

Variation technique in the Adagio of Mozart's D major String Quintet, K. 593¹

This paper seeks to review some observations by the analyst V. Kofi Agawu on Mozart's application of variation techniques, not as formal variation sets per se, but as the working-out of the potential of material by means of variation in the spirit of 'improvisation'. Following Mozart's music as an informal (that is, non-structural) sequence of 'variations', we may combine a detailed analytic view of the workings of the 'deep' musical structure with the experience of the listener appreciating the unfolding of the musical 'surface'. Within forms of all types, Mozart imports devices for varying material that were part of the art of improvisation. This paper is an attempt to apply some of Agawu's suggestions to the Adagio of Mozart's String Quintet in D, K. 593 – a sonata-form.

This paper takes as its starting-point some recent observations by the analyst V. Kofi Agawu on Mozart's application of variation techniques, not as formal variation sets per se, but in the spirit of 'improvisation': the working-out of the potential of material by means of variation.² 'Variation', in this formulation, is not systematic, in the sense that a series of variations traces a progression from a beginning (simple) to an end (complex). Instead, an exemplar (for instance, a theme, or a figuration pattern) is regarded as a vehicle upon which Mozart could – by exercising his extraordinary powers of improvisation – make something forever 'new', adapting certain features of the exemplar to create fresh material, either in immediate local proximity to that exemplar, or elsewhere in the movement, creating large-scale inter-relationships across the structure as a whole. Within forms of all types (sonata form, rondo and so forth), Mozart imports devices for varying material that were part of the art of improvisation: these works may be understood as demonstrating the art of variation independently of the variation genre. Close observation of Mozart's skill for this kind of 'variation' potentially offers the analyst new approaches to his music, stressing not the 'formalist' designs of past traditions of musicology, but something more in keeping with the aspirations of the so-called 'new musicology' of the 1990s, one of whose agendas is (or should be) to break down the barriers between the rather forbidding techniques of 'analysis' (which appears too often as a specialist and remote science, understood only by a few experts) and the undeniably 'popular' appeal of Mozart's music. Agawu believes that by following Mozart's music as an informal (that is, non-structural) sequence of 'variations', we may combine a detailed analytic view of the workings of the 'deep' musical structure with the experience of the listener appreciating the unfolding of the musical 'surface'. What is needed now, claims Agawu, is for the so-called 'new musicology' to rise to this challenge, adopting alternative critical positions

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2. V. Kofi Agawu, 'Prospects for a Theory-based Analysis of the Instrumental Music', in: S. Sadie (ed.), *Wolfgang Amadè Mozart: Essays on his Life and his Music*, Oxford 1996, pp. 121-131; idem, 'Mozart's Art of Variation: Remarks on the First Movement of K. 503', in: N. Zaslav (ed.), *Mozart's Piano Concertos: Text, Context, Improvisation*, Ann Arbor 1996, pp. 303-313.

that go beyond formalism. One way in which this goal may be realized, according to Agawu, is by refocusing our attention on Mozart's acknowledged gift for improvisation:

'The view of the new musicology seems to be that formalism and its close relatives, structuralism and positivism, are dead; in their place is a new (and presumably better, not merely different) set of critical practices that aims to take full advantage of the entire range of post-structuralist resources (...). To improvise is to interpret and/or reinterpret an existing representation, to vary some things while keeping others constant. A key compositional device, then, is variation, not only as a feature of formal variation sets but as a more general principle found in diverse forms and genres. Accordingly, a productive line of analytical enquiry into Mozart's music might take the variation technique as a point of departure.'³

A preliminary trial of this proposal is offered in Agawu's study of Mozart's C major Piano Concerto, K. 503 (1786), which presents a selection of different manners of variation found in the first movement. Among the categories outlined are elaboration of a relatively simple melody by repetition, transposition, inversion, heterophony; adaptation of harmonic progressions, both by 'local' sequential manipulation and longer-range recollection; elaboration of contrapuntal models. Balancing these set-piece demonstrations is a more extended account of the continuity of two larger sections of the movement, read as paradigm-variation models. Among the conclusions drawn from Agawu's preliminary survey is that Mozart's music can indeed be profitably read in terms of its 'fragments, effects, and localized musical environments': that is, operating parallel to the linear continuity that characterizes organicist readings of his music, including readings that privilege articulation of structure by harmonic means. Agawu argues for

'(...) an analytical plot that is at odds with the formalist streak in contemporary Mozart analysis. Formalism seeks to control Mozart's texts (...). But if we remove the props of formal categories and engage with process (...) we may well open up more fruitful paths for creative participation in Mozart's music.'⁴

