 'Notte e giorno faticar', an aria from Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*. Beethoven's caricature of J.B. Cramer is less obvious. In the variation after the Mozart parody, variation XXIII, Beethoven writes in the style of one of Cramer's etudes. (Ex. 15)

Example 15: Variation XXIII
Assai Allegro

The conspicuous scales in contrary motion maintained throughout the variation spoof Cramer's tendency to isolate one technical idea in an etude.

On a more reflective level, Beethoven parodies Bach's Goldberg variations in the slow, C minor thirty-first variation. Kinderman likens this variation to, "...a kind of grand aria-variation in which the intricate, almost improvisatory ornamentation adorns the melody."³⁷ (Ex. 16)



The corresponding variation in the Goldberg set, variation XXV, possesses the same kind of elaborately decorated melody, texture and tempo as Beethoven's 'aria-variation.' Perhaps this was an attempt on Beethoven's part to pay homage to Bach's work, or to place his variation set on equal footing with Bach's masterpiece. While his motivation is unknown, the resemblance between the two variations is uncanny.

Beethoven parodies Mozart again in the final variation. However, this time the result is less of a caricature and more of a homage to Mozart and the earlier Classical style that his works represented. In this final variation, Beethoven transforms Diabelli's flighty waltz into an elegant and graceful Mozartean minuet. Though the lyric quality and inflection of the melody is pure Mozart, the thick texture and imitation proclaim it Beethoven's minuet. His minuet does not end in triumph or grandeur; it concludes with a

³⁷Ibid., 120.

delicate and ethereal coda full of pianissimo arpeggiations and light staccato notes. Even the final forte chord, placed on the second beat, radiates a sense of lift and ascendancy.

For Beethoven to conclude such a formidable and expansive variation work with a Classical minuet is unexpected to say the least. The thumping and vivacious fugue of the previous variation would have been a more predictable choice. Despite the irregularity of such an ending, it does seem fitting; the piece began with a dance and perhaps should end with one. The final variation, the most profound example of transformation and parody of the work, closes the set with a paradox; the work that propelled variation technique to a higher level and foreshadowed the coming Romantic period closes with a idealization of the past, a fleeting Classical style.

Chapter VI Variation Writing for Keyboard during the Romantic Period

*“In variations the object in view is always before us but seen as though through colored glass”*¹

The nineteenth century was the century of the piano. It gave voice to the individual, performer and poet within every composer. Consequently, many of the major composers of the nineteenth century, including Mendelssohn, Schumann, Brahms, and Liszt, wrote variations for the keyboard. In an attempt to express the emotional and subjective, a common aesthetic of the Romantic period, some composers preferred a loose variation form, free from rules and restrictions. Others tried to evoke character and mood within defined structures. A few strove for the middle ground. The result was a variation repertoire rich with diverse techniques and forms.

During the course of the Romantic period, roughly from the 1820s to the turn of the century, four types of keyboard variations dominated: melodico-harmonic, formal-outline, fantasy/free and basso ostinato. The melodico-harmonic variation was a hold-over from the Classical period. It continued to be churned out by virtuoso performers during the 1820s and 1830s. The formal-outline and fantasy/free variation types, loosely categorized as ‘character variations,’ personified the Romantic impulse to conjure character and mood in music. Works of these two types accounted for the majority of keyboard variations written during this period. Finally, the basso ostinato, abandoned

1

This is a paraphrase of a quote attributed to Robert Schumann. See *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, s.v. “Variations”, 311.

during the Classical period for its polyphonic texture, made a resurgence during the last half of the nineteenth century.

Salon Variations

The growing number of touring piano virtuosos was the driving force behind the continuation of the melodico-harmonic variation into the first two decades of the Romantic period. The ‘salon variation,’ a staple of the solo piano recital, varied popular tunes and operatic arias using melodic decoration and elaboration. Technical flourishes were added to appeal to audiences. Pianists such as Herz, Kalkbrenner, Thalberg and Moscheles favored variations of this type.

While most of this variation repertoire faded from view almost immediately after it was performed, Mendelssohn’s *Variations sérieuses* (1841) has survived. This variation set, one of Mendelssohn’s most performed keyboard works, was fashioned using a combination of melodico-harmonic and constant-harmony techniques. Similar in construction to Beethoven’s 32 *Variations in C minor*, the *Variations sérieuses* featured “characteristic keyboard figurations”¹ such as staccato touch, syncopations, inner-voice melodies, and broken-octaves. The work concluded with a brilliant finale comparable to the finale of Beethoven’s C minor variations.

¹Gilliespie, *Five Centuries of Keyboard Music*, 209.

While salon variations were popular among pianists and concert-goers, there were other musicians who disdained them. Robert Schumann, composer and publisher of *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, was one of its biggest detractors. In his music journal, he rallied against the type saying:

...in no other genre of our art is more bungling incompetence displayed....variations should create a whole, whose center is the theme...the time is passed when one can create astonishment with sugary figure, a yearning suspension, and Eb major run over the keyboard. Now one strives for thoughts, for inner connections, with the whole bathed in fresh fantasy.²

Schumann and later Brahms would fashion a new type of 'romantic' variation rooted in the formal-outline techniques introduced by Beethoven in his masterpiece, the Diabelli variations.

Character Variations

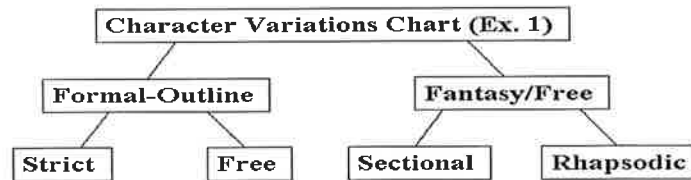
The great majority of Romantic period keyboard variations fall into the broad category of 'character variation.' The category is defined "...by its manner of setting off the component variations from the theme and from each other through sharp contrasts in expression."³ Variations of this class are bound by their effect: shifts in character, mood and expression; the technique and format used to bring about this outcome accounts for the subcategories within the character variation heading.

2

Schumann offered this scathing comment in a review dated 1836. See Sisman, *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Variations," by Elaine Sisman, 310.

³Nelson, *The Technique of Variation*, 91.

To avoid confusion and to aid in understanding, I have charted the many offshoots of the nineteenth-century character variation. (Ex. 1)



The division between subcategories is defined by the overriding tension of the Romantic period between the reliance on form and structure and the freedom from such restrictions. The two main subcategories, formal-outline and fantasy/free, illustrate this difference. Formal-outline variations preserve the barest remnant of the theme, its formal outline (head motives, phrase length and cadences). Fantasy/Free works feature variations that loosely approximate the theme or sometimes digress from it entirely.

The subcategories within each subcategory take this distinction to the next level. Strict formal-outline variations always relate to the theme in some way; free formal-outline variations interrupt the set with an episode(s) unrelated to the theme. Sectional fantasy/free works, though only loosely based on the theme, maintain a clear and recognizable division between variations and are non-programmatic; rhapsodic

fantasy/free variations are continuous in nature, so that the beginnings and endings of the variations are unrecognizable. A program or extra-musical association becomes the formative basis for these variations.

The keyboard variation repertoire of the nineteenth century spans the spectrum of Character Variation from the highly restrictive and structured to the loosely constructed and free. While the strict formal-outline and rhapsodic fantasy/free variation will likely never be confused, not much distinguishes the free formal-outline from the sectional fantasy/free variations. Labeling pieces of these two types is highly subjective and open to many interpretations. With this in mind, I will offer my analysis and categorization of the nineteenth century Character Variation repertoire.

Strict Formal-Outline Variations

The strict formal-outline variation of the Romantic period was a direct descendent of Beethoven's Diabelli variations. Like the Diabelli set, the Romantic type worked with original themes or themes taken from instrumental works (unlike the song/operatic variations of the 18th century), featured an extended and often independent finale, and most importantly, relied on motivic development and thematic transformation to vary the theme. However far the variations seemed to move away from the theme, they always preserved some connection to it. The most noteworthy examples of this type were written by Brahms.

Brahms wrote six independent variations sets for piano: *Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann*, Op. 9; *Variations on an Original Theme*, Op. 21 no. 1; *Variations on a Hungarian Song*, Op. 21 no. 2; *25 Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel*, Op. 24; *Variations on a Theme by Paganini*, Op. 35; and *Variations on a Theme by Haydn*, Op. 56a. Discounting the first and last sets, the other variations sets were composed within a short time span, from 1861 to 1866. Even with the inclusion of the Schumann and Haydn variations, Brahms' keyboard variation output was extremely concentrated. During this period, Brahms wrote only two pieces for piano that were not variations: *Ballads*, Op. 10 and *Waltzes*, Op. 36. Brahms' single-minded focus on variation form during these few years led many to describe this time as the 'Variation Period.'⁴

Why did Brahms write so many variations in such a short period of time? One theory, put forth by Donald Ferguson, suggests that Brahms, in choosing the variation form, was trying to prove his mettle as a composer.

Remembering that Brahms is now gravely concerned to prove himself that champion of true musicality whom Schumann had announced, and remembering that the Variation form is perhaps the severest test of the whole capacity of a composer, we can understand why the next compositions...will be, with one exception, sets of variations.⁵

Another theory is that Brahms recognized his own abilities and strengths as a composer. A self proclaimed classicist, Brahms gravitated toward forms with clear and precise structures that required reasoned and inventive writing. Within these parameters, he was best able to express himself. Variation form afforded him the most freedom to evoke

⁴See Gillespie, *Five Centuries of Keyboard Music*, 259.

⁵Donald Ferguson, *Piano Music of Six Great Composers* (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1947), 262.

several moods and characters within the defined parameters of the theme's framework.

Both of these theories are valid and worthwhile explanations as to Brahms' interest in and fidelity to variation form.

Brahms' celebrated work, *25 Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel*, Op. 24 best exemplifies formal-outline procedures, Romanticism contained within Classical restraints, and his extraordinary gift for variation writing. The theme, taken from Handel's Keyboard Suite in Bb, is ideally suited to formal-outline variation; its clear-cut harmonic outline, diatonic melody and symmetrical phrase structure constitute a solid foundation from which Brahms could spin out all manner of variation. (Ex. 2)



Using Beethoven's Diabelli variations as a model, Brahms subjects the theme to profound motivic development and thematic transformation. At times, only the shell of the theme remains.

Although its structural attributes lend themselves to formal-outline variation, the theme's melody and character leave much to be desired. Ferguson likens the theme to an,

“idle jingle, well suited to the harpsichord.”⁶ As with Beethoven’s use of Diabelli’s inane theme, Brahms was more interested in the solid and compact construction of Handel’s theme rather than in its beauty, character or lack thereof. In fact, its neutral emotion worked to Brahms’ advantage; from an emotional blank slate, he could fashion variations that evoked countless moods and characters.

Although the motivic development and transformation necessary to create formal-outline variations is a primary component of this variation set, I believe its balance of Romantic sentiment and Classical structure is what distinguishes it from other formal-outline variations. At base, the variation techniques used in this variation set differ little from those used by Beethoven. Yet, in many ways, the Brahms Handel variations is more conservative and at the same time more progressive than the Diabelli set. The riddle of the Handel variations is rooted in the paradox of ‘Classical Romanticism.’

In terms of key, meter, tempo and phrase length, the Handel Variations are a throwback to strict Classicism. All but four of the variations remain in the original key, Bb major. The only exceptions are Variations V, VI and XIII in Bb minor and Variation XXI in g minor. The entire work maintains common time except for three variations, XIX, XXIII and XXIV, that move to 12/8 time. Brahms includes expressive indications such as *animato*, *con vivacità*, and *vivace*, but indicates an entirely new tempo only in variation XIII. This variation, the ‘slow movement’ variation, is titled *Largamente ma*

⁶Ibid., 275.

