

Variation 5: an Instrumental Fantasy

The progressive argument of variation 4 suggests that this group describes a dynamic investigation of genre – the ‘stylistic cues’ of the variation are not stable, but dramatize the theme’s structure (especially the cry). Variation 5 develops this investigation. Its cues are more extrovert than those of variation 4 and warp the theme’s structure more obviously. The progression of these cues is presented as a continuation from the preceding variation, not an arbitrary imposition. For instance, variation 4’s accompaniment figure becomes the central motive for variation 5. In variation 4 the material was (as the accompaniment to a quasi-vocal melody) intrinsically *instrumental*, being introduced as supporting material (A period), before gradually achieving dynamic parity with the melody (A’ period). Now, in variation 5, it is privileged further and becomes the sole focus. Its characteristics determine the variation’s genre: in the preceding variation it was more an ostinato process than a sequence of shaped phrases, while in variation 5 this amorphous material is given a formal responsibility which it interprets in a strikingly liberal way. The material’s individuality lies in instrumental sonority, and the investigation of this supersedes purely formal concerns of thematic reference. The variation’s genre is of a lively fantasy, as suggested by its marking *Allegro capriccioso*.

Hypermetrical ambiguity is evident from the outset. After the clear-cut structures of previous variations, the stresses and phrase-units of this variation are difficult to isolate. The registral profile of the opening suggests that the entire preemptory first bar (109) can be heard as an upbeat to the accented note of the following bar. Given the variation’s accelerated tempo, this one-bar upbeat is comparable in duration to the extended upbeat introduced at the end of the preceding variation in bar 107. Contrariwise, bars 109-10 may be understood as a single impulse written out as a broken chord – there is, after all, no melodic or harmonic movement. Furthermore, after the subdued dynamics of variation 4 the general marking *f* in bar 109 creates an effective accent comparable to the explicit accent in the following bar. This ambiguity complements the texture’s Beethovenian flamboyance and intensifies the contrast with the preceding music. In the absence of a well-defined melody this freewheeling energy rapidly mutates the surface textures and allows cross-rhythms and phrase expansion, thereby further obscuring the hypermetre:

Var. 5: A Period

Allegro capriccioso

109 *f* *p* *staccato e legg.*

antecedent: 2+2

113 *f* *p* *legg. e stacc.* *sosten.*

consequent: 3+4

Ex. 9.30 – Phrase proportions of A period of variation 5, as suggested by the texture which creates a call (single-minded bare octaves) and response (communal chords, sotto voce) within each phrase.

Underlying the asymmetric surface is an unconventional but symmetrically proportioned scheme of two overlapping seven-bar phrases:

Var. 5: A period

antecedent

consequent

Ex. 9.31 – Overlapping phrases in the underlying contrapuntal basis of variation 5's A period.

Nonetheless, the passage is *heard* as irregular and progressively expanding. This becomes a defining feature of the variation, in which each period is progressively extended:

	A		B			A'		(coda)
Theme	1-4	5-8	1-2	3-4	5-8	1-4	5-8	~
Var. 5	1-4	5-11	1-2	3-4	5-12	1-5	6-10	–22

Bar numbers restart at each section, and are grouped by phrase. There is a two-bar overlap between B and A' sections (see text).

This is the first variation to break from the equal proportions set up by the theme; but it is the character of a capriccio to be free of such restraints. This not only has local consequence, but it means that hereon any variation that *does* audibly follow thematic proportioning will imply a distinct sense of 'recapitulation'.

The B period presents an 'expansionist' reading of the now familiar sequence in which propulsive regularity arises from intermittent bursts of activity: the opening motive acquires authority and direction just as in the theme the C# minor chords acquired structural weight. Overall the period recalls the shape of the A period's antecedent, four bars expanded to ten in a rapid *Steigerung*.

Var. 5: A Period

antecedent

consequent

Allegro capriccioso

f

p

staccato e legg.

f

Var. 5: B Period

f

f

p legg.

cresc.

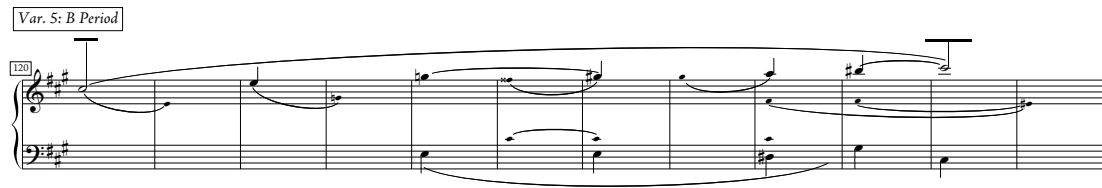
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ff

Var. 5: A' Period

Ex. 9.32 – Variation 5's B period as an expansion of its A period antecedent.

The motive initiates the sequence in bar 120 by presenting not simple octave leaps (as in the A period, C[#]–C[#]) but a falling sixth (C[#]–E); the next statement (bar 122) is a third higher, and the pattern continues, albeit irregularly.



Ex. 9.33 – The contrapuntal outline of variation 5's B period.

Bar 130, a registral and dynamic peak, is the highpoint of this passage. Its moment of 'triumph' is undercut in the next bar, however, when it is denied confirmatory closure (for instance with a bass C[#]). It rapidly becomes evident that the A' period has already begun. Just as the goal of the opening antecedent was buried within the next phrase (see Ex. 9.31), so the goal of the B period is appropriated by the ensuing period. Such dovetailing of sections is inimical to perceptibly regular hypermetre. The cry of the theme was an instant of metric displacement, and the capricious variation 5 elevates this displacement to the level of the phrase.

All but one of Brahms's *Volkslieder* possess a short instrumental coda. These codas rarely imitate the preceding melodic lines, and often have small flourishes that befit an instrumental part freed from the constraints of accompaniment. It is perverse to envisage variation 5 as the coda to variation 4 – its proportions and energy are so much greater. Instead, variation 5 demonstrates the potential of accompanimental emancipation in the absence of a controlling genre: once liberated from accompanimental duties the material strikes out and investigates a new genre. Its expansionist tendencies persist to the end, when the variation presents the set's first concluding cadential prolongation. All previous variations had followed the pattern set down by theme, following its melody through to the final phrase and then ending. This variation, celebrating instrumental freedom from rigorous thematicism, allows the last phrase to open out – if not into a coda, at least into a cadenza-like flourish building to the concluding cadence.²⁶