

VARIATIONS IN PERFORMANCE: HOW THE THEME AND VARIATIONS FORM CAN
BE USED TO TEACH HORN PEDAGOGICAL TECHNIQUES

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Solo performances are a core aspect of professional music development. They provide players with the chance to work on a piece of music written for their instrument and are a vital method for teaching core technical skills and instilling confidence in their performance. Within the horn repertoire, there exists several solos for horn and piano that they can choose from, with the most popular being concerto and sonata genres. However, one limitation with these genres is that their ability to teach players new skills can be limited. Since both use the sonata form, each one must follow the ternary form of an exposition, development and recapitulation section. Works written in these forms follow strict guidelines on how material is introduced and developed within the music. While the development section can introduce new material, the exposition and recapitulation are limited to using material from the primary thematic area throughout most of the sections. This can leave them limited in their ability to teach players new skills, with little variation in articulation, meter, and style.

But one form that overcomes this limitation is the theme and variation. As implied in its name, the form introduces a main theme for a piece then repeats it in a series of movements called variations with each new variation including minor alterations to the original theme. These alterations include but are not limited to rhythm, meter, harmony, style, and tempo, making its potential for implementing new styles and technical skills wider than other forms. The following essay will analyze a selection of theme and variations for solo horn that implement several techniques used in horn pedagogy. It will then use pedagogical materials for horn and brass instruments to show how these techniques can be practiced and played in a performance setting.

When analyzing the theme and variations form, one of the first pedagogical strengths can be seen in the styles and forms used in each movement. As previously stated, the primary function of the form is to alter the theme of the piece by altering and introducing new material

within the piece's variations. This includes altering the form of the theme. A good example of this can be seen in the usage of introductions and preludes of *The Prelude, Theme, and Variations* (1804) by Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1804) and the *Introduction, Theme and Variations, Op. 13* (1875) by Franz Strauss (1822-1905). Both pieces feature an introductory movement that proceeds the theme. The Strauss uses its introduction to establish core melodic fragments present in the theme and subsequent variations such as the appoggiaturas present in Variation One¹. Later, the section plays a fragmented version of the descending stepwise motion in Variation Two as part of the consequent of the first phrase². Although the tempo and style of the movement differs from the rest of the piece, its usage of material from the variations allows it to remain connected to the theme. It serves as foreshadowing to the audience, allowing them a peak at how the piece alters the theme. The result creates a logical progression in how the theme is interpreted and performed from movement to movement, all encapsulated in the Introduction.

In contrast, the Rossini Prelude sets the key thematic material in a new context to draw attention to the key elements used between the movements. It opens with a slow, legato horn line in B major, contrasting heavily with the quicker and lighter theme of the piece in F major. The main melodic idea is first introduced on the piano, then performed by the horn throughout the rest of the movement³. While the movement seems to operate independent of the rest of the piece, there are some key similarities. Like the Strauss, the Prelude introduces a few key motivic ideas present in Variations Two and Three such as the usage of triplet runs and juxtaposed duple and triple meter patterns. The resulting contrast further strengthens the connections between the

¹ Franz Strauss, *Introduction, Theme, and Variations Op. 13*, (Munich: Otto Halbrieter, 1875), mm. 10-14.

² Franz Strauss, *Introduction, Theme, and Variations Op. 13*. Munich: Otto Halbrieter, 1875, mm. 21.

³ Gioacchino Rossini, *Prelude, Theme and Variations in E major, for Horn and Orchestra*. Edited and arranged by Joseph Eger, (New York: International Music Company, 2001), mm. 11-18.

Prelude and Variations as while the context and instrumentation may change, the motive remains unified.

Another example of a form used in the theme is seen in the usage of a cadenza variation. In this form, the composer will have a variation use the theme as a base to create a longer lyrical section for the player to perform. They are often marked with many of the typical traits of the form, such as altering the tempo, increased melodic activity, and high virtuosic performances. One example of a work that exemplifies many of the techniques and stylistic elements of the section is the Ludwig van Beethoven *Twelve Variations on a Theme from Handel's Judas Maccabeus WoO 45* (1796/1997). Originally written for Cello, the Beethoven was transcribed for horn by Kazimierz Machala (1948) and is now considered a core staple of the horn repertoire. During Variation Eleven, the piece uses the theme as the basis for a lyrical duet between the piano and the soloist. The variation features several common techniques used in cadenzas, such as turns, a rubato tempo, and extended melismatic passages⁴. The passage is an excellent way for the student to practice the techniques and phrasing used in cadenzas. By following the piano's lead and allowing the melody to slow down and speed up as needed within the phrase, the player learns to adapt the style into their performance. This prepares them for performing an improvised cadenza, as they can use the techniques to alter and shape of a phrase to create a new melodic idea from prior thematic material.

