

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

33 Variations on a Waltz by A. Diabelli, Opus 120

Michael Oelbaum, piano

1 Thema: Vivace	:52	18 Var. 18 Poco moderato	1:33
2 Var. 1 Alla Marcia maestoso	1:46	19 Var. 19 Presto	:46
3 Var. 2 Poco allegro	:50	20 Var. 20 Andante	2:38
4 Var. 3 L'istesso tempo	1:29	21 Var. 21 Allegro con brio – Meno allegro	1:21
5 Var. 4 Un poco più vivace	1:00	22 Var. 22 Allegro molto	:54
6 Var. 5 Allegro vivace	:59		<i>alla "Notte e giorno faticar" di Mozart</i>
7 Var. 6 Allegro ma non troppo e serio	2:03	23 Var. 23 Allegro assai	:49
8 Var. 7 Un poco più allegro	1:25	24 Var. 24 Fughetta: Andante	2:50
9 Var. 8 Poco vivace	1:31	25 Var. 25 Allegro	:46
10 Var. 9 Allegro pesante e risoluto	2:05	26 Var. 26 [Piacevole]	1:25
11 Var. 10 Presto	:37	27 Var. 27 Vivace	:54
12 Var. 11 Allegretto	1:04	28 Var. 28 Allegro	:58
13 Var. 12 Un poco più moto	1:07	29 Var. 29 Adagio ma non troppo	1:22
14 Var. 13 Vivace	1:16	30 Var. 30 Andante, sempre cantabile	1:45
15 Var. 14 Grave e maestoso	3:34	31 Var. 31 Largo, molto espressivo	7:03
16 Var. 15 Presto scherzando	:38	32 Var. 32 Fuga: Allegro – Poco adagio	3:13
17 Var. 16 and 17 Allegro	2:10	33 Var. 33 Tempo di Menuetto moderato	3:54
			<i>(ma non tirarsi dietro)</i>

It would be hard to find a more striking example of downright improbable disparity between apparent subject potential and treatment, than that shown by Beethoven's *Thirty-three Variations on a Waltz by Diabelli*. The variations range extravagantly in the orbit of a waltz which, presenting itself as a subject for variations, would have seemed rather to suggest limitations, restrictions, inhibitions. In an obverse sense, it is the extent of this disparity which forms the requisite expanse for this very imposing work.

Convenient to writing about music, the general circumstances attaching to its composition, can shed some light on its qualities. In 1819, Anton Diabelli, a Viennese music publisher and composer of "*Gebrauchsmusik*," sent a little waltz of his own invention to all composers in Austro-Hungary, inviting each to write one or two variations. Fifty-one composers accepted and the collection was published with the patriotic objective of raising money for those bereaved by recent war. In contriving a waltz for this purpose, Diabelli supplied a piece of capital ordinariness and expected that it would be clearly and conventionally understood exactly as he conceived its modest content and effect. Thirty-two bars long, divided symmetrically on the dominant at bar sixteen, Diabelli's waltz seems not much more than a sequence of barely individuated generalities, mechanically arranged for extrapolation as motivic "subjects" for respective variations. Everything is presented here in a condition of plainness calculated to summon the impulse to elaborate.

EXAMPLE 1

Thema
Vivace

Opus 120

The musical score for the first variation of the waltz is presented in a two-staff format. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The key signature has one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 3/4. The tempo is marked 'Vivace'. The score begins with a piano (p) dynamic. The first variation (Var. 1) is marked 'Alla Marcia maestoso' and features a more solemn, march-like character with sustained chords in the right hand and a steady bass line. The score includes dynamic markings such as piano (p), forte (f), and sforzando (sf).

Franz Schubert wrote a variation for Diabelli responding beautifully within the compass of Diabelli's expectations:

EXAMPLE 2

Schubert's comment on Diabelli's waltz was, in effect, "you are plain, let me make you prettier, I will give you an affecting eloquence, pathos, (minor mode) sexier harmonies." The result was a very lovely moment in Diabelli's collection. This is an indulgent attitude however, a distancing patronage, and in a composer of less than Schubert's calibre, it might not have produced a touching replacement of the mundane, but instead, decorative distractions failing to divert the attention from underlying banality.

