

In the above example 1 the variation moves in continuous semiquavers, the original tune being readily discovered. The student should aim at something more interesting, based on the use of consistent figuration.

Ex 2. Theme

Brahms

This is a rather florid example, justified by the long notes of the original. Notice that although the rhythmic formula is the same in every bar, Brahms takes care to vary the melodic curve.

A rhythmic figure should not be used for too long before being replaced by something else:

Ex.3 Theme

Mozart

(New)

Later in this variation the original figuration returns in order to give unity.

Notice also that it is not necessary to follow faithfully every note of the original. In example 3 the asterisked notes are omitted in the variation.

In all the above examples, observe that notes in the variation corresponding to notes in the original theme always occur as part of the same beat. This practice is rarely departed from.

It is usual in this type of variation to retain the original harmonic basis.
There is no reason however, apart from tradition, why the harmony should not be changed.
It is sometimes changed slightly by way of decoration:

Theme Franck

Ex. 4

Var. 1

Finally under this heading we can consider the case where the variation is a simplification of the theme rather than an elaboration, i.e. the theme is a variation of the variation!

Theme *tr* *tr* Handel

Ex. 5

Var 2.

This method is usually best when mixed with the normal one.

Summary of Decoration Method:

- a) Use consistent figuration, but not ad nauseam.
- b) Omit some melody notes if it makes a better result.
- c) Occasionally simplify a portion of the melody, if it is already elaborate.
- d) Occasionally change the harmony, if suitable, otherwise retain it.

B. Canto Fermo Method

The melody is kept intact (with perhaps slight alterations) and used as a Canto Fermo (given melody) around which an interesting texture is constructed. Any of the following ways may be adopted:

a) The melody may simply be reharmonised. Only good if the new harmony is interesting:

Theme Beethoven

f *Allegro molto*

mp

Ex 6 Var. 6 Andante

p

b) A countersubject may be added to the melody (which latter can be in a lower part if desired) :

Ex 7

C.F. in alto

Bach

Ex 8

C.F. in bass

Elgar

Detailed description: Example 8 consists of two systems of musical notation. The first system shows a treble clef staff with a 12/8 time signature and a key signature of two flats. The melody features eighth-note patterns with slurs. The bass clef staff has a similar 12/8 time signature and key signature, with a 'C.F. in bass' label. It contains a simple bass line with eighth notes and rests, marked with a '2' below. The second system continues the melody in the treble clef, with a '2' below the bass clef staff. The piece concludes with a double bar line and a key signature change to one flat.

c) A contrapuntal texture may surround the C.F., based on figures which are either new, or maybe derived from the melody.

Ex 9

Var 3. (using new figure)

Byrd

Detailed description: Example 9 shows a four-measure musical phrase in common time (C) with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The treble clef staff contains a melody with eighth and sixteenth notes, some with grace notes. The bass clef staff features a rhythmic accompaniment with eighth notes and rests. A bracket in the bass staff indicates a specific rhythmic figure. The piece ends with a double bar line.

Ex 10

Var 7. (using derived figure)

Ibid.

etc...

Detailed description: Example 10 shows a four-measure musical phrase in common time (C) with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The treble clef staff contains a melody with eighth and sixteenth notes. The bass clef staff features a rhythmic accompaniment with eighth notes and rests. Brackets in both staves indicate specific rhythmic figures. The word 'etc...' is written below the bass staff in two places. The piece ends with a double bar line.

d) The C.F. may be inverted, if it is suitable:

Theme Tchaikovsky

Ex 11

Var 7 Arensky

Sometimes older composers made no change other than a rearranged accompaniment texture:

Theme Handel

Ex 12

Var 2

Avoid this sort of thing; there is no fresh harmony, and the new counterpoint in the bass lacks rhythmic interest. Even the top melody has got less interesting. This is Handel at his worst.

C. Harmonic method

This slightly misleading term implies that the original harmony is *retained* and the original melody discarded. Brahms, the chief exponent of this type, said:

"A theme for variations actually means to me little more than the bass. This, however, is sacrosanct; it is the firm foundation on which I construct my story. On the given bass, I really invent anew, I invent for it new melodies, I create."

By "bass" Brahms really meant "harmony" as he rarely kept the same bass notes. Even the harmony was not entirely sacrosanct, as will be shown. However, the important part of his dictum is the last eight words. In the following example the two melodies have no resemblance whatsoever, but the harmonies are the same (see chord numbers):

Ex 13

Theme Haydn

I IV I V VI II II7 (chrom.) (I) V

Var. 7

I IV I chrom dec. of V7 VI

Brahms

II II7 (chrom.) V

Rigid adherence to the harmonic basis is not necessary throughout:

Ex 14

Var 5 **Vivace** *sfp*

I IV IV I V I II
C min

V II V
Bb

Sometimes a canon is possible, though the changing harmonies usually offer obvious difficulties:

Ex 15

Var 32 **Beethoven**

Original harmony

Bach achieved many canons in his Goldberg Variations, which all use the harmonic method.

