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Variations Op. 9, 21 nos. 1&2, 24

Paul Berkowitz



The principle of musical variation plays an especially prominent role in Brahms' compositions. In addition to the independent variation sets, a number of movements from larger works are made up of variations, stretching from Brahms' first published work, the piano sonata in C major, to one of his last, the clarinet sonata in E-flat major, Op. 120, no. 2. Brahms' fascination with variations is especially notable given the low status of variation sets during his youth. Variations, like fantasies, were the domain of the virtuoso pianist-composers who dominated public concerts in Europe (especially Paris) in the 1830s and flooded the market with flashy re-workings of familiar tunes, often from Italian opera. Robert Schumann, Brahms' friend and mentor, was particularly scathing in his dismissal of these fashionable variation sets, describing them as "rubbish" and "trivia", and writing in 1836 that "surely in no genre of our art has more bungling mediocrity been perpetrated...one could scarcely imagine such wretchedness springing up on every side, such vulgarity that no longer knows any shame." Schumann, of course, was no stranger to the composition of variations, and for both Schumann and Brahms, the composition of variation sets was something of a rescue operation, wresting a genre that had been the site of serious masterworks by Bach and Beethoven from the clutches of the salon virtuosi. Although Brahms composed variations throughout his life, his musical priorities changed over the years. He seems to have been questioning his relationship to variation forms right around the time that three of the four works on this disc were composed, and these particular pieces bear traces of this self-examination.

The earliest of Brahms' independent variation sets is the Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann, Op. 9, from 1854 (Brahms' first biographer, Max Kalbeck, thought that the Variations on a Hungarian Theme, Op. 21, no. 2 could have been composed as early as 1852, but it is much more likely that it dates from 1856). At

this time, Brahms was in thrall to both Robert and Clara Schumann, whom he had met in the fall of 1853, shortly before Robert wrote his famous article for the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* proclaiming Brahms to be the heir to Beethoven. Brahms' Op. 9 variations are both biographically and musically intertwined with the lives of the Schumann family. Presented to Clara as a gift marking the birth of the Schumann's son Felix, the variations are based on a theme (Robert's *Albumblatt*, Op. 99, no. 4) already used by Clara for a variation set of her own (Brahms' manuscript was originally inscribed "Little Variations on a Theme by Him. Dedicated to Her."). Musically, in addition to quoting Robert's *Albumblatt* verbatim as his theme, Brahms acknowledged modeling one of his variations (no. 9) on another of Robert's *Albumblätter*, and seems to have paid tribute to others of Robert's keyboard works throughout the piece. Brahms also quoted a theme by Clara at the end of his tenth variation ("Clara speaks!" as he wrote to Joachim), a theme which, in turn, had been used both by Clara herself in her own variations, and by Robert in his Op. 5 Impromptus.

In Brahms' autograph manuscript, ten of the sixteen variations are signed with initials (written into the bar lines at the ends of the variations), five with "B," for Brahms, and five with "Kr;" for Kreisler, referring to E.T.A. Hoffmann's character Johannes Kreisler, whom Brahms had adopted as an alter ego and associated with a number of his early works. Brahms' use of initials to assign different variations to different personalities recalls both Robert Schumann's similar practice in dividing his *Davidsbündlertänze* between his alter egos Florestan and Eusebius, and Hoffman's novel *Kater Murr*, in which pages ostensibly written by Kreisler alternate with those purportedly by his cat. In general, the "Brahms" variations (4, 7, 8, 14 & 16) are slower and more contemplative than the capricious "Kreisler" variations (5, 6, 9, 12 & 13), which are

more brilliant and extroverted. The “Kreislcr” variations also stray farther from the theme, failing to follow its phrase structure, and retaining only fragments of its melodic substance. Despite the fantastic nature of the “Kreislcr” variations, and the fact that Op. 9 has long been held up in the Brahms literature as an example of a freer approach to variation that the composer would later repudiate, it is remarkable how closely and cleverly Brahms follows Schumann’s theme in about half of the variations. In these variations, Brahms confines himself to Schumann’s phrase structure, and uses easily audible paraphrases of either Schumann’s original melody, or of the bass line that accompanies it. Variations 1 and 3 use variants of Schumann’s melody in the left hand, while Variation 2 fits a new melody to Schumann’s original bass line. Three more variations use Schumann’s themes as parts of canons. Variation 8 is a canon based on Schumann’s melody, with an expressive statement in the soprano followed at a distance by a murmuring echo in the left hand. Variation 10 combines Schumann’s bass used as a melody in the soprano with its inversion, first simultaneously in the bass, and then as a canon with the alto. The penultimate variation, which mimics the texture of one of Schumann’s *Davidsbündlertänze* (Book II, no. 5), is a slow canon between soprano and bass, based on Schumann’s melody, and the final variation has attenuated fragments in the right hand over a quiet and dignified statement of Schumann’s bass. These artful manipulations of Schumann’s musical materials reminded Joachim of Beethoven; the highest compliment that he could have paid his friend, and one seconded by Clara, who confided to her diary that Beethoven’s spirit hovered over the work.

