

5 Variations

1. **Franz Joseph Haydn** (1732-1809)
Variations in F Minor (1793) (17:06)

2. **Georges Bizet** (1838-1875)
Variations Chromatiques (de concert) (1868) (12:46)

3. **Carl Nielsen** (1865-1931)
Chaconne, Op. 32 (1916) (9:59)

4. **Johannes Brahms** (1833-1897)
Variations on an Original Theme, Op. 21, No. 1 (18:44)

5. **Franz Peter Schubert** (1797-1828)
"Rosamunde Variations"
(Impromptu in B flat, D. 935, No. 3) (1827) (13:31)

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PIANO

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Five Variations

The five variation sets collected here form a bouquet of sorts—five distinctive treatments of the form, five quite different musical experiences, and five unique specimens of their creators' art. All are special favorites of mine—some old favorites, some new. It is a great delight to encounter a remarkable creation which has been largely neglected—and it is perhaps an even more surprising delight to discover for oneself an acknowledged masterpiece which had somehow escaped one's attention. In this case I am speaking of the Bizet and Haydn variations, respectively. Of the others, the Schubert impromptu is universally performed and taught, for obvious reasons—yet the Brahms "Original Theme" variations and Nielsen's Chaconne are seldom heard, the Brahms marginalized by his more famous piano variations, the Nielsen hidden by that composer's unfortunate general under-exposure.

Haydn: Variations in F Minor

Haydn wrote innumerable variation movements in all genres, but only a handful of independent sets for keyboard. The F Minor Variations (called "Andante Varié" in my edition) was composed in 1793, and was possibly intended as the opening movement of a sonata. Clearly though, it is a profoundly self-sufficient work, and in its depth and intensity directly comparable to two of Haydn's greatest sonatas, the G Minor and C Minor, composed twenty years earlier. Unique in stature among his keyboard variations, it is also an example par excellence of a procedure called "alternating variations" (or

“double variations”), a type much explored by Haydn and associated with him, though strictly speaking, he did not invent it. In this procedure not one, but two, themes are presented in contrasting modes (i.e., major and minor) of the same key. Variations on each theme unfold in alternating pairs. The themes themselves usually exhibit (in addition to their opposing modes) contrasting material, though some shared features are sometimes preserved. In the present variations, the contrast could not be more striking. The f minor opening theme (A) is a somber and dramatic lament, almost Baroque in character, its bass-line in motion, its melody partly frozen, and obsessed with a repeated dotted rhythm. Its counterpart (B), charming and highly embroidered, shifts to the lighter and fashionable “galant” style. Both are lengthy, well-developed themes, and accordingly, so are the ensuing variations. As a result, every change of mode carries special weight. In other minor/major alternating variations, Haydn chose to end in the major mode, but here he saves his greatest surprise for last. He begins, after two increasingly elaborate alternating variations, with a simple reprise of theme A. Profoundly effective in itself, this reprise is interrupted by a long, improvisational coda of unsuspected depth. Truly, Beethoven seems present here in spirit – and in the heightened dramatic use of register and texture. In the long winding-down of this final section, the original dotted rhythm, in its tolling repetition, seems to eclipse everything else, until nothing is left. The work expires with a unison separated by five octaves—practically the entire range of Haydn’s keyboard.

Bizet: Variations Chromatiques

Georges Bizet—bright star in the firmament of nineteenth century opera, and composer of the ever-popular “Carmen”—was a gifted enough pianist, it seems, to have pursued a concert career. His priorities were elsewhere. Nonetheless, his overall keyboard facility and (by various accounts) prodigious sight-reading and score-reading abilities clearly served him well in the preparation and production of many an opera. And it is possible that his immersion in orchestra-to-piano transcription affected his piano writing style, an inference which could be made from some of the (cheaper) pianistic effects in the Chromatic Variations, his most noteworthy piano creation. Written in 1868, this singular work is a fascinating wedding of conceptual rigor and brilliant stagecraft. The noted conductor Felix Weingartner admired it, and orchestrated it in the 1930s (reversing the direction of Bizet’s customary transcriptions!). The theme is a skeleton of sorts: a bare chromatic scale, slowly rising, then descending, in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, over a low-C pedal tone. Dramatic C minor cadences punctuate both the top and bottom of this scale. In fact Bizet had already deployed several such “skeletons” in his opera music. It is indeed a grand and spooky theme—and heavy on the portent. What follows? Seven minor-mode variations, then seven major-mode variations, and a quixotic coda. Oh yes—and a thunderous minor-mode cadence at the very end! This large-scale “clouds-and-sunshine” use of modes clearly derives from Beethoven’s C Minor variations, a fave of Bizet. The theme and its variations are compact, and have no internal repeats—one important factor in the work’s ability to create a strong sense of

