

# Diabelli Variations

Melvin Chen, piano

**Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)**

**Variations on a Waltz by Diabelli, Op. 120**

**60:05**

<b>1</b>	Thema: Vivace	0:58
<b>2</b>	Var. 1 - Alla Marcia maestoso	1:36
<b>3</b>	Var. 2 - Poco allegro	0:53
<b>4</b>	Var. 3 - L'istesso tempo	1:25
<b>5</b>	Var. 4 - Un poco più vivace	1:06
<b>6</b>	Var. 5 - Allegro vivace	0:56
<b>7</b>	Var. 6 - Allegro ma non troppo e serio	1:46
<b>8</b>	Var. 7 - Un poco più allegro	1:18
<b>9</b>	Var. 8 - Poco vivace	1:36
<b>10</b>	Var. 9 - Allegro pesante e risoluto	1:53
<b>11</b>	Var. 10 - Presto	0:43
<b>12</b>	Var. 11 - Allegretto	1:01
<b>13</b>	Var. 12 - Un poco più moto	1:05
<b>14</b>	Var. 13 - Vivace	0:57
<b>15</b>	Var. 14 - Grave e maestoso	6:04
<b>16</b>	Var. 15 - Presto scherzando	0:34
<b>17</b>	Var. 16 - Allegro	0:58
<b>18</b>	Var. 17 - Allegro	1:03
<b>19</b>	Var. 18 - Poco moderato	1:53

<b>20</b>	Var. 19 - Presto	0:53
<b>21</b>	Var. 20 - Andante	2:27
<b>22</b>	Var. 21 - Allegro con brio - Meno allegro	1:23
<b>23</b>	Var. 22 - Allegro molto ( <i>alla "Notte e giorno faticar" di Mozart</i> )	0:37
<b>24</b>	Var. 23 - Allegro assai	0:56
<b>25</b>	Var. 24 - Fughetta: Andante	3:41
<b>26</b>	Var. 25 - Allegro	0:51
<b>27</b>	Var. 26 - [Piacevole]	1:34
<b>28</b>	Var. 27 - Vivace	1:00
<b>29</b>	Var. 28 - Allegro	1:11
<b>30</b>	Var. 29 - Adagio ma non troppo	1:39
<b>31</b>	Var. 30 - Andante, sempre cantabile	1:37
<b>32</b>	Var. 31 - Largo, molto espressivo	6:13
<b>33</b>	Var. 32 - Fuga: Allegro - Poco adagio	3:12
<b>34</b>	Var. 33 - Tempo di Menuetto moderato ( <i>ma non tirarsi dietro</i> )	4:06

## Variations on Diabelli's Waltz

<b>35</b>	Johann Nepomuk Hummel (1778-1837)	1:24
<b>36</b>	Friedrich Kalkbrenner (1785-1849)	1:15
<b>37</b>	Ignatz Moscheles (1794-1870)	1:12
<b>38</b>	Franz Liszt (1811-1886)	1:04
<b>39</b>	Franz Schubert (1797-1828)	1:23
<b>40</b>	Carl Czerny (1791-1857)	1:04

When composer and music publisher Antonio Diabelli (1781-1858) invited a number of Viennese composers in 1819 to write variations to a modest waltz theme of his own creation, no doubt he had little idea how the theme would be treated by Beethoven—and certainly not if he knew that Beethoven initially referred the waltz scornfully as a “Schusterfleck”—“cobbler’s patch”—for its bland repetitiveness.

But Beethoven’s initial scorn somehow turned into creative frenzy, and he eventually ignored Diabelli’s request for a single variation and produced 33—nearly an hour’s worth of music. Diabelli published this opus 120 in 1823 (Beethoven composed 23 variations soon after Diabelli’s request, and the final 10 were completed in 1823.) The single variations of the remaining 49 composers—of which Melvin Chen performs examples by Hummel, Liszt, Schubert, Czerny, Moscheles and Kalkbrenner on this recording—were published separately in 1824.

Most commentators have emphasized the broad variety of approaches Beethoven brought to the original theme. “From Parody to Transfiguration,” the title William Kinderman gave to the liner notes on his own recording of the variations, pretty much sums up the prevailing assessment. That Beethoven originally scoffed at the notion of participating in the composing challenge, then not only changed his mind but created one of the major works of his shape-changing late period, probably tells more about Beethoven’s genius than about any change in his original assessment of the modest theme.

The “cobbler’s patch” Beethoven first railed against is a modest pattern, repeated and varied. A theme is presented, repeated a tone higher, then inverted and varied in its subdominant. The waltz rhythm remains predictable and certain, almost heavy handed, throughout.