A frequent technique of the form is to alter the rhythmic pattern and meter of the theme in each variation. The ability to read and perform complex rhythmic patterns is crucial during a performance. A performer must be able to maintain a steady tempo while switching between different rhythmic subdivisions such as duple or triple patterns. The Rossini best exemplifies this

⁴ Ludwig Van Beethoven, *Twelve Variations on a Theme from Handel's Judas Maccabeus WoO 45*, Edited and arranged by Kazimierz Machala (New York: International Music Company, 1997), mm.281-88.

through its usage of both duple and triplet rhythmic patterns. The opening theme follows a strict rhythmic pattern of two sixteenth notes on the downbeat of beat one followed by one eighth on the offbeat⁵. Although the pattern seems simple in design, the piece alters the melody using several rhythmic alterations. Variation One subdivides the pattern into extended sixteenth note arpeggiations⁶, while Variation Two alters the pattern to use triplets⁷. A similar effect can be observed within the Strauss. The theme opens in 4/4 time that pays strict adherence to the harmonic progression by using a limited number of passing and neighbor tones⁸. Later in the *Rondo* (Variation Three), the meter switches to a quick 6/8⁹. Despite these changes, the core melodic idea introduced in the theme remains consistent in both variations. The main melodic line in both pieces can be identified in the downbeats of each variation and still follows the same harmonic progression. The alterations to the theme allow the performer to focus on the technical requirements of each variation by using shared melodic and harmonic structure. This creates a sense of shared continuity between the excerpts, which in turn makes it easier for the player to learn the piece. Rather than learn three separate sections of music, the player instead develops one core skill in each variation using the theme as a guide.

Both pieces serve as an example of Hill's idea of derivative etudes, in which a performer creates a pedagogical exercise based on a technical and musical idea present in a piece¹⁰. One of the issues with practicing etudes is that students approach them as isolated pieces. They use the

⁵ Gioacchino Rossini, *Prelude, Theme and Variations in E major, for Horn and Orchestra*. Edited and arranged by Joseph Eger. (New York: International Music Company, 2001), mm. 107.

⁶ Gioacchino Rossini, *Prelude, Theme and Variations in E major, for Horn and Orchestra*. Edited and arranged by Joseph Eger. (New York: International Music Company, 2001), mm. 131.

⁷ Gioacchino Rossini, *Prelude, Theme and Variations in E major, for Horn and Orchestra*. Edited and arranged by Joseph Eger. (New York: International Music Company, 2001), mm. 207.

⁸ Franz Strauss, *Introduction, Theme, and Variations Op. 13*. Munich: Otto Halbrieter, 1875, Theme, mm. 1-8.

⁹ Franz Strauss, *Introduction, Theme, and Variations Op. 13*. Munich: Otto Halbrieter, 1875, *Rondo*, 1-8

¹⁰ Douglass Hill, *Collected Thoughts on Teaching and Learning, Creativity, and Horn Performance*, (Miami: Warner Bros. Publications 2001), 101-102.

etude to develop a specific skill or technique but struggle to apply them in a solo or ensemble setting. The theme and variation form resolves this issue by applying the pedagogical strengths of etudes within a solo work. By isolating the key differences between the variations and practicing them proactively, students can recontextualize the more difficult passages in the piece and identify what skills are needed to resolve them. The result streamlines the learning process by building upon the skills first learned in the theme of the piece, then applying this knowledge alongside a single new performance technique.

Another key skill developed in the Rossini is the ability to triple-tongue. As previously mentioned, Variations Two and Three feature several passages with fast sextuplet patterns. The performance requires using the triple-tonguing to meet the rhythmic and metrical demands of the passage. However, one point of contention is the method in which the tongue attacks each note within the pattern. Altering the way in which the tongue moves while playing can have an immense impact on the note's attack. One example can be seen in the Gardner, which uses a "Tu-Tu-Ku" pattern to play triplets. The author argues that proper triple-tonguing technique develops both the "Tu" and "Ku" articulations independently of one another, which allows the player to retain a clear division of the beat within the triplet pattern¹¹ (Gardner 2016, 58-61). In practice, the Gardner method has many advantages when applied to the Rossini. It gives the player an easier transition between triple and duple patterns while preserving the division of the beat. By minimizing the movement of the tongue while maintaining a clear articulation with the "Ku," the player increases the speed of their attacks without losing any clarity of sound.