When Beethoven got Diabelli's invitation, he declined impolitely, suggesting other uses for Diabelli's waltz, and summarily dismissed it as a "*Schusterfleck*," i.e., cobbler's patchwork. In fact, *Schusterfleck* is a finely precise deprecation, referring to obvious seams in the waltz and, in particular, to a mechanically undifferentiated harmonic sequence called "*rosalia*" (see asterisks, Example 1). Ah, but Beethoven reconsidered, and over a period of four years, first intending a handful, then perhaps a dozen, the project growing with Beethoven's creative

absorption, he wrote thirty-three variations, which the shaken Diabelli then announced to the world upon separate publication with flabbergasted gratification as “no ordinary set of variations.”

Why did Beethoven reconsider? Years earlier, he remarked, “I shall show the English what is in their ‘Queen’,” and then wrote the seven variations on “God Save the King” (1803): a signal declaration because it shows Beethoven’s disposition not to take the familiar for granted, but to seek what is immanent, to rediscover the original force of meaning in what has become commonplace. On the evidence provided by the variations we might begin by considering the *rosalia* which at first annoyed Beethoven: in this case a sequence of triads propelled by secondary dominants to a cadence, not basically much different from good musical connective tissue that Beethoven wrote throughout his career, e.g., the celebrated rising bass passage in the Piano Sonata, Opus 2, No. 2, first movement, the Third Symphony, *et al.* But in these instances, the sequence leads imperatively to a particular point of pith and moment. In Diabelli’s waltz, the *same* sequence which arrives on the dominant in the first half, returns to the tonic in part two—not unintelligible grammatically, but certainly a cost-efficient serviceability of musical components at odds with any claim to organic unity. If the sequence is the same, one could just as well switch the endings of each half. Diabelli’s waltz fails then to demonstrate that its form has any necessary relation to its harmonic trajectory. Its shape is patched on arbitrarily—a cobbler’s patchwork. But, the indifference of Diabelli’s *rosalia* to its destination provoked a remedial determination in Beethoven, which elicited in thirty-three successive representations some of the most formidable harmonic and contrapuntal thinking to be found in Beethoven’s catalogue. The insipid sameness of Diabelli’s *rosalia* in both halves of the waltz becomes a paradoxical merit which frees Beethoven to bridge the halves with transcendent arches, to link them with a unique circuitry in which a progression appearing in the first part may reappear at any time in part two. Beethoven’s most subtle illustration of this subject is probably Variation 15, where an exquisitely-fine chromatic representation of the *rosalia* in part one

does lead to a cadence on C, (teetering towards the subdominant). In part two, an enharmonic derivative confirms the movement to the tonic unambiguously.

EXAMPLE 3

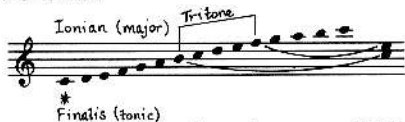
Another very important feature of Diabelli’s waltz is that it immediately gives the primary diatonic function, tonic-dominant, followed directly by the principal vertical component of chromatic challenge to diatonic function: a tritone. Well-known to medieval musicians as *Diabolus in Musica*, the tritone has enjoyed a notorious career subverting tonal stability. In the modal precursors of the diatonic system, *Tritonus* did his devil’s work by resolving the semitones within each mode to an area other than the *finalis* (tonic).

EXAMPLE 4



Of course, early musicians knew all about this, and got around the problem of major modes overbalanced on the dominant or subdominant by the device of *musica ficta*, meaning corrective accidentals pertinently deployed. But art is practice, artists thus practical, and unwilling to tolerate polite fictions which have become inconvenient. Since the effect of most *musica ficta* was to convert for example the Lydian and Mixolydian to Ionian, which is in fact the major mode, the Ionian at last officially supervened. Quarantining the tritone within the Ionian mode was a stunningly elegant victory for tonal stability, because here the same tritonic activity which unsettled all other modes could only serve to confirm the Ionian.

EXAMPLE 5



This victory has never been absolute, however. Wedged discontentedly between the fourth and seventh degrees of the scale, Tritonus chafes and constantly seeks opportunity to break out and to challenge tonal security. One can, if one wishes, see his devilry in the most basic modulations where it is decontaminated and rationalized, and which now seem innocuous to us, we having become decadently familiar with their effect.