While some few have found merit in Diabelli’s waltz—Tovey found it “rich in musical facts”—most agree with the soloist on this recording, who terms it “quite unimaginative.” Diabelli’s composition is at best simple and not idiosyncratic in the slightest—facts that gave Beethoven the freedom to adorn it in the wildest possible manner, with extensively developed counterpoint, a broad variety of rhythmic and dynamic interpretations, and all manner of trills and musical allusions.

Most all of Beethoven’s variations follow the same pattern: two sections of contrasting nature, both repeated. But that said, no two variations are alike. Exaggeration is key: excess is the goal. In fact, the central appeal to Beethoven in composing these variations seems to be the ability to go to extremes—overly long, comically short, extensively parodistic, and excessively dramatic use—bordering on abuse—of the original material.

The first variation, a march, prepares the listener with noble anticipation for what is to follow. It displays gravitas in direct proportion to the theme’s unvarnished pleasantness. Which may be a clue that Beethoven plans as much parody as he does serious musical exploration: the very incongruence of the march’s nobility—coupled with the insistently repeated note of G, characteristic of the theme—add clues to this plot.

In many ways, Beethoven has created a great gulf between the theme and the first variation, and for the remaining 32 variations uses his robust musical imagination to fill that gulf. Sometimes it means altering the melody (Var. 3, 4).



Anton Diabelli

Other times the original material remains basically intact, but so exaggeratedly ornamented that any reference aurally to the theme becomes totally obscured (Var. 6). Sometime individual elements of the original get almost sinister alteration: the second half of the theme contains a charming, four-note downward run in the left hand, a gesture that ends the phrase and gives a certain sunny momentum to Diabelli's waltz (the kind of figure where a man might twirl his dance partner flirtatiously). In several early variations (3, 6) this twirl gets a diabolical face-lift—a kind of stormy transformation that all but threatens the listener.

The first half of Beethoven's set seems to meander without consequence through various changes. Many variations bring about distinct rhythmic disturbances, either with staccato markings or repeated rests (Vars. 1, 2, 5, 9). Other variations, many marked dolce, portray an introspective mood (Vars. 2, 3, 4, 5, 11).

But beginning with the glorious large-scale variation 14, Beethoven builds a sense of creative momentum. Variations 16 and 17, though brief, are both virtuosic and flamboyant. Variations 18 and 19 seem to build on the same energy, and with Variation 20, one seems to have reached a place where the pieces are at the same time *sui generis* yet linked mysteriously to each other.

Variation 22, with its dedication to/deconstruction of Leporello's *Notte e giorno faticar* from *Don Giovanni*, may be short, and simple—basically unison playing in both hands—but the rocket has taken off. (Some commentators have speculated that Leporello's relationship with Don Giovanni—frustrated complaints mixed with loyalty, as epitomized in the aria—may mirror Beethoven's disdain for/devotion to his “cobbler's patch” of a theme.)

From here Beethoven does not let up. The next variation, extraordinarily brisk, and performed here with almost rash abandon by Mr. Chen, leads almost incongruously to the placid first fugue. Now we are clearly in late-period Beethoven, where no rules apply but his own. Variation 25 makes the final true

point of reference to the original theme—although modified in such a dramatic way by tempo that one must mentally dredge up the original to have a frame of reference.

Variation 26 seems a simple interlude of alternating scales, but it turns out to be a warm-up act for the ensuing pyrotechnics. The fantastically vivace Var. 27 cannot seem to move fast enough, and Var. 28, although at the same extreme tempo, has an entirely different character—staccato, heavily accented. Vars. 29 and 30 seem attempts to introduce the tempestuous second fugue that climaxes the *Diabelli Variations*, but typically for Beethoven, Var. 31 intercedes. Long—the longest variation of all—meditative and somewhat melancholy, this may be the most interesting departure from the original theme of the set.

Then the fugue, not a *Grosse Fugue* for sure, but its soul mate. “While Beethoven's variations seem to burst through the boundaries, Bach stays within them,” says Melvin Chen, and nothing could be truer. Beethoven's three-voice fugue is all invention, character and color, a distant remove from the uncomplicated original.

The centerpiece of the variations lies clearly in the two fugues, variations 24 and 32, each with quite different musical textures. The first is meditative, controlled, never rising above piano; the second creates a storm of manic energy—it can be likened to the *Grosse Fugue* in this regard—more characteristic of the unbridled compositions that predominate in Beethoven's late period. The second fugue builds to a tremendous climax, with all three of its voices melding in the second half, before collapsing with a thunderous dissonance.