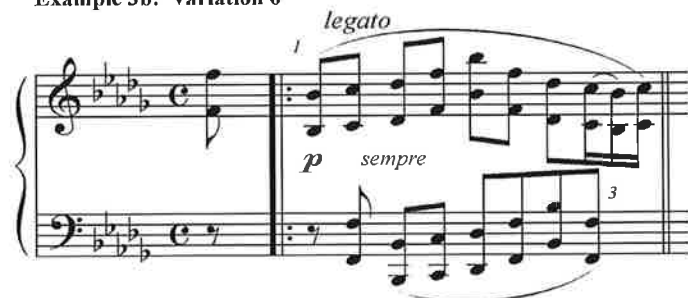
non più. Finally, the phrase length of the theme, 16 bars, is faithfully preserved throughout the entire set. The only exception is variation XV with 18 bars and of course the fugal coda with 109 bars. Such faithful executions of the formal attributes of the theme are rare in the Romantic period, yet typify Brahms' works. Indeed, when compared to Beethoven's Op. 34 variations,⁷ Brahms' work exceeds Classical strictures and becomes "super-classical."

To such neo-classical considerations as consistent key, meter, tempo and phrase structure, Brahms counters with neo-baroque fascination with contrapuntal techniques such as invertible counterpoint, canon and fugue. (Ex. 3)

Example 3a: Variation 8



Example 3b: Variation 6



⁷Beethoven's *Variations in F major* Op. 34 features a change in key, meter and tempo with each variation.

Example 3c: Fugue

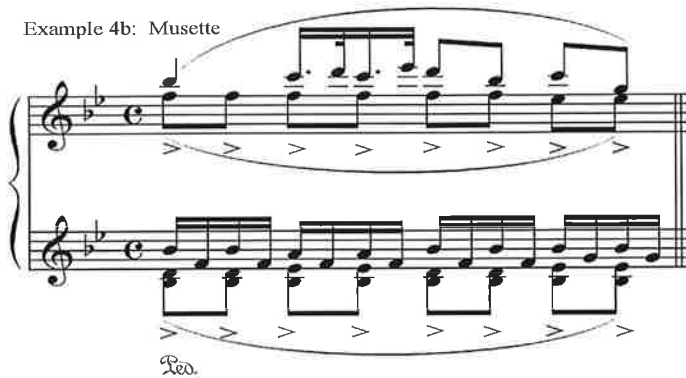
Brahms' fascination with contrapuntal techniques remains a constant throughout his oeuvre. Examples from the keyboard works extend beyond the Handel variations and include 'studies' on themes (Presto and Chaconne) by J.S. Bach.

Perhaps it was the Baroque quality of Handel's theme that inspired Brahms to fashion some variations into Baroque vignettes such as the siciliana (Var. XIV), the musette (Var. XXII), strict (Var. VI) and free canon (Var. XVI), and fugue (Coda: see Ex. 3c). (Ex. 4)

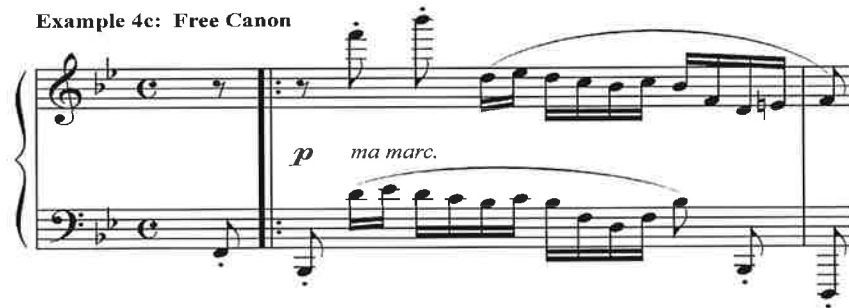
Example 4a: Siciliana

leggero e vivace

Example 4b: Musette



Example 4c: Free Canon



Brahms' acquiescence to Baroque style and forms was not so unusual. He often fashioned variations according to the tenor of the theme. For his Paganini variations, Brahms wrote technical variations that pay homage to the technical prowess of Paganini; for his Hungarian variations, he wrote variations with obvious gypsy connotations. He wrote melodic variations for his Schumann variations since the theme, taken from Schumann's *Bunte Blätter*, Op. 99 No. 1, was essentially a simple song. Likewise, he added touches of the Baroque to the Handel variations in deference to Handel's theme.

Within such restrained structures and amidst such learned counterpoint, Brahms produced a work of profound Romantic sentiment. Brahms is often likened to Bach or Beethoven, but he shares a connection with the Romantic composers as well. Edwin Evans describes Brahms' romanticism in the following words:

The descendant of Bach and Beethoven, he was no less the inheritor and disciple of Schumann, and it was his work to show how full a measure of the new poetry could be poured into the molds of an exact and perfect musical design...at its most impassioned moment it never loses grasp, at the flood time of eloquence it never forgets restraint; it is wholly incapable of extravagance or sensationalism, of cheap effect or facile appeal.⁸

Despite its severity of form and structure, the Handel variations illustrate the full palette of Brahms' musical emotion and character.

Brahms' personal expression of emotion, mood and character finds its musical voice in specific forms that use his unique keyboard style. Throughout his keyboard oeuvre, Brahms seems drawn to the character piece, Hungarian music, the etude, and other smaller forms.⁹ Brahms' affinity for these genres is illustrated in the Handel variations. Of course, Brahms favored the variation form because it allowed for musical invention and emotion within defined parameters. It is fitting then, that Brahms fashioned miniature character pieces, Hungarian rhapsodies, etudes, fanfares and marches within individual variations. (Ex. 5)

⁸Edwin Evans, *Handbook to the Pianoforte Works of Johannes Brahms* (London: W. Reeves Ltd., 1936), 2.

⁹

Brahms' op. 76, 79, 116, 117, 118 and 119 feature 'character pieces' with such titles as 'Intermezzo' and 'Capriccio.' Brahms also wrote 10 Hungarian dances and 51 exercises.

Example 5a: Variation 5 (character piece)

espress. 1 2

p

Example 5b: Variation 13 (Hungarian rhapsody)

1 3 2 5

f espress.

Example 5c: Variation 21 (Etude)

1 3 3 3 2 3 3

p dolce

Example 5d: Variation 25 (March)

1 2

ff

Evans comments that, “his variations seem as if they were each a quotation from a larger work.”¹⁰ Within the course of 16 bars, the length of the theme and its subsequent variations, Brahms evokes the same complexity and variety of emotions found in his larger works; in a way, the variations become a microcosm of Brahms’ compositional output.

Present throughout the Handel variations is Brahms’ unique and somewhat cumbersome keyboard style: thick textures created by thirds, sixths and octaves, rhythmic complexities and contrapuntal devices. Brahms’ inclusion of contrapuntal techniques has been previously discussed at some length. The excerpt of Variation XXI, illustrated in the fifth example, clearly demonstrates Brahms’ use of polyrhythms, in this case three against four. Syncopation, another favorite rhythmic device, is present throughout the Handel variations, with conspicuous use in Variation XVIII. Thirds, sixths and filled in octaves pervades the work; Variation XIV features a melody of descending sixths, and Variation IV fills in the successive octaves with occasional thirds and sixths. The most compelling examples of this texture are found in the fugue. (Ex. 6)

Example 6a: Fugue (3rds)



¹⁰Evans, *Handbook to the Pianoforte Works of Johannes Brahms*, 33.

Example 6b: Fugue (6ths)



Example 6c: Fugue (octaves)



Here, Brahms writes long passages in double thirds, sixths and octaves. For all of its acquiescence to Baroque fugal techniques, it is not a fugue that Handel or Bach would have written; it is pure Brahms.

The success of the Handel variations is due to the juxtaposition of Romantic sentiment and Classical restraint. Classical restraint translates into structural, motivic and contrapuntal invention. Within these boundaries, Romantic sentiment, the evocation of vivid characters and moods, is unleashed. Ferguson said it best when he concluded:

The work is a convincing demonstration of the skill - amounting to virtuosity - which Brahms has now attained in the art of composition...The imagination which can make out of such material as Handel's so great a number of individual and meaningful character sketches is more mature than that which is required to perceive possibilities of canon where none were intended. The highest ingenuity, however, is not that which makes something out of nothing. It is that which brings into clear focus the core and the true substance of what we can sense as real, but have not the wit to focus for ourselves.¹¹

¹¹Ferguson, *Piano Music of Six Great Composers*, 279-280.

Free Formal-Outline Variations

Free formal-outline variations are similar in construction to their strict counterparts. The major discrepancy between the two types is the degree to which they retain the formal constructions of the theme throughout the variations. The strict variety faithfully preserves the formal-outline (head-motives, cadences and phrase lengths) of the theme throughout the variations. The free strain of the formal-outline variation maintains the formal connection between theme and variations most of the time, but strays from the theme in some instances. These instances are not labeled ‘variations’ since they bear no resemblance to the theme. Instead, they are categorized as ‘episodes.’ Since they have no connection to the theme, the episodes replace the theme with new melodic and harmonic material.

The best and clearest example from the keyboard repertoire of free formal-outline variation is Schumann’s *Études symphonique*, Op. 13 (1834). Titled ‘études’ because of their extreme technical difficulty, Schumann clearly intended them to be variations. The theme, borrowed from Baron von Fricken,¹² is indicated as such in the sub-title. For most of the work, Schumann alters the études using formal-outline procedures. What differentiates this work from strict formal-outline variations is Schumann’s deviation from variation technique. In the third and ninth études and much of the finale, Schumann

¹²

Baron von Fricken was the father of Ernestine von Fricken, a fellow piano student of Friedrich Wieck. Schumann had a brief infatuation with Ernestine before he fell violently in love with Clara Wieck.

abandons the theme to introduce new, unrelated material.

By titling the work 'etudes' instead of 'variations,' Schumann telegraphs his intent to fashion loosely-formed variations. The free formal-outline format affords him the freedom to do this. Since Schumann's intentions are not confined to strict variation technique, Ferguson believes his conception of the work springs from a creative impulse rather than an intellectual one.

Indeed, the third and ninth etude are not variations of the theme at all, but quite independent pieces. But the fact that they fit satisfactorily into the scheme of the whole work is proof that something besides the intellectual problem of variations - something more interesting to the composer than any solution of that problem - was the creative spur for the whole work.¹³

Unlike Brahms, who was liberated by prescribed forms and invigorated by the intellectual challenge of variations, Schumann was at his best in elastic forms that could be reshaped to accommodate his creative digressions. The free formal-outline variation form is such a form.

Sectional Fantasy/Free Variations

Free treatment of variation form dates from about 1875¹⁴ and continues through the first part of the twentieth century. The fantasy/free types vary everything: expressive constructs, melody, harmony and even structure. The sectional variety, the more conservative of the two, follows a format in which the beginnings and endings of the

¹³Ferguson, *Piano Music of Six Great Composers*, 170.

¹⁴Nelson, *The Technique of Variation*, 112.

variations are sectionalized and clearly delineated. In contrast, the rhapsodic type features loosely constructed, continuous variations that have no clear beginning or ending. However vague its connection to the theme, sectional fantasy/free variations still resemble traditional variation form. The same cannot be said for the rhapsodic type.

The sectional fantasy/free variation is the offspring of the free formal-outline variation used by Schumann in the earlier part of the Romantic period. It inherited from the formal-outline type economy of key, coda-like finales, and the development and transformation of theme fragments. On a more basic level, the systematic change of characters links these two formats. In both types, 'character change' translates into "pronounced departures from the mood of the theme."¹⁵ The contrast from one variation to the next is marked and often extreme. The later type, the sectional fantasy/free variation, often elevates the variations' distinctions of mood and character to the level of drama. To depict character at this level, more flexibility and less formal constraints are necessary.

What distinguishes free formal-outline from its strict counterpart, incidental free episode, also distinguishes the free formal-outline from the sectional fantasy/free. The degree of free treatment separate from the theme increases from an incidental use in the free formal-outline type to a preponderant use in the sectional fantasy/free type. This is an important but sometimes elusive distinction. How much free treatment constitutes

¹⁵Ibid., 113.

incidental use versus preponderant use? What is the threshold? The answers to these questions are entirely subjective and must be made on a piece-by-piece basis.