EXAMPLE 6



Transposition of the tritone to other steps in the scale generates chromaticism:

EXAMPLE 7



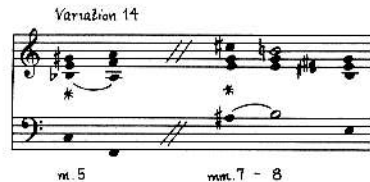
The tritone can, of course, resolve enharmonically:

EXAMPLE 8



This possibility clearly fascinated Beethoven and during the variations, all accidentals in Diabelli's waltz are employed or exchanged enharmonically, often in the same variation.

EXAMPLE 9



The opposition of diatonic fundamentalism, tritonic chromaticism with its potential enharmonic correlatives, and the exigent reconciliation of this opposition convincing for the cadences resolving at bars 16 and 32 was, doubtless, as a thesis, antithesis, synthesis, a proposition which Beethoven could not refuse.

The entire cycle of the thirty-three variations gives clear evidence of a comprehensive organizing process. The vast meditation of Variation 20, for instance, is bafflingly profound as a representation or transformation of

Diabelli's waltz, but it is tremendously convincing in place. Now just try to imagine this variation played directly following the waltz, or even as one of the early variations. Clearly an intervening synthesis has occurred which makes the placement of Variation 20 possible and plausible. In the one commensurable work, Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, the great minor Variation 25 could be played following the Aria. Not to be recommended, but still, a quantum gap would not be so flagrantly manifest. This work is built on different lines.

Commentators have advanced the idea that overall, the *Diabelli Variations* is organized as a complex of variation groups, but to my knowledge, they have not discussed the operative method by which the joining of variations into groups is accomplished. The first thing that Beethoven actually did with Diabelli's waltz was to command it into a condition of higher self-awareness by molesting it with the addition of Beethovenian *crescendi*, *fortissimi*, and *sforzandi*. In Variation 1, he proceeds by striking the waltz with his Olympian hammer, at once splitting it open so that more structure is disclosed, and rousing its constituent parts to a state of martial alertness, eager—ready. One might mention the enharmonic exchanges of measures 12-13 and 24-28 as a portent of things to come. Variation 2 irritates Diabelli's triads with dissonant collisions. In this ambience of resonant abrasion, enharmonic activity abounds; e.g., measures 13-14 and 20-21. Variation 2 is a kind of preliminary lexicon or exposition—probation work for the audacious harmonic vocabulary of the entire cycle.

In Variations 1 and 2, Beethoven sticks pretty closely to the thematic outline of the waltz, which recommends itself, as a reminder that the principle of *invariance*, an abiding essence which resists change, is the other side of the cogency of the variation premise.

Regarding the following several variations as a group, let's return to the waltz and seriously contemplate, as Beethoven did, the immanence of the most apparently trivial item in the waltz—the turn motive.

EXAMPLES 10 and 11

A mirror motion is condensed here:



but most importantly, the basic harmonic movement of the entire waltz is completely anticipated.

EXAMPLE 12



As an icon of entire content, this turn can thus be resourcefully exploited in whole, in part, by architectonic expansion, and at any point in any of the variations. In the second half of Variation 3, a striking equivocation occurs.

EXAMPLE 13



Is this a secondary dominant of D, or of F?

EXAMPLE 14

Variation 3, part 2

m. 20 — m. 24 mm. 27 - 28

It's F, which means that the bass moves C-B flat. This bass is then adjusted to C-B natural with telling octave reinforcement in measures 27-28, and B later moves to C at the final cadence. The turn motive is thus expanded,

EXAMPLE 15

Variation 3

mm. 27 - 28 m. 32

but the telling octave reinforcement of measures 27-28, introduced for just three beats and then quitted, leaves a feeling of unfinished business.

In Variation 4, second half, this matter is taken up again. The B - C motion is not expanded, but is part of an E minor substitution for a G major triad; a transient but significant harmonic enrichment.

