Variation Writing

by Terence Dwyer

Variations are composed on a "theme" (not the same as "melody"). A theme includes melody, bass, harmony, structure, rhythm, tempo, colour, key, mode and dynamics. If none of these is altered, there is no variation. If all of them are changed, the theme is lost. Therefore a variation must alter some features and retain others.

Discretion is needed to keep a proper balance: it is useless to keep only, say, the tempo and the colour and lose everything else! On the other hand, if only these two features are altered, a satisfactory variation is unlikely to result. The point is that some features have stronger ties to the theme than others: the most important are the melody and the harmony, so one or the other must normally remain in some form or other. All other features are subsidiary, and any changes made in them are additional to the main scheme.

There are four methods of variation (and only four) available to the composer;
- 1) Melodic decoration
- 2) Canto Fermo method
- 3) Harmonic method
- 4) Free method

The following modifications may also be used in conjunction with one of the above, though none is sufficient on its own:
Changes to:-
- a) Mode
- b) Rhythm
- c) Time signature
- d) Tempo
- e) Key
- f) Instrumentation
- g) Dynamics
- h) Colour (= high or low register, type of texture, etc.)

Now we'll look at the four main methods in some detail.

A. Melodic decoration
The melody is ornamented by the addition of passing notes, chord notes or other extras so that the melody is disguised.
In the above example 1 the variation moves in continuous semiquavers, the original tune being readily discovered. The student should aim at something more interesting, based on the use of consistent figuration.

Ex 2.

Theme

Var. 12

Brahms

This is a rather florid example, justified by the long notes of the original. Notice that although the rhythmic formula is the same in every bar, Brahms takes care to vary the melodic curve.

A rhythmic figure should not be used for too long before being replaced by something else:

Ex.3 Theme

Var.1

Mozart

Later in this variation the original figuration returns in order to give unity. Notice also that it is not necessary to follow faithfully every note of the original. In example 3 the asterisked notes are omitted in the variation.

In all the above examples, observe that notes in the variation corresponding to notes in the original theme always occur as part of the same beat. This practice is rarely departed from.
It is usual in this type of variation to retain the original harmonic basis. There is no reason however, apart from tradition, why the harmony should not be changed. It is sometimes changed slightly by way of decoration:

Ex. 4

Finally under this heading we can consider the case where the variation is a simplification of the theme rather than an elaboration, i.e. the theme is a variation of the variation!

Ex. 5

This method is usually best when mixed with the normal one.

Summary of Decoration Method:

a) Use consistent figuration, but not ad nauseam.
b) Omit some melody notes if it makes a better result.
c) Occasionally simplify a portion of the melody, if it is already elaborate.
d) Occasionally change the harmony, if suitable, otherwise retain it.
B. Canto Fermo Method

The melody is kept intact (with perhaps slight alterations) and used as a Canto Fermo (given melody) around which an interesting texture is constructed. Any of the following ways may be adopted:

a) The melody may simply be reharmonised. Only good if the new harmony is interesting:

Ex 6

b) A countersubject may be added to the melody (which latter can be in a lower part if desired):

Ex 7

C.F. in alto
c) A contrapuntal texture may surround the C.F., based on figures which are either new, or maybe derived from the melody.

Var 3. (using new figure)
d) The C.F. may be inverted, if it is suitable:

Ex 11

Sometimes older composers made no change other than a rearranged accompaniment texture:

Ex 12

Avoid this sort of thing; there is no fresh harmony, and the new counterpoint in the bass lacks rhythmic interest. Even the top melody has got less interesting. This is Handel at his worst.
C. Harmonic method

This slightly misleading term implies that the original harmony is *retained* and the original melody discarded. Brahms, the chief exponent of this type, said:

"A theme for variations actually means to me little more than the bass. This, however, is sacrosanct; it is the firm foundation on which I construct my story. .... On the given bass, I really invent anew, I invent for it new melodies, I create."