It's probably not happenstance that Beethoven chose fugal subjects for the two linchpin variations in the Diabelli set. For one, fugues harken back to the most famous previous piece in the form, Bach's legendary *Goldberg*



*Variations*, allowing Beethoven, as Mr. Chen says, “to connect himself to the pleased Beethoven’s sense of artistic mischief that the major variations in the Diabelli set were basically theme-and-variation variations. “The fugue,” says Mr. Chen, “like the variation form, is a test of creativity for the composer, who must demonstrate within strict limits his ability to create something unique.”

One would think the final variation—after this wild fugue—would be coda-like and simple. Simple, yes; but also highly individual, a far remove from not only our original waltz, but also the preceding fugue itself in texture, melody and rhythm.

The remaining 49 composers exist as trivia answers—at least when it comes to Diabelli’s project. Schubert, Liszt (he was 11 at the time), Czerny and Hummel all achieved great or good things as composers, but compared to Beethoven’s output here they remain footnotes. Each of the six variations Mr. Chen has chosen here are slight. The works of Hummel and Czerny are remarkable in their similarity: despite vastly different tempos, the notes are nearly identical. Predictably, Liszt’s variation is the most virtuosic, and Schubert’s the most graciously song-like.

Mr. Chen’s adventurous reading of the Diabelli Variations bears the mark of the great composer himself—fearless, eager for the extremes available in the score, yet rigorously true to the original.

—Keith Powers

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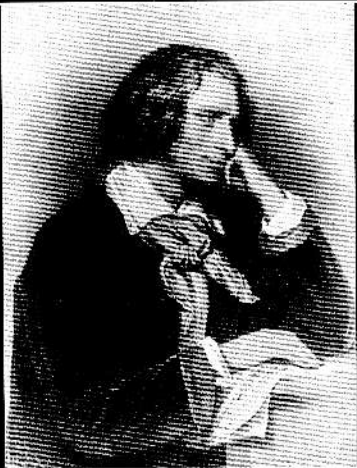
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**Keith Powers** covers classical music and the visual arts for the Boston Herald. His most recent book is *Making Music Matter: The Resurgence of the New Bedford Symphony Orchestra* (2004).



**Carl Czerny (1791-1857)**  
Lithograph by Joseph Krichuber,  
Vienna 1833



**Franz Liszt (1811-1886)**  
Lithograph by Joseph Krichuber,  
Vienna 1846



**Johann Nepomuk Hummel**  
(1778-1837)  
Lithograph by Vigneron



**Ignaz Moscheles**  
(1794-1870)  
Lithograph by A. Brandt, 1849



**Friedrich Kalkbrenner**  
(1785-1849)



**Franz Schubert**  
(1797-1828)  
Lithograph by  
Wilhelm August Rieder, 1829

A native of Tennessee, pianist **Melvin Chen** has been recognized as an important young artist, having received acclaim for performances throughout the United States and abroad. As a soloist and chamber musician Mr. Chen has performed at major venues in the United States, including Carnegie Hall, Alice Tully Hall, the Frick Collection, the Kennedy Center, and Boston's Jordan Hall, in addition to appearances throughout the USA, Canada and Asia. An enthusiastic chamber musician, Mr. Chen has collaborated with artists including Ida Kavafian, David Shifrin, Robert White, Pamela Frank, and members of the St. Lawrence, Mendelssohn, Miami, Orion, Borromeo, and Guarneri quartets. Recently, Mr. Chen was selected to be a member of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center: Chamber Music Society Two.

Melvin Chen completed a doctorate in chemistry from Harvard University, and also holds a double master's degree from the Juilliard School in piano and violin, where he studied with Seymour Lipkin and Glenn Dicterow, respectively. At Juilliard, he was the recipient of the U.S. Department of Education Jacob Javits Fellowship, as well as the William Petschek Piano Scholarship and the Ruth D. Rosenman Memorial Scholarship. Previously, he attended Yale University, receiving a B.S. in chemistry and physics. Upon graduation, he was awarded the New Prize by the fellows of Jonathan Edwards College. During his tenure at Yale, he studied with Boris Berman, Paul Kantor, and Ida Kavafian. Mr. Chen is currently on the piano faculty of the Bard College Conservatory of Music, where he also serves as associate director. He was previously a member of the piano faculty at the Yale School of Music.



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*Melvin Chen*

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Beethoven, circa 1823