¹¹ Randy C. Gardner, *Good Vibrations: Masterclasses for Brass Players* (Self-published. Randygardnerhorn.com, 2016), 58-61.

This can prove beneficial in Variation Three of the Rossini, where the frequent alternations between duple and triple patterns can prove difficult for younger players to master¹². The pattern's versatility makes it best suited for these situations as it allows a greater level of flexibility and clarity in the player's sound. However, one of the drawbacks of this technique is that it requires teaching the player two separate forms of articulation patterns: first double-tonguing, then triple-tonguing. If the player is not yet proficient in double-tonguing, learning the Gardner method may prove more difficult.

Another example of a triple-tongue pattern can be found in Farkas' *The Art of Brass Playing*, in which the author notes, "... players will solve certain triplet passages with double-tonguing, emphasizing the proper notes regardless of whether they occur on the 'T' or the 'K'". The benefit of this technique comes from its ability to adapt the double-tonguing technique to meet the needs of the triplet pattern. Instead of the player learning a new tongue pattern, they instead alter the skill to the needs of the piece. Like the Gardner method, the Farkas method still required the player to develop a clear "Ku" attack to preserve the clarity of the sound. But unlike the Gardner method, it also requires the student to be able to maintain the triplet subdivision on both attack patterns. This can prove to be difficult, as the method requires more precise tongue placement and movement. However, the focus on the "ku" attack helps strengthen the player's overall agility and endurance. By practicing each attack separately then combining them with long, uninterrupted passages playing a single tone, the player can achieve balance and clarity between the two while minimizing movement in the mouth.

¹² Gioacchino Rossini, *Prelude, Theme and Variations in E major, for Horn and Orchestra*. Edited and arranged by Joseph Eger. (New York: International Music Company, 2001), mm. 254-261.

Applying the method to the Rossini yields similar results. When applied to Variation Two, the Farkas method provides the player with greater endurance while playing long passages of triplet or sextuplet patterns¹³ (mm. 223-230). But regardless of which technique is implemented, the primary goal is to achieve a consistent subdivision of the beat in both the front and back of the mouth to preserve the triplet subdivision of the music. Players should strive to have an equal level of articulation with both attacks. By minimizing the tongue's movement in the mouth, the player maintains a constant airflow and consistent embouchure.

Another area of focus theme and variations can provide developmental assistance is with articulations. As previously discussed, articulations play a crucial role in the tone and clarity of a performance. They help shape the style and form of the piece by providing contrast between notes and shaping the melodic line. One of the best examples of this can be seen in the Beethoven. While each of the variations alters the theme in several ways, one consistent change can be seen in articulation. Each variation alters the articulations used in the horn part to contrast the styles and contour of the melodic lines. The piece makes great usage of the three different styles of staccato articulation described in Farkas' *Art of French Horn Playing* (1956). Farkas outlines three types of staccato brass players can use: Staccatissimo, Medium Staccato, and Melodic¹⁴. Staccatissimo passages are marked by high speed and number of consecutive notes being played. They are characterized as having a dryness to the tone, as well as a quick but controlled release to each note from the player.

Variation Seven provides an excellent example of an extended passage in which a staccatissimo articulation pattern is required. It alters the theme of the piece using a series of

¹³ Gioacchino Rossini, *Prelude, Theme and Variations in E major, for Horn and Orchestra*. Edited and arranged by Joseph Eger. (New York: International Music Company, 2001), mm. 223-230.

¹⁴ Philip Farkas, *The Art of French Horn Playing* (Miami: Summy-Birchard 1956), 51-52.

triplet arpeggiations and stepwise motion at fast *Allegro Vivace* tempo¹⁵. As seen in the Rossini, a deliberate movement of the tongue allows the player to retain the sound clarity throughout the piece. Air control is a core aspect of brass playing, so learning to use the tongue in an effective manner will help improve their control, tone, and overall sound quality while performing. The player can achieve this by using as little movement in the tongue as possible, producing a light and agile articulation.

The second type of staccato articulation Farkas desc is the melodic staccato. Unlike a stacatissimo or “medium” staccato, the melodic staccato is used to create space but not lightness in a note’s attack. The goal of the articulation is to alter the length of a note without disrupting or detaching it from the rest of the phrase¹⁶. Within the Beethoven, there are two distinct examples of a melodic staccato. The first can be found in Variation Three, where the student is required to perform the notes with an accented staccato articulation¹⁷. When performing this articulation, it is important to maintain a sense of momentum in the performance. The note should be played at full value, but still retains a degree of separation between attacks. To do this, the player must use the attack to create a greater sense of power and control in the articulation by using the tongue to regulate the airflow in the instrument.

