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Beethoven's Diabelli Variations – Misunderstood Genius

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Ludwig Van Beethoven is considered to be one of the greatest composers of all time. He was a musical genius in every sense of the word, and the Diabelli Variations are a perfect example of this. In these works Beethoven takes an unremarkable, mechanical, “cobbler’s patch” (Beethoven’s own words) of a waltz and turned it into a remarkable and revolutionary musical masterpiece. The Diabelli Variations are made up of 33 separate and completely different variations all based on Anton Diabelli’s original waltz. “No other work by Beethoven is so rich in allusion, humor, and parody.” (Kinderman)

Beethoven was born in Austria and baptized on December 17, 1770. He only attended school through the elementary levels and his first music teacher was his father, who taught him the piano and violin. Beethoven made his first public appearance in March of 1778 at the tender age of eight. His mother died of tuberculosis in 1787 and his father in 1792 – just a few months after Beethoven had moved to Vienna. Beethoven studied under Haydn for a short time while he was in Vienna – but the two composers did not like each other and this arrangement did not last long. As is common knowledge, Beethoven had hearing problems and eventually went completely deaf. The first letters referring to this hearing problem the have survived the years are dated from the year 1801

– Beethoven was thirty-one years old. By 1820 Beethoven was using ‘conversation books’ to communicate with people - he was completely deaf. (Johnston)

Beethoven did not write all the Variations at one time. He took time away from them to compose several other works including the *Missa Solemnis*. As was stated above, the Diabelli variations are made up of 33 separate variations on the same waltz.

Beethoven started composing them in 1819, and added variations 1, 2, 15, 23-26, and 31 in 1823. We know quite a bit about Beethoven’s thought processes and intentions as he wrote this massive work due to his sketchbooks, which have survived through the years.

It is through these sketchbooks that we can tell the actual chronological sequence of the variations and see their origins and developments. (Kinderman) Beethoven’s first sketches of Op. 120 found in the Paris manuscript 58B – they are just a set of pencil drawings on loose bifolium (Kinderman).

There are both similarities and differences between the different variations that make up Beethoven’s Op. 120, or the Diabelli Variations. It has “no less than three variations in a slow tempo, Variations 29, 30, 31; and the free movement entitled Variation 32 is a fugue suggested by a mere tag of Diabelli’s absurd theme. (Tovey, 127) Variation 22 references Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, while “Variation 23 is an etude-like parody of pianistic virtuosity alluding to the *Pianoforte Method* by J.B. Cramer.” (Kinderman – from online abridged source) Variation 11 is a kind of ‘liquidation

variation' in at an allegretto pace and is closely related to variation 12, "almost forming a double variation based on the turn motif from the waltz." (Kinderman, 95) Variations 3 and 4 are likewise related. This paper will focus mainly on Variations 1, 3, 4, 11, 12, 19, 20, 32 and 33.

Variation 1 utilizes and emphasizes the linear voice-leading pattern in the theme, namely the ascent and descent from the third of the key – E. (Kinderman, 84) Beethoven used sustained and accented chords to emphasize his initial climb from the tonic C, to the dominant. He also uses sequences to reinforce this ascent. In the end Beethoven hits a high D and returns to the tonic from the third of the chord. The Rhythm of this first Variation is also interesting. This piece would be quite boring due to its repetitious patterns – but Beethoven utilized a rhythmic structure that assured that this would not be so. (Tovey) As he used sustains and accented chords to drive his melody in this variation, he used rhythmic ambiguity to drive his tempo. This centered on the second chord in each bar "which sounds like an aftershock from the chords preceding, but also like an upbeat preparation for the next downbeat." (Kinderman, 84) This rhythmic echo effect drives the piece to its conclusion. Example 1 shows how in the second half of this work he added in an appoggiatura and its resolution to this echoing effect to add color and motion to the work.

Example 1



Variation 3 and 4 from Beethoven's Op. 120 are best looked at together because they related to each other quite closely. "Even in Beethoven's earliest sketches, Var. 3 and 4 are juxtaposed." (Kinderman, 86) Variation 3 is the shorter of these two works and its end prepares the listener for the variation to follow – as so many of the works in this composition do. The most remarkable thing about Var. 3 is its harmonic content. "The contrapuntal texture of Var. 3 is expanded to as many as five imitative entries spanning the whole keyboard." (Kinderman, 86) This extensive contrapuntal texture drives the piece into the 4th Var. and is the first time that virtuosity begins to take on an important role in Op. 120. (Johnston) In Var. 4 the pervading rhythm changes from mainly straight quarter notes to a dotted quarter followed by an eighth and then another quarter. This creates a rhythmic pulse throughout this work that accentuates the downbeats. This creates a faster paced and more exciting texture in this variation. Var. 4's most noteworthy attribute "is the way in which it suspends the lower level phrase divisions of the theme." (Kinderman, 86) The piece is broken up into two parts the fit together cohesively only through Beethoven's genius. Beethoven used deceptive cadences to

smooth over breaks in the theme and uses the bass to supply the motion of the work, it ascends and the other parts follow it. The bass, with its phrase divisions and ascents to the dominant of the key, is what controls this work and pushes it towards its conclusion.