forward motion. But it is Bizet's special theatrical sense which, most of all, shapes and animates this low-budget production. A rapid succession of vivid, sharply-etched scene changes is made to build inexorably to a tremendous midpoint climax, then suddenly, almost comically, relax into a series of diversions (including a set-piece nocturne and polonaise) before concluding with a sort of mock (some have said, ineffectual) mini-drama at the end. All in all, High Art meets Disneyland. A comment on the piano writing: though it is sometimes methodically, even mechanically, rigged up to serve the short scene (which it does perfectly), a refreshing and redeeming quality of parody is, I think, always close by. As cheap props go, for example, Bizet gives us, shamelessly, no less than three tremolo-based variations (5, 7, 13). Not even Liszt would have gone this far. Yet all work brilliantly - 5 and 13 balancing mid-range melody with higher-up tremolo, and 7 using a chromatically-clashing, chordal tremolo to bring the first half of the piece to its over-the-top, Halloween climax. Near the work's end, a so-called fifteenth variation precedes the coda. Here all chromaticism is thrown aside in a swirl of G⁷ harmony (all white keys until the last four bars!). An event better described as a smiling, rogue prelude to a quirky coda. This coda, beginning with a quasi-recitativo, is a thing of starts and stops and changes of weather. A flashback (to variation 13) is also thrown in. The final crashing chords (cloudy weather) provide a very stagey ending. What fun!

Nielsen: Chaconne, Op. 32

Nielsen was 51 when his Chaconne was written, in the summer of 1916, a several months after the completion of his Fourth Symphony, the "Inextinguishable." Only about ten minutes long, the Chaconne is a compact, densely concentrated work, and, for me, a masterpiece. But it is not a theme-and-variations in the conventional sense embodied by the other specimens on this disc, the sense that there is always a distinct and direct correspondence between a theme and its variations. And even though the work was conceived in homage to Bach's great Chaconne in the same key (of D minor), its *modus operandi* bears a somewhat oblique relationship to ground-bass variation procedure. Nielsen's Chaconne begins with a simple, muted, and mysterious bass line of eight bars (quite different, of course, from the full-throated chordal opening of Bach's Chaconne). This bass line traces an arc, within its eight bars, which begins and ends on D. It is this arc, and its enclosed harmonies, implied or suggested, which guide the ever-changing substance of the ensuing nineteen 8-bar "variations," and the lengthy, elevated coda to follow. But the opening line (the "theme," if you will) while restated in variation 1, with an over-lying countersubject, is not heard again until (resoundingly so) in variations 17 and 19. What we hear in the interim is a steady (one might even say "inextinguishable") flow of new material and textures, seemingly evolving in the moment, all in adherence to the 8-bar format, but showing wonderful harmonic license within each unit. The boundaries between variations are blurred, at times, by

deceptive cadences, or by the strategic introduction of new material before the end of a given variation. The writing is thoroughly and brilliantly contrapuntal, and may itself constitute the deepest homage to Bach. So ingenious and original is Nielsen's use of rhythm, register, phrase variety, and piano sonority, that one can easily overlook the fact that "simple" two-part counterpoint accounts for more than a third of the entire piece. Unusual piano sonorities come center stage in the latter part of the piece, and none is more important or impressive than the ethereal, flowing thirty-second notes of the long coda, a sustained figurational tour de force. In this coda, two more elements are superbly joined: 1) the afore-mentioned countersubject of the first variation, and 2) a new and final arrival of the major mode. I remarked earlier that Haydn had created, in the turbulent coda of his F Minor Variations, a newly Beethovenian dimension. Nielsen, in his Chaconne, has fused fantasy and logic in a way which, for me, is not unlike Beethoven of the late period. No higher praise is possible.

