

Beethoven Masterworks

Diabelli Variations
Sonata Opus 90

Daniel Shapiro



A z i c a

Any pianist—or at least this one—who is about to begin Beethoven's Diabelli Variations is unlikely to be filled with the intimidation one feels before beginning such works as the Sonata Op. 106 or the Fourth Concerto. One simply starts to play a charming little waltz-tune, and then some intriguing and fun variations. The variations keep coming, and the pianist soon realizes that he is in the midst of a journey encompassing the entire cosmos of the soul. Beethoven may have had a similar experience when he sat down to write a variation on a waltz by the publisher Anton Diabelli. Diabelli had asked Beethoven and about fifty other composers for one variation each. Beethoven ended up, eventually, with thirty-three. The waltz-theme, though derided by Beethoven, had so many easily definable motivic features that he could not help but capitalize on them—he was inspired to write more and more variations that become ever more diverse and profound.

One often thinks of a masterwork as serious, lofty, and abstruse. This is true, in a sense, of the Diabelli Variations, one of the greatest masterworks ever composed, but Beethoven here achieves greatness through the unexpected avenue of humor. Humor was for Beethoven a stepping-stone to higher realms of spirituality and consciousness. This is quite exceptional: most composers, including Beethoven most of the time, achieve transcendence through tragedy or conflict. But in this work, there are few variations that could be described as “unhappy,” and arguably none that are truly tragic. Moreover, we find overtly humorous music juxtaposed with music possessing the transcendent qualities we often find in Beethoven's last works. Some of the funniest variations immediately precede and/or succeed some of the most sublime (note for example the sequence of V. 13, 14 and 15).

Though such juxtapositions show the kinship of humor and transcendence for Beethoven, they are also an example of the astonishing diversity of character among the variations. One could even go so far as to say that there is a greater diversity of character here than in almost any piece of music (equaled only,

perhaps, by the Chopin Preludes). And Beethoven emphasizes the diversity by placing variations of radically different character next to each other.

One particularly intriguing example of character diversity is the contrast between variations with “will” and those without “will.” We could even call it a contrast between “Beethovenian” and “non-Beethovenian” music. Much of Beethoven's music possesses a strong sense of will—of energetic determination. This is achieved primarily by two means: by a strong sense of direction from tonic to dominant, and by foreshortening, in which musical material is progressively abbreviated or condensed into smaller spans of time. Diabelli's theme and almost all of the variations contain these elements to some degree. Yet some variations, such as nos. 11 and 18, have a curious lack of will, and instead have an aimlessly wandering quality rarely found in Beethoven's music. They contain only suggestions of foreshortening, and the sense of purposeful direction from tonic to dominant has all but vanished. The contrast with the more customary strong-willed variations is, once again, heightened by placing each of the meandering ones right after an especially energetic and aggressive one.

Many of the variations barely qualify as variations in the traditional sense. Normally a variation is a paraphrase or ornamentation of the theme, with the theme's shape and structure easily recognizable; what's new are the variation's character and/or basic musical patterns. But several variations in this work are not so much variations as essays based on specific motives or ideas presented in the theme. Each “essay” strings together dozens of iterations of one of these elements, in much the same way that the rhythm of the first four notes of the Fifth Symphony is obsessively used throughout its first movement. In some of the variations, an almost direct quote of a motive from the theme is used (the best example is V. 9, an amusingly carping essay on the first four notes of the theme); in some, Beethoven creates a new motive similar to or derived from a motive from the theme (as in V. 6 or 12). Several other variations are based on a rhythmical or structural detail of the theme (for example, the rhythm of

the upbeat forms the basis of V. 15, and the idea of the tonic note followed by repetitions of the dominant note forms the basis of the fugue subject of V. 32). Because these “essays” are based on only a small element of the theme rather than its entirety, and because their characters are so individual, they practically achieve an independent life of their own; that they do still follow the general harmonic course of the theme is merely a kind of grudging acknowledgement of their origin.

The overall arrangement of the Diabelli Variations is determined largely by maximization of contrast, with three slow, mystical variations (nos. 14, 20 and 24) serving as pillars or spiritual centers of the entire piece. Beethoven also uses other procedural tools that are virtually unique in variation literature. He will introduce a particular motive, rhythm or harmonic progression in a variation, and then recall it in a much later variation (for example, the wonderfully bizarre harmonic progression in measures 5 through 8 of V. 15 is brought back in the awe-inspiring last eight bars of V. 20; the A-A flat-G rhythmic foreshortening in the penultimate bar of V. 1 recurs in the last bar of V. 14). Also, Beethoven will start a trend or pattern with one or two variations, leave it to start a new trend, and then return to the first. One of the most significant of these trends is the continual varying of the motive of the first four pitches of the theme (D-C-B-C). As previously mentioned, V. 9 is based on quotations of this motive. After a complete contrast in V. 10, we then have a variation based upon a rhythmic variant of the motive, followed by a variation based on a variant of that variant—as if Beethoven were writing variations on variations rather than merely variations on the theme. The trend is then dropped, resumed in V. 18, hinted at in V. 19, forgotten, recalled, and so on. These procedures create a wonderfully elaborate, interweaving tapestry of ideas.

The overall humor and energy of the work reach a fever pitch in V. 28 and are then set aside for the internal journeys of the great trilogy of c-minor variations. Each of these is progressively more emotionally involved, culminating in the

arioso-like V. 31. The ensuing fugue (V. 32) reveals just how far the variations have spiritually evolved during the course of this work, and that we have entered the realm of exaltation. In the final variation, the theme is transfigured into a kind of “superterrestrial” minuet. We feel that we have reached the summit of all experience, music, and time.

