

## *String Sextet No. 2 in G major, Op. 36 (1864-65): Adagio*

The Adagio of the Second Sextet was written only four years after the Andante of the First Sextet, but the development apparent in Brahms's composition is as marked as between the Andantes of the first two piano sonatas. Open declamation has given way to a deep fusion of technical device and emotional suggestion, creating an 'elusive but deeply expressive world'.<sup>16</sup> The sextet ensemble is now treated as a meeting of six independent parts, between which a shimmering counterpoint of motive, colour and articulation arises. The emotional content of the Sextet is also less straightforward than in its predecessor. Each movement provides a rich array of overlaid or successive states, but none is more affecting than the Adagio.

### *Motives of variation*

Brahms had unlimited means of making his themes do duty as humble but not lifeless accompaniment.<sup>17</sup>

This statement is never more true than in this movement. It has a more consistently contrapuntal, less treble-melody orientated texture than Brahms's previous slow-movement variation sets. The First Sextet Andante avoided the essentially decorative nature of the sonatas' variation technique, yet its theme was motivically spartan and established the primacy of melodic lines across the movement. In contrast, the theme of the Second Sextet Adagio contains a wealth of motives. The fabric of the ensuing variations is woven more assiduously from explorations and permutations of these motives than Brahms ever attempted in any other variation set. The tight logic and coherence is not merely an intellectual game: it is responsible for the movement's compelling intensity.

'Motive of variation' is a phrase coined by Schoenberg to describe use across a variation of a pliable, principal musical idea derived from the theme. In the hands of a master the aural connection between theme and variation can be at once both more subtle and more pervasive than with decorative variation technique. In the Second Sextet Adagio every aspect of the music's fabric is called upon to create dynamic inter-variational and thematic relationships. The motivations behind Schoenberg's tract *Brahms the Progressive* have been much discussed, but an unquestioned aim was to display his profound respect for Brahms's ability to transform and reshape musical material of any kind, be it in the context of developing variation and sonata form or of a variation movement.

The consistent use of a motive of variation creates a recognizable 'variation-character'. For instance, variation 1's character is that of neither *the* theme nor *a* theme. The continued use of a motive, homogeneous within itself, entails an essential monotony which makes a variation fundamentally non-thematic – one might consider it a form of 'arrested liquidation'. This draws the listener to matters that might otherwise be considered secondary,<sup>18</sup> for variation is the art of isolating and developing the parts to enrich our perception of the whole and the original. The scope for composers to focus attention on the internal object of their choice is unrivalled, but dependent on the creation of a texture that provides support for this object without detracting attention from it. When Schenker castigated Reger for motivic wealth within variations he had found a lack of clarity: the variation no longer yielded an insight into the theme through either its internal organization or its reworking of thematic material.<sup>19</sup>

The texture of variation 1 divides into three groups: the descending scales of the 1st violin and 1st viola, the ascending arpeggios of the 2nd viola and 1st cello, and the triplet upbeat figure of the 2nd cello (imitated by 2nd viola and 2nd violin in the final phrase). Each can be related to the theme. Each line, however, is not a development of an individual strand of the theme, for each freely draws on elements from all parts: the independence and equality of the instruments are continually being reaffirmed. The

descending scales are a conflation and reinterpretation of thematic strands, taking the lower voices' pitches and dynamics and the 1st violin's melodic outline, rhythm and slurring.

**Motives from the Theme**

lower parts

1st violin

1st violin

Var. 1

pitches (chromatic scale down a fifth)  
dynamic arch over a scale  
part doubling

melodic outline  
tessitura  
octave displacement

rhythm  
slurring

molto *p* *espress.*

molto *p* *espress.*

Ex. 5.24 – Motivic derivation from the theme in the 1st violin and 1st viola parts in variation 1.

The ascending arpeggios take other characteristics of the same initial ideas to create a quite different accompaniment:

**Motives from the Theme**

1st violin

1st violin

all parts

Var. 1

pitch-outline

rhythm

2-octave range with part-doubling

pizz.

*p*

pizz.

*p*

Ex. 5.25 – Motivic derivation from the theme in the 2nd viola and 1st cello parts in variation 1.

Meanwhile the bass line reveals a pedal syncopation latent within the opening bar:

**Motives from the Theme**

1st viola

Var. 1

syncopated pedal  
triplet rhythms

Ex. 5.26 – Motivic derivation from the theme in the 2nd cello part in variation 1 showing a focusing of the pedal's latent syncopation.