With such little to separate the two types, one general rule of thumb is to rely on the date of the variation work. If the composition dates back to the first few decades of the nineteenth century, then it is probably a free formal-outline variation. Likewise, if the composition dates after 1875, it probably contains more instances of free treatment and should be labeled a sectional fantasy/free variation. Although this method seems a bit simplistic and crude, it usually works.

A great majority of the sectional fantasy/free variation repertoire was written for orchestra.¹⁶ Those that were composed for the piano include: Dvorak's *Pianoforte Variations*, Op. 36 (1876); Glazounov's *Pianoforte Variations*, Op. 72 (1901); Reger's *Hiller Variations* (1907); and Rachmaninoff's *Variations on a Theme by Chopin*, Op. 22 (1903) and *Variations on a Theme by Corelli*, Op. 42 (1932). All of these examples date after 1875.

None of the above-mentioned repertoire is performed with any regularity. In fact, few if any pieces from the entirety of Dvorak's, Glazounov's, or Reger's piano output are ever heard in recital. In contrast, some of Rachmaninoff's piano works are performed

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Orchestral works written in sectional fantasy/free variation form include Dvorak's *Symphonic Variations*, Op. 78; Elgar's *Variations on an Original Theme*, Op. 36 and Tchaikovsky's *Variations on a Rococo Theme for Cello and Orchestra*, Op. 33.

with alarming regularity. It seems almost impossible to go to a piano competition and not hear one of Rachmaninoff's concerti. His *Preludes*, Op. 23 and Op. 32, not to mention his famous *C-sharp minor Prelude*, Op. 3 no. 2, and his *Etudes-Tableaux*, Op. 33 and Op. 39 are studied, taught and performed quite frequently. In recent decades, his larger works for solo piano, two sonatas and two variation sets, have also enjoyed a prominent place in the pianist's repertoire. Through my analysis and recording, I hope to draw attention to the Corelli Variation's important place as a sectional fantasy/free variation in the history and evolution of variation form and to illustrate the variations' hybrid formation and intense psychological drama.

Rachmaninoff's *Variations on Theme by Corelli*, Op. 42 is difficult to categorize. The variations are sectional and sometimes demonstrate free treatment. These attributes suggest either a free formal-outline or sectional fantasy/free classification. Although the degree of free episode is minimal in the work, its late date, 1932, reliance on a hybrid of variation techniques rather than formal-outline technique, and intense psychological drama support its categorization as a sectional fantasy/free variation. The fact that the work is of a conservative bent for a fantasy/free variation fits Rachmaninoff's profile as a the 'Puritan of Pianists'¹⁷

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For an account of Rachmaninoff's nickname, see Schonberg, *The Great Pianists*, 398. To label this variation set 'conservative,' one need only consider the date of this composition. By 1932, Copland had completed his *Piano Variations*; the twelve-tone system had taken hold and Messiaen was the 'father' of the avant garde. In comparison, Rachmaninoff's post-romanticism seems quite conservative. The fact that his two variation sets are classified with nineteenth century character variations is an another indication of his conservatism.

The theme, quoted in Corelli's *Violin Sonata No. 12*, is actually based on *la folia*, a traditional Portuguese dance that has been the subject of many variations, including those written by Bach and Liszt.¹⁸ It is characterized by a simple sarabande inflected melody in symmetrical and periodic phrases and features a brief tonicization of F major (III). (Ex. 7)



For the first six variations, Rachmaninoff remains faithful to much of the theme by preserving the melodic, harmonic and structural outline of the theme. From Variation VIII on, he draws on multiple techniques to create melodic, harmonic and structural variations that transform the very nature of the theme.

In Variation VII, Rachmaninoff buries the melodic outline amidst a flurry of chromatic broken chords. (Ex. 8)

¹⁸The folia is quoted in Bach's *Peasant Cantata* and forms the basis of Liszt's *Spanish Rhapsody*.

Example 8: Variation 7

The second phrase of the variation digresses into free episode. The chromatic flurries overwhelm the melody and break out into furious descending, diminished chord arpeggios.

The theme's simple tonic-dominant harmonies are entirely reworked with liberal use of chromatic harmonies (bVII, bII, #II, bI, secondary dominants and augmented and diminished chords) that typify Rachmaninoff's post-romantic harmonic language. Despite these chromatic digressions, Rachmaninoff preserves the basic harmonic motion from d minor to f major and back again throughout the work. Sometimes this is the only thing that links the variations to the theme. (Ex. 9)

Example 9: Variation 19

In this example, Variation XIX, the tonicization of III is the only recognizable connection to the theme. The rest is chromatic fantasy.

Sometimes, even the harmonic movement to F major is abandoned. What remain are two eight-bar phrases that comprise the basic structure of the theme. (Ex. 10)

Example 10: Variation 13

Agitato

The texture of the chromatic harmonies in this example is so thick and overwhelming that one is hard pressed to call this a variation. The only link to the theme is the symmetrical eight-bar phrases. Whether this is audible to the listener is debatable. This variation could be classified as a free episode.

After the chaos of Variation XIII, the work dissolves into free rhapsody and loose cadenza. Rachmaninoff titles this segment 'Intermezzo.' (Ex. 11)

Example 11: Intermezzo

The musical score for Example 11: Intermezzo consists of three systems. The first system features a piano accompaniment in the left hand and a violin melody in the right hand. The piano part begins with a series of chords and then moves to a more active role. The violin part starts with a series of eighth notes and then moves to a more active role. The dynamic marking *ff* (fortissimo) is placed above the violin staff, and *dim.* (diminuendo) is placed below the piano staff. The second system continues the piano accompaniment and violin melody. The dynamic marking *p* (piano) is placed below the piano staff. The third system continues the piano accompaniment and violin melody. The dynamic marking *mf* (mezzo-forte) is placed below the piano staff.

The intermezzo breaks from the theme and abandons variation technique in favor of improvisation. Improvisation and free fantasy lead into a straightforward presentation of the theme in D-flat major (b1). To modulate from d minor to Db major requires creativity and room to wander. The free nature of the intermezzo affords Rachmaninoff the space he needs to make this modulation work.

The reason behind the placement of the Intermezzo and Variation XIV brings up the larger consideration of the ordering and overall shape of the work. It is clear from this one example that Rachmaninoff put a great deal of thought into the succession of the variations. The question then becomes, “what is the rationale behind the organization of the variations?” I believe the work’s emotional arc is the impulse behind the architecture of the work.

It has been previously mentioned that the depth of character and mood evoked in each variation rises to the level of drama. Essentially, each variation adds up to a composite emotion, personality trait or quirk. The precise ordering and succession of the variations parallels the unfolding of character and emotion in a drama. The emotional goal of the variations is catharsis.

Anchoring the set are three segments that mark the emotional goal posts of the work. The first segment, the theme, is the starting point from which the first twelve variations succeed. With each variation, the thematic material becomes less obvious and more obscured by episodic material until the work digress into fantasy. In this fantasy state, the second emotional anchor, Variation XIV, materializes.

In effect, Variation XIV is a second presentation of the theme, only this time in Db major. Much of the original theme, its tempo, melody, phrasing and inflection, resurface. Although much remains the same, the altered key and harmonic liberties taken during the variation recast the tenor of the theme. The d minor theme exudes objectivity and reason; the Db major theme elicits an outpouring of intimate emotion and sentiment. Upon hearing this variation, the listener knows that he has arrived at some new understanding of the theme. Rachmaninoff prolongs the dream state with melodic elaboration in the next variation. Variation XV ends with a fading Db major sweep up the keyboard. Unlike the complex modulation into Db major, there is no elaborate attempt to transition back to d minor. The suddenness of d minor in Variation XVI combined with

its square rhythm and clear texture remind the listener that what came before was only an aberration.

Much like the opening twelve variations, the variations that follow the Db theme progress from the conventional to the enigmatic. The difference this time is the alacrity with which the digression occurs. Rachmaninoff journeys from the second psychological anchor to the final one in a matter of five variations. As with the previous instance, he digresses into free fantasy prior to the restatement of the theme. The building tension and intensity of Variation XVIII and XIX boils over into the last variation. Toward the end of the last variation, Rachmaninoff gets caught up in the tumult and goes off on a tangent of fortissimo chords that land on an ostinato d octave that eventually fades into the coda.

The coda is pure catharsis. The original tempo and key return but not much else. The melody, liberated from the confined range of the theme, soars to the highest registers of the piano, while the harmony wanders through chromatic ‘purple patches.’ Rachmaninoff concludes his emotional drama with the sublime and a touch of the surreal.

Fantasy/Free Variations

The final variety of character variation, Fantasy/Free Variation, has little in common with the other types. Rather than taking its cue from earlier variation forms, it resembles the loosely organized fantasia, rhapsody and symphonic poem of the late

nineteenth century. Continuous and freely developed, it is organized around an extra-musical association or program. As with other programmatic works, thematic transformation is the primary technique.

Examples of this type of variation are confined almost entirely to the orchestral repertoire. The most notable examples include Franck's *Variations Symphoniques*, Strauss' *Don Quixote*, d'Indy's *Istar* and Frederick Delius' *Appalachia*. I am not aware of any piano variations that qualify as fantasy/free variations if the above-mentioned criteria are used.¹⁹

Although Romantic composers were disinclined to write rhapsodic fantasy/free variations for the piano, the form is still relevant to the discussion of nineteenth-century variation writing. The type illustrates the result of a philosophy taken to the extreme; when all formal barriers and rules governing variation form are discarded, rhapsodic fantasy/free variation results.

Nineteenth-Century Basso Ostinato

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Romantic composers showed a renewed interest in the basso ostinato. Largely forgotten during the Classical period, the type

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Liszt's *Spanish Rhapsody* comes the closest. Although the work is loosely constructed and goes in and out of the theme, the theme, when it is varied, is based on the folia, a basso ostinato. In the end, Liszt's work must be categorized as a nineteenth century basso ostinato variation.

resurfaced in such early works as Schumann's *Impromptus on a Theme by Clara Wieck*, Op. 5 (1833) and Liszt's *Spanish Rhapsody* (1845). Liszt's *Variations on a Theme by Bach* (1866) and *Prelude* (1859) on the same theme signaled the form's return into the mainstream; it was no longer seen as incidental or novel. The basso ostinato would remain a viable variation form through the twentieth century. Although it was written in the twentieth century, Reger's *Introduction, Passacaglia, and Fugue*, Op. 127 (1913) was the last basso ostinato variation written in the nineteenth-century style. Basso ostinato works written after this piece were clearly built using twentieth century compositional ideas.

The nineteenth-century basso ostinato balanced the structural traditions associated with the Baroque type with the musical Romanticism of the day. Its conservative traits, continuous form and dance rhythm were tempered by more radical changes such as increased chromaticism and emotion and freer treatment of the ostinato. While Baroque composers wrote independent basso ostinato works, Romantic composers included the form in multi-movement works.²⁰ Those that were independent compositions grew to include lengthy introductions, chorales, and even fugues.²¹ Although the choice of chorale and fugue was in deference to the basso ostinato's Baroque heritage, the inclusion of

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Examples of basso ostinato in multi-movement works include the *Allegro energico* from Brahms' *Fourth Symphony* and the finale of Brahms' *Variations on a Theme by Haydn*, Op. 56a.

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Liszt's *Variations on a Theme of J.S. Bach* includes Bach's chorale *Was Gott thut, das ist wohlgethan*. Reger's *Introduction, Passacaglia, and Fugue* begins with a lengthy introduction and ends with a fugue. Another non-variation work that incorporates Baroque forms is Liszt's *Ad nos, ad salutarem undam*. This work was originally conceived for organ but was later transcribed for solo piano by Busoni.

unrelated material in basso ostinato works expanded the form's potential for contrast and development.