Brahms: Variations on an Original Theme, Op. 21, No. 1

Brahms' most celebrated variations for piano, mature and highly virtuosic works, were based on borrowed themes – those of Handel and Paganini. The slightly earlier "Original Theme" variations, published in 1861, were actually written around 1858, and in the wake of the heaven-storming D Minor Concerto, whose elegiac, radiant slow movement clearly prefigures these variations. But for Brahms, the "Original Theme"

variations represent a swing in the opposite direction from the passionate extroversion of the concerto (and, for that matter, the early piano sonatas, Opp. 1, 2, and 5) toward a more modest, controlled, and inwardly-focused sensibility. These variations were written during an interval in which Brahms was producing canons, fugues, and organ works, the fashioning of which had a steadying function for the composer, a return to the basics of his craft. And indeed the variations are a most workmanlike effort. But also a quietly exalted one, with a strong prevailing quality of meditation and self-communion. They begin with a theme of such unusual beauty and amplitude that it feels almost self-contained and self-fulfilled. An interesting asymmetrical phrase structure of $2 + 2 + 2 + 3$ is featured in each of its two sections. Richly chordal, bedecked with expressive ornamentation, and underpinned at start and finish with a D pedal-tone, this theme seems to ask "What more can be added?" And so, at first, Brahms subtracts. Variations 1-4 begin with a single line and gradually build the texture back to a rich harmony over a D pedal-tone. (The alternation of linear texture with chordal/pedal-tone texture is a hallmark of the entire work.) Variation 5, a delicate canon in contrary motion, gives way to the soaring, sweeping 6th variation, which in turn resolves into a floating, almost impressionistic variation 7. Variations 8-10 show something of the D minor turbulence of the piano concerto—a needed contrast, yet, if truth be told, variations 8 and 9 feel, somehow, wanting in substance. The coda, expansive and slow-moving, enfolds several variations of its own, and like the opening theme, begins and ends with a D pedal-tone. And like the theme, it is gorgeous.

Schubert: Variations on a Theme from “Rosamunde”

These variations are, of course, most often identified as the third of Four Impromptus, D.935 (Op. 142), a work written in December of 1827 (less than a year from Schubert's death) and perhaps conceived originally as constituting a sonata. And it is true that this theme and five variations do not presume to be a self-standing or especially “important” work. They presume nothing; but they are perfect. They achieve what Mozart often achieved: a seemingly effortless state of grace, an art which feels artless. This is my opinion. No less a critic than Robert Schumann felt otherwise. A generally discerning and generous spirit, Schumann found the piece, upon its publication, “undistinguished” in both theme and variations! Schubert's theme, a favorite of his, appearing both in his “Rosamunde” music and his A Minor String Quartet, certainly sets the tone of the whole work. It is a winsome theme, innocent and cheerful, and its melodic fallings and risings sigh a little. Interestingly, Schubert's treatment of this theme in the slow movement of his quartet (which is not a variation movement) is quite different—marked by poignant subtleties of harmonic development. (Schumann would probably have preferred this!) But in the present case, Schubert's instinct, correctly, was to optimize, in its content and contours, his theme's variation potential. The twice-repeated final cadence, by the way, is a lovely touch, which repays dividends in all the variations. Let us reflect on these variations. Of all the sets on this recording, this one is the most modest enterprise in size, scope, drama. It is a short excursion

whose purpose, largely, is to enjoy the scenery. To that end, the internal repeats are welcome and essential. The scenes themselves readily lend themselves to one-word characterizations (flowing, frisky, troubled, relieved, soaring) and their progression has a simple, almost pat, profile. But there is felicity and magic everywhere—from details of texture, figuration, and harmony, to the entire scenic arc—and a satisfying rightness to everything. There is ambiguity too: these variations seem wonderfully poised between a “classical” format (in which variations are tethered to the theme's pulse) and a looser sequence of character-pieces requiring (discrete) adjustments of pulse. At the center of the work the “minore” third variation goes farther afield harmonically, in its B section, than all other variations. The ensuing G flat variation, despite its exotic aura of the submediant, provides a relatively simple, untroubled path back to the tonic. As the high-flying fifth variation finally glides to rest, it arrives at a truncated, somewhat sotto voce, reprise of the theme (beginning an octave below its original statement). This is a coda of happy resignation: brief and simple, and, in this recital, the only one of its kind.

