

A Closer Look at Mendelssohn's *Variations sérieuses*

by Ryan Fogg

As a composer, Felix Mendelssohn is generally regarded as having been more traditional than modern, more conservative than progressive, and more committed to serious musical expression than empty sentimentality. Such characteristics are particularly reflected in his first and most successful set of variations. In its importance for the evolution of the variation genre in the nineteenth century, the *Variations sérieuses* stands alongside such monumental works as Beethoven's Thirty-Two Variations in C Minor, Schumann's Symphonic Etudes, and Brahms's Handel Variations. This discussion serves to highlight the value of the work through a detailed, yet concise, historical, structural, and harmonic analysis, while offering some performance tips along the way.

Background

Mendelssohn composed the *Variations sérieuses* in June of 1841 in response to a call for compositions to be included in an anthology of piano music honoring Beethoven (the proceeds from the publication were to be used toward the completion of the Beethoven monument in Bonn).¹ The anthology included works by several prominent pianist-composers of the day, including Chopin, Czerny, and Liszt, to name a few, but Mendelssohn was the only composer of the group who contributed a set of variations.²

The composer's choice of title for the work is intriguing. While Mendelssohn could have used the more generic title, "Variations in D Minor," or "Variations on an Original Theme," he deliberately chose a more specific title ("*sérieuses*") that not only reflected the persona of its honoree Beethoven, but it also distinguished the work from the rampant "*brillante*" variations of

the mid-nineteenth century, which were considered to be virtuosic for the mere sake of virtuosity and devoid of musical expression.

Overview

The work begins with an original theme in D minor, marked *Andante sostenuto*. The theme is sixteen measures long with an upbeat, in typical binary form, but without repeats, and is presented in a four-voice texture. The harmony is chromatic with a prominent use of suspensions, but is fairly straightforward. It modulates to the relative key of F major in measure eight and returns to D minor in measure sixteen.

The musical score is presented in three systems, each with a treble and bass clef staff. The tempo is marked *Andante sostenuto*. The first system (measures 1-4) begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The second system (measures 5-8) shows modulation to F major, with dynamics ranging from piano (*p*) to fortissimo (*ff*). The third system (measures 9-16) shows modulation back to D minor, with dynamics including piano (*p*), fortissimo (*ff*), and *dim.* (diminuendo).

While the texture and rhythmic motion of the theme are often varied, its solemn character, regular phrase structure, and chromatic harmony remain fairly constant in the seventeen variations that follow; notable exceptions provide both climactic effect and coloristic variety. Most of the variations are continuous, and some may be grouped in pairs. Tempo changes occur periodically

to reflect the mood of each variation (see below). Where no tempo is indicated, the performer should be careful to maintain the tempo of the previous variation.

Theme	<i>Andante sostenuto</i>	Var. 10	<i>Moderato</i>
Var. 1		Var. 11	
Var. 2	<i>Un poco più animato</i>	Var. 12	<i>Tempo del Tema</i>
Var. 3	<i>Più animato</i>	Var. 13	
Var. 4		Var. 14	<i>Adagio</i>
Var. 5	<i>Agitato</i>	Var. 15	<i>poco a poco più agitato</i>
Var. 6		Var. 16	<i>Allegro vivace</i>
Var. 7		Var. 17	
Var. 8	<i>Allegro vivace</i>	Coda	<i>Presto</i>
Var. 9			

Analysis

Variation One maintains the same melodic and harmonic content as the theme, as well as its phrase structure, but increases the underlying rhythmic motion from eighth notes to sixteenth notes. Also, the bass line is now written in octaves and is marked *staccato*. The performer should be careful to note the differences in articulation between the hands.



Variation Two is marked *Un poco più animato* and increases the rhythmic motion further by featuring sixteenth sextuplets. The phrase structure and harmonic progression are maintained, but the theme itself is slightly varied, though still recognizable.



This leads directly into Variation Three, which is marked *Più animato*. Here the theme is less apparent, although its contour is still present. Its most notable feature is the use of rapid chords in the right hand with octaves in the left hand, often in a question and answer dialogue.



Variation Four maintains the drive of Variation Three and shows the first obvious use of contrapuntal imitation. The writing at times resembles that of a two-part canon and is to be played *sempre staccato e leggero*.



While the *agitato* theme in Variation Five is more noticeably similar to the original than in the previous two variations, the left-hand harmony is now syncopated and is anchored by a tonic pedal point. This results in an arrival of D major at the midpoint of the sixteen-bar variation instead of the expected F major sonority. This may very well be a preview of things to come.



Variation Six is a dialogue of registers, with two eighth-note chords sounded in the low register followed by two eighth-note chords in the high register. To show the dialogue, it's often effective to have differing dynamics between the two registers.



This continuous pattern, combined with the chromatic harmonies and increasing dynamics, creates a buildup of intensity that culminates in a D minor arpeggio that signals the beginning of Variation Seven, marked *con fuoco*. Here the dialogue continues, but instead of a dialogue of registers, it has become a dialogue of textures. The pedal should be kept through the arpeggio in order to capture the full sonority of the harmony.



Variation Eight is marked *Allegro vivace* and features triplet sixteenths throughout. Any melodic relation to the original theme here is absent, although the harmonic progression is similar to the original.



Variation Nine maintains the triplet-sixteenth rhythm of Variation Eight, but this time it is featured in both hands to thicken the texture.



