

Antithetical Drama Through the Variations

In the theme successive phrases neutered the ‘scotch-snap’ stated with such forthright drama at the opening. Variation 1 (bars 21ff.) satisfies both the teleological and the periodic demands of variation form: the snap returns (echoing the opening of the theme), yet now tame and gentle. Indeed, the snap has been rhythmically augmented, transferred from strings to piano, and the variation’s dynamic is *piano*, not the theme’s *forte*. The strings too carry an echo of their former role, recalling the continuous semiquavers heard in bar 21 (see Ex. 6.18). The variation thus thrives on antithetical contrasts. The piano and string parts are now rooted in the same metre – the mutual isolation of the theme’s opening has been permanently debunked. In compensation, their parts in the first two bars (bars 28-9) are especially differentiated through rhythm, articulation and register. The next two bars are for piano solo and transform the strings’ cursory motive into a flowing, dynamically shaded, *espressivo* line. This is a drastic change in the musical character of the music. It is not sufficient for one part (here the piano) to appropriate the other’s material (the strings’): it must make it its own.

Var. 1

28

p

p

antithetical contrast

antithetical contrast

espress.

p

6

Ex. 6.20 – Variation 1 presents antithetical contrasts both between piano and strings and between the first and second pairs of bars.

The regular contrasts of the first phrase (bars 28-35) create an exaggerated two-bar periodicity; consequently, the strings’ re-entrance *three* bars into the second phrase (bar 39) is jarring. This is a stylization of the phrasing conflict heard at the analogous moment in the theme. Then the parts *began* to unite in one, here it is the alignment not of the metre but of musical material that is at issue. In bar 38 the piano again presents its development of the strings’ motive fused with its own style of parallel thirds and bass chords (here arpeggiated and cast as sextuplets). In bar 39 the strings present a reduction of *both* string and piano parts from earlier bars.

Ex. 6.21 – The strings present a reduction of both the piano and the string parts during the second phrase of variation 1.

These are two different approaches to appropriation of each other's material, their juxtaposition accentuating the parts' separation. Only as the phrase moves towards its peak do the piano and string parts become more like each other, while the octave doubling of the two strings flowers into counterpoint. This allows a supreme reversal in the third phrase. At this point the theme exchanged material between strings and piano, repudiating the idea of material unique to their instrument families. Variation 1 rejects even the idea of a natural dichotomy between strings and piano (assumed from their differences in sonority, range and ability to create polyphony), and its third phrase (bars 48–54) presents two groups: violin, contrasted against cello and piano.

Ex. 6.22 – The third phrase of variation 1 modifies the instrumental groupings of its model in the theme.

This division breaks down later in the phrase so that the cello may imitate the violin's as yet unfinished line (bars 51ff.), yet the point has been made. The theme initially exaggerates the immiscibility of the components of the piano trio medium, whereas the rest of the movement treats every property as malleable and every part permeable by other influences.

Variation sets for piano trio often contain variations for piano solo (for instance the second variation of Beethoven's Op. 44 set or the first variation of his Op. 121a set). The second variation of Brahms's trio introduces a quintessentially pianistic texture:

Ex. 6.23 – Variation 2 opens with a self-sufficient solo piano texture.

There are many precedents for solo piano variations in the piano trio genre, and in these opening bars there seems little reason to doubt that the whole variation is for piano only. This is not to be a solo variation, however, but the starting point for another exaggeration of the supposed ‘problem’ of the medium. Brahms embarks upon an almost Webernian strategy in which motivic working (an ‘abstract’ musical process) gradually ‘orchestrates’ material that was introduced as a piano solo. In the consequent of the first phrase (bars 59ff.) the violin ‘steals’ the piano’s opening motive. The melody is now shared between the two instruments, alternating every half bar while the piano retains control of the accompaniment; and the slurs across motives are translated into a tiny overlap on the last semiquaver of every bar. The split instrumentation provides a rudimentary motivic analysis of the phrase. Moreover, it draws our attention to the frequency and internal composition of the motives. These derive from the theme’s opening scotch-snaps, and two are provided every bar but staggered rather than simultaneous, recalling the theme’s metric dislocation between strings and piano.

Ex. 6.24 – The violin soon enters in variation 2, and the piano line is shared between piano r.h. and violin.

The cello enters in the second phrase (bars 63ff.), and now the melody is shared by all three instruments, while the motive previously left to the piano is deconstructed, thus revealing its internal counterpoint.

Ex. 6.25 – The cello enters a few bars after the violin. The piano line is divided again, revealing three distinct components.

