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Music 454

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Generalization of Required Listenings

A historical lineage of the variation form would place Beethoven first among the four composers whose variations were on the listening list. Beethoven separates the other three composers, twentieth-century contemporaries of each other, by more than a century. His variations, transitively, show a more straight-forward approach and simple tonal harmonic language derivative of nineteenth-century common practice. His theme is a short, tonal, eight-bar sentence, basically composed of a circle-of-fifths progression in a minor key. The texture is traditional piano writing. This simple basis proves a strong foundation for the ensuing variations. At the beginning, the variations are seamless. The first three variations flow into one another, the sixteenth note runs being passed from the left hand to the right and then appearing in both. As Beethoven desires more variation to his variations, though, each consecutive variation becomes distinctive from the previous. Many standard tonal devices (descending chromatic bass for example) augment the harmonies explicit in the opening phrase. Virtuostic runs appear in variations X and XI, changing back the seamless

texture Beethoven adopted during the beginning of his set. Complexity builds up onto complexity, until the climax of the minor theme is reached in XI, and Beethoven has no choice but follow with a relative major version of the theme. These relative major versions, lasting from XII-XVI, see more variety, such as the appearance of the theme in the left hand in XIII-XIV. More devices augment the theme back in its minor version: syncopation in XXI, interlocking of parts (canon?) in XXII. Throughout the variations, Beethoven follows the general practice of climaxing in the six or seventh with the right hand, noticeable mostly in these later variations. A final change of meter (to 3-4) in XXX-XXXII prepares the piece for its grand close. The final variation is an extended version, lasting 50 measures, where Beethoven uses dominant pedals and short returns of the theme to buildup until the end of his piece.

Copland's 20 variations begin (in the foreground at least) differently than Beethoven's 32. The opening theme has an angular quality and spans a large register, compared to Beethoven's compact, linear nineteenth-century writing. Also, the tonality of Copland's theme is vague and the rhythm, mysterious to the listener. In general, the variations seem unlyrical until about #12-13 when compared to Beethoven's romantic model. Much of this lack of lyricism is due to Copland's large play with register, rhythmic motives, and increasing dissonant harmonies (8).

Even when the piece gains rhythmic impetus, the theme never flows continuously like Beethoven. Odd time signatures, appearing for just one measure at a time, can be found in 14. More jagged rhythms appear in 17, including alternations between 3-4 and 9-8 time. Even in the final variation (20), quick starts and stops characterize the thematic material. Like Beethoven, though, Copland uses this last variation as a chance to write an extended, broad interpretation of his opening melody.

The variations by Berg in *Wozzeck* seem even more far removed from Beethoven. In fact, to my ear, they did not seem like variations at all. Analysis would assuredly prove my ear wrong, but I did not go into in depth observations. The theme was relatively short (eight bars?), atonal, with little quickly evident defining characteristics. It also seemed as if Berg tried to hide the variations even further. Climaxes, as in the second bar of variation 2, seemed to occur at irregular points in the phrase. Also, the voice part crossed the boundaries of each variation with its own phrases. The ritards and a *tempi* sections also seemed unrelated to relative position within each variation and more related to inner aggregate play. The only thing which seemed to identify the seams between each variation were the textures. Instrumentations behind the voice changed with each consecutive variation noticeably on the page. Unfortunately, these changes were not so noticeable to the ear.

Britten's variations were the most contemporary. Based on a popular song which appears in the final variation, these eight variations span a larger amount of time between each recurrence of the theme than the previous three sets. The theme is usually hidden far behind the foreground, obscured by motivic play with figuration and ornamentation. Like Copland's variations, the rhythm is loose, including many starts and stops within each thematic recurrence. The instrumentation is not traditional (classical guitar), but even the techniques used on the instrument were not traditional. Copland used a few non-traditional techniques in his variations, too (the silently depressed note which sounds when others are struck), but Britten really stretches the guitar. Artificial harmonics appear often in the later variations. Four or five open strings sound at one time to fill out harmony. Series of clusters challenge the traditional voicings. In fact, rare use of the traditional voicings or counterpoint quality of classical guitar are used. Anyhow, Britten's last variation is a passacaglia, which ties him to the variation tradition already discussed and the passacaglia tradition of Bach and Ligeti.

Bach's passacaglia follows, of course, in the traditions of tonality and counterpoint he inherited from the seventeenth-century. The ground bass appears prominently as the lower voice in most of the repetitions, played, I presume, by foot pedals. Only occasionally, such

as the end, does the left hand take up the bass part in an ornamented, sixteenth-note version. In variation eleven, though, the bass pops up into the upper voice, a noticeable change in texture. In general, however, the texture of the piece, written for just organ, stays relatively consistent, even when compared to Beethoven's 32 variations for solo piano. Bach uses counterpoint and imitation (like the inner-voice imitation of bar 7, variation 1) as his main vehicle to build up tension and add variety to the piece. The work generally organically grows and flows from the very beginning, a sudden stop of motion only noticeable in variation 18.

Ligeti's passacaglia is a different story in many ways, but the same in some, too. The opening ground bass appears high in the harpsichord's register and begins a gradual descent throughout the course of the piece. The eight bar phrase structure and the contour of this ground bass remind me of an atonal version of Pachelbel's Canon for some reason--maybe the way in which the ground bass seems to be composed of a two note motive transposed down a third three times with an ending two-note cadence figure. Maybe I'm wrong. Ligeti's Hungarian rock had a strikingly different quality than his passacaglia. Instead of the regular quarter-note rhythm of the previous piece, a quick, recurring 2+2+3+2 note in 9-8 pushes the piece forward. This one-measure ostinato continued throughout the piece in the left hand. The tenor part of the left hand changed,

however, alternating between thirds and fourths for harmonies with the bass. The right had played syncopated rhythmic melodies against the regular left hand. In general, this piece made the harpsichord sound more like a jazz organ than a classical harpsichord or a rock instrument.

In retrospect, the pieces listened to seemed to be a stark contrast between the strong tonal pinnings of the eighteenth-century and the atonal/modified tonality of the twentieth-century.

