AN ANALYSIS OF PIANO VARIATIONS

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The idea of variation in music is fascinating, as it is among the most common ways to develop a musical idea. The common trait among the greatest composers of every era is that they all had a unique and interesting way of developing and varying their ideas. The music of Haydn, for instance, although heavily monothematic, keeps the listener engaged and interested because the composer was able to develop his ideas in such a way that the music is never predictable. Haydn developed his music so masterfully that even his simplest ideas seem like new ideas. He achieves this by manipulating phrase structure, by treating melodies differently, or even by writing ‘surprise’ harmonic progressions. In some cases, different movements were connected by the minutest detail, for instance, only a few intervals. To the listener, these connections are not easily recognizable; however, a thorough analysis can reveal that at the core, the foundation of so much music can be only a few ideas. This is the very essence of variation: taking the smallest amount of material that one can take and spinning from that as much music as possible. This was my philosophy and approach when composing my Piano Variations. I also wanted my theme to be as short as possible so I could further hone what I consider to be the most important skill as a composer.
In order to compose the shortest amount of material I could think of, I decided to write a single tone row, but not being very interested in serial or atonal music, I wrote a tonal tone row. This resulted in a four bar theme as seen in Fig. 1.

My goal was to write approximately twenty minutes of music based on this theme, and to present the first variations in a tonal level, and the latter variations presented in a less recognizable manner. Necessarily, I would have to treat the theme in multiple ways, including tonally, atonally, intervallically, motivically, rhythmically, harmonically, and in pitch-class sets. Finally, to add more variance to the set, I chose to compose each variation in a different style, reflecting traits of different genres.

In order to do this, I first had to analyze the theme itself. A motivic analysis of this theme reveals that it is comprised of three different motives. As illustrated in Fig. 2, the opening Motive A combines with the ascending minor-third gesture (spelled as an augmented second) (B) and forms the only phrase within the Motive AB. What follows (C) is reminiscent of what one might refer to as a Messiaen-like bird call. It does not make a phrase, but it provides a nice contrasting afterthought to the opening two measures. Incidentally, the pitches from the start of m. 2 until the B-natural in m. 3 create the tone row.
This kind of analysis allowed me to write variations that provide the listener with “recognizable themes” (or motives). In order to vary the theme, I analyzed the theme intervallically. This provided me with the information necessary to create harmonies that are implied by the theme (Fig. 3).

Doing this, I realized that the main intervals that drive motive AB is the perfect fourth (P4) and the minor third (m3). Motive A can be seen as two perfect fourths a minor second apart, and motive B can be seen is two minor thirds a minor second apart (One of the minor thirds is spelled as an augmented second, and the F♯ is not considered part of the theme, rather it is a coloristic addition to the B motive). Motive C is made up of a minor-second cluster and a leap of a major sixth, which inverted is another minor third. Thus, the entire theme can be seen as minor seconds, minor thirds, and perfect fourths. This allowed me to construct harmonies in several of the variations, which provide for less key-oriented presentations of the theme. Also, each motive is linked by a gesture that includes a descending minor second from the first pitch of the motive. This includes Bb→A, F→E, and C→B within Motive A, B and C respectively.
Finally, to get the farthest away that I could from a tonal presentation of the theme, I analyzed this using some tools of pitch-class set theory (Fig. 5). By doing this, I looked at each motive (A, B, and C) as a set rather than as tonal gestures. This provided me with a way to develop the theme using the same intervallic material but in a non-traditional way. By analyzing the theme in these various ways, I now had the tools necessary to compose the variations.