In what follows, I attempt to apply Agawu's variation model to the Adagio of Mozart's D major String Quintet, K. 593, composed in autumn-winter 1790 and published in Vienna in May 1793, along with a companion work, the Quintet in E flat, K. 614. An advertisement for the two quintets that appeared in the *Wiener Zeitung* on 18 May 1793 claimed that they were written 'at the earnest request of a friend of music' ('auf eine sehr thätige Aneiferung eines Musikfreundes').⁵ In one sense, the following approach seeks to recover ways in which that unknown 'Musikfreund' of the 1790s may have appreciated the musical surface of Mozart's Adagio in terms of its variation procedures. Mozart's Adagio is, not, of course, an overt set of variations, but a sonata form (with development), and in what follows, straightforward melodic embellishment and subtle adaptations of the harmony or texture are not the main concern. Instead, two 'generative' aspects of Mozart's variation procedure are considered here: local phrase-succession and structural cross-reference; links with contemporary understandings of topicality are also discussed.

3 Agawu, 'Prospects for a Theory-based Analysis', pp. 126, 128-129.

4 Agawu, 'Mozart's Art of Variation', p. 312.

5 See *Neue Mozart Ausgabe* VII/19/i, p. xi.

I. Local successions

One dimension in which an appreciation of Mozart's capacity for variation of his material is fruitful is that of phrase-to-phrase continuity. Consider, for example, the Violin 1 part of the second period in the second subject group (bars 21-26). Occurring over a uniform harmonic rate of change outlining a circle of fifths beginning from F#, the successive bars of this soaring theme essentially present six different ways of varying a single pitch (F#, F#, B, E, A, D), each lasting a whole bar and standing at the top of a chord. The contemporary theoretical context for this kind of local construction by variation is an interesting one. The relation of Mozart's actual theme to the underlying single pitches is that recognized in the eighteenth century as figured and simple melody. Figured melody builds upon the simple model, varying its profile to a greater or lesser extent, resulting in decorations of an underlying scheme. The technical principles of figured melody are explained in several eighteenth-century treatises including Leopold Mozart's own *Violinschule*, the *Anfangsgründe zur musikalischen Setzkunst* of Joseph Riepel (a copy of which was owned by Leopold) and – in their most advanced presentation – Heinrich Christoph Koch's *Versuch einer Anleitung zur Composition*. Koch's treatise, especially, formalized the constructive power of melody within the classical style. The essential points here are that: (1) the techniques to be observed in these theoretical writings (that is, repetition, repetition on a different pitch, sequential extension, insertion of new figures in the middle of a phrase, reiteration of cadence-patterns, and so on) are all species of variation – a process empowering the music's forward motion; and (2) they appear to represent contemporary listening strategies, such as that implicit in Johann Friedrich Daube's *Anleitung zur Erfindung der Melodie*. This was a manual designed to provide guidance for the contemporary concert-goer. Its second part opens with an affirmation that melody was the leading voice in music, which harmony followed.⁶ Earlier, in the first part of his account, Daube notes that '[t]hrough frequent repetition and transposition of each figure, a melody of one or two bars may be lengthened to one hundred bars or so.'⁷ Mozart himself is said to have remarked to the Irish tenor Michael Kelly, that '[m]elody is the essence of music.(...) I compare a good melody to a fine racer, and counterpointists to hack post-horses.'⁸ Melody, then, was a primary force in musical construction, within which the art of variation was a key strategy.

II. Structural cross-references

Another way of viewing bars 21-26, mentioned above, is as a paradigm-variant relationship. Bar 1 of the violin theme is the paradigm; each successive bar is a variant of that paradigm. Such a model is more revealing on a broader level of musical structure. Three examples will be considered here. In the first, the paradigm is the phrase at bars 8³/9-10 of the Adagio (see Example 1). Within the development section, Mozart varies the original paradigm of bars 8³/9-10, retaining the antiphony between upper and lower strings as before, but this time beginning each statement from a different pitch (so expanding the harmonic range). The element of antiphony is likewise varied, for beyond the initial presentation there are two further ones, now halved in length (to just one bar), and leading to a dissolution of the whole passage in imitative counterpoint cascading down through the ensemble and outlining a diminished-7th preparation for the abrupt break-

6 J.F. Daube, *Anleitung zur Erfindung der Melodie*, Vienna 1797/1798, II, p. 1.

7 Daube, *Anleitung* I, p. 9.

8 O.E. Deutsch, *Mozart: a Documentary Biography*, London 1965, p. 531.

Example 1

W.A. Mozart, String Quintet, K. 593, Adagio, bars 1-15.

ing-off on E minor in bar 52. The identity of this passage depends upon our appreciation of its origin in the earlier paradigm and suggests that Mozart's technique of variation, as embodied in 'host' structures such as sonata form, was one manner in which he was able to signal connections across broad spans of a movement.