Although published as the second of the Op. 21 variation sets, the Variations on a Hungarian Song were actually composed before the Variations on an Original Theme (Op. 21, no. 1). The melody upon

which the Variations on a Hungarian Song is based came to Brahms from the Hungarian violinist Eduard Reményi. Brahms knew the tune by 1853, when he sent a piano setting of it to Joachim, but probably did not compose the variations until 1856. Reményi had been exiled from Hungary for his involvement in the 1848 Hungarian uprising against the Hapsburgs, and passed through Hamburg on his way to the United States. Brahms heard Reményi perform in Hamburg, and toured with him in 1852, after Reményi had returned from America. Brahms had already been exposed to various forms of Hungarian popular and dance music by other Hungarian refugees that had stopped in Hamburg on their way out of Europe, but it was his time with Reményi that led directly to works like the Hungarian Dances, and movements “in the Gypsy style”, like the finale of the G minor piano quartet, Op. 25, or, to a lesser extent, the last movement of the Violin Concerto.

Although there is no reason to believe that Reményi’s tune is anything other than an authentic Hungarian song, neither the tune nor the subsequent variations are much marked by the distinctive styles of Brahms’ Hungarian Dances or Liszt’s Hungarian Rhapsodies; works that aped what Brahms and Liszt thought of as “Gypsy” music, but was actually popular music by middle-class Hungarian composers. Brahms’ variations lack the improvisatory feel and self-conscious melodic exoticism of those works (there are some slight whiffs of the “gypsy” style, especially in Variations 5 and 13, marking Brahms’ first tentative flirtations with this style). Instead, Reményi’s song is notable both for its meter and its brevity. The theme is only eight bars long, and consists of alternating bars of three and four beats per measure (effectively equivalent to four measures of seven-four). The odd meter creates a sense of rhythmic awkwardness, made more prominent by its habit of cadencing on the seventh (and last) beat of each two measure group. Eight bars is startlingly short for a variation theme



(although there is one obvious precedent in Beethoven's 32 Variations in C minor, WoO 80, which Brahms may have had in mind as a model). Themes are typically at least twice that long, and usually contain some internal repetition (the original theme that Brahms supplied for Op. 21, no. 1, for instance, has two nine bar phrases, both repeated). The first twelve variations maintain the eight bar structure, with each flying by as if uttered in a single breath, before the final variation expands into a lengthy finale. After the theme is stated in D major, Brahms immediately turns to minor for the first six variations, with the melody moving to the bass, quoted almost exactly in the first variation, fragmented so that only every other bar is heard in the second variation, and incorporated into a flurry of semiquavers (sixteenth notes) in the third. The group of six variations in D minor ends with a fermata, marking the first pause in the uninterrupted cascade of terse variations. After this brief respite, Brahms returns to D major, with the melody once again given a plain statement in the bass, this time in imitation of a plucked cello. After Variation 8, Brahms gives up on the alternation of three and four beat measures, moving to duple meters that make the variations even shorter. The set of major variations begins softly and sweetly, but, from the eleventh variation on, becomes ever louder and busier until a rising scale heralds the finale. Paul Berkowitz describes the finale as "bits of everything combined into a *potpourri*: a quick reversion to D minor in "Hungarian Style" and snapped rhythms, some wild trills and scales, an extended lyrical episode in B flat major that sounds as if it walked out of the Op. 10 Ballades, interrupted briefly by a martial *ben marcato* passage pitting duplets against triplets with thick orchestral chords, a reprise of the rollicking refrain turned up a few notches and then culminating in a return to the Theme in its original guise but speeded up (*Tempo 1 più animato*) with a few extra bells and whistles a Hungarian folk tune given full Lutheran