Formally, Variation I, consists of an introduction, followed by two statements of AB, and then a repeated statement of A. In this variation, an interval in motive A gets expanded transforming it from [0156] to [0157]. The variation starts with an atmospheric introduction constructed by [0156] (A) sounded twice followed by two statements of [0134] (B) to prepare for the entrance of the melodic material, comprised of Motive AB. Thus when Motive A appears in the right hand, the arpeggiated harmonic content surrounding it is [0156] and when Motive B appears in the right hand, the harmonic content surrounding it is [0134] (see Fig. 6).
This is how the entire variation is treated, but for one exception. Measure 19 contains both A (this time, in an intervallically contracted form [0145] and B occurs simultaneously and somewhat contrapuntally. Therefore, I chose to use pitches that amount to [0124], a variation of motive C (see Fig. 7).
Variation II treats the theme in two different ways, the first being more pointillistic (Fig. 8), and the other having more traditional contour. The variation starts out pointillistic, as seen in Fig. 8. After two different statements of this approach, a semi-sequence is used to travel down a second from D, and then up a fifth from C to G, where motive AB is placed against motive C of the theme in the upper register, and against a descending chromatic baseline (see Fig. 9).

After this, one more semi-sequence is used, this time, moving in the opposite direction from the prior sequence; the sequence travels up a second from F to G, and then down a fifth to C, where another presentation of the recognizable theme is heard, at which point the variation cadences in the key of F.
Variation III also treats the theme in a pointillistic manner. Similar to the preceding variation, the outer voices all make up motive A [0156]. Also, similar to the first variation, the melodic notes determine the inner arpeggiation notes that make up the computer “blips” (see Figs. 10 and 11). This was the foundation for this particular variation, although notes were sometimes left out or changed to obtain a better-sounding effect. While the pitch set from motive C does not appear in this variation, its rhythmic gesture of three staccato eighth notes does appear in the middle of the variation used to connect the larger “AB” together (see Fig. 12).
Variation IV is the first to be written in what could be considered a strict ternary form. The variation relies heavily on a left-hand ostinato made up of [0156] from motive A while the right hand melody has a contracted form of this same motive [0145] (see Fig. 13).
This variation shows the influence of the music of Prokofiev, with the use of ostinato, rhythmic intensification which plays a heavy role in the B section, use of tritone and minor-ninth harmonies (see Fig. 14) and extreme register jumps (see Figs. 14 and 15).

Variation V, similar to the preceding variation, contracts motive A into [0145], but now presents this in the context of G major.
Also similar to Variation IV, this variation is in ternary form. The B section of this variation contains a left-hand presentation of melodic material from the Section A, only here it is in the key of the subdominant. Flat-nine harmonies were used throughout this section, which was influenced by music of George Gershwin (see Fig. 17). The A section returns in E-flat major, but ultimately resolves to G major, where it concludes with more Gershwinesque harmonies (see Fig. 18).
As mentioned in the introduction the sixth variation in the set treats the theme intervallically, so harmonies could be constructed using the intervals from the theme. The ostinato that is used is built of a perfect fourth rising by a minor second, which outlines the intervals from motive A ([0156]). Gradually, motive B is introduced under the ostinato first as a melodic rising minor third, then as harmonic minor thirds descending by minor seconds (see Figs 19 and 20). Eventually, as shown in Fig. 20, the minor-third motive is combined with motive A’s harmonic perfect fourth, creating a diminished-major 7th harmony. Tension is built as the bird-call motive is used to move material higher in register while simultaneously these new harmonies crescendo into a statement of motive A marked fff. A statement of motive B follows this harmonized with perfect fourths from motive A and with the bird calls from motive C as background subtleties (see Figs.21 and 22). This continues until the variation concludes.