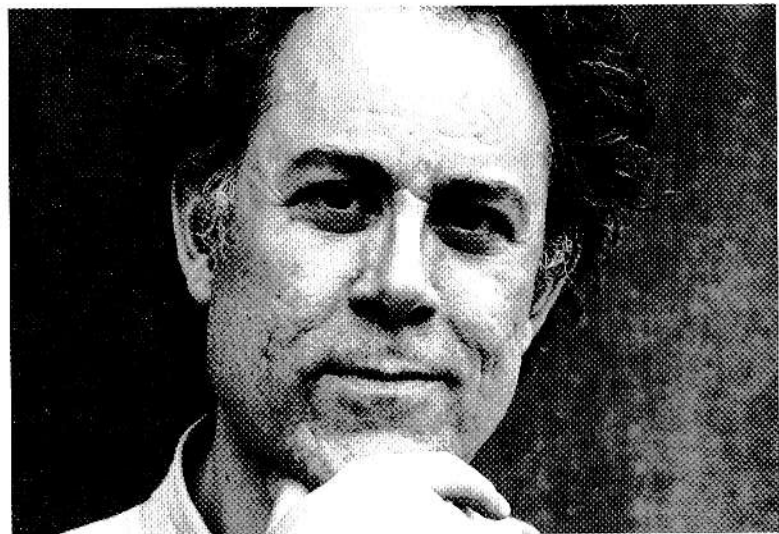
—Andrew Rangell, July, 2010

Andrew Rangell

Born in Chicago and raised in Colorado, Andrew Rangell is a graduate of the Juilliard School, earning a doctoral degree in piano under Beveridge Webster. Mr. Rangell made his New York debut as winner of the Malraux Award of the Concert Artists Guild

and has since performed throughout the United States, and in Europe and Israel. He has also lectured extensively, and taught on the faculties of Dartmouth, Middlebury, and Tufts University. His many New York recitals have included an unusually wide range of repertoire, from Gibbons, Sweelinck, and Froberger to Berio, Nielsen, Schoenberg, Enescu, and the two epic sonatas of Charles Ives. Mr. Rangell's gifts as an extraordinary interpreter of Beethoven received high acclaim during three successive seasons (1986-89) devoted to the performance, in a seven-concert sequence, of the thirty-two Beethoven piano sonatas. This period saw ten traversals of the complete cycle (including Boston presentations at both Sanders Theater and Jordan Hall, and at New York's 92nd Street Y) as well as a debut at Lincoln Center's Mostly Mozart Festival and the award of an Avery Fisher Career Grant. Of Mr. Rangell's most recent New York recital, Charles Michener of the New York Observer wrote: "For me, the great discovery of the series has been Andrew Rangell... Mr. Rangell is an individualist. And such was his intensity—like the late Glenn Gould, he seemed to be propelled by an irresistible force—that the listener's attention was riveted to the music."

Andrew Rangell's extensive discography on the Dorian label includes Bach's Goldberg Variations, Beethoven's final five sonatas, two diverse collections entitled "A Recital of Intimate Works" (Vol. I & II), and a pairing of Beethoven's Diabelli Variations and Ravel's Gaspard de la Nuit. A two-disc set of Bach's six Partitas released in November, 2001 was cited in both *The Boston Globe* and *Boston Phoenix* as one of the 'Best



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recordings of 2001.' Mr. Rangell's performances of the complete Chopin Mazurkas joined the Dorian catalogue in 2003 and were characterized, in Gramophone, as "taking the humble mazurka to new heights of variety and sophistication." 1998-99 marked Andrew Rangell's first active concert season following a long hiatus due to a serious hand injury. Since that time he has steadily reclaimed and expanded his performance and recording career. He was honored to perform a solo recital (which featured Ives' "Concord" sonata) in the 2003 Venice "Biennale," Italy's foremost contemporary music festival. In spring of 2008 Andrew Rangell was Artist-In-Residence of the Philadelphia Bach Festival.

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