chorale treatment as performed by a marching brass band! Quite a *tour de force*..." Brahms reexamined his attitudes about the process of musical variation around this time. He and Joachim were engaged in a mutual self-improvement project concerning counterpoint, and, in addition to exchanging canons and fugues, Joachim sent Brahms a set of variations in 1856. This occasioned the following response from Brahms: "From time to time I reflect on variation form and find that it should be kept stricter, purer. The Ancients were very strict about retaining the bass of the theme...I sometimes find, however, that the Moderns more often worry the theme. We anxiously retain the entire melody, but don't manipulate it freely. We don't really create anything new out of it; on the contrary, we only burden it." Brahms returned to this subject in 1869, writing to a critic that "In a theme for variations, it is almost only the bass that *actually* has any meaning for me. But this is sacred for me, it is the firm foundation on which I then build my stories." While it would overstate the case to suggest that Brahms had some kind of conversion experience with regard to variation sets in 1856, it is notable that the two sets that predate the letter to Joachim (Op. 9 and Op. 21, no. 2) are pieces that do largely "retain the entire melody," (or melodies, in the case of Op. 9, which treats both the soprano and the bass of Schumann's theme as melodies). At least by the time of the 1869 letter, Brahms had repudiated the variation techniques that he had used in Op. 21, no. 2 quoting some fragments of the Hungarian song and its variations, and writing that he thought of them "with horror". It is also probably not a coincidence that the first variation set that followed the 1856 letter, the Variations on an Original Theme, Op. 21, no. 1 of 1857, are more variations on a harmonic scaffolding than variations on a melody.

As mentioned above, Brahms' theme for Op. 21, no. 1 falls into two nine-bar phrases, with both halves repeated. There are eleven variations, and, as is the case in Op. 21, no. 2, all but the last follow the phrase structure of the theme (with the exception of a single extra bar in Variation 8), with the last variation blossoming into an expansive finale. In stark contrast, though, to Op. 21, no. 2, in which the Hungarian Song is a near-constant presence, and which culminates in a resounding restatement of that theme, Brahms' melody for Op. 21, no. 1 all but vanishes after the initial statement of the theme, with only the slightest hints of its melodic contour appearing in the subsequent variations. Even the distinctive quaver (eighth-note) upbeat that begins the melody is banished from all the variations save one. Given that these variations are linked by a common harmonic structure, rather than by a shared melody, Brahms complicated his task considerably by writing a theme whose bass line is fairly immobile. Both the first six bars of the theme, and the last five bars of theme are suspended over a single pitch, a pedal on the tonic, D. The theme itself is beautiful, warm and introspective, setting a contemplative mood that is largely sustained through the first seven variations. After the rich texture and expressive ornamentation of the theme, the naked left hand arpeggios that open both halves of Variation 1, almost reminiscent of a Bach cello suite, come as something of surprise. The left hand figuration is retained in Variation 2, where it underlies an expressive but new melody in the right hand. Here Brahms is following his own prescription to "invent something actually new" and "discover new melodies" in his bass lines. The third variation is the one that hews closest to the original theme. This is the only variation that remembers that the theme began with a quaver (eighth-note) pickup, and the one that follows the melodic contour of the theme the most closely. The bass pedal, which had been less prominent in the first two variations, reappears with a vengeance here, underlying almost the entire

variation. The bass pedal is also a feature of Variation 4, where it is transformed into a quiet, but insistent throbbing. The fifth variation is again the excuse for a new melody, this time one which is combined with its inversion in a canon. This combination of a Romantic, expressive melody with the rigors of Baroque counterpoint is almost uniquely Brahmsian, marrying his immersion in the melodic language of Schumann with his respect for the methods of Bach, and demonstrating the fruits of his correspondence course in counterpoint with Joachim. Variations 5 and 6 outline the theme's harmonic structure with different types of keyboard figuration, first flowing triplets in both hands, and then a spare two-voice texture in which the hands take turns with big leaps of octaves and tenths. Variation 8 marks a turning point in the set. For the first time, the mode shifts to minor, the mood becomes martial, and a crescendo moves the piece into the realm of double and even triple forte, also for the first time. The next variation is still in minor, still forte, and still march like, with the bass pedal presented in the guise of a timpani roll. Brahms returns to the major mode for Variation 10, but the military certainty of the preceding two variations has been replaced with quiet agitation. The final variation is extraordinary. The grumbling bass of Variation 10 has been compressed into a trill, over which floats duets and trios in the right hand. Instead of literally repeating each half of the variation, Brahms supplies a second, even more elaborately embroidered variation for each half. Such extensive use of trills, especially in combination with passagework in the upper reaches of the keyboard, inevitably recalls the late Beethoven piano sonatas, and in particular the end of another variation set, the last movement of Opp. 109 and 111. After cycling through the theme's harmonies this last time, Brahms rounds off the set with a magnificent coda that finally returns to the calm mood of the opening variations. Although rarely performed today, Op. 21, no. 1 is a masterwork, combining great beauty with compositional craft. Joachim recognized this