The Sonata Op. 90 stems from a period in Beethoven’s life when he composed comparatively sporadically—only two or three works per year at most. These works are generally more intimate and personal than those of the great outpouring of his “middle period.” Op. 90 is also one of four of Beethoven’s mature sonatas to have only two movements (the others are Opp. 54, 78 and 111). There seems to have been something about the two-movement format that brought out some of Beethoven’s most personal and singular writing. One of the primary qualities we associate with him is contrast, and in these sonatas the degree of contrast between movements is astounding. We find contrasts not only of volume and temperament but also of texture, form, and philosophical outlook. Yet in each of these sonatas the two movements are so utterly codependent that the hearing of one without its partner makes little or no sense. It is as if the struggle to unite these opposites into a synthesis greater than the sum of the parts led Beethoven to heights of inspiration.

It is usually impossible to assign a particular character to a great work of art, or even to one movement of a sonata; usually a work will embody several emotions simultaneously, among them seemingly contradictory ones. The first movement of Op. 90 is filled with the passion and drama we expect from Beethoven, yet it is saturated with a sense of woundedness, vulnerability and melancholy. Also, as we expect, the opening bars contain much of the motivic material for the movement. Especially significant are the upbeat-downbeat idea, the three falling scale-tones (G, F#, and E), and the rhythmic pattern of dotted quarter note-eighth note-quarter note. The first of these contributes greatly to the movement’s thrust and drive, the second to its melancholy and

pessimism. The third throws a sense of lilt and dance into the mix.

The descending minor scale fragment that leads to silence and ends the first movement is inverted to ascension and "majorized" at the beginning of the second. This immediately and decisively sets the mood for the entire movement. It is filled with contentment, warmth and love. Its main theme is justly famous; the numerous repetitions of it during the course of the movement are often unjustly criticized. Each statement of the theme is slightly different in feeling simply because of its position in the movement's form or "story." The overall journey of this theme and of the movement is one of increasing intimacy, inwardness and rapture.

—Daniel Shapiro

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Dr. Shapiro has performed with orchestras including the National Symphony, the São Paulo State Symphony Orchestra, the Academy of London, the Knoxville Symphony and the Los Angeles Debut Orchestra. He received the top prize at the 1992 William Kapell International Piano Competition, and also won the American Pianists' Association Beethoven Fellowship Award.

As a chamber musician, Shapiro has performed regularly with members of the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Chicago and Cleveland Orchestras, and has also performed with the Cavani and Mirò Quartets. He has participated at the Marlboro and Ravinia Festivals and the Fellowship Program at Tanglewood. He has released chamber music compact discs on the Harmonia Mundi and ASV labels.

As a conductor, he studied with Daniel Lewis, Victor Yampolsky, Fritz Zweig, and Gustav Meier. He made his conducting debut at sixteen at Tanglewood, where he was given a special award for outstanding achievement in piano, chamber music and conducting. In March 2001 he conducted Mozart's *Don Giovanni* with the Akron Lyric Opera.

He has also had extensive experience as a collaborator and coach in art song and opera. He studied with Gwendolyn Koldofsky and Natalie Limonick, and was an opera and art song coach at UCLA.

A native of southern California, he began the study of piano at the age of six. His teachers have included Leon Fleisher, John Perry, Russell Sherman, Joanna Graudan, and Reginald Stewart. He studied at the University of Southern California and at the Peabody Conservatory, where he received his doctorate. Before joining the Cleveland Institute of Music he was on the piano faculty of the University of Iowa.

Thirty-Three Variations on a Waltz by Anton Diabelli, Op. 120 54:29
by Ludwig van Beethoven

1. Thema: Vivace 0:53
2. Var. 1: Alla marcia, maestoso 1:48
3. Var. 2: Poco allegro 0:49
4. Var. 3: L'istesso tempo 1:19
5. Var. 4: Un poco più vivace 1:05
6. Var. 5: Allegro vivace 0:54
7. Var. 6: Allegro ma non troppo e serio 1:49
8. Var. 7: Un poco più allegro 1:11
9. Var. 8: Poco vivace 1:22
10. Var. 9: Allegro pesante e risoluto 2:09
11. Var. 10: Presto 0:38
12. Var. 11: Allegretto 1:11
13. Var. 12: Un poco più mosso 0:49
14. Var. 13: Vivace 1:05
15. Var. 14: Grave e maestoso 5:00
16. Var. 15: Presto scherzando 0:35
17. Var. 16: Allegro 0:54
18. Var. 17: 0:59
19. Var. 18: Poco moderato 1:43
20. Var. 19: Presto 0:47
21. Var. 20: Andante 2:39
22. Var. 21: Allegro con brio—Meno allegro 1:17
23. Var. 22: Allegro molto 0:49
24. Var. 23: Allegro assai 0:52
25. Var. 24: Fughetta: Andante 2:26
26. Var. 25: Allegro 0:45
27. Var. 26: 0:57
28. Var. 27: Vivace 0:51
29. Var. 28: Allegro 0:57
30. Var. 29: Poco adagio 1:15
31. Var. 30: Andante, sempre cantabile 2:19
32. Var. 31: Largo, molto espressivo 5:17
33. Var. 32: Fuga: Allegro 3:07
34. Var. 33: Tempo di menuetto, moderato 3:44



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Sonata No. 27 in e minor, Op. 90 13:48
by Ludwig van Beethoven

35. I. Mit Lebhaftigkeit und durchaus mit Empfindung und Ausdruck 5:33
36. II. Nicht zu geschwind und sehr singbar vorzutragen 8:11

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