EXAMPLE 16

Variation 4, part 2

m. 27 mm. 30-31

The important thing is that Variation 4 has reacted to the adjustment of a quirk in Variation 3. Reaction must mean connection. Variation 4 "remembers" something of importance in Variation 3. It reacts, and so forms a link to its predecessor. E minor as passed through in Variation 4 now suggests an E minor (mediant) goal at bar 16 in Variation 5. Motivic content now reshapes harmonic space at large.

EXAMPLE 17

Variation 5

The energetic leading tone canon which begins and determines Variation 6 is an enthusiastic rhetorical affirmation upon the return of the tone B from its E minor content to C major.

EXAMPLE 18

Allegro ma non troppo e serioso

It is through this process of endowing a sequence of variation by reactive transformation of common constituent material with *past* connections, i.e., a history, that groups are formed, brilliantly united in a dimension of meaning beyond allusion and reference.

Similarly, the enharmonic half step potential, motivically expanded, gives breathtaking reciprocal results. In Variation 8, Beethoven suavely substitutes a D minor triad for the initial presentation of the dominant. Since this is the first time up to now in the variations that the dominant has been replaced at this point, the effect is marked. This yields a chromatic derivative of the turn:

EXAMPLE 19

Variation 8

D minor replaces G major

Beethoven now wants to see if he can get away with making the *tonic itself* an enharmonic B sharp.

EXAMPLE 20

spelled mostly for convenience

With luminous imagination, he enharmonically adjusts and interprets the motivically derived chromatic bass line of the beginning of Variation 8 as an encompassing frame for Variation 9. In celebration of this fact, no doubt, the turn motif roves in "Ur" form confidently through the entire texture.

EXAMPLE 21

Variation 9 mm. 17-21 mm. 26-27 m. 31

Bass, Variation 8 (see ex. 19)

Variation 9

mm. 17-21 mm. 26-27 m. 31

Just to point out how far Beethoven is willing to go with this turn motive, let me blaspheme by mentioning that in the awesome half sentence which sums up the oracular Variation 20, once can trace its profile:

EXAMPLE 22

Variation 20

from:

29. dim. pp

Many writing about this work have said that the three C minor variations, 29-31, make a group. I concur, and would add to this group the fugue, Variation 32. Tonally, what joins these variations is the chromatic lowering of the major third, E, of C major to E flat, as part of C minor, and then, as the tonic in the fugue, Variation 32. In the waltz, all chromatic tones appear save D sharp - E flat. I would propose that by way of penultimate compensation for this "missing" accidental, Beethoven puts a group right before the end of the work in which this "missing" accidental is generously in requirement. Having done so, the idea of definitively "cancelling" the E flat by the sliding up to E in order to conclude the variations appeals to Beethoven. For this reason, he returns to C major following the E flat fugue with an E minor triad instead of the dominant. This progression, unalloyed, would produce unacceptable parallel perfect fifths. Beethoven's elaboration of the customary 5-6

technique for breaking up fifths occasions the most towering enharmonic transition in all music.

EXAMPLE 23

A.

B.

C. adjust enharmonically, add G as dominant pedal

D.

Add auxiliary harmony (*) and syncopations evoking image of Diabelli's "rosalia"

Pursuing the analytic exercise indiscretely to the threshold of indecent exposure, one could notice the turn motive here as well in an attitude of some dislocation. It is also residual after the apocalypse, as it were, in the chromatic alterations of the final scale of Variation 33 which contract to a simple triad in an ultimate conjunction of Diabelli's and Beethoven's triad faith.

EXAMPLE 24

A.

B.

155

160

161

Tempo di Menuetto moderato (ma non tirarsi dietro) (aber nicht schleppend)

p grassioso e dolce

All other features of the waltz, the repeated chords, the clear outlining of the intervals of the fourth and fifth, the cadence structure, rhythmic wont, and especially the *rosalia* itself are put through their paces in the variations as ingeniously as the turn. I've focused on the turn because it is the most apparently inconsiderable of them, and the protean employment of it in ways which would have been inconceivable had Beethoven not demonstrated them, reminds us that the most fascinating mysteries do not always issue from the conspicuously remarkable. Paraphrasing Goethe: the deep sense dwells in the details.