Summary of Harmonic Method

- a) Copy out the required number of bars and insert the chord names underneath. Do not depart from the original structure, i.e. phrase-lengths.
- b) On the basis of the given harmony, compose any music you think artistic and appropriate. It must have individuality and should not resemble the original melody. It may take the form of a sustained melody, a contrapuntal texture, or a dialogue between the various parts. Do not overlook the bass line in this respect.
- c) The basic harmonies need not appear in the same inversions as in the original. They may be decorated chromatically or with suspensions, etc., and may occasionally be completely altered.

D. Free Method

Part of the theme, often a mere fragment, is used as the subject of a free fantasia. No rules can be laid down for the composition of such variations; they will either be cast in some well-known form such as Ternary, or will correspond roughly to the development section of a sonata (with less modulation) and require the same sort of technique in handling. In all cases, a satisfactory balance of form must be evident.

Examples are too long to quote: the reader is referred to such works as Elgar's *Enigma Variations*, Tchaikovsky's *Variations from Suite No.3 in G*, Britten's *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, and the final variation of many sets by Mozart.

The final variation can take the form of a fugue - if you know how to write one.

Combination of Methods

Methods 1 & 2 can be combined in theory, but in practice the listener would find it difficult to attend to contrapuntal details whilst trying to recognise a disguised theme.

Methods 3 & 4 combine effectively. The harmonic basis is retained, and the superimposed material consists of a free working of a derived fragment:

Allegro Theme Diabelli

Ex 16

Var 9

Use of subsidiary changes

These should be freely employed along with the four methods, as they help to give character to each variation.

a) Change of mode (to tonic major or minor)

Modulations may cause difficulties. With methods 1 & 2, keep the same melody if possible and adapt to new harmonies rather than force a poor effect. Method 3 sometimes gives a problem if the major original modulated to the dominant key: perhaps treat this passage as an Imperfect Cadence, or simply modulate to the relative major.

b) Change of rhythm and/or time.

This is an interesting way of giving character to a variation:

Theme **Andante** Elgar

Ex 17

Var 2 **Allegro**

Theme Mozart

Ex.18

Var 6.

c) Change of tempo, tone-colour and dynamics

These will naturally suggest themselves aids to characterisation. Note carefully that these subsidiary changes are rarely enough to make a satisfactory variation, even when several are combined. Thus in the following example there are changes of mode, tempo, tone-colour and dynamics, yet the composer does not rely only upon these: he changes the harmony also:

Theme > Grieg

p Woodwind

sf

Ex.19

Var.

p Strings

Design of a set of variations

It is not at all necessary to use all possible methods, in fact the inner unity of a set is likely to be stronger if they are all based on one, or two methods. Brahms' *Variations on a theme of Haydn* are all harmonic except the final passacaglia. All Bach's *Goldberg Variations* are harmonic. (For an exception, see Arensky's charming *Variations on a theme of Tchaikovsky*, which uses every possible method.) Sometimes a variation changes its method halfway.

The modern trend is to favour free form, whilst retaining many of the older features.

A careful study of Elgar's *Enigma Variations* will reveal much of the technique of the Free Method. These are all matters of taste and judgement: you will no doubt decide on a favourite method of your own.

However, you are strongly advised to get practice in the first three basic methods before using the Free method as an easy copout. Also remember that the subsidiary changes (key/mode, time signature, etc.) are not enough: also use either the Decoration, Canto Fermo or Harmonic method as a firm basis. And usually keep the same bar-structure as the original.

One more time: you must retain either the **melody** in some form or the **harmony** (or both), or it's not a variation, it's a new theme.

For exercises in variation writing, see the following pages.

EXERCISES

1. Vary the following melodic line in three different ways. Keep the original key and time signature.

The first staff shows a melodic line in B-flat major, common time. The second staff shows a variation in B-flat major, common time, with a different rhythmic pattern and ending in a double bar line with a key signature change to D major (two sharps) and a 6/8 time signature.

2. Vary the rhythm of the following, retaining the same time-signature:

a)

The first staff shows a melodic line in D major, 6/8 time. The second staff shows a variation in D major, 6/8 time, with a different rhythmic pattern and ending in a double bar line with a key signature change to B-flat major (two flats) and a 3/4 time signature.

b)

The first staff shows a melodic line in B-flat major, 3/4 time. The second staff shows a variation in B-flat major, 3/4 time, with a different rhythmic pattern and ending in a double bar line with a key signature change to B-flat major (two flats) and a 3/4 time signature.

3. Rewrite this in Bb minor and 4/4 time:

The first staff shows a melodic line in B-flat major, 3/4 time. The second staff shows a variation in B-flat major, 3/4 time, with a different rhythmic pattern and ending in a double bar line with a key signature change to D major (two sharps) and a 3/4 time signature.

4. Compose interesting material for piano on the given harmonic basis. Use Ternary form:

Key A 3/4 I | V I | IV V | I | V I | V I | I | I | IV V | II

F# min E maj A maj

5. Write two variations on each of the four methods on this theme:

Tempo di menuetto

Vln
Vla
Cello

6. Write three variations on the following theme:

Andante espressivo

Piano

6. Write three variations. Let the piano have the original melody in Var. 2.

Vivo

Violin

Piano

mf *f*

p *f*

mf

p