In the name of greater flexibility and expression, nineteenth century composers overlooked the stock basses that constituted the majority of Baroque basso ostinato works. In the Romantic period, composers did not title these works 'passacaglia' or 'chaconne,' the most popular Baroque designations. Instead, nineteenth century composers favored titles such as *Spanish Rhapsody* (which uses a folia bass line) or *Prelude* (which uses a vocal ostinato). All of the above-mentioned modifications lessened the rigidity of the basso ostinato form, making the type more appealing to nineteenth century composers.

One such composer was Franz Liszt. Although he wrote fewer variations than most of his contemporaries,²² his basso ostinato works accounted for a great majority of the nineteenth century repertoire of this type. His basso ostinato works for solo piano included *Spanish Rhapsody*, *Variations on a Theme by J.S. Bach* and *Prelude on a Theme by J.S. Bach*. As previously mentioned, the *Spanish Rhapsody* was built on the *folia*. Both the 'Variations' and 'Prelude' used the same vocal ostinato: *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen* from the opening chorus of Bach's cantata of the same name.

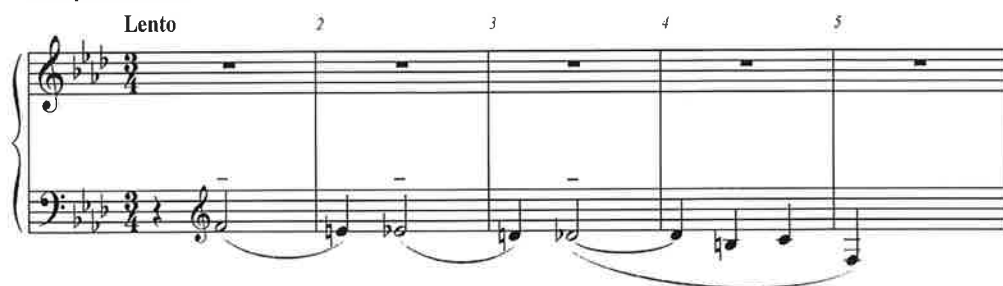
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Although Liszt did not write many variations, many of his compositions depend on a type of variation technique, thematic transformation. He also wrote paraphrases of other composers' works. For a discussion of Liszt and variation form, see Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt: the Man and his Music* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1970), 278.

Of the three works, the *Prelude on a Theme by J.S. Bach* is the most conservative.

Written in 1859, the work consists of twenty-five repetitions of Bach's theme. (Ex. 12)

Example 12: Theme



The theme, which depicts weeping, crying, sorrowing, and sighing, features one long chromatic descent from the tonic note (F minor) to the dominant note with a final cadence articulating the close of the four-bar theme. Throughout the variations, Liszt remains faithful to the notes and rhythm of the theme, but does not confine the statements of the theme to the bass line. (Ex. 13)

Example 13a:



Example 13b:



Despite the regularity with which the four-bar theme is heard, Liszt manages to disguise it with elaboration. (Ex. 14)

Example 14:



In this example, Liszt weaves a compound melody of diminished chord arpeggios that highlight the ostinato. By filling in the ostinato with moving notes and leaving a sparse texture, Liszt breaks the spell (some would say monotony) that the previous forty-four measures of steady quarter note pulse and chorale style texture create. Later, Liszt adds chromatic lower neighboring tones to the ostinato. This changes the direction of the two-note slur from a descending shape to an ascending one.

Liszt takes advantage of the chromatic quality of the ostinato and the melancholy character of the theme to produce a work of Romantic passion. Sprinkled throughout the work are suspensions, diminished chords and two-note slurs that convey weeping and sobbing. The climactic peaks, complete with tremolos and dotted rhythms, and pensive valleys, written in a chorale style, rival those in any of Liszt's more fantasy-like compositions. Although the theme was conceived during the Baroque period, its expressive potential makes it the perfect vehicle for musical Romanticism.

Chapter VII Keyboard Variation Writing in the 20th Century

“The essentials of variation form...have probably existed as long as music itself has existed, and in the early stages of musical evolution were inseparable from all the other aspects of musical form...in modern times again they have come to penetrate all genres.”¹

The importance of variation in music of the twentieth century cannot be stressed enough. Composers continued to write variations, working with existing models such as the basso ostinato and creating new formats such as the serial variation. Although the number of variation sets composed during this period was roughly comparable to what was generated in the nineteenth century, the principle of variation, “simultaneous contrast of repetition and change²,” permeated every facet of contemporary musical style. The fruits of variation technique manifested themselves in such diverse musical styles as Serialism and Minimalism. What caused this sea change in attitude? Just a few decades earlier, variation technique was held to be the lowest form of thematic development, which, left in incapable hands, produced only tripe. Tovey derided the form as the “expression of sublime inactivity.”³ Why then, were variation form and technique so prevalent during the twentieth century?

Elsie Payne theorized that the abandonment of tonality (more precisely diatonicism), a primary source of musical development, led to the eventual rise of

¹Elsie Payne, “The Theme and Variation in Modern Music,” *The Music Review* 19 (1958): 112.

²John Gillespie, *Five Centuries of Keyboard Music*, 43.

³Donald Francis Tovey, *Beethoven*, 134.

variation technique and form. She stated her case in the following words:

It (the resurgence of variation) was provoked basically by the poverty of musical resources which resulted from the disintegration of the orthodox systems at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. The disintegration of diatonicism meant the weakening of the functional and dramatic power of harmony and of modulation - the loss, therefore, of one of the greatest means of musical development and prolongation.⁴

Without tonality and the structural by-products it generated, composers were compelled to experiment with new ways of organizing music. What used to be secondary constructions (changes in register, dynamics and texture as well as rhythmic complexities and orchestral color) became structural 'events' that anchored a work. Extra-musical programs were sometimes used to lend coherence to what could otherwise be perceived as disjunct and incidental musical moments.

The presence of a program, conjured by a descriptive title or reference to a story or legend, provided a framework from which non-diatonic pieces could develop into large-scale works. Initially, abstract music lacked such a framework. Thus according to Payne, "Purely abstract music...tended inevitably to get shorter and shorter, lacking the scope and the urge for development."⁵ Aaron Copland, a preeminent composer of abstract music, once admitted that, "The foremost problem in the structure of a piece of absolute music that has no story content is truly one of the most challenging things the human mind can battle with."⁶

⁴Payne, "The Theme and Variation in Modern Times," 112.

⁵Ibid.

⁶

This quote is taken from a conversation between Leo Smit and Aaron Copland that was included in the liner notes of Smit's recording. See, Aaron Copland, *The Complete Music for Solo Piano*, Leo Smit, CBS 79234.

Composers of abstract music explored new ways of organizing and extending non-diatonic and atonal compositions. Their findings, whether based on twelve notes, symmetrical structures or pitch sets, were dependent on thematic variation to develop or extend a musical idea. Payne reasoned:

Thematic discussion...has always played an important part in musical development, but only one part: now it has become of primary importance. And to a large extent this means thematic variation.⁷

Thematic variation, synonymous with variation technique, replaced modulation and other tonal processes that produced musical development. Since musical development was necessary to extend a composition, variation technique became an indispensable tool of non-diatonic and atonal music; it enabled 'modern' absolute music to break out of its constricted one-or two-page length and extend into large-scale forms. Thus, regardless of a composer's musical ideology, variation technique and its natural consequence, variation form, came to "penetrate all genres."⁸

Variation form, the systematic use of variation technique, thrived in the twentieth century. The repertoire from this period can roughly be divided into four categories: character variation, basso ostinato, serial variation and hybrid variation. The character variation, a hold-over from the nineteenth century, reflected a Post-Romantic movement in music that extended well into the twentieth century. Variations of Max Reger and Sergei Rachmaninoff, discussed in the previous chapter with other Romantic period

⁷Payne, "The Theme and Variation in Modern Music," 113.

⁸Ibid., 112.

variations, typified the Post-Romantic character variation. The second type, basso ostinato, enjoyed a revival of sorts from the last quarter of the nineteenth century well into the twentieth century. In contrast, the serial variation was an entirely modern invention: the product of twelve-tone procedures in variation format. Finally, hybrid variation form, which relied on multiple techniques and formats, appealed to a wide cross-section of modern composers. Its lack of doctrine made it a pliable form that was compatible with a variety of musical aesthetics.

At this time, I will elucidate the primary forms of variation writing in the twentieth century through a discussion of each type's general characteristics and an analysis of its specific repertoire. Since the character variations of the early twentieth century were clear descendants of the late nineteenth century type and were discussed as such in the previous chapter, I will forego any discussion of the form and its repertoire in this chapter and will begin instead with the basso ostinato.

Basso Ostinato

In the twentieth century, basso ostinato form was synonymous with the *passacaglia*. For whatever reason, composers eschewed the other forms, the chaconne, folia and ground, and faithfully titled their basso ostinato variations 'Passacaglia.' In keeping with the Baroque title, contemporary composers generally adhered to its historic design: eight-bar recurring bass line, 3/4 meter and continuous form. Modern composers,

according to Leon Stein, “attempted to graft twentieth century devices” to this generic plan.⁹ These devices were the various idiosyncratic harmonic idioms that abounded in modern music. The replacement of the ‘old’ diatonicism with the current ‘ism’ of the day became the hallmark of the twentieth century basso ostinato.

The fact that modern composers ‘updated’ the Passacaglia and did not simply ‘borrow’ or ‘imitate’ the Baroque models went a long way to support Stein’s assertion that the twentieth century basso ostinato was ‘reborn’ during this period.

The revival of this form, is then, no superficial “borrowing” or “imitating,” nor is it in any sense a “going back,” but is an actual regeneration, a rebirth of a form from a complex of mutually interactive forces, quite similar in nature to those which first produced this particular pattern more than two centuries ago.¹⁰

Sisman agrees that the models were updated and transformed to meet the contemporary standards of the day. Yet unlike Stein, who discounts all of the basso ostinato repertoire of the late nineteenth century, Sisman envisions a link between the resurgence of the form in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and its continuance into the twentieth century.

The attraction of the ostinato variation as a format for conflation of old and new, as well as its appearance in composers as different as Liszt and Brahms, predicated the wholesale return of the passacaglia in the 20th century.¹¹

The modern Passacaglia takes its cue from the basso ostinato works of Brahms, Liszt and Reger. These earlier works demonstrate a reworking of ‘new’ styles in old forms; the modern works follow the same path, redefining what is ‘new’ in terms of their own

⁹Leon Stein, “The Passacaglia in the Twentieth Century,” *Music and Letters* 40 (1959): 152.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 153.

¹¹*New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, s.v. “Variation,” by Elaine Sisman, 313.

idiosyncratic style.

Whatever its perceived lineage, modern composers identified with the Passacaglia. Barber, Berg, Bloch, Britten, Copland, Dohnányi, Hindemith, Nielson, Piston, Schoenberg, Vaughan Williams and Webern were just a few composers who wrote Passacaglias. The list, though not exhaustive, demonstrates that the Passacaglia was a substantive form and not “merely a historic curiosity.”¹² The form’s wide appeal during the twentieth century stemmed primarily from a need for order and structure in the post-tonal world of modern music.

As previously discussed, the abandonment of tonality and/or diatonicism led to a collapse of the form governed by these harmonic systems. According to Stein:

The aesthetic-constructive principle of the passacaglia is that of repetition, a repetition which provides continuity, coherence, order and symmetry. These elements become the more sought after in order to compensate for the lack of the organization which was previously provided by tonality and by the use of accepted and established forms.¹³

The rigid structure of the Passacaglia filled the void left by a retreating tonality. The quest for the organizing structures that would replace the tonal system led many composer down a path toward ‘total control.’ Total control in music was expressed in terms of mathematical and architectural principles. These “architectonic tendencies”¹⁴ found an outlet in the Passacaglia.

¹²Stein, “The Passacaglia in the Twentieth Century,” 151.