This is supported by Reynolds, who describes how, “No attack can be considered successful if it is not accurate. A large factor in accuracy, tongued or slurred, is the player’s ability to form links between how a pitch looks, how it feels, and how it sounds”¹⁸. Playing the accented staccato using the tongue’s movement to control the airflow allows the performer to

¹⁵ Ludwig Van Beethoven, *Twelve Variations on a Theme from Handel’s Judas Maccabeus WoO 45*, Edited and arranged by Kazimierz Machala (New York: International Music Company, 1997), mm 169-172.

¹⁶ Philip Farkas, *The Art of French Horn Playing* (Miami: Summy-Birchard 1956), 52.

¹⁷ Ludwig Van Beethoven, *Twelve Variations on a Theme from Handel’s Judas Maccabeus WoO 45*, Edited and arranged by Kazimierz Machala (New York: International Music Company, 1997), mm 73-78.

¹⁸ Verne Reynolds, *The Horn Handbook* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1997), 35.

preserve the tone quality of the attack. When playing, a performer should keep a constant airflow at times moving from the embouchure into the instrument. Without it, the pitch can become brassy or unclear. The tongue acts as a means of controlling the quantity of air moving through the instrument instead of its velocity. The faster it moves, the greater the impact of the note's attack.

A second example of a melodic staccato is demonstrated in Variation Nine. The theme is altered to include several descending slur pickups in the beginning of variation and at the ends of key phrase endings¹⁹. The phrasing and placement of the notes on the offbeats and downbeats confers an emphasis on the later melodic staccato note, as it falls on a metrically stronger beat in the meter. Similar to the staccato accent mark, the student's performance must communicate this emphasis by creating a sense of separation and weight in the note's articulation.

This is reliant on the second aspect necessary for good articulation: the release. Proper articulation performance relies just as much on the release of a note as it does on the initial attack. Reynolds describes the role of a lyrical release as the process of bringing a note to a close by "tapering" the note in a way that diminishes the quantity but not the speed of the air being used. He explains how, "In lyrical playing we might think of a breathing place as a seam, which is defined as a line formed by sewing together two pieces of cloth. Sometimes the seam is used as a decorative element; at other times it is appropriate to disguise the seam"²⁰. When releasing a note, the goal should not be to block the air in a sudden and dry motion. Instead, the performer should create a gradual but still deliberate tapering of the note that rings from without the horn.

¹⁹ Ludwig Van Beethoven, *Twelve Variations on a Theme from Handel's Judas Maccabeus WoO 45*, Edited and arranged by Kazimierz Machala (New York: International Music Company, 1997), mm 217-235.

²⁰ Verne Reynolds, *The Horn Handbook* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1997), 35.

The result allows the note to still be heard at full value while creating the necessary separation within the phrase.

One of the best examples of the pedagogical capabilities of the theme and variations form is found within the David Amram (1930) *Blues and Variations for Monk for Unaccompanied French Horn* (1982). Written in memory of the jazz performer and composer Thelonius Monk (1917-1982), the solo differs in several ways from the previously mentioned works. One of the first can be seen in its style. As indicated by the title, *Blues and Variations* draws heavily from the blues and jazz traditions. While it is uncommon for the french horn to be performed in a jazz setting, it is not unheard of. Several musicians such as Amram, Julius Watkins (1921-1977), and Willie Ruff (1931-2023) have managed to obtain lucrative careers as jazz horn performers. As indicated by Hill, a core strength of teaching jazz theory to horn students lies in its ability to develop a player's sense of improvisation and artistry. He explains how by teaching players to improvise, they are developing a better understanding of their own capabilities and preferences as performers²¹. Like cadenzas, jazz improvisation helps develop a student's musicianship. It conditions the performer to approach a phrase from a melodic perspective, helping them identify key ideas and connections within the music that need to be featured during the performance.

Within the Amram, the main theme includes jazz elements such as emphasis on the offbeat, swung triplet patterns, and a modal tonal center²². When first learning to perform jazz, it is crucial for players to be able to understand the importance of swing rhythms and emphasizing the offbeat. As noted by Berliner, "...the backbeat provides an important rhythmic target point for improvisors. In this sense, from the viewpoint of African American music, the

²¹ Douglass Hill, *Collected Thoughts on Teaching and Learning, Creativity, and Horn Performance*, (Miami: Warner Bros. Publications 2001), 105.