early, especially praising the “exceedingly beautiful” theme, and the first five variations, which “as a perfect whole belong to the deepest and noblest inspirations” that he had seen from Brahms.

After publishing the Op. 21 variation sets, Brahms turned away from variations for a few years, returning to them in 1860 with the slow movement of the Sextet for Strings in B-flat major, Op. 18, and then more intensively between 1861 and 1863 with the four-hand Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann, Op. 23 (1861) and two big, virtuoso sets for solo piano, the Variations and a Fugue on a Theme on Handel, Op. 24 (1861) and the Variations on a Theme by Paganini, Op. 35 (1862-3). Another chamber work with variations in the slow movement, the 1864 second Sextet for Strings (G major, Op. 36) rounds off this second group of Brahms variation works.

Another of Brahms’ principles of variation composition is that variations should reflect the character of the theme that spawned them. This may seem an obvious point, but, as Elaine Sisman points out in her excellent article “Brahms and the Variation Canon”, this was by no means a standard practice at the time, with the outstanding counterexample Beethoven’s Diabelli Variations, which wrests a staggering profusion of affects from a banal theme. This principle is audible in all of the sets on this recording. The Op. 9 Schumann Variations, for instance, are infused not just with the spirit of Schumann’s style, but make reference to specific works by both Robert and Clara. Brahms’s musical language, though, is much closer to that of Schumann, barely a generation older, than that of the Baroque master Handel. For the Handel Variations, Brahms chose a theme from Handel’s Suite in B-flat major, which was published in 1733 (Brahms owned a first edition), exactly a century before Brahms was born, and the dialogue between Handel and Brahms creates an even greater stylistic tension than that between

Schumann and Brahms in the earlier set. Brahms may have been inspired not just by Handel, but also by the more recent example of Robert Volkmann, who had published a substantial set of variations on the “Harmonious Blacksmith” theme from another Handel keyboard suite in 1856. Like that of Op. 21, no. 1, the autograph of the Handel Variations bears a veiled dedication to Clara Schumann (“Variations for a dear friend”) The Handel variations were composed on a 1839 Graf piano that Brahms had received from Clara Schumann

The neo-Baroque spirit of the Handel Variations comes to the fore most markedly in the Siciliano of Variation 19 and the tinkly French music box of Variation 22. Even when not so obviously in anachronistic styles, other variations use Baroque procedures like the canons in Variations 6 and (more loosely) 16. In general, the set encompasses an usually rich diversity of styles. The clarity of Handel’s harmonic language permeates the set, such that even the less explicitly neo-Baroque variations are dominated by bright major triads. Accompaniment figurations, like Mozartian semiquavers in Variation 11 and the horn-fifths of Variation 12 also suggest earlier eras. This creates a sound-world which sets the more Brahmsian chromatic variations, like Variations 2, 9 and 20 in sharp relief. Variation 9, in particular, with its pervasive chromatic motion and obstinate pedal points suggests late nineteenth-century organ music much more readily than the sound of Handel’s harpsichord. Another distinctive sound is the Hungarian style hinted at in Op. 21, no. 2. As Jonathan Bellman has pointed out, Variations 13 and 14 form a “miniature *czárdás*” modeled on the typical Hungarian coupling of a slow, heavy, ornamented *lassan* and a lively *friska*. Brahms apparently did not feel that the Handel Variations formed a set in which every variation was critical to the structure of the work, describing the set as a “haystack” from which one or a few variations could be omitted without

collapsing the whole. The Handel Variations ends with a massive fugue in four voices, whose subject ornaments the melodic contour of Handel's theme. The inclusion of a fugue is simultaneously another nod to Bach's era, but also (and perhaps more significantly) an homage to late Beethoven, reminiscent of both the culminations of the last sonatas in either variations (Opp. 109 and 111) or fugues (Opp. 106 and 110), and, above all, the combination of variation and fugue in the Diabelli Variations.