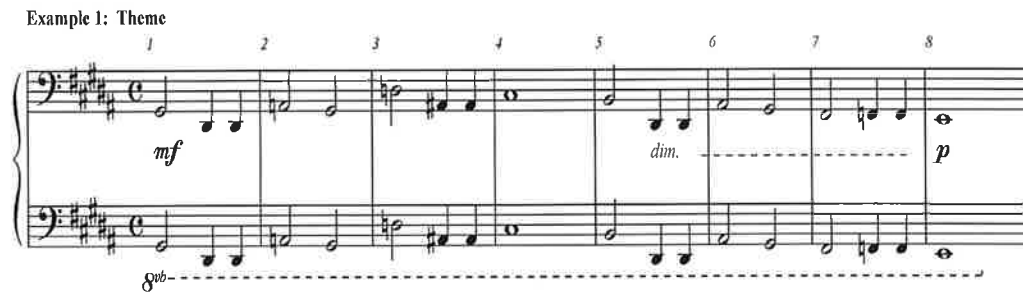
¹³Ibid., 152.

¹⁴Ibid.

Aaron Copland's *Passacaglia*

Copland began work on his *Passacaglia* in 1921 at the insistence of his teacher, Nadia Boulanger. Apparently, she was known to assign Passacaglias to students whom she thought needed to understand the importance of structure and architecture in music.¹⁵ The result of Copland's efforts and Boulanger's disciplined tutelage was an abstract work of "closely argued material"¹⁶ that exuded a clear architectural structure.

The theme, a recurring eight-bar bass line in G# minor, is introduced by both hands in unison in the bottom registers of the piano. (Ex. 1)



During the course of the eight variations, Copland subjects the theme to canon, diminution, augmentation and even retrograde. (Ex. 2)

¹⁵

For a discussion of Nadia Boulanger's teaching style, see Julia Smith, *Aaron Copland* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1955), 46.

¹⁶Neil Butterworth, *The Music of Aaron Copland* (n.p.: Toccata Press, 1985), 20.

Example 2: Retrograde



These ‘intellectual’ manipulations of the theme, though expertly executed and musically convincing, coincide with Copland’s study of compositional form and technique with Boulanger and must be viewed as the product of such study.

Although the piece is firmly rooted in G# minor, Copland eschews the traditional diatonicism and tonality in favor of multiple harmonic idioms. These idioms include, chromaticism, quartal and quintal harmonies, and augmented and extended triads. The result of such variety is a hodge-podge of musical styles. Julia Smith comments:

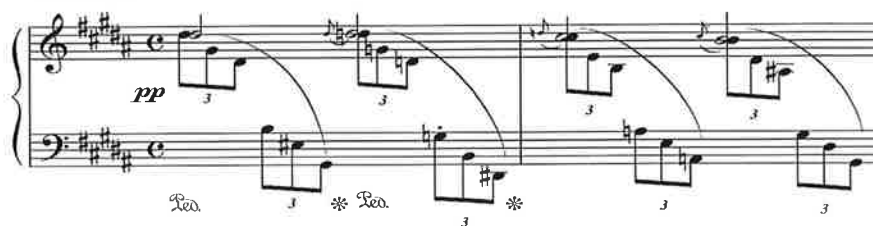
In spite of the skill and imagination evidenced in the handling of the different variations and the various contrapuntal devices contained therein, as well as the excellent writing for the piano, the ‘Passacaglia’ is a work not unified in style. Its diatonic and chromatic harmonies as well as its style of piano writing shows the influences of Schumann, Franck (and) Fauré...¹⁷

The influence of the French musical style is evident in the second and fifth variation.

(Ex. 3)

¹⁷Julia Smith, *Aaron Copland*, 50.

Example 3a:



Example 3b:



In the second variation, the melting harmonies and duality of texture built on sudden changes of dynamics create a blended languorous style that could easily be mistaken for a Fauré nocturne. The delicate rolled chords and impish dotted rhythms and crushed grace notes of the fifth variation suggest a style more often associated with Poulenc.

For all of its modern updates, Copland continues the Baroque tradition of growing toward a climactic moment. The Passacaglia, as with all basso ostinato variations, is essentially an organic form. A sectional and disjunct eight-measure theme alone can not produce a large-scale work; the form is incumbent on continual development and growth. Despite the occasional pauses and the doubling of tempo in the fourth and fifth variations, Copland achieves a sense of culmination through the clever control of rhythmic animation and the masterful pacing of dynamic and textural differences.

variation. In twelve-tone music, the basic manipulations of a row can be construed as variation technique. Inversion, retrograde, retrograde-inversion, transposition and combinatoriality, which are standard twelve-tone techniques, are forms of variation. Previously, it has been pointed out that variation technique permeated all genres of modern music. This is but another example of that truth. What distinguishes twelve-tone variation form is the recognizable and systematic variation of a theme. All twelve-tone music varies a row; twelve-tone variations alter a theme.

Arnold Schoenberg

Considered the ‘father of atonality’ and the inventor of the twelve-tone system, Schoenberg was a crucial figure in the development of modern music and the modern variation. Through his teaching, writings and music, he put forward his ideas on variation technique and variation form that directly influenced the other composers of the Second Viennese School and reverberated into future generations. Two concepts, ‘Grundgestalt’ and ‘Developing Variations,’ were central to how variation technique operated in twelve-tone music. Bryan Simms describes ‘Grundgestalt,’ or basic shape, in the following way:

A basic shape is a special type of motif occurring at the beginning of a work that, by an ongoing variational process, governs many of the subsequent melodic and harmonic manifestation. It is different from a traditional motif because it consists purely of a succession of intervals, devoid of rhythm or other musical features.¹⁸

‘Developing Variations’ describes the continual shaping of ‘Grundgestalt’ by thematic

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Bryan R. Simms, *Schoenberg, Berg and Webern: A Companion to the Second Viennese School* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 175.

development and transformation.

Although Schoenberg's application of these concepts was startlingly new, the ideas behind them can be traced back to Beethoven and Brahms. In their formal outline variations, Beethoven and Brahms conveyed the essence of the theme with the opening head motive and then were free to digress into free development. Schoenberg himself said that "Brahms fulfills his obligation to the theme in the first part of the measure, and is thus freed for the rest of the measure."¹⁹ These composers realized that recognition can hinge on the barest of fragments if presented at the beginning of a phrase.

As previously mentioned, the distinctiveness of twelve-tone variation comes from its fidelity to a theme that happens to be a row. Thus basic shape, which is concerned with merely pitches and intervals does not in itself produce variation form. Nelson makes the distinction with the following words:

...only those variations that follow the melodic-rhythmic form of the theme possess the same structure as the theme. All other must necessarily be free with respect to the theme, even if they show the same serial form.²⁰

In the serial variation works of Schoenberg (*Variationen* from the *Serenade*, Op. 24; *Thema mit Variationen* from the *Suite*, Op. 29; and the *Variations for Orchestra*, Op. 31) the melodic structure of the theme as well as the row are always maintained.²¹

¹⁹

This quote is in reference to the second variation of Brahms's *Variation on a Theme by Handel*. See Robert Nelson, "Schoenberg's Variation Seminar," *The Musical Quarterly* 50 (1964): 149.

²⁰Ibid., 150.

²¹Ibid., 163.

Schoenberg's fidelity to the structure of the theme, in many ways reminiscent of Beethoven and Brahms, betrays his traditional tendencies. For all of his harmonic innovations, he reverts back to a conservative notion of form and structure. Nelson concludes:

With sure instinct he realized that in serial music as in tonal, the most characteristically variation-like form is not the free variation, built upon a motif, but rather the structural variation, built upon a definable melodic theme.²²

Because of this, a clear distinction exists between Schoenberg's serial music and serial works in variation form.

Anton Webern

Among the three composers of the Second Viennese School, Webern earned the reputation as a strict constructionist. Although Schoenberg devised the system, he did not always follow his own rules. In contrast, Webern wholeheartedly embraced the emancipation of pitch and the sanctity of the row. He rigorously maintained the exact presentation of the twelve-tone row, studiously avoiding repetitions that his teacher and mentor Schoenberg allowed and shunning tonal implication in his rows. The result was a concentrated musical style of motivic cells, imitative counterpoint, complex rhythmic patterns and fine gradations in dynamic level.

In terms of variation, Webern, like Schoenberg, did much to further the form. His

²²Ibid.

three serial variation works, the second movement of the *Symphony for Small Orchestra*, Op. 21; *Variations for Piano*, Op. 27; and *Variations for Orchestra*, Op. 30, broke away from Schoenberg's more conservatively structured variation format. Whereas Schoenberg maintained the melodic structure of the theme, Webern preserved only the abstract form of the theme in his *Symphony* and forged a "new kind of free variation"²³ with his *Piano Variations* and *Orchestra Variations*.

In his *Symphony* movement, Webern constructs the variations around a palindrome. The first half of the theme, its intervals, duration, dynamics and phrasing, is repeated exactly in retrograde, filling out the row. Throughout the seven variations and coda, Webern consistently preserves the symmetrical phrasing of the theme if not the melodic contour of the theme. Nelson concludes that this, not the melody or accompaniment is the true theme of the work.

But the actual theme used by Webern is neither this melody nor its accompaniment. Rather, it is the rudimentary palindrome of intervals found in the row. The implications of this statement are clear. The *Symphony* movement has no theme at all, in the usual sense. Instead, what Webern calls "theme," "variations," and "coda" are all realizations of the basic row materials.²⁴

The abstract form of the theme that is maintained throughout the variations is the "two balancing sections related through retrograde interval."²⁵

²³Robert Nelson, "Webern's Path to the Serial Variation," *Perspectives of New Music* 7 (1968-9): 92.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 78.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 82.

His piano variations, completed in 1936, are quite different in nature from the strictly controlled symmetry of the Symphony. Written in three movements with no indication as to the actual theme or boundaries of the individual variations, the piano variations mystify theorists. Most contend that the last movement is the only one in variation form²⁶, and that the first, in ABA form, and the second, in binary form, are freely constructed. It is universally agreed that the only apparent connection between the three movements is their reliance on the same tone row.

Webern does make use of a palindrome in the first movement; all fourteen phrases of the movements end the second half of the phrase with the retrograde of the opening motivic pattern. As with the Symphony movements, Webern's faithful preservation of the palindrome structure in each phrase parallels Schoenberg's insistence on maintaining the melodic contour of the theme. Although the phrases differ in melodic contour, they still exhibit the same structure. Thus the phrase's structure becomes a surrogate 'theme' that remains constant.

Both the second movement, made up of two eleven-bar phrases, and the third movement, a theme with six variations, are radical departures from Schoenberg's concept of variation and Webern's previous 'structural variations.' Instead of creating a reoccurring structure, Webern carves out from the row motifs that are developed throughout the movements. These motifs are short, sometimes only two notes, and do not

²⁶David Burge, *Twentieth Century Piano Music* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1990), 96.

rise to the level of a theme though they are developed thematically. Despite their length, they form the important link between the ‘theme’ and the subsequent phrases.

Up until the piano variations, Webern treated his motives to uniform development: a motive remained fundamentally unchanged and thus recognizable. With the Piano Variations and to a greater extent his orchestra variations, Webern altered a motive’s dynamic level, rhythmic shape, texture, articulation and register, developing “patterns that are conspicuously asymmetric, discontinuous and sharply contrasting.”²⁷ Nelson characterizes this type of motivic development as ‘free variation.’

Variation form results from the simultaneous preservation and alteration of a theme. If a work does not preserve the melodic contour, phrase structure, harmony or motivic units of its theme, then can it truly be considered a variation? Is it enough to maintain the intervallic structure (the row)? True, the works feature highly sophisticated motivic development, but don’t other forms as well? Motivic development in itself does not constitute variation form. If Webern had not titled these works ‘Variations,’ would we still consider them to be variations? Probably not. His free variation method looks more like serial technique than variation technique.

²⁷Nelson, “Webern’s Path to the Serial Variation,” 87.

