

Adapting and Transcribing Entire Sets

Sometimes entire variation sets, not just their themes, are borrowed. These ‘composite’ themes are then subject to ongoing, ‘parallel’ variation: transcription is typically at the heart of such endeavour. Transcription from a solo string to a keyboard instrument in particular allows the addition of many new parts and opens out many chordal and registral possibilities. Bach’s D minor Chaconne for solo violin has been arranged for many instruments, especially piano and organ. Some versions, such as Brahms’s transcription for piano left hand, are remarkable for the transformation effected despite minimal alterations to the notes; Schumann’s or Mendelssohn’s piano accompaniments, Busoni’s arrangement for solo piano or especially Arno Landmann’s arrangement for solo organ enthusiastically take advantage of the scope for adding additional contrapuntal lines and harmonies, and for interpolating often substantial flourishes.

A more far-reaching example of ‘parallel’ variation is Johan Halvorsen’s arrangement (1897, rev. until 1914) of the Passacaglia from Handel’s G minor Harpsichord Suite for unaccompanied violin and viola.⁶⁴ This transcription of a strongly chordal piece replaces a single polyphonic instrument with two solo instruments: the creation of a strongly conversational texture is perhaps the arrangement’s greatest triumph. Halvorsen first provides a synopsis of Handel’s set, recalling in sequence at least one of each group of the original variations, frequently exaggerating them and adding interest to the subsidiary line. Handel followed a conventional pattern in which variations are often generated by inverting the texture of the previous variation; Halvorsen provides a ‘short-cut’ to this method which places the dialogue between parts on a quicker timescale and allows greater variety of tone:

Ex. 1.35 – Halvorsen creates a dialogue from the solo textures of Handel’s G minor harpsichord Passacaglia.

The summary of Handel's set occupies only the first half of this set. Halvorsen then provides two calm Andante variations which revel in suspensions, before launching into a new set of variations of considerably greater virtuosity and spectacle. As the work draws to a conclusion the two parts gradually coalesce – dialogue between instruments gives way to dialogue between Handel's theme and Halvorsen's virtuosity:

Ex. 1.36 – The first of the three variations making up the finale of Halvorsen's reworking of Handel's G minor Passacaglia.

The 24th Caprice from Paganini's Op. 1 is itself a variation set, as well as the source of one of the most popular of all borrowed themes.⁶⁵ Liszt's treatment in his *Etudes d'Exécution Transcendante d'après Paganini* and *Grandes Etudes de Paganini* (discussed in Chapter 3, pp. 99-102, alongside Schumann's and Brahms's settings) retains virtually every note of the violin original, but is so inventive and pianistically decorated that it must surely rank as a parallel variation in its own right. A more overt approach is taken by Lutoslawski in his set for two pianos (1941). Whereas Halvorsen in his Passacaglia had presented a dialogue merely between two instruments, Lutoslawski uses the two pianos to present a dialogue between his and Paganini's compositions which begins with the theme itself:

Ex. 1.37 – From the outset Lutoslawski creates an ongoing dialogue between his 'voice' and Paganini's.

The original Caprice is a paradigmatic example of a virtuoso showpiece for one musician, and the many derivative variation sets are typically for solo or massed instruments; this set, however, is conceived for *two soloists*. At any one moment on one piano Lutoslawski develops the violin's figuration through the variations in appropriately pianistic ways while on the other piano a contrasting yet intimately relevant response is heard.

The image shows a musical score for Paganini's Variations on a Theme by Paganini, specifically variations 1, 2, and 3. The score is arranged in three columns, each representing a variation. The top staff is for Violin (labeled 'Paganini') and the bottom staff is for Piano (labeled 'Lutoslawski').

- Var. 1:** The Violin part starts with a forte (*f*) dynamic, followed by a sforzando (*sf*) dynamic. The Piano part starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic, followed by a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The tempo is marked 'Meno mosso'.
- Var. 2:** The Violin part starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic, followed by a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The Piano part starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic, followed by a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The tempo is marked 'Meno mosso'.
- Var. 3:** The Violin part starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic, followed by a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The Piano part starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic, followed by a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The tempo is marked 'Meno mosso'.

Ex. 1.38 – Lutoslawski's *Variations on a Theme by Paganini* rework a solo line into an argument for two soloists.⁶⁶

There are many other twentieth-century variation sets that take another complete set as their 'theme', forever distorting their model without ever breaking free and becoming genuinely independent works: one can appreciate Brahms's *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel*, Op. 24 without a close knowledge of Handel's original variation set, though one cannot appreciate Mauricio Kagel's 'Variations without Fugue' (1971-72) without a close knowledge of Brahms's Op. 24 set. Kagel's composition (which reorders, orchestrates and 're-pitches' Brahms's variations while recalling its fugue through explicit omission) is a crystallized comparison of two styles,⁶⁷ as opposed to the dramatic argument presented in Lutoslawski's variations cited above: instead of a dialogue, there is a consistent distortion through which the informed listener can hear Brahms's original. These techniques are quite incompatible with a Brahmsian concern for the unification of theme and variations: Brahms subsumes Handel's set, and indeed its Baroque world, into his own variations. As Kagel emphasizes with his set's optional two actors (a silent 'Handel' and a speaking 'Brahms'), Brahms's aesthetic of variation form is centred around integration and synthesis, and in his adaptations of complete sets his own voice either stays in the background (for instance the transcription of Bach's chaconne) or delivers a monologue (for instance in the sets on variation themes by Handel and Paganini, Opp. 24 and 35).