Fig. 18: Var. V mm. 199-200, showing more Gershwin-influenced harmonies. The D7#9 was spelled with an F-natural due to the melody note and so the pianist would not see E# resolve to Eb in the upper register.
Variation VII is an invention in the style of J.S. Bach. As illustrated in Fig. 23, motive AB makes up the invention’s subject, while motive C makes up the countersubject. This combined makes for an interesting exposition, as the second statement of the subject enters on the chromatic mediant of the key. After this four-measure exposition, the development begins.
The rhythm of Motive A provides the drive throughout the entire development section, as it is always presented in its strict form (long-short-short-long-long) or one varied form (short-short-long-long-long). This development implements, three compositional devices from Bach. The first is the use of pedal points. Pedal points appear twice within this variation (see Fig. 24). Another idea taken from Bach is the recapitulation entering in the subdominant key, not unlike what happens in Bach’s B♭ minor prelude (BWV 891) from the Well-Tempered Clavier Book II (see Fig. 25). And lastly, the famous e-minor fugue from Bach’s WTC Book I (BWV 855) employs a unique and somewhat comical measure (at least from a contrapuntal
standpoint) towards the end of the piece, Bach throws away all counterpoint, and writes one-and-one-third measure of sheer parallel octaves as if to say, “Enough! Let’s just end this!” This was pointed out to me during a composition lesson, and so I decided to borrow this device and write a phrase of parallel sixths in the same vein (see Fig. 26).

Fig. 23: Var. VII mm. 235-238

Fig. 24: Var. VII mm. 246-251 (top) and mm. 262-264 (bottom). Shows use of pedal points
Variation VIII is also in a loose ternary form, and focuses mainly on [0156] from motive A. It is also the first of three variations that treat the thematic material mainly using pitch-set variation rather than tonal variation. Following a four-measure introduction of oscillating [0156] material, the A section enters with more [0156] material presented in the right hand, against motive B’s falling minor thirds, which are harmonized with motive A’s perfect fourth (see Fig. 27). The B section enters with a presentation of motive A immediately followed by fast repeating sixteenth notes. These notes foreshadow the toccata variation which immediately follows Variation VIII. The [012] from motive C also appears once, used to separate two utterances of motive A (see Fig. 28).

Recapitulation of Var. VII mm 266-269 on IV (Eb Major)

Recapitulation of Bach’s Bb minor Prelude (BWV 891) mm. 55-59, on iv (eb minor)

Fig. 25: Var. VII mm. 266-269 (top) and Bach’s Bb minor Prelude BWV 891 mm. 55-59 (bottom)
The second half of the B section contains motive A [0156] being played against falling sixteenth notes also made up of [0156] (see Fig. 29). The variation concludes with the [0156] gesture from the A section escalating until it reaches its key-center arrival on A, which functions as dominant of the next variation.

Variation IX, the toccata was inspired by two famous toccatas: Prokofiev’s *Toccata* op. 11, and Ravel’s toccata from *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. The key was chosen as homage to Prokofiev’s *Toccata* op. 14, in d minor, and the figure from mm. 333-334 was modeled after Ravel’s toccata (see Fig. 30).

Fig. 26: Bach’s e minor Fugue BWV 855 use of parallel octaves (top), and Var. VII’s use of parallel 6ths
Structurally, this toccata variation is also in ternary form. The A section opens with a dissonant harmony constructed of [0156], followed by a statement of a permutation of [0145], the pitch set derived by contracting an interval [0156]. These statements are harmonized by using the minor seconds, which link all three motives from the original theme (see Fig. 31). As a foreshadowing of the B section, a measure of two statements of [0156] is presented. These two [0156] statements are linked by holding “D” invariant (see Fig. 32). The A section concludes with a reiteration of [0156] presented in “D” which cadences as dominant to “G”, the tonal center of the B section.

The B section enters with repeated statements of [0156] all centered around “G”, and is then followed by the descending third taken from motive B (see Fig. 33). The second half of the B section contains a combination of motive C and motive B before the recapitulation.
Just as the first A section started in D and cadenced on its subdominant, the recapitulation does likewise, entering on G, and cadencing on C.

Variation X was inspired by Scriabin’s *Etude no. 3* from his *Eight Etudes*, op. 42. The coloristic approach that Scriabin took was borrowed and applied to this variation, as illustrated in Fig. 34. Structurally, this variation could be considered as AAB. The pitch material in the left hand is all derived from [0156], while the three-note figures in the right hand are [012] from motive C. Also, in the opening measure, the first sixteenth note of each three-note group outlines [0156], which was the compositional genesis for this the phrases in this section although it was not always strictly employed (see Fig. 35).