²² David Amram, *Blues and Variations for Monk*, Rev. ed (New York: C.F Peters, 2013), mm. 9-20.

backbeat itself can be viewed as the strong beat”²³. Much of the focus on the offbeat is derived from the music’s origins in dance music. Throughout most of its history, jazz has been used in social settings focused as music to various dances. As such, helping performers visualize the dance like quality to the music will assist their understanding of how to perform it. A good example of this can be seen in Variation I. The variation uses a variety of rhythmic patterns, including offbeat eighths, dotted eights and sixteenths, and triplets²⁴. While it can be tempting to play each rhythm based on how they subdivide the beat, it is crucial that the player recognizes and learns how each pattern functions both individually and as part of the phrase. The goal is to create a sense of anticipation within the music in which the downbeat helps lead into and heighten the arriving downbeat. It acts as the driving force behind the music, pushing the phrase forward to the next crucial point.

In addition, the Amram uses several performance techniques unique to the horn. Variation Two features two different techniques, first tapping on the bell in a triplet pattern, then ending the piece by blowing air through the horn without creating a buzz using a prewritten articulation pattern in the music²⁵. While air flow may seem simple at first, getting the sound to travel through the horn and still sound clear and present in a performance setting can prove difficult. Hill provides several techniques in *Extended Techniques for Horn* to assist projecting the effect. These include using the placement of the lips around the mouthpiece, pushing in the valves at “half-valve” position, or using a combination of both to create a greater sense of resistance within the instrument²⁶. In keeping with the core concept of the form, the piece uses

²³Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994) 149.

²⁴ David Amram, *Blues and Variations for Monk*, Rev. ed (New York: C.F Peters, 2013), 21-27.

²⁵ David Amram, *Blues and Variations for Monk*, Rev. ed (New York: C.F Peters, 2013), mm. 38-44

²⁶ Douglass Hill, *Extended Techniques for the Horn: A Practical Handbook for Students, Performers, and Composers*, (Van Nuys, CA: Alfred Music Publishing, 1996), 74.

these techniques to alter the means of performing the original theme in a new context. Although no notes are being played, the variation still utilizes the thematic material by using a triplet rhythmic pattern in the tapped sections that later appears in Variation Three²⁷. Juxtaposing the rhythmic pattern in both sections creates a logical development of the theme. The contrast in performance creates a greater sense of memorability and musicianship, which allows the audience to identify key thematic elements. It acts as a subversion of expectations by changing not only the music played, but also its means of delivery.

Variation Four continues this development using stopped horn techniques. Starting in measure 57, the player is instructed to bend the pitch of the note using their right hand down a semi-tone from C to B-natural, then later from G to F-sharp²⁸. When discussing pitch bending, it is important to also talk about its relationship to stopped horn. Both are achieved by using the right hand to cover up most or all of the bell to muffle the sound. The key difference lies in how the hand affects the sound itself. The goal of hand-stopping is to completely cover the bell, causing the pitch to rise by a half step. However, Farkas notes that there is a way to cause the pitch to bend in the opposite direction and lower the pitch. This is caused by the performer partially covering the horn bell, rather than fully covering it²⁹. By using this technique, the performer bends the pitch to create the desired effect in the piece. During the piece, the player should work towards developing a quick and deliberate motion in the right hand while keeping their embouchure steady. While how much of the horn should be covered varies from person to person, a general rule of thumb is to cover between three-quarters to the entire bell. A student

²⁷ David Amram, *Blues and Variations for Monk*, Rev. ed (New York: C.F Peters, 2013), 38-56.

²⁸ David Amram, *Blues and Variations for Monk*, Rev. ed (New York: C.F Peters, 2013), mm. 57-59.

²⁹ Phillip Farkas, *The Art of French Horn Playing*, (Miami: Summy-Birchard, 1956), 80.

should practice with a tuner to ensure the pitch is centered while muted. The horn should do all the work to bend the pitch using the limited exit for the air to flatten the sound.

The theme and variations for solo horn repertoire is an important tool for horn pedagogy thanks to its ability to develop multiple performance practices within a varied but unified form. While the form is not requested as much as other solo works, its use in developing a player's skills cannot be underestimated. Its ability to help students learn new skills by altering a set pattern is a perfect example of Universal Design for Learning principles, making it ideal for the classroom setting. Thanks to its lack of clear rules on how a theme can be altered, the form can also be used to help students learn compositional practices whether for another solo work or for their own compositions. In a time when developing a player's ability to perform in a concert setting is more important than ever, having a piece that can teach so much with so little music can make all the difference.

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