

### *Variations 1-3 (or Act I, in which the Action Begins)*




#### *Variation 1 (a Buffoon's Solo)*

A first variation plays a crucial role in the character of a set. This is most acute when the theme is borrowed from another source, and so the first variation marks the entrance of the composer's voice. In the present case the first variation differentiates between the movement's characters rather than the composers' voices. Writing on Brahms's *Variations on a Theme by Paganini*, Tovey emphasizes the wide-reaching effects of the first two variations' severity. That theme is light and playful, not wholly unlike this finale's theme. The double-set itself, though, is very far removed this finale, being rather on a scale comparable with that of the entire Quartet. Tovey's contention is that this is never in doubt:

After the playful mocking tone of the theme, Brahms plunges into variations laid out on a large scale. He wishes to make it clear that this very slight theme is to be the foundation of a serious work ... Now that we see it done, it is clear to us that this beginning with a pair of variations on one severely simple idea is the broadest and most dignified opening that could have been devised.<sup>42</sup>

A theme in itself does not set the tone of a variation set since it cannot reveal the variations' relationship to the theme, that being the role of the first variation (see the discussion in Chapter 3 of sets on



Paganini's theme, p. 99). The finale of the B<sup>b</sup> Quartet is not a 'serious work' 'laid out on a large scale', but a component in an unusually light and cheerful quartet. After the preceding movement, entitled *Agitato*, it rests with the first variation to reassure the listener and to confirm that the finale will be more peaceful. The first variation immediately seizes upon the humorous face of the theme as any uncertainties lingering from the *Agitato* evaporate with a smile and laughter. The variation recaptures bars 7-8's sense of self-parody, and its texture relates closely to those bars. The *pizz.* accompanying parts avoid strong beats, recalling their *detaché* punctuations. Those bars also accentuate the fourth-quaver appoggiatura figure of the opening by leaving it texturally and registrally exposed. Variation 1 places its melody at the heart of the texture with the viola, preventing such exposure:

<p>Theme: Opening</p>  <p>distinctive viola writing; dynamic and registral stress on fourth-quaver appoggiatura figure</p> <p>light, playful tone of utterance (unity between melody and accompaniment)</p>	<p>Theme: Second Section</p>  <p>off-beat, <i>detaché</i> accompaniment; textural and registral stress on appoggiatura figure</p> <p>self-mocking tone of utterance (disparity between melody and accompaniment)</p>	<p>Var. 1</p>  <p>off-beat, <i>pizz.</i> accompaniment; textural and dynamic stress on appoggiatura figure</p> <p>self-mocking tone of utterance (disparity between melody and accompaniment)</p>
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Ex. 7.28 – *Precedents for aspects of variation 1.*

In the theme the viola played a distinctive but accompanimental role; by retaining aspects of its writing for its centre-stage role in the first variation Brahms suggests a subsidiary character emerging from the multitude. This character's oration is made humorously pompous by its encrustation with appoggiaturas and other decoration, and the multitude's benign amusement is clear from the frequent accompanimental interjections and asides. It reacts to the melody, rather than supporting it as though by pre-arranged strategy.

The second section pushes the humour towards caricature. The viola line passionately reworks the theme in its climax building (bars 18-19), forgetting the theme's early peak and pressing through to a point fully two bars in from the double bar. The ever-increasing force of the diminished seventh suggests humorous overstatement:

<p>Theme: Second Section</p> 	<p>Var. 1: Second Section</p> 
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Ex. 7.29 – Variation 1 exaggerates and prolongs the climax building of the theme. The viola's histrionics are gently mocked by the *pizz.* accompanying instruments.

The accompaniment remains *pizz.* Although it tracks the melody's rhythm, harmonic motion and *forte* dynamics, crucially it ignores the melody's heightened legato. The disparity between parts is thereby emphasized. Were the accompaniment marked slurred *arco* (as in the theme), the sonority at the climax of bar 20 would be considerable: this *f* is the first explicit marking above *p*, and the registral spread the widest yet by far. However the energetic pluckings puncture any sense of genuine passion, much as Beckmesser's plucked accompaniment to 'his' Prize Songs in Acts II and III of *Die Meistersinger* makes them, and him, immediately ludicrous. Both viola and Beckmesser exhibit overblown pomposity which amuses their well-meaning audiences. Both are preoccupied with elaborate figuration at the expense of the metre: Beckmesser with his ill-advised accompanimental cadenzas, the viola with its arpeggiation.