In the final phrase of the theme a new, slower-moving part entered at the bottom of the texture. In variation 1 there is scope for an entrance (2nd violin), but the registral span is already exceptionally wide and the surface pulse very slow. To create a comparable intensification without disturbing the sense of stasis Brahms resorts to the 'learned' technique of augmentation.

**Motives from the Theme**

1st violin

(Var. 1)

*pp*

*pp*

*pp*

*pp*

Ex. 5.27 – Augmentation in the 2nd violin and 2nd viola parts in the final phrase of variation 1.

The last two bars of the theme's melody are elongated across the variation's final phrase in such a way as to imitate textural strands already introduced (see Ex. 5.24 & Ex. 5.26).

The procession of variations 1-4 sees a transition from stratified to highly imitative textures and from glacial to frenetic surface activity. The nature of motive-of-variation changes accordingly as the derived cell becomes ever shorter and its use ever more widespread across the texture. In variation 3 the basic unit of imitation not only encapsulates primary features of all parts of the theme, but within itself subjects them to melodic decoration and extension.

Ex. 5.28 – Motivic derivation from the theme in the figure of imitation from variation 3.

Variation 4 goes further. The activity and frequency of imitation have increased, and the basic cell of the lower three parts is so short that – in itself – it is little more than a chattering figure. Responsibility for sculpting this plastic form into a thematic reminiscence now lies with the pattern and intervals of imitation:

Ex. 5.29 – The pattern of imitation of the accompaniment chattering figure in variation 4 outlines the accompaniment in the theme.

This procedure yields a great urgency and excitement. Between variations 4 and 5 is an episode, a contrasting oasis of calm. This surface description is articulated also by its structure and derivation. The material is cut loose from the rigours of the theme's phrase structure, and is allowed space in which to expand. The motivic derivation is some of the most openly straightforward in the movement, since the opening bars of the theme have been simplified and their textures inverted (bars 61-2) or augmented (bars 63-5).

In contrast, the final variation offers some of the densest motivic cross-relations. The tempo is halved, allowing the listener (who is by now well acquainted with the underlying motives) more scope to assimilate derivations. The flowing semiquaver lines in all parts are saturated with figurations from the theme (and, necessarily, the intervening variations). The impression of dense motivic working is accentuated by the widespread imitation between voices. The imitation does not deal exclusively in 'whole' cells, however; rather, the cells are heard to gather notes until they reach a quorum, at which point the process starts again.

The image shows musical notation for two staves: '2nd violin' and '1st violin'. The '2nd violin' staff starts at bar 1 and contains a rhythmic motif with notes on the 2nd, 4th, and 6th beats. Annotations below it state: 'rhythm', '-missing downbeat', and '-pulse, after metric halving'. The '1st violin' staff also starts at bar 1 and contains a melodic motif. Annotations below it state: 'itches' and '-independent of mode'. To the right, a staff labeled 'Var. 5' starts at bar 66 and shows a more complex, flowing melodic line. A dashed arrow points from the 'itches' annotation in the 1st violin staff to the 'Var. 5' staff, indicating a motivic derivation. Brackets are used to group notes in the 'Var. 5' staff, showing how the original motif is expanded and integrated into the variation's texture.

Ex. 5.30 – Motivic derivation from the theme given cumulative expression in variation 5.

The process is reminiscent of ocean waves. In the example above there is a gentle swell across bar 66 with several wave crests, and as the bar line is passed the wave breaks and dissipates, allowing another wave to take its place.

This variation and the coda together function as a lyrical epilogue (of great intensity) to the movement, their character is as much akin to the 'decorative' style of the poetic Andantes Brahms composed for his earlier Opp. 1, 2 & 18 as to the more structural variations that preceded it. It is, therefore, appropriate that the 1st violin recovers the original register and pitch outline of the theme: dense motivic working has been channelled towards melodic decoration. The coda continues the ideas suggested by bars 61-2 of the episode: simple motives with very obvious derivation are allowed to proliferate and progress more by sequence than by adherence to thematic plan. The movement achieves a climax in bar 82 when the rising motive introduced in the 1st violin in bar 1 reaches its apogee; the movement ends when the motive is stated in 'tonic' form beginning and ending on the 1st scale degree. It rises right across the texture, completely recognizable but broken into constituent fourths shared between the instruments (bars 85-7).