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DRAMATURGICAL FEATURES OF VARIATIONS BY LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

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Abstract

This article examines the dramaturgical features of variation cycles in the piano works of Ludwig van Beethoven. The study focuses on the evolution of the variation genre in Beethoven's oeuvre, highlighting the transition from ornamental variation to a structurally and conceptually complex form. Particular attention is given to the role of tonal and modal relationships, including the function of the *Minore* as a key dramaturgical device.

The research analyzes the principles of thematic development, metric organization, and tempo relationships, emphasizing their contribution to the unity of the variation cycle. Special consideration is given to structural techniques such as arch form, central symmetry, and continuous development, as well as to the role of polyphonic methods and motivic integration.

The article also addresses the transformation of the variation cycle in Beethoven's mature and late periods, where individual stylistic features become increasingly prominent. It is argued that Beethoven reconceptualizes the variation cycle as a dynamic process of juxtaposition and development of contrasting expressive spheres, closely related to symphonic thinking.

The findings demonstrate that Beethoven's principal achievement in the field of variation lies in the synthesis of contrast and directed development, leading to a new level of structural unity and artistic generalization. His variation cycles reveal a tendency to transcend the traditional boundaries of the genre, ultimately contributing to the formation of Romantic aesthetics.

Keywords: *piano variations, variation cycle, musical dramaturgy, thematic development, tonal and modal relationships*

Introduction

The variation genre occupies a significant place in the history of European music, particularly within the framework of Viennese Classicism. However, among the various genres of Beethoven's piano oeuvre, variations remain comparatively underexplored. This circumstance determines the relevance of the present study.

Beethoven composed variations throughout his entire creative career; therefore, this genre clearly reflects an evolutionary trajectory associated with the transition from strict ornamental variation to a freer and more structurally complex type. His early variation cycles largely continue the traditions of ornamental variation.

While building upon the traditions of Joseph Haydn and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, L. Beethoven simultaneously reveals new expressive possibilities in his variations. As noted by N. Fishman, “ornament begins to transform from a means of embellishment into a means of thematic development.” In this context, tonal relationships acquire particular importance. Beethoven rarely preserves tonal unity, primarily maintaining it in variation movements within sonata cycles, whereas in independent variation cycles a fixed tonality becomes the exception (e.g., Variations, Op. 76).

Beginning with the variation movements of the Bonn period, Beethoven introduces the *Minore*, thereby establishing modal contrast as a key dramaturgical device. This contrast is often intensified through changes in tempo and character. Already in early variation cycles, dramatic minor variations emerge, contrasting with surrounding sections and generating a strong impulse for development. In some cases, the influence of the *Minore* extends into the coda, and its placement reveals certain structural regularities.

In Beethoven’s mature-period variations, the juxtaposition of both parallel and relative tonalities plays a significant role. In certain cases, the preservation of meter functions as a unifying factor, both in sonata movements and in independent works. Unlike Mozart, Beethoven generally avoids metric contrast in variation movements of the early and middle periods, a tendency observable even in large-scale cycles such as the *32 Variations*, WoO 80, and the *15 Variations*, Op. 35. In his late sonatas, however, Beethoven treats meter more flexibly as a means of unification. In some variation cycles, rhythmic contrast becomes the structural basis, reflecting the opposition of distinct expressive spheres (e.g., Variations, Op. 76).

Extended slow variations are relatively rare in Beethoven’s piano cycles. In contrast to Mozart, Beethoven largely abandons them in solo works. However, the Mozartian tradition of placing a slow variation before the finale is preserved in chamber variation cycles, particularly in the cello variations and the trio variations, Op. 121a. These works also demonstrate a tendency toward an in-

creased number of slow variations (e.g., Op. 66).

Beethoven frequently follows Mozart’s model in accelerating the tempo of the final variation and introducing a change of meter; however, the contrast is more pronounced metrically than temporally. Alternation between duple and triple meter becomes more frequent, and tempo modifications may occur within individual variations.