(Var. 1: Hypothetical Renotation)

Ex. 7.30 – Metrical re-evaluation in variation 1, here demonstrated with a hypothetical renotation.

By 'appropriating' the unaccented quaver upbeat to bar 19 this section acquires a breathless quality which befits the excitable viola line. The outburst led by the viola is a step too far for the accompaniment, however. The two violins sideline the viola, assuming its sonority in bar 20<sup>2</sup> (slurred *arco*, *f*) and then dismantling it; the variation ends with an egregious *dolce*. It has demonstrated a character-drama between the parts of delicacy and immediacy. It is not dependent on long-range tonal forces but on subtle instrumental usage expressing a drama of diction. It is given context by the theme, whose ironical, self-mocking tone it perpetuates.

In the autograph for the variation finale of the E major Piano Sonata, Op. 109 Beethoven used double-bar lines judiciously to delineate the variations' groupings: var. 1, vars. 2-4 and vars. 5-6.<sup>43</sup> As the work evolved, double-bar lines were placed after every variation, and most section repeats in these variations were written out and significantly altered. In Beethoven's final conception each variation is a substantial and semi-autonomous entity. This is made notationally explicit in the numbered titles of each one, an unusual practice in incorporated variations, particularly where the *movement's* title does not refer to variation.

Each of Brahms's variation finales treats its variation boundaries differently. As a passacaglia, the Symphony's finale is not truly comparable: a short theme is stated 32 times, largely without intervening punctuation, occasionally with double-bar lines before key structural moments. The Clarinet Quintet has only five variations. As in the Beethoven example each is a substantial unit, and rather than numbered titles they are given rehearsal marks and, frequently, fermatas. The Clarinet Sonata shows more continuity between its six variations, only occasionally employing fermatas. The variations themselves are not made explicit – other than by the double bar-lines they are not signed by any notational or titular devices. These boundaries are significantly different from those between variations in some of Brahms's slow movements, such as the short episodes in the String Quintet, Op. III (see Chapter 6, pp. 190-200). The difference between the two types of boundary – a new breath or musical episode – relates to momentum. The boundaries *between* finale variations do not impede the momentum, because

the music does not come to rest between variations. These sets may create a linear kinetic profile which spans multiple variations and builds to a climax. The slow movements, on the other hand, have a different function within their cyclic wholes: they are oases of relaxation. Variation slow movements that *are* built from a continuous rhythmic acceleration stereotype (such as in Beethoven's 'Appassionata' Piano Sonata, Op. 57) are rarely self-contained structures but instead lead directly into finales.

The B<sup>b</sup> Quartet has nine variations, the last of which is an extended finale. This is more than some independent sets, let alone most variation movements. None of Brahms's other variation movements has more than six variations, while his independent sets vary between 10 and 32. The abundance of quartet variations can be ascribed to the theme's short duration.<sup>44</sup>

	<i>Theme's Duration</i>	<i>Movement's Duration</i>	<i>Ratio Theme : Movement</i>
<i>String Quartet, Op. 67</i>	0:49	9:24	1 : 12
<i>Clarinet Quintet, Op. 115</i>	1:06	8:42	1 : 8
<i>Clarinet Sonata, Op. 120/2</i>	1:05	7:24	1 : 7

Simple arithmetic suggests that the string quartet will have more, shorter variations than the other two works shown, and indeed it is the only set of the three whose variations are consistently below a minute in duration. Unsurprisingly, this movement's organization is reminiscent of independent sets. The theme is comparatively short, and is even entitled 'Poco Allegretto con variazioni', echoing the formula 'Theme and Variations'. Few of the repeats in the variations are written out; and the decoration is never substantial. Most notably, the variations are unquestionably arranged into groups. Most theorists on variation form suggest creating intermediate formal structures by grouping variations, but these are normally more relevant to independent sets than movements. The combined implications of a short theme and the overall scale of the quartet lead Brahms, in his first variation finale, to employ a structuring principle he had used consistently in his independent sets.