The drama takes a moment of respite in Variation Ten. Here the tempo is pulled back to *Moderato*, and the texture is transformed to that of a four-voice fugato. The opening chromatic motive of the original theme serves as the basis for this contrapuntal variation.



If Variation Ten reflects the composer's affinity for Baroque procedures, then Variation Eleven reminds us of his Romantic nature. Here the similarities to the original theme are sparse and can only be found through melodic fragments and the basic harmonic skeleton. Marked *cantabile*, this variation is reminiscent of Schumann through its multi-layered texture, increased chromaticism, and syncopated harmony.

Var. 11
cantabile

ppp simile cresc.

Variation Twelve returns to the original tempo and features an exciting rapid-fire alternation of octaves and chords between the hands. The constant rhythmic drive is the most prominent characteristic here. The original harmony is essentially preserved, but the melodic theme is hidden in the midst of the thick texture and is not audibly noticeable.

Var. 12
Tempo del Tema

f sempre f

Variation Thirteen maintains the rhythmic drive of Variation Twelve, but the texture has been thinned out considerably. Here the original theme is clearly stated in the middle voice (and should be voiced carefully), with *leggiero* figuration in the right hand above and *pizzicato* bass below.

Var. 13
sempre assai leggiero

sf sempre assai marc.

Variation Fourteen is set apart by its slow tempo and its coloristic change to D major. The theme is hidden in a lower voice, and the harmonic content has shifted to reflect the key change.

Most notable, however, is a broadened depth of resonance that brings a glimmer of hope among the other more despondent variations.



Marked *poco a poco più agitato*, Variation Fifteen not only returns to the opening key and mood of the piece, but also serves as a transition into the final two variations. Here the right hand chords are syncopated above a *legato* bass line.

Var. 15
poco a poco più agitato

219

sempre ppp

This musical score for Variation 15, poco a poco più agitato, spans measures 219 to 224. It features a treble and bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The right hand plays syncopated chords, and the left hand plays a legato bass line. The dynamics are marked *sempre ppp* (pianissimo).

Variations Sixteen and Seventeen are marked *Allegro vivace*, a tempo not seen since Variations Eight and Nine. They also maintain the continuous triplet-sixteenth rhythm from those prior variations, but with an entirely different texture. Variation Sixteen features alternating hands, with the left hand providing either octaves or single notes on the beat, and the right hand filling in the harmony with a broken chord texture between beats.

Var. 16
Allegro vivace

267

cresc.

This musical score for Variation 16, Allegro vivace, spans measures 267 to 272. It features a treble and bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The right hand plays a broken chord texture with a triplet-sixteenth rhythm, and the left hand provides octaves or single notes on the beat. The dynamics include a *cresc.* (crescendo) marking.

The rhythmic flow is uninterrupted in Variation Seventeen, except here the hands switch roles: the right hand now plays octaves and chords on the beat, while the left hand mostly features broken tenths between beats. At this point, endurance may become an issue for the pianist, as the writing is rather relentless. The performer must use the many rests as brief moments to release any excessive physical tension.



After cadencing in D minor in measure sixteen of this variation, thirty-eight extra measures of mostly virtuosic sequential writing serve to build the excitement toward the final coda.

The coda is marked *Presto* and provides an impressive ending to the variation set. The feeling here is highly *agitato*, and the writing at first is very reminiscent of Variation Five, in which chords alternate between hands. The difference here is that the left hand is on the beat, while the fragments of the theme can be heard on top of the syncopated right-hand chords.



After twenty measures, the hands switch rhythmic roles (a feature for which the composer clearly had an affinity) and the excitement continues to build until the arrival of a fully-diminished seventh chord. This sound is prolonged for nine measures until the final cadence in D minor brings the work to a somber close.

Conclusion

Mendelssohn's contemporaries had high praise for the *Variations sérieuses*. The two leading musical journals of the day, the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* and the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, both hailed the musical value of the work,³ and fellow composers Moscheles and Schumann are quoted as having admired it greatly.⁴ In addition, the work inspired the writing of later composers Brahms, Franck, Reger, Busoni, and Bartók.⁵ While some of his other works for piano may be more familiar, the *Variations sérieuses* are clearly Mendelssohn's most significant contribution to the literature. And although the piece was written in honor of Beethoven and shares similarities to his Thirty-Two Variations in C Minor in its compositional process, any specific influence of one work to the other is indirect and very debatable.⁶ That being said, the rich variety and clever pacing of Mendelssohn's work make its musical substance just as gripping as that shown in Beethoven's Thirty-Two Variations and other notable masterpieces of the nineteenth century.▲

¹Todd, R. L. (2004). "Piano Music Reformed: the Case of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy," in *Nineteenth-Century Piano Music* (ed. R. Larry Todd). New York: Routledge, p. 205.

²Todd, R. L. (2005). *Mendelssohn: A Life in Music*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 414.

³Jost, C. (1992). "In mutual reflection: historical, biographical, and structural aspects of Mendelssohn's *Variations sérieuses*," in *Mendelssohn Studies* (ed. R. Larry Todd). Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press, p. 38.

⁴Jost, p. 43.

⁵Werner, E. (1963). *Mendelssohn: A New Image of the Composer and His Age*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press of Glencoe, p. 364.

⁶Jost, 44.