Post-Second Viennese School

At this juncture, one might ask why I did not make specific mention of Alban Berg and his variation works. After all, he is the third member of the second Viennese School whose body of work is performed more often than either Schoenberg's or Webern's put together. The reason for this omission is that Berg did not invent the serial style, as did Schoenberg, and did not write any piano variations, as was the case with Webern. Aside from his student composition, *Zwölf Variationen über ein eigenes Thema* (1908), Berg's variation works are confined to the vocal literature²⁸ and concertos.

The twelve-tone method profoundly shaped the trajectory of musical composition in the first half of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, to faithfully trace the dissemination of twelve-tone procedures would require a certain depth of discussion that is not possible in this paper.²⁹ However, I think some discussion of the method's influence on subsequent composers and some mention of the important serial variations for the piano after the 1930s is merited.

Generally speaking, there were two strains of dissemination after the 1930s: one in America and the other in Europe. With the Second Viennese School centered in

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Sisman points out that the "repetitive forms are particularly effective in charting the opera characters' obsessions." See *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, s.v. "Variations," by Elaine Sisman, 317.

²⁹For a thorough and lengthy account, see Bryan R. Simms, *Schoenberg, Berg and Webern*, 315-372.

Austria, one would assume that the European strain would spring directly from Schoenberg, Berg and Webern. Yet, that was not the case. In 1933, Schoenberg fled the Nazis and emigrated to the United States. Shortly afterward, in 1935, Berg died. With the Nazi party in control of Vienna after the Austrian *Anschluss* of 1938, Webern essentially withdrew from musical life (such as it was during the second world war) and died in 1945. With the sudden departure and deaths of its key proponents, the dissemination of twelve-tone theory was left to figures outside of the ‘School’ such as Olivier Messiaen and Rene Leibowitz.

After the war, figures like Messiaen and Leibowitz were pivotal in the perpetuation of twelve-tone techniques. They organized groups of students at the Paris Conservatoire to study the compositions of Stravinsky, Schoenberg and Berg. Later, Leibowitz published two books, *Schoenberg et son école* (1947) and *Introduction à la musique de douze sons* (1949), which were widely regarded as the first coherent and reliable accounts of twelve-tone theory. In the same year, Messiaen broadened the serial elements in this landmark work, *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités* (1949), to include duration, dynamics and attack as well as pitch, in effect demonstrating the potential of the serial approach. Through their teaching, writing and compositions, Messiaen and Leibowitz influenced a whole new generation of European composers that would otherwise have been unfamiliar with the twelve-tone method.

Two such composers were Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Both

students of Messiaen, they identified strongly with the compositions of Webern. Boulez wrote in 1955:

Whereas Schoenberg and Berg ally themselves to the decadence of the great German romantic tradition, and in such works as *Pierrot Lunaire* and *Wozzeck* round it off by the most luxuriant, flamboyant means, Webern...reacts violently against all inherited rhetoric, in order to rehabilitate the powers of sound.³⁰

Boulez and Stockhausen believed that the total serialism implied in Messiaen's *Modes de valeurs et d'intensités* was the logical continuation of Webern's music. Stockhausen held that if Webern's composing had not been curtailed by the war and his sudden death, he "would have achieved complete structural integration."³¹

Although Boulez and Stockhausen saw themselves as the legitimate successors to Webern, they did not follow in his footsteps and write variations. Perhaps their reluctance to write variations stemmed from their view that all interest lay with the individual note and not with the theme. Stockhausen described his *Kreuzspiel* and *Punkte* (1952) as well as Boulez's *Structures* (Book I) and *Polyphonie X* as 'pointillist.' He explained:

Pointillist - Why? Because we hear only single notes, which might almost exist for themselves alone, in a mosaic of sound; they exist among others in configurations which no longer destine them to become components of shapes which intermix and fuse in the traditional way; rather, they are points amongst others, existing for themselves in complete freedom, and formulated individually and in considerable isolation from each other.³²

If a single note conveyed such profound meaning outside of a theme, the motivation to write themes and vary them disappeared.

³⁰Ibid., 325.

³¹Ibid., 330.

³²Ibid.

In the United States, composers benefitted from Schoenberg's emigration. Although he did not publish anything that explained his twelve-tone theories until 1949, he lectured on the method as early as 1933. In these lectures, he seemed hesitant to analyze his works in any detail and chose rather to speak of the method in the most general of terms. He commented:

I did not call it a 'system' but a 'method,' and considered it a tool of composition, but not as a theory. And therefore I concluded my explanation with the sentence: "You use the row and compose as you had done previously."³³

In addition to his lectures, as unenlightening as they were, Schoenberg composed a series of 'American' works in the 1930s and 1940s that influenced American composers and shaped the path of American serialism in the 1950s.

One such American was Milton Babbitt. Unlike his European contemporaries Boulez and Stockhausen, Babbitt found Schoenberg's pieces to be revolutionary and did not disparage them in favor of Webern's works.³⁴ He went to great effort to formalize Schoenberg's twelve-tone method and lay out its future trajectory in his study *The Function of Set Structure in the Twelve-Tone System*. In this study, Babbitt introduced the rules and degrees of combinatoriality and the formation of aggregates and defined a special class of all-interval sets. Simms maintained that Babbitt's understanding was miles ahead of the Europeans' attempts at serialism.

Here is manifest a level of understanding of the twelve-tone method that not only embraces both Schoenberg's and Webern's practice but could include a great deal more, and that

³³Ibid., 316.

³⁴Ibid., 340.

is far beyond the reach of the Europeans at the time. More to the point, perhaps, is that this kind of understanding of the twelve-tone method had not taken root in Europe... and that its absence there would force European composers to find alternative ways of making their music “serial.”³⁵

Babbitt understood the implications of the Second Viennese School’s discoveries as no one had previously. His *Semi-Simple Variations for Piano* (1957) reflected this understanding.

The work, thirty-six measures in length, is a suitable introduction to Babbitt’s compositional style. He groups the first six measures into the theme and each subsequent six measures into a variation. According to Elaine Barkin, “in each group of six measures, dynamics, register, texture, articulation, frequency and recurrence of specific intervals, rhythmic patterns and transformations of the set (row) are clearly differentiated and, perhaps with the exception of each nuance of the pitch organization, are clearly perceptible.”³⁶ Babbitt’s ‘semi-simple’ variations exemplify a total serial approach to variation writing that is anything but simple.

By the middle of the century, the twelve-tone method and its by-product, serialism, had taken hold. Serialism was the ‘ism’ of the moment. George Perle commented in 1960 that, “Twelve-tone composers are now so common in America and elsewhere that the label no longer guarantees one recognition as a member of the avant-

³⁵Ibid., 341.

³⁶

Elaine Barkin, “A Simple Approach to Milton Babbitt’s Semi-Simple Variations,” *The Music Review* 28 (1967): 316.

The subsequent variations are highly concentrated movements that build in intensity and contrast in character. Each variation is a study in character and genre whose exact placement controls the pacing of the whole. The first variation, a nocturne, closely resembles the theme's texture, tempo and dynamic. (Ex. 6)

Example 6: Variation 1

Andante notturnale $\text{♩} = 50$
poco più mosso

pp *delicato* *mp* *claro* *ppp* *8va*

The theme is presented in prime form at $t=0$ in the middle register of the piano surrounded by a pedal point and vertical sonorities. The top voice breaks into vocally inspired runs reminiscent of a Chopin Nocturne.

The next three variations, cantabile, scherzo and fugue, gradually pick up the pace and at the same time personify their respective genres. The cantabile is written in a lyrical style with the initial three-note motives drawn out into extended, arching phrases. The scherzo presents the row harmonically in precise and active rhythms. Naturally, the fugue is conceived in a contrapuntal texture with the three-note motif made further disjunct by

octave displacement and added rests. (Ex. 7)

Example 7: Fugue

Fugato scherzevole $\text{♩} = 64$

With each variation, Musgrave wanders further from the opening contemplative character of the theme until the fugue “screws up the tension and explodes into a coda of eruptive gestures.”³⁹

The coda is characterized by declamatory gestures and nervous runs that either disappear into silence or erupt into *ff*, crashing chords. (Ex, 8)

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Taken from the liner notes written by Anthony Payne that were included on the record, *Composers at the Piano*, Decca Record Co. Argo ZRG 704.

Example 8: Coda

The musical score for Example 8: Coda consists of two systems of piano music. The first system features a treble and bass staff with various dynamics including *ff* (fortissimo), *sfz* (sforzando), and *sfz* (sforzando). It includes trills, triplets, and a large slur spanning across both staves. The second system begins with the marking *p* (piano) and includes the tempo markings *accelerando* and *molto*. This system features a rapid, ascending scale in the treble staff and a more rhythmic bass line. The piece concludes with a final flourish in the treble staff.

For the majority of the unbarred coda, Musgrave is generous with her indications for *accelerando*, *rubato* and *pause*, obviously urging the pianist to take an improvisatory approach. Tempo, meter, and regular rhythms return for the last six bars, catapulting the piece to its final surge to the top registers of the piano.

In retrospect, I find that I focus more on the musical gestures and individual style that each variation evokes rather than the row and all of its technical manipulations. Some of this stems from my perspective as a pianist and performer rather than a theorist. I have found that it does no good to try to convey an abstract idea such as a tone row to an audience. Although it is essential that I understand how the piece is conceived and constructed, my job as a performer is to go beyond these abstractions and bring the emotional intent to the foreground. Musgrave makes my job easier by writing in an

intuitive rather than intellectual manner. I think my analysis reflects this.

It seems that once something reaches a critical mass, it loses its novelty and seems less interesting or desirable. If everyone is writing in the same style, it becomes passé. Twelve-tone music and serialism suffered this fate. In the decades that followed, composers would move on to Post-Modernism, Minimalism and Neo-Romanticism to name but a few 'isms.' Limiting oneself to the mathematical manipulations of twelve-notes held less appeal. Cage expressed the rising tide against twelve-tone music and serialism when he said, "I thought there were eighty-eight tones; you can quarter them too."⁴⁰

Hybrid Variations

The hybrid type does not adhere to one overriding plan or format for the entire set of variations; instead, it draws from multiple plans. One variation could be fashioned around a theme's melody, while another could be formed around the theme's structure or harmony. Thus, hybrid variations are not characterized by a lack of organization but by the presence of many organizing principles. This type offers composers an array of formats to choose from to best depict a variation's particular invention. This pliable form accommodates twentieth century composers' penchant for writing in diverse styles and using diverse compositional techniques.

⁴⁰Bryan R. Simms, *Schoenberg, Berg and Webern*, 353.

By their very nature, hybrid variations are difficult to characterize. The following list of twentieth century hybrid variations is the result of my own categorization. Along with naming the more notable hybrid variations of this century, I will offer my rationale for characterizing them as such. My list of twentieth century hybrid variations includes: Copland's *Piano Variations* (1930), Ben Weber's *Fantasia* (1946), George Rochberg's *Partita Variations* (1976) and Frederic Rzewski's *Variations on "The People United Will Never Be Defeated!"* (1975).

Since Copland's *Piano Variations* is included in my recording project, I will discuss it at greater length momentarily. First, Weber's *Fantasia* proves that the harmonic idiom need not limit a variation set's format. Although the work is based on twelve-tone principles, it uses three distinct formats: free variation, passacaglia and fantasy. Weber has indicated that when writing this piece, he tried to "combine Lisztian pianistic style with dodecaphonic procedures."⁴¹ The second example, *Partita Variations*, is the result of Rochberg's wish to connect with his audience in a more emotionally direct way. After the strict serialism of his earlier works, he "reacquires tonal procedures"⁴² through collage, pastiche and quotation of tonal works. The mix of old and new creates a juxtaposition of styles that typifies Post-Modernism. Apparently, for both of these works, a mix of variation forms is required to produce the desired mix of styles.

⁴¹David Burge, *Twentieth Century Piano Music*, 201.