When Beethoven reconsidered Diabelli's invitation, he did one of the great "Wait a minute—what if..."s, just as Einstein, reflecting again on the Michelson/Morley experiment, considered "what if" the failure to disclose the movement of the earth through the "ether" meant more than the inadequacy of instruments not fine enough to register an extremely small increment.

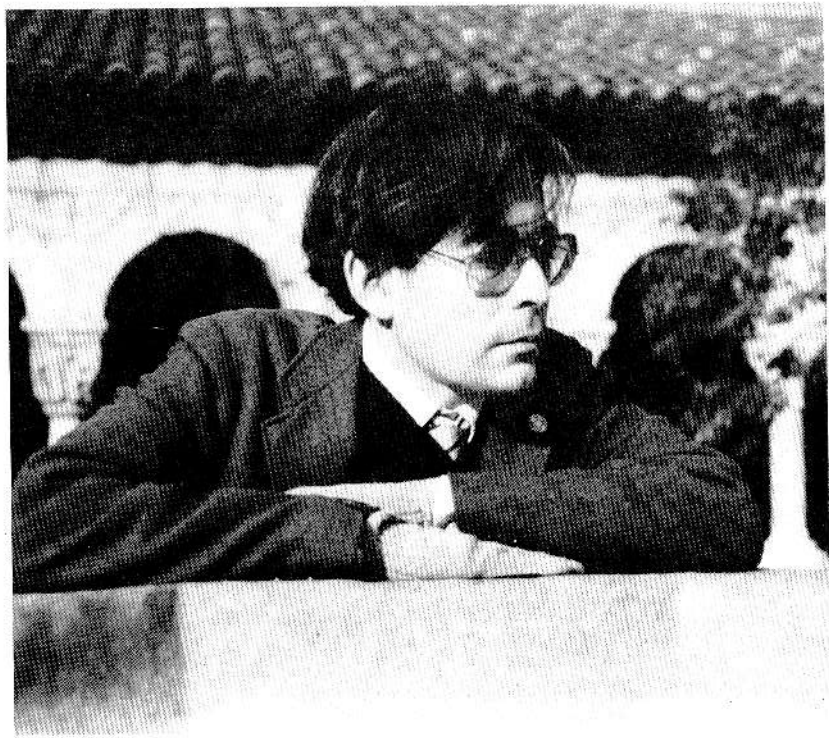
In the fabulous act of creation which is the *Diabelli Variations*, Beethoven isolates himself from his usual concern with strategically systematized architectonic mutability as exemplified by the classical sonata principle, for an exhaustive probe of the essential functional properties of tonal material. As a still life, more than a naive representation of digestible objects ramifies in a deep contemplation of the geometry of bodies in space, so Beethoven offers a beautiful formative reckoning of the primary gravitational and energetic qualities of tonal activity in musical space. Proceeding from the ordinariness of Diabelli's waltz, Beethoven reveals that its mundanity resides in our complacent over-familiarity with its elements, a revelation, which felicitously disturbing this complacency, prophetically intimates that directly beyond our comfortable habitations is the dome of the universe itself.

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MICHAEL OELBAUM

From the moment of his debut, Michael Oelbaum has fascinated audiences with searching interpretations of the classics. A *New Yorker*, he attended the Mannes College of Music, where he was a pupil of Nadia Reisenberg. As guest soloist, Mr. Oelbaum has performed with the San Jose Symphony, the New Jersey and Baltimore Symphony Orchestras, and has toured the United States and Mexico with the Vienna Chamber Orchestra. He has played solo recitals in cities including New York, Washington, Cleveland, Pittsburgh and Boston. As a chamber music player, he has participated in the Marlboro Music Festival in Vermont. Mr. Oelbaum has been presented in recital on several occasions under the auspices of Young Concert Artists and has received special study grants from the Martha Baird Rockefeller Fund for Music. In November, 1980, Michael Oelbaum made his European debut in London. Following this, he was presented in a recital under the auspices of UNICEF at Finlandia Hall in Helsinki. He has since returned to Helsinki where, at the Sibelius Academy, he gave a series of lecture-recitals on form and tonal planning, followed by similar appearances in the United States. Recent concerts include recitals at Princeton University, The Gardner Museum in Boston, Grinnell College, as well as solo appearances with the Cedar Rapids Symphony Orchestra.





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