The same is true, in a more advanced way, of the ensuing retransition, leading back to the tonic, G, for the recapitulation at bars 52³-57 (Example 2). It unfolds as a quite complex interweaving of falling suspension chains, most obviously between the two violas (but also between other voices in the texture). In this case, the familiar melodic pattern from bars 8³/9-10 is resituated as a counterpoint to this suspension chain, a variation of its environment, as it were. And yet another variant is simultaneously present: the suspension chain is a reworking of the harmonic process operative in bars 9-12, in which, on each successive beat, the Violin 1 becomes momentarily dissonant against its shifting chordal support, proceeding as a suspension-resolution chain. (Arguably, this origin is hinted-at by the freely dissonant Violin 1 and Violin 2 parts of bars 52³-57.) This passage exhibits what might be termed 'mixed' variation: variation of several paradigms simultaneously.

The image displays a musical score for five staves, representing the Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Cello, and Bass parts of a string quintet. The music is in D major and Adagio. The first system covers bars 52-54, and the second system covers bars 55-57. The score includes various musical notations such as rests, sixteenth-note patterns, and sustained notes. Dynamic markings like 'p' (piano) are present. The notation is clear and professional, typical of a printed musical score.

Example 2

W.A. Mozart, String Quintet, K. 593, Adagio, bars 52³-57.

A different illustration of 'mixed variation' is to be found in the closing section of the movement (bars 94-102). Here, a change in the environment of an earlier paradigm is once again present, but whereas in the previous example all the varied material was taken from the same paradigm, here Mozart imports material from two different original locations. The Violin 1 off-beat turn figure beginning in bar 94 (later viola, bar 98) is a variation of that originally given to the cello at bar 17 (now transferred to the top of the texture). Its function is different, however: the cello presentations initially served as an antiphonal reply, whereas the violin's variant is a contrapuntal strand in phase with the cello's theme and the sextuplet semiquaver filling. Imported into this new environment is a variation of the opening theme (bars 1 and 2 are altered, but the sighing suffix remains). Also contextually relevant for this closing section is the modulating passage, bars 33-35. Texturally, these bars are very similar to bars 94-97, but Mozart varies their function towards the movement's close, recasting what was originally a modulating passage (leading to a varied restatement of the opening theme in B flat) as a stable tonic region.

III. Tracing topics

Variation of the musical surface sits well with contemporary theories of musical 'topics', whose succession across the surface of a piece of music offered the listener a kind of 'plot' to follow: not literally a 'narrative' in the sense of a quasi-libretto, but a series of suggestions or clues, according to which the music unfolded by association with certain typologies familiar from the dance and the operatic stage. Indeed, Mozart's audiences may have 'read' the varied surface of his music as a succession of unfolding topics. To some extent, the variation model at work in this movement is co-ordinated with the migration of topics. I will consider here some possible consequences of topicality for the understanding of K. 593's Adagio.

Tracing the sequence of topics through the first subject and transition (bars 1-15) reveals a migration from [i] theme and accompaniment (cantabile style), to [ii] antiphony (the transition material at bars 8³-10), to [iii] contrapuntal dialogue (bars 12-15, leading to the dominant, D). This is followed by a shift to a sustained passage of *Empfindsamkeit* (the second subject, bar 16), emphasized by the arrival of expressive melodic appoggiaturas as a prominent feature of the Violin 1's line and by the antiphonal texture, pitting the cello's declamatory arpeggios as respondent to the rest of the ensemble. This passage too demonstrates a migration from antiphonal to contrapuntal writing, although the proportions are significantly different: the transition became contrapuntal only towards its close; by contrast, the *Empfindsamkeit* passage shifts almost immediately to contrapuntal dialogue (bar 21). In one sense, then, the second subject area, commencing from bar 16, is a variation of the 'topical plot' of the first. This plot likewise influences the development (bars 36-56), the bulk of which is a variation of the antiphonal material of bars 8³-10 (as mentioned previously): its culmination is the fivefold contrapuntal imitation at bars 49³-52, representing the furthest stage in a topical succession from 'cantabile' idiom (bar 36, which recollects the Adagio's opening theme) to a more agitated mode represented by signals such as the undermining of key stability, registral contrast and fragmentation of the antiphonal pattern (progressively from two bars to one bar, to a single beat).⁹ The paradigm-variant model, allied to eighteenth-century topicality, reveals that the first subject, transition, second subject, and development are related not by reference to a hypothetical (formalist) complex of intervals but by variations of a single strategy of topical succession (antiphony-counterpoint) – a 'narrative' alternative to a more 'conventional' appreciation of the movement's unfolding sonata-form structure, situated moreover, on the music's surface, reclaiming Mozart's music for the listener.