The issue of tempo unity in Beethoven’s variation cycles is complex. The absence of explicit tempo indications does not necessarily imply a single tempo throughout the cycle. Rather, tempo markings often function in a relative manner, forming an internally coordinated system that contributes to the overall coherence of the work.

Where tempo and meter remain unchanged, contrast may be achieved through progressive rhythmic diminution, whereby each successive variation employs increasingly shorter note values, creating the impression of acceleration. This technique is widely used in variation movements by both Mozart and Beethoven.

Method

Structural devices play a crucial role in achieving the unity of the variation cycle. Symmetry may be established through the central placement of a minor variation, articulating a tripartite structure. Another important unifying principle is the so-called “arch,” formed by the partial or complete return of the theme. While the *da capo* principle is not characteristic of early cycles, Beethoven more frequently employs exact thematic restatement in later works.

Unity is further reinforced through the isolation of a core thematic motive and its subsequent presentation in different tonal contexts, enhancing both dynamism and structural coherence. Codas often contain additional variation processes, sometimes in a different key.

A characteristic feature of Beethoven’s variation cycles is the intensification of activity in the concluding sections, whose function, as noted by B. A. Katz, lies in the “synthesis of various stages of development.” This tendency toward generalization explains Beethoven’s introduction of

the fugue as a finale in the Variations, Op. 35, where it becomes an integral structural component.

One of the most important unifying principles in Beethoven's variations is continuous development. In mature works, successive variations are often connected through uninterrupted motion, so that each becomes a direct continuation of the previous one. Beethoven also employs techniques of textual "reflection," preserving certain thematic or accompanimental elements across variations.

Another unifying device is the use of harmonic suspension on unstable chords. For example, in the G major cycle, WoO 77, a dominant harmony precedes the coda, while in Op. 35 a fermata on a dominant chord prepares the transition to the fugue. Beethoven also occasionally introduces improvisatory sections before the finale, functioning as transitions to the reprise.

In the *Diabelli Variations*, Op. 120, a cadenza precedes the final variation, featuring an enharmonic modulation from E-flat major to C major through reinterpretation of an augmented triad. Variation movements within sonatas may also include connective episodes.

Intonational relationships between variations play a significant role: certain thematic elements assume the function of leitmotifs, permeating the entire cycle. Polyphonic techniques, including imitation, are also widely employed.

Already in early variation cycles, the idea of a large concluding fugue emerges, later fully realized in Opp. 35 and 120. The dramaturgy of Beethoven's variations – especially in the mature period – is closely connected with symphonic principles. The variation cycle is conceived as a process of juxtaposition and development of contrasting expressive domains.

Results

Beethoven's principal achievement in the field of variation lies in the synthesis of contrast with dynamic and goal-directed development. A pronounced centripetal tendency is evident, particularly toward the conclusion of the cycle, where all elements converge into a unified artistic whole. Beethoven's variations demonstrate a clear tendency to transcend the conventional limits of the genre.

The relationship between general and individual features evolves throughout Beethoven's oeuvre. Early works exhibit characteristics typical of late eighteenth-century virtuoso variations. Variations on original themes are most often embedded within sonata cycles, while independent works frequently serve pedagogical purposes. Drawing upon the techniques of Haydn and Mozart, Beethoven develops principles – such as intonational unity and developmental intensity – that reach full realization in his mature works.

From the early 1800s onward, independent variation cycles on original themes assume primary importance. Individual stylistic traits become increasingly prominent, reflecting Beethoven's transition to a fundamentally new compositional approach – the so-called "new manner." Its defining features include large-scale design, structural unity, interaction of different formal principles, intensified contrast between expressive spheres, individualization of each variation, and expansion of pianistic technique. At the same time, classical principles remain operative. In late works, variations acquire a philosophical function within the sonata cycle, and ornamental variation reaches a new conceptual level.

Thus, Beethoven's variations demonstrate a clear evolution from adherence to the principles of Haydn and Mozart toward the expansion and deepening of individual stylistic features.

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