By "bass" Brahms really meant "harmony" as he rarely kept the same bass notes. Even the harmony was not entirely sacrosanct, as will be shown. However, the important part of his dictum is the last eight words. In the following example the two melodies have no resemblance whatsoever, but the harmonies are the same (see chord numbers):
Rigid adherence to the harmonic basis is not necessary throughout:

Sometimes a canon is possible, though the changing harmonies usually offer obvious difficulties:

Bach achieved many canons in his Goldberg Variations, which all use the harmonic method.
Summary of Harmonic Method

a) Copy out the required number of bars and insert the chord names underneath. Do not depart from the original structure, i.e. phrase-lengths.
b) On the basis of the given harmony, compose any music you think artistic and appropriate. It must have individuality and should not resemble the original melody. It may take the form of a sustained melody, a contrapuntal texture, or a dialogue between the various parts. Do not overlook the bass line in this respect.
c) The basic harmonies need not appear in the same inversions as in the original. They may be decorated chromatically or with suspensions, etc., and may occasionally be completely altered.

D. Free Method

Part of the theme, often a mere fragment, is used as the subject of a free fantasia. No rules can be laid down for the composition of such variations; they will either be cast in some well-known form such as Ternary, or will correspond roughly to the development section of a sonata (with less modulation) and require the same sort of technique in handling. In all cases, a satisfactory balance of form must be evident.

Examples are too long to quote: the reader is referred to such works as Elgar's *Enigma Variations*, Tchaikovsky's *Variations from Suite No.3 in G*, Britten's *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, and the final variation of many sets by Mozart.

The final variation can take the form of a fugue - if you know how to write one.

Combination of Methods

Methods 1 & 2 can be combined in theory, but in practice the listener would find it difficult to attend to contrapuntal details whilst trying to recognise a disguised theme.

Methods 3 & 4 combine effectively. The harmonic basis is retained, and the superimposed material consists of a free working of a derived fragment:
Use of subsidiary changes

These should be freely employed along with the four methods, as they help to give character to each variation.

a) Change of mode (to tonic major or minor)
Modulations may cause difficulties. With methods 1 & 2, keep the same melody if possible and adapt to new harmonies rather than force a poor effect. Method 3 sometimes gives a problem if the major original modulated to the dominant key: perhaps treat this passage as an Imperfect Cadence, or simply modulate to the relative major.

b) Change of rhythm and/or time.
This is an interesting way of giving character to a variation:

c) Change of tempo, tone-colour and dynamics
These will naturally suggest themselves aids to characterisation. Note carefully that these subsidiary changes are rarely enough to make a satisfactory variation, even when several are combined. Thus in the following example there are changes of mode, tempo, tone-colour and dynamics, yet the composer does not rely only upon these: he changes the harmony also:
Design of a set of variations

It is not at all necessary to use all possible methods, in fact the inner unity of a set is likely to be stronger if they are all based on one, or two methods. Brahms' *Variations on a theme of Haydn* are all harmonic except the final passacaglia. All Bach's *Goldberg Variations* are harmonic. (For an exception, see Arensky's charming *Variations on a theme of Tchaikovsky*, which uses every possible method.) Sometimes a variation changes its method halfway. The modern trend is to favour free form, whilst retaining many of the older features. A careful study of Elgar's *Enigma Variations* will reveal much of the technique of the Free Method. These are all matters of taste and judgement: you will no doubt decide on a favourite method of your own.

However, you are strongly advised to get practice in the first three basic methods before using the Free method as an easy copout. Also remember that the subsidiary changes (key/mode, time signature, etc.) are not enough: also use either the Decoration, Canto Fermo or Harmonic method as a firm basis. And usually keep the same bar-structure as the original.

One more time: you must retain either the **melody** in some form or the **harmony** (or both), or it's not a variation, it's a new theme.

*For exercises in variation writing, see the following pages.*
1. Vary the following melodic line in three different ways. Keep the original key and time signature.

2. Vary the rhythm of the following, retaining the same time-signature:
   a)

3. Rewrite this in Bb minor and 4/4 time:
4. Compose interesting material for piano on the given harmonic basis. Use Ternary form:

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Key A 3/4 I | V I | IV V | I
F# min  E maj  A maj
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5. Write two variations on each of the four methods on this theme:

**Tempo di menuetto**

Vln

\[ \text{\#3} \]

Vla

\[ \text{\#3} \]

Cello

\[ \text{\#3} \]

6. Write three variations on the following theme:

**Andante espressivo**

Piano
6. Write three variations. Let the piano have the original melody in Var. 2.