The material for the B section is more freely derived, but still restricted to using the same sets that were used for the A section. The left hand always plays [0156] and
climbs up chromatically from C♯ to B-natural, while the right hand is always playing [012] (see Fig. 36). The variation concludes with repeated notes outlining [0156] agogically arriving to the Finale of the set (see Fig. 37).

The finale or Variation XI is a through-composed variation that is a hybrid of material from several of the previous variations. The opening of the variation consists of seven bars that contain a repeated statement of motive A harmonized with [0156] against a bass line of [0145], the contracted version of motive A (see Fig. 38).
Fig. 34: Scriabin Etude Op. 42 no. 3 (top) and Var. X mm. 362-363 (bottom)

Fig. 35: Var. X mm. 362-365 shows organization of pitch material

Fig. 36: Var. X mm. 374-385 shows left hand notes chromatically rising
What follows is a series of statements and interruptions comprised of different variations from the whole piece. The march from Variation V starts this section, giving its first of two appearances with dissonant harmonies until it crescendos into a Lisztian swell into the lower depths of the piano at which point the ostinato from Variation VI emerges. This ostinato rises to the top of the piano where Variation VIII makes a statement, only to be interrupted by Variation VI’s ostinato, which in turn, is interrupted by the concluding statement of Variation VIII (see Fig. 39). This statement is then interrupted by a violent statement of Motive A filled with minor ninth and minor second dissonances before cadencing on D, which functions as V of the next interruption, a presentation taken from the toccata, Variation IX.
The toccata statement plunges into the lower depths of the piano, where the ostinato from Variation VI once again emerges. This is again interrupted by the last utterance of the march from Variation V (the same interrupting material used before, only harmonized differently). This erupts into another Lisztian swell, this time cadencing on D, which functions as V of G, the key of the coda. While centered on D, several bursts up and down the keyboard appear, reminiscent of the “computer blips” gesture from Variation III, which are completely overridden by [0156] and some instances of subset of it [015]. The variation finally cadences into the Coda in G Major (see Fig. 40).
The Coda, marked *bittersweet with cliché* is dominated by motive A throughout. After a fourteen-measure introduction based on motive A, the tempo increases and an eighth-note triplet inner-line appears against octave bass notes. This section has several different musical clichés, one being a chord progression drawn from pop-music, namely the I-iii-IV (see Fig. 41).
A further cliché appears with the introduction of the bombastic triplet gospel-swing chords in m. 449, and culminating in m. 459 in the final key of the piece, D Major. The harmonic layout of these triplet chords makes up the ‘line cliché’ within the major key, a progression typical in jazz and pop that has a descending line moving chromatically down from the tonic of a chord to the sixth scale degree (see Figs. 42 and 43). (It should be noted that I did consider modulating the music up a half-step to reach its fullest cliché potential, but I chose against it—I felt that it would be too cliché).
The coda concludes with a bombastic plagal cadence, which is widely associated with church music. However, to end this variation set with such a traditional ending seems to detract from the contemporary language used throughout the majority of the piece, so instead, the plagal cadence is used as a deceptive cadence to what could be called a second coda. To break the cliché sounding gospel variation, the piece ends with two bursts of the [0156] set, outlining a D-5-b9-added-11 chord and a DM7-added-11 chord, respectively (see Fig. 44).
One of my goals when composing this set of variations was to write individual pieces that sounded completely different than the rest of set. Unlike many other variation sets, which tend to be in the same style (generally in the style the composer), I wanted to write variations that reflected completely different styles and genres of music, which is why I included elements of marches, toccata, baroque counterpoint, and other types of music. By doing so, I felt that I could write a long set of variations that reflected different styles, genres, and even composers, but incorporating my own stylistic language. The end result, I feel, is a set of variations that take the listener on a journey through different musical time periods with my own compositional twists, which makes for an interesting and entertaining piece of music.