Variations 11 and 12 are also closely related to each other. Beethoven simplifies the texture of his work in Var. 11 to provide a clear picture of his harmonic movements.

Example 2 shows this clear motion and simplified texture of Var. 11.

Example 2



This piece is relatively simple in its form, the first part is dominated by the upper voices and after the first cadence the bass picks up the same material and repeats it. This Variation also foreshadows Var. 20 with its “element of abstraction and crystallization.” (Kinderman, 95) The structure of Var. 12 parallels that of Var. 11. Neither one repeats their first halves, and both begin their second halves with a restatement of the principle motive, but Var. 12 is faster paced than Var. 11. There is a departure from the abstract tone of this variation in the beginning of the work. “The reason for this discrepancy can be sought in Beethoven’s compositional procedure.” (Kinderman, 95) In other words, this part of Variation 11 was originally intended to be part of Variation 7 (See example 3).

Example 3

Variation XII
Un poco più moto

The image shows the musical score for Variation XII, Op. 120, No. 19 by Ludwig van Beethoven. The score is in 2/4 time and consists of three systems of two staves each. The first system starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The second system includes a crescendo (*cresc.*) marking. The third system includes a piano dolce (*p dolce*) marking. The score features complex rhythmic patterns, including sixteenth and thirty-second notes, and various fingering and articulation markings.

Why Beethoven changed his mind and did this no one knows – but it does work none the less.

Var. 19 is a presto Variation and it absolutely flies. This piece has a lot of echoing and imitating between the voices. It also uses the entire keyboard. Var. 19 is one of the most straightforward Variations of Op. 120 in terms of structure. It uses Diabelli's original sequences and has little development material. "Perhaps the finest moment of the variation occurs in the final 4 bars." (Kinderman, 101) See Example 4.

Example 4



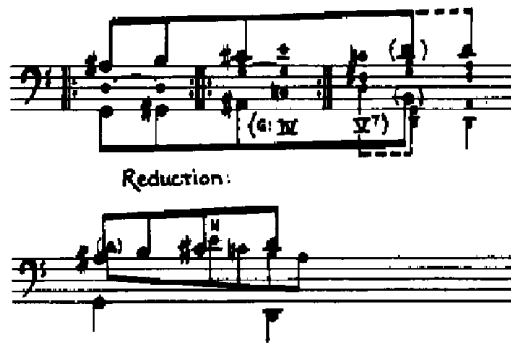
These bars contain the main motive and bring it to the forefront of your mind right at the end of the piece. Most likely this unusual fast paced piece was meant to catch you off guard (since Var. 18 has very little movement in it) and propel you into Var. 20 – a slow and thoughtful work.

Variation 20 is the “enigmatic slow variation.” (Kinderman, 102) This piece is painfully slow and has almost no rhythmic movement. It is composed of chords that normally last for a half note. There are quarter notes in this work – but they are few and far in between. This variation is like the eye of a hurricane – with crazy, fast, and awesome winds all around you – yet not touching you. Beethoven uses chromatic chords and notes to build tension in this work – which he does not fully release until the last bars when “the bright and open sound of A natural returns” (Kinderman, 102) and prepares you for the final cadence. Many dissonant chords in this variation appear to be unresolved, and sound unresolved – that is how Beethoven builds the tension of this work. They are diminished seventh chords “that are indeed eventually resolved within the larger progression to G-major.” (Kinderman, 102) See examples 5 and 6.

Example 5

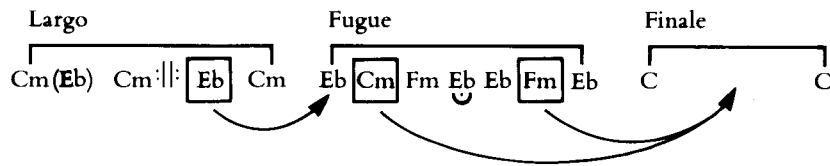


Example 6



Variation 32 of Op. 120 is a fugue. “This variation in fugue is highly ambitious piece, and a rare example of Beethoven’s works of triple fugue.” (Kinderman, 122) In this piece we have three strong subjects, all contrasting, that are eventually combined at the climax of the work. (Charleton) This is the first Variation to be set in a foreign key to Diabelli’s original waltz – it is in E flat major. “It is noteworthy that the modulatory scheme of the fugue avoids its own dominant B flat, but emphasizes C minor, the relative minor of E flat and the tonic minor of the entire work.” (Kinderman, 123) This fugue has a lot of rhythmic energy that comes from partial repeats of the subject, and this energy continues right up until the end of the work. It is not fully reconciled until the final minuet that ends the set of Variations. See example 7.

Example 7



In conclusion, Beethoven's Diabelli Variations are truly the work of a genius.

Beethoven took a completely unremarkable waltz and turned it into a masterpiece of incredible length and creativity. This work was not truly understood during Beethoven's time, and honestly, still isn't today. There are many puzzles within this work – like Variation 20 and the slightly mismatch material in Var. 12. The length of this work is also a stumbling block to understanding it – it's just too massive to really absorb in one piece, which is how it was intended to be performed.

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