⁴²*Ibid.*

Rzewski's *Variations on "The People United Will Never Be Defeated!"* is a twentieth century equivalent to Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. Lasting an hour, the work demonstrates a grand formal scheme that rivals Bach's in its detail and scope. The theme, based on a Chilean resistance hymn (lending the work a profound political dimension), is thirty-six measures long. What follows the theme is thirty-six variations in six groups of six. Every sixth variation of a set summarizes what took place in the first five variations.⁴³ Sets one through four and six rigorously follow a twenty-four bar structure; the fifth set is freely constructed. The work ends with a sixty-six bar coda.

Each set is written and conceived in a different vein. The first two sets mix variations written in species counterpoint with those written in clusters and outside of tonality. Robert W. Wason characterizes the remaining sets as jazz style, scherzo/etude style, confrontation and resolution. The 'confrontation' occurs in the freely-constructed fifth set. The set features motivic fragmentation and a quasi-minimalist style. The sixth and final set of variations essentially summarizes the summaries of the five previous sets, thus Wason's label, 'resolution.' Throughout the work, a plethora of musical styles dictates a variety of harmonic techniques. In speaking of the harmonic idioms used in the variations, Wason affirms, "we have seen ones which we might call tonal, some which were atonal, and some managed to straddle the fence between these extremes."⁴⁴

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For a elaborated discussion of the sets formal attributes, see Robert W. Wason, "Tonality and Atonality in Frederic Rzewski's *Variations on 'The People United Will Never Be Defeated!'*," *Perspectives of New Music* 26 (1988): 111.

⁴⁴Ibid., 137-138.

Aaron Copland's *Piano Variations*

Copland's *Piano Variations* is most noted for its 'economy of means.' All of the sources refer to it, and when one analyzes and plays the piece, it becomes readily apparent why this is an apt description. Julia Smith describes 'economy of means' as "how to extract the very essence, both the musical and the expressive, from a motive or an idea."⁴⁵ Neil Butterworth comments that the variations demonstrate "remarkable economy, ingenuity and craftsmanship in an uncompromising, declamatory manner."⁴⁶ When asked to elaborate on the 'economy of means' in his variations, Copland said:

You go about it by getting ideas that seem pregnant with possibilities for development... an idea that seems to have within itself...the possibility for development, for being combined with other ideas that seem nuggets of expressivity - those you hold on to for dear life.⁴⁷

In the case of the variations for piano, the 'nugget' is a four note theme.

E-C-D#-C# is deliberately declared at the outset and punctuated with polytonal harmonies (A major and minor and C major and minor) and hints of E major. (Ex. 9)

⁴⁵Julia Smith, *Aaron Copland*, 126.

⁴⁶Neil Butterworth, *The Music of Aaron Copland*, 54-55.

⁴⁷

Taken from a conversation between Copland and Leo Smit and included in the liner notes of Smit's recording, *The Complete Music for Solo Piano*, CBS 79234.

Example 10a: Variation 2 (combinatoriality)
Example 10b: Variation 20 (retrograde)

In these two examples, Copland subjects the theme to a sort of combinatoriality in the second variation and presents the prime and retrograde of the theme in variation twenty. These are certainly manipulations common to twelve-tone music. And yet, the piece is not serial. At times the theme's melody, harmony and structure are all preserved. Yet to label these variations as melodic, harmonic or structural does not do the work justice; it is a work of 'total variation.'

Despite the fanatic preservation of thematic material and the economy with which Copland executes the variations, the work contains the breadth of compositional style and

emotional character present in his other works of the 1920s and 1930s. Throughout the work, Copland makes use of dissonance (intervals of a second, seventh and ninth), widely spaced arpeggios and pointillism. (Ex. 11)

Example 11a: Variation 1

Example 11a: Variation 1. Musical score for piano, marked *p* (piano) and *molto espress.* (very expressive). The tempo is indicated as quarter note = 54. The score consists of two staves. The right hand plays a series of chords and single notes, while the left hand plays a more active, arpeggiated line. The key signature has one sharp (F#).

Example 11b: Variation 7

Example 11b: Variation 7. Musical score for piano, marked *ff* (fortissimo). The score consists of three staves. The right hand plays a series of chords and single notes, while the left hand plays a more active, arpeggiated line. The key signature has one sharp (F#).

Example 11c: Variation 12

Example 11c: Variation 12. Musical score for piano, marked *mp* (mezzo-piano) and *scherzando* (playfully). The tempo is indicated as quarter note = 126. The score consists of three staves. The right hand plays a series of chords and single notes, while the left hand plays a more active, arpeggiated line. The key signature has one sharp (F#).

To this Copland utilizes a “cumulative rhythmic design worked out according to Stravinskian principles of changes in meter.”⁴⁹ (Ex. 12)

Example 12: Variation 16



These techniques conjure a breadth of emotion from the quiet and tender interlude of variation eleven to the nervous, excited energy of variation twenty and everything in between.

Although the formal layout of the variations is almost entirely continuous, Copland did not initially conceive of the variations in a specific order. In a conversation with Leo Smit he contended:

I didn't write the variations consecutively. In other words, I got the ideas for the variations and worked on them without having too clear a notion as to exactly where they were going to fit in the finished piece. And then on one fine day every variation seemed to run to its right place. That was, of course, a lovely day.⁵⁰

It is almost inconceivable that Copland did not have a master plan for how the variations would fit together. Since the variations build off of each other in such a natural and organic way in the final version, it would be hard to imagine them in any other order.

⁴⁹Ibid., 132.

⁵⁰Aaron Copland, *The Complete Music for Solo Piano*, Leo Smit, CBS 79234.

Apparently Copland was also pleased with the ordering and sense of culmination and growth that the work engendered. Again, speaking to Leo Smit, he commented on the variations' progression, saying:

The Variations...seem to build and to have a sufficient variety so that by the time you are done listening, you have a canvas that seems larger than each separate variation taken by itself. There are pieces called variations that are really almost separate pieces. Each variation is a kind of a separate, three-page piece. But my Variations are much shorter, so that the work would be much more fragmentary if they did not build in some satisfying way. My work is meant to have more of an architectural shape where each variation seems to be part of a fragmented whole, which, by the time you get to the end of it, is supposed to add up to a finished work.⁵¹

I wholeheartedly agree.

The three above-mentioned variation types, basso ostinato, serial variation and hybrid variation, along with the previously mentioned twentieth-century character variation, constitute the majority of contemporary works written in variation form. Although this chapter in no way accounts for all twentieth century variation works, it is my hope that it offers a basis for discussion and further research.

⁵¹Ibid.

Chapter VIII A Pianist's Reflection on the Keyboard Variation Repertoire

During the many months that I have worked on this dissertation project, I have thoroughly enjoyed playing and studying variations. The diverse repertoire and challenging research has been invigorating. In an attempt to have the recordings reflect a variation repertoire that spans six centuries, I have included many pieces that are off the beaten path. I am almost too embarrassed to admit that prior to this project I had never played a work by an English Virginalist such as William Byrd or a French Clavecinist such as François Couperin. Of course I have studied their music in numerous piano literature and music history classes, but I have never actually learned any of their music. Regretfully, I am a typical pianist who confines myself too much to the standard repertoire of the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

With so much great repertoire from these three centuries alone, a pianist will never play it all; he or she must make choices that often exclude lesser known composers or works and other musical periods. This explains the current concert fare. When Baroque keyboard music is programmed, it is almost always the music of Bach and very rarely the music of Handel or Scarlatti let alone Frescobaldi or Couperin. If 20th Century music is programmed, it is usually a piece written before the Second World War. I have certainly never been to a piano recital that featured music of the English and Spanish Renaissance and have only rarely heard music after 1950 performed. The result is a largely ignored variation repertoire.

I am grateful that this topic afforded me the opportunity to play and perform a repertoire that I had previously known only in an academic way. Playing the variation works of Aston, Bryd, Couperin and Musgrave has been refreshing and enlightening. It has given me a first-hand knowledge of their music and style and has motivated me to uncover their other lesser known keyboard works for myself and my students.

At the same time, I have reveled in the challenge of playing some of the great examples of variation writing in the keyboard repertoire. Beethoven's Diabelli variations, Brahms' Handel variations and Rachmaninoff's Corelli variations are not just monuments of variation form; they are technical and musical giants. Playing difficult repertoire raises the bar and compels me to meet the challenge. Recording and performing these pieces has furthered my technique and musicianship in ways that will impact my future playing and teaching. After playing the Diabelli variations, everything else, dare I say, will seem like a walk in the park.

When I started this project, I was curious if the different variation forms and techniques would necessitate a distinct pianistic approach. How much difference would it make in my preparation and performance if the piece was a formal-outline variation, melodic-outline variation or passacaglia? Would stylistic distinctions (ex. Baroque versus Classical) matter more than formal disparities? In the end, my conclusions were mixed. In some instances, differences in form and technique altered my approach to a piece; other times it did not. With many works, the stylistic considerations far outweighed any formal

issues; in a few cases, the style and variation form were interdependent.

In terms of form, the distinction between continuous and sectional variations is profound. Generally speaking, variations that follow a continuous form tend to grow organically; each variation builds off the previous one creating a sense of inevitability and culmination similar to other ‘developed’ forms. The path of the sectional variation is more circuitous. While variation of this type often add up to a convincing whole, the individual variations frequently resemble miniature pieces in their own right. The advantage of this format is the ample opportunity it provides for musical variety and character change; the danger is that the work can amount to a number of separate events that don’t relate to each other in a meaningful way.

Couperin’s basso ostinato work, *Les Folies Françaises, ou les Dominos*, illustrates the different strengths of the continuous and sectional variation sets. Although the work features a recurring eight bar bass line and thus is categorized a basso ostinato variation, it follows a sectional format. The sectional format optimizes stark contrasts in character, tempo and mood, while the continuous format mimics organic development. Since Couperin’s desire to evoke different masked guests at a ball is at the heart of this work, it follows logically that he would choose the sectional format. If Couperin had followed the typical continuous format of the basso ostinato variation, he would have been limiting the degree to which he could evoke change and contrast. Couperin’s set illustrates how a variation’s format can help realize a work’s artistic *raison d’être*.

The ‘trick’ to performing these two types of variations is to play to their strengths. I found with the continuous type (mainly basso ostinato variations such as the ground, passacaglia and chaconne) that it was essential to trace the overall arc of the piece; where it crested and where it ebbed. When this became apparent, I could then cast the repetitive theme in terms of ascending to and descending from the peak(s). If the composer included moments that digressed from the theme, such as moving from minor to the parallel major, I accentuated the change in order to offer relief or provide a diversion from the arc of the piece. The variation works that I recorded that illustrate this continuous structure include Aston’s *Hornepype*, Liszt’s *Prelude on a Theme by J.S. Bach*, and Copland’s *Passacaglia* and to a lesser degree the *Piano Variations*. When playing these variations, I was always concerned with and aware of the trajectory of the piece, going to great lengths to develop the piece organically.

The sectional variation’s strength is its endless possibility for contrast and invention. When playing variations of this type, whether they were constant melody, melodic-outline, or character variations, I tried to identify the prevailing mood, character or niche of each variation. Then, I tried to highlight the compositional elements that defined and characterized the variation. Most often, in these types of variations, there was not much variety within a single variation. The ‘trick’ was to accentuate each variation’s fidelity to one character or mood and let the contrast come from the juxtaposition of the variations. Variations that were linked by a common tempo, key and character offered little contrast but contributed a sense of growth and continuity. Those variations that

stood in stark contrast to each other provided color if not unity. A convincing sectional variation set balanced the need for unity with the need for contrast. My job as the performer was to recognize which need a given variation satisfied and then to realize its intended effect, be it of unity or contrast.

Having played variation works that span six centuries, I can say with a certain degree of assurance that the various styles associated with the historical periods necessitate completely different technical and musical approaches. The florid contrapuntal figuration of Byrd's *Carman's Whistle* requires a completely different approach from the mixed meter and strident sounds of Copland's *Piano Variations*. This may seem like an obvious statement, but it is an important point to make because sometimes the technical and musical distinctions that comprise a musical style matter more than the formal ones. Other times the style and form go hand in hand.