IV. Some reflections

The alternative model explored here is one which deliberately makes no pretension to comprehensiveness (which, indeed, is suspicious of the very claims of some formalist doctrines to comprehensiveness). Purported 'latent unities' underpinning Mozart's works derive not so much from an *Arbeitsprinzip* inherent in the finished scores (still less in his autographs and sketches) but from a historically contingent position adopted by certain analytical creeds, according to which, for instance, 'unity' is the defining quality of greatness in Mozart's chamber music. The variation model contrasts this absolutist stance with one that focuses on the contribution of surface diversity to a work's aesthetic value, free from any doctrinal requirement to reveal the 'totality' that – according to some formalist

9 In the recapitulation the first two versions of this topical strategy return, suggesting a 'cyclic' variation plan.

creeds – valorizes a ‘great’ work. In contrast to organicist readings, the variation model celebrates the overt manipulation of surface features, caring nothing for hierarchies, real or imagined. It is unconcerned to demonstrate completeness, particularly completeness defined as unity. It resides more closely in the realm of improvisation, representing, in part, compositional structures insofar as they reflect the spirit of improvisation. It regards a composition as a live, spontaneous act (closely related, indeed, to the art of improvisation, of which Mozart was a master), and whose principal identifying characteristic is its surface malleability. While it does depend on establishing relationships (for instance, the origin of bars 52³-57 in bars 8³-12) such relationships are ‘additive’, not inclusive. Indeed, the relationships suggested in the preceding section touch on an aesthetic rather than an analytic quality of Mozart’s variation procedure. We take pleasure in observing Mozart’s art of variation in progress in much the same way as we take pleasure in a mathematical summation series such as Fibonacci’s numbers, the successive steps of which do not ‘add up’ to anything per se: we may derive a rule for its progression, but there is no containing ‘result’. Our pleasure in predicting the next number in the series derives from our participation in a pattern whose extension we can understand but not control ‘from the centre’. By analogy, our enjoyment of Mozart’s variation procedures derives from our involvement in deriving variant from paradigm in an unfolding progression rather than a controlled hierarchy.

Radically theorized, the variation model aspires towards an escape from temporality in musical analysis. It suggests that to understand musical structures ‘organically’, in terms of derivation from a singularity, is not actually to understand the essence of the music but only its conventional – indeed, inevitable – presentation within a temporal framework according to recognized schemes. The ‘flash of inspiration’ that a composer experiences may be multivalent, rather than singular – that is, ‘paradigm and variant(s)’ simultaneously imagined – combining, for instance, not only different facets of a theme, a harmonic progression, a rhythm pattern, but qualities such as dynamic, colour, texture, spatiality, antiphony, stasis, motion and so on. But, of course, multiple qualities may only be conceived objectively and presented successively, one after another because of the web of time in which music is situated (within the human condition of perception anyway). The composer has to present his ideas in a sequence; it is that sequence that the listener or analyst experiences, either ‘live’, in performance, or else notated as a text. Improvisation, on the other hand, inhabits the periphery of this temporal web in the sense that its informality – its unpredictable flow – only borders on conventional structures of presentation: temporally presented, yes, but existing prior to the stage in which any structural interrelations are encoded in a text. Of course, an improvisation still has to present ideas in a temporal framework, but because an improvisation lies outside of a conventionally organized form scheme, the ideas that it presents, while still displayed sequentially within a temporal frame, are a ‘pure’ reflection of that complex of ideas whose original formulation in the imagination was multiple and simultaneous, ‘unstructured’ in the sense that it exists prior to the fixed intentionality implied by notation. The improvisation is in a sense a figure for that multiple ‘flash of inspiration’, saying something ‘ever new’. A corollary within the ‘variation model’ of analysis (which treats composition as a ‘live, spontaneous act’) is that the paradigm that is multiply projected onto the surface of the text is not only an ancestor of those projections, it also ‘is’ each of those projections, independent of the realm of temporality. In contrast to the controlling aspirations of certain strands of formalist analysis, operating in the ‘past tense’, examining a fixed text within which structures are apparently encoded (requiring revelation), Agawu’s variation model offers instead a ‘present tense’ way of approaching the music’s process that promises exciting vistas for those who interpret Mozart’s music.