Intensification through the second phrase is achieved through melodic development, in which the scotch-snap syncopations are replaced by continuous quavers (bars 66-7). These are no longer motivically distinct, and the split instrumentation is abandoned. The first peak of this intensification wave (bar 68) sees a close reprise of the texture of bar 1, with strings in octaves, imitated by the piano. The scotch-snap is now more forthright, and the crescendo continues. Further instrumental alignments are suggested, such as violin and piano against cello. The third and final phrase sees a duet between violin and cello, and the accompaniment figures now occupy both the pianist’s hands. The effect is of a lied, accentuating the contrast between sustaining instruments (such as strings or voices carrying the melody) and more percussive instruments (supplying an accompaniment). The variation’s opening

has been ‘reverse-engineered’: it was an exemplification of a pianistic nocturne or ballad style and here in the third phrase is the model for such a style. Brahms forever creates a musical argument from the relationship between instrumentation and abstracted material. Moreover, within this single variation he has encapsulated the survey of possible instrument groupings in a piano trio that Beethoven applied to an entire set in his Op. 121a (see p. 171).

If variation 2 recalled Beethovenian strategies, variation 3 is almost a musical analogue to Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors*, since the instruments play an elaborate charade of impersonation and mistaken identity. The strings open the variation, playing a metrically ‘resolved’ conflation of the theme’s opening (see Ex. 6.15, p. 175):

Ex. 6.26 – At the beginning of the third variation the strings subsume the piano’s role (a reversal of variation 2’s strategy: see Ex. 6.23).

Two bars later, the piano enters with substantially the same part as that just played by the strings. This chordal material fits the piano far better than it does the strings, and the listener realizes that he has heard something extraordinary – a piano reduction of the opening, preceded by a strings’ imitation of a piano reduction. In case this game has been too obscure, the second phrase (bars 90ff.) elaborates on the deception. The piano begins, playing this same pianistic reduction but now culminating in parallel octaves (very pianistic) rather than the contrary-motion of the strings’ earlier semiquavers (more appropriate for individual parts – see Ex. 6.3, p. 170).

Ex. 6.27 – In its answering phrase, the piano uses parallel octaves to imitate contrary motion in the strings’ opening phrase.

When the strings enter two bars later, however, they imitate the piano’s octaves. Initially these could be heard as a reference to the octave textures opening the movement, but the staccato semiquavers betray

them as an impersonation of the piano's right hand. The 'plot thickens' in bar 94, when the strings separate and imitate *both* string and piano parts, the duality emphasized by metric separation.

Ex. 6.28 – In the second phrase of variation 3 the strings between themselves imitate a texture containing both strings and piano.

The impersonation reaches the complexity of a screwball comedy towards the end of the second phrase, by which time the piano is presenting a complete conflation of ideas, each individually given metric freedom. As in a Shakespearean comedy, the only resolution to this chaos of identity is a complete unmasking of all participants. The third phrase presents an unambiguous separation between piano and string parts in a close thematic reprise, a rarity for a variation in the middle of a set. The kinship of the violin and cello is emphasized when in the final bars (bars 105-08) the violin takes over from the cello as the pitch climbs. A more eloquent articulation of two instruments articulating a single line could hardly be imagined:

Ex. 6.29 – In the third phrase of the third variation the violin deputizes for the cello in an imitation of the violin (itself)...

After the madcap exuberance of variation 3, the movement adopts much gentler expressions of instrumental diversity: the 'problem' of medium has been mocked over the previous variations, but now it is ignored. Variation 4 presents a stable separation between the piano and string parts. In the first phrase they clearly inhabit the same metric space, yet 'make space' for each, the piano tying-over the beats and the strings avoiding off-beats. The strings are again treated as a single instrument of great

range. The dialogue of instrumentation in the second phrase is understated, as the strings gracefully cede melodic hegemony to the piano but without radical changes in material or texture. As the phrase continues the cello flirts with a new metric space (the offset $\frac{3}{4}$ of bars 121-22) before the strings wrest back the melodic focus. For the first time in the movement the third phrase (bars 129ff.) expresses largely the same instrumental balance as the first had, and invertible counterpoint is loosened in favour of a sweeping 7-bar phrase.

The final variation and coda maintain a stable textural division throughout. During the coda a counter-melody occasionally crystallizes from the piano accompaniment when one of the two string parts has fallen silent (e.g. bars 157²-158¹). The coda is an extension of the third phrase in which the two strings imitate each other at ever closer metric intervals, finally uniting for a single motivic statement free even of pitch inversion. In the ensuing bar the piano joins them, and for the first time in the movement the three sound a single chord with like articulation, dynamic and duration — and the music achieves closure.

(Coda)

165

f dim. *p* dim. e rit. *pp*

strings united in metre and pitch

cresc. *f* *p* *p* dim. e rit. *pp*

cresc. *f* dim. *p* dim. e rit. *pp*

all parts united

Ex. 6.30 – In the movement's final bars the three instruments gradually move together, and eventually coalesce only on the final chord.