At times, the different technical and musical approaches supersede any considerations of variation form and technique. Aston's *Hornepype* and Copland's *Passacaglia*, though both continuous basso ostinato variations, could not be further removed in terms of technique and musical style. The former requires independent and deft fingers that can maneuver the rapid scales and cleanly convey a simple texture, while the latter necessitates a whole-body approach that can manage large lateral leaps, octaves and a texture that spans three staves. Although both works develop organically and share many of the same formal attributes, their striking musical and technical styles

overshadow their structural similarities in performance.

Sometimes a variation's technical and musical solutions are intertwined with its construction. In the case of constant-melody variations, the form's characteristic contrapuntal figuration and abundant ornamentation are the technical and musical challenges. If you voice the individual melodic lines and incorporate the ornamentation into the melodic contour, you have solved the technical problems and at the same time have projected the formal attributes of the constant-melody variation. The same holds true for melodic-outline variations. The elaboration of the melody within a largely static phrase and harmonic structure characterizes the type. The musical and technical considerations such as balancing the hands and shaping the melody and phrase go a long way to project the form's attributes. It goes without saying that if you are playing ornamental variations, you had better know how to ornament and shape a melody.

On a more serious note, I have come to realize that a piece's formal design, while important, does not necessarily dictate its outcome. The basic premise of variation writing, the juxtaposition of constants and changes, provides composers countless permutations with which to fashion their realization of the theme, or musical idea. Certain types can predicate certain outcomes. For this reason, composers choose the variation form or multiple forms, in the case of the hybrid type, that will best convey the inherent potential of their musical idea. Yet, a piece's form is only a vessel waiting to be filled; what goes into it can be as unique and experimental or as predictable and stale as the

composer imagines it to be. For every masterpiece in variation form (such as Bach's Goldberg variations, Beethoven's Diabelli variations, Brahms' Handel variations and Copland's *Piano Variations*) there are perhaps five mediocre sets and a couple of truly dreadful works. Writing interesting and compelling variations is the ultimate test of a composer's invention and skill. I suppose that is the form's fatal allure and accounts for six centuries of variations - and counting.

Supplemental List of Selected Solo Keyboard Variations

- Arnold, Malcolm
Variations on a Ukranian Folk Song 1944
- Ashton, John
Theme and Five Variations
- Aston, Hugh
Hornepype
- Aurenhammer, Josephine
Six Variations on a Hungarian Theme
- Babbitt, Milton
Semi-Simple Variations 1956
- Bach, Carl Phillip Emanuel
12 Variationen auf die "Folie d'Espagne"
Variationen auf "Ich schlief da traumte mir"
- Bach, Johann Christoph
Sarabande mit 12 Variationen
- Bach, Johann Christoph Friedrich
Variations on "Ah, vous dirai-je, Maman"
- Bach, J.S.
Aria Variata S.989
Aria with variations in the italian manner
The Goldberg Variations
- Bach, P.D.Q.
"Goldbrick" Variations 1996
- Beach, Amy
Variations on a Balkan Theme, Op. 60
- Beethoven, Ludwig van 22 Variation sets including:
6 Variations on a Swiss Air, WoO 64
24 Variations on "Vieni Amore" by Righini, WoO65
13 Variations on "Es war einmal" by Dittersdorf, WoO 66
12 Variations on a Minuet à la Vigano by Haibel, WoO 68
9 Variations on "Quant è più bello" by Paisiello, WoO69
12 Variations on a Russian Dance by Wranitzky, WoO71
Variations on "Une fièvre brûlante" by Gretry, WoO72
10 Variations on "La stressa la stessissima" by Salieri, WoO73
7 Variations on "Kind, willst du ruhig schlafen" by Winter, WoO75
8 Variations on "Tändeln und Scherzen" by Sussmayr, WoO76
6 Variations in G major, WoO77
6 Variations in F major, Op. 34
15 Variations and Fugue in Eb major, Op. 35
7 Variations on "God Save the King", WoO78
5 Variations on "Rule Britannia", WoO79

- 32 *Variations in C minor*, WoO 80
 6 *Variations in D major*, Op. 76
 33 *Variations on a Waltz by Diabelli*, Op. 120
- Berg, Alban
- 12 *Variationen über ein eignes Theme C*
- Berio, Luciano
- Cinque variazioni per Pianoforte*
- Bizet, George
- Variations chromatiques*, Op. 3
- Bloch, Augustyn
- Variations for Piano* 1962
- Blow, John
- Ground in G major*
Ground in E minor
- Boulanger, Lili
- Theme and Variations* 1914
- Brahms, Johannes
- Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann*, Op. 9
Variations on an Original Theme, Op. 21 no. 1
Variations on a Hungarian Theme, Op. 21 no. 2
Variations on a Theme by Schumann, Op. 23
25 Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, Op. 24
Variations on a Theme by Paganini, Op. 35
Variations on a Theme by Haydn, Op. 56a
- Britten, Benjamin
- Twelve Variations* 1931
- Bull, John 16 Grounds and 9 Variations including:
- Bonny Sweet Robin*
Walsingham
- Busoni, Ferruccio
- Variations on the Chopin Prelude in C minor*
- Byrd, William 130 Variation sets including:
- Fortune*
John Come Kiss Me Now
The Carman's Whistle
The Woods So Wilde
Walsingham
- Cabezòn, Antonio de *Obras de música* including:
- Diferencias sobre la pavana italiana*
Diferencias sobre la dama le damanda
Diferencias sobre el canto llano del cabellero
- Chopin, Frédéric
- Variations on "La ci darem"*, Op. 2
Variations in Bb on "Je vends des scapulaires", Op. 12

- Variations on a German Folk Song*
- Copland, Aaron
Passacaglia
Piano Variations
- Couperin, François
Les Folies Françaises, ou les Dominos
La Passacaille in B minor
- Couperin, Lois
Passacaglia in G minor
Passacaglia in D minor
- Crumb, George
Gnomic Variations 1981
- Czerny, Carl
Variations on a Beloved Vienna Trauer-Walzer of Schubert, Op. 12
Variations on a Theme by Rode, Op. 33
Variations sur la Valse Charmante de Johann Strauss, Op. 249
Variations on "La ci darem" from Mozart's Don Giovanni, Op. 825 no. 17
- Dello Joio, Norman
Concert Variants
- Dohnányi, Ernst von
Variations and Fugue on a Theme of E.G., Op. 4
Passacaglia, Op. 6
Variations on a Hungarian Folk Song, Op. 29
- Dubois, Pierre Max
Variations sur Un Air Connu 1977
- Dukas, Paul
Variations, Interlude et Finale sur un thème de Rameau
- Dupré, Marcel
Variations in C# minor, Op. 22
- Dussek, Johann Ladislav
Variations, Op. 10
Variations, Op. 71
- Dvorak, Atonín
Tema con Variazioni, Op. 36
- Farnaby, Giles
Bony Sweet Robin
Daphne
Pawles Wharfe
Rosasolis
- Fauré, Gabriel
Theme and Variations, Op. 73
- Field, John
Variations in A minor on "Vive Henry Quatre"
- Finney, Ross Lee

- Variations on a Theme by Alban Berg* 1952
- Foss, Lukas
Passacaglia 1940
- Frescobaldi, Girolamo
 Variations on popular airs titled *Partita*
- Friedman, Ignaz
Passacaglia, Op. 44
- Froberger, Johann Jacob
6 Variations on "auf die Mäyerin"
- Frumerie, Gunner de
Chaconne, Op. 8
- Gibbons, Orlando Variations included in the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book
The Woods So Wilde
- Glazunov, Alexander
Theme and 15 Variations in F# minor, Op. 72
- Glinka, Michael 8 Variations sets including:
Variations on an Original Theme
Variations on a Theme from Mozart's Don Giovanni
- Godowsky, Leopold
Passacaglia 1928
- Grieg, Edvard
Ballad, Op. 24
- Handel, George Frederic
Air and Variations on "The Harmonious Blacksmith" from Suite No. 5
Air with Variations in Bb major
Chaconne G major
- Haydn, Franz Joseph
Variations in Eb major
Variations in A major
Variations in C major
Variations in F minor
Variations in D major
- Heller, Stephen
33 Variations on a Theme by Beethoven, Op. 130
- Hindemith, Paul
Variations 1936
- Honegger, Arthur
Toccata and Variations
- Hummel, Johann Nepomuk 23 sets of Variations including:
Variations on a Gavotte by Gluck, Op. 57
Variations on an Austrian National Song, Op. 8
- d'Indy, Vincent
Thème varié, Fugue et Chanson, Op. 85
- Ives, Charles

- Varied Air and Variations*
- Ivey, Jean Eichelberger
Prelude and Passacaglia
- Kabalevsky, Dmitri
 2 sets of Variations, Op. 40
 5 sets of Variations, Op. 51
Variations on an American Folk Song 1966
- Krenek, Ernst
12 Variations, Op. 79
- Lee, Benjamin
Fantasy Variations 1983
- Ligeti, György
Passacaglia Ungherese 1978
- Liszt, Franz
Spanish Rhapsody
Variations on "Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen" by J.S. Bach
Prelude on a Theme by J.S. Bach
- Mendelssohn, Felix
Variations sérieuses
Variations in Bb major
Variations in Eb major
- Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus 18 sets of Variations including:
12 Variations in Eb major on "Je suis Lindor", K. 354
12 Variations in C major on "Ah, vous dirai-je, Maman", K. 265
9 Variations in C major on "Lison Dormait", K. 264
6 Variations in F major on "Salve tu, Domine", K. 398
9 Variations in D major on a Minuet by Duport, K. 573
8 Variations in F major on "Ein Weib ist das herrlichste Ding", K. 613
- Musgrave, Thea
Monologue 1960
- Nielsen, Carl
Theme and Variations, Op. 40
- Pachelbel, Johann
Hexachordum Apollinis
Chaconne in C major
Chaconne in D major
- Paderewski, Ignace Jan
Variations and Fugue in Eb minor, Op. 23
Theme and Variations, Op. 16 no. 3
- Persichetti, Vincent
Variations for an Album, Op. 32
- Poulenc, Francis
Thème Varié 1951
- Powell, John

- Variations and Double-Fugue on a Theme of F.C. Hahr*, Op. 20
- Rachmaninoff, Sergei
Variations on a Theme by Chopin, Op. 22
Variations on a Theme by Corelli, Op. 42
- Reger, Max
Variations and Fugue on a Theme by J.S. Bach, Op. 81
Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Telemann, Op. 139
- Rimsky-Korsakov, Nicolas
6 Variations on BACH, Op. 10
- Rochberg, George
Partita Variations 1976
- Rzewski, Frederic
Variations on "The People United Will Never Be Defeated!"
- Satie, Eric
Passacaille
- Schubert, Franz
Variations on a Waltz by Diabelli
10 Variations in F major on an Original Theme, D. 156
13 Variations on a Theme of Anselm Hüttenbrenner, D. 576
- Schumann, Clara Wieck
Variations on a Theme by Bellini, Op. 8
Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann, Op. 20
- Schumann, Robert
Variations on Abegg, Op. 1
Études symphoniques, Op. 13
Variations on an Original Theme
Variations on a Nocturne by Chopin
- Szymanowski, Karol
Theme and Variations in Bb minor, Op. 3
Variations on a Polish Folk Song, Op. 10
- Tchaikovsky, Peter Ilich
Theme and Variations, Op. 19 no. 6
- Turina, Joaquín
Trois Variations 1926
- Weber, Ben
Variazioni quasi una fantasia, Op. 65
- Weber, Carl Maria von 8 sets of Variations including:
Variations on Bianchi's "Vien' quà, Dorina Bella", Op. 7
Variations on "Schöne Minka", Op. 40
Variations on a Gypsy Air, Op. 55
- Webern, Anton von
Variations, Op. 27
- Welcher, Dan
Dance Variations 1979

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