*Derek Katz*

#### PAUL BERKOWITZ

Montreal-born Paul Berkowitz is a graduate of McGill University and of the Curtis Institute, where he studied with Rudolf Serkin. He lived in Britain for 20 years appearing frequently at the Queen Elizabeth and Wigmore Halls and on the BBC, as a soloist with major orchestras in Britain and Canada and at music festivals in Belgium, Denmark, England, Scotland, France, Italy and Spain. Mr. Berkowitz left the Guildhall School of Music in London, where he had been a professor since 1975, to join the music faculty at UCSB in 1993, where he is Professor of Piano and currently Chair of the Department of Music. He has been invited to present master classes at major conservatories, universities and festivals, and his students have won prizes in numerous competitions, including the BBC Young Musician of the Year, the International Piano Competition "Palma d'Oro" in Italy, the Bradshaw and Buono International Competition in New York, and the Los Angeles Liszt Competition.

Mr. Berkowitz has recorded the complete Piano Sonatas of Schubert for Meridian Records to worldwide acclaim, winning accolades for Record of the Year in the Sunday Times of London and the Los Angeles Times, as well as CDs of Schumann and Brahms. BBC Music Magazine reviewed the CD release of Brahms' Piano Music Vol. II commenting, "...praise to Meridian, which has in the Canadian pianist Paul Berkowitz an artist who isn't shy of taking on the kind of repertoire traditionally the preserve of more internationally high-profile artists. Rightly so, for he has a voice, a musicality, a bigness of pianism distinctively his own...his integrity is commanding, his stylistic authority convincing and his refusal merely to play the notes impressive."



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Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann, Op.9		
[1] Thema: Ziemlich langsam	1:05	[36] Variation 6
[2] Variation 1	1:02	[37] Variation 7: Poco più lento
[3] Variation 2: Poco più moto	0:30	[38] Variation 8: Ancora un poco più lento
[4] Variation 3: Tempo di tema	0:57	[39] Variation 9
[5] Variation 4: Poco più moto	0:44	[40] Variation 10: Espressivo agitato
[6] Variation 5: Allegro capriccioso	0:56	[41] Variation 11
[7] Variation 6: Allegro	0:50	[42] Variation 12
[8] Variation 7: Andante	0:54	[43] Variation 13
[9] Variation 8: Andante (non troppo lento)	1:17	[44] Finale: Allegro
[10] Variation 9: Schnell	0:35	
[11] Variation 10: Poco Adagio	1:48	Variations on a Theme of G. F. Handel, Op.24
[12] Variation 11: Un poco più animato	0:48	[45] Aria
[13] Variation 12: Allegretto: poco scherzando	0:42	[46] Variation 1
[14] Variation 13: Non troppo Presto	0:37	[47] Variation 2: Animato
[15] Variation 14: Andante	1:07	[48] Variation 3: Dolce
[16] Variation 15: Poco Adagio	1:36	[49] Variation 4: Risoluto
[17] Variation 16	1:55	[50] Variation 5: Espressivo
		[51] Variation 6
		[52] Variation 7: Con vivacità
		[53] Variation 8
		[54] Variation 9: Poco sostenuto
		[55] Variation 10: Energico
		[56] Variation 11: Dolce
		[57] Variation 12: Soave
		[58] Variation 13: Largamente: ma non più
		[59] Variation 14: Sciolto
		[60] Variation 15
		[61] Variation 16
		[62] Variation 17: Più mosso
		[63] Variation 18: Grazioso
		[64] Variation 19: Leggiero e vivace: legato
		[65] Variation 20
		[66] Variation 21: Dolce
		[67] Variation 22
		[68] Variation 23: Vivace e stacc.
		[69] Variation 24
		[70] Variation 25
		[71] Fuga
Variations on a Hungarian Song, Op.21, No.2		
[30] Allegro	0:18	
[31] Variation 1	0:17	
[32] Variation 2	0:16	
[33] Variation 3	0:17	
[34] Variation 4	0:18	
[35] Variation 5	0:16	

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