

Motivic techniques in Schumann's Theme in E-flat major, WoO 24

Biographical notes

On the night of February 17, 1854, Robert Schumann, suffering from severe hallucinations, believed angels dictated a theme to him. According to Clara Schumann's diary, he immediately wrote the theme down, and began composing variations on it around 22 or 23 February. Only one draft page survives, and it's unclear if he completed the set at that time.

On February 27, Schumann attempted suicide by jumping into the Rhine but was rescued. Astonishingly, he resumed work on the variations the next day and apparently finished them, sending the piece to his wife Clara, who had already left to stay with a friend.

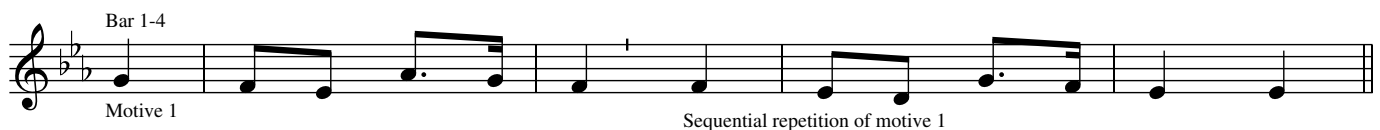
On March 4, Schumann admitted himself to an asylum in Endenich, where he remained until his death in 1856.

The Geistervariationen (Ghost Variations), also known as Theme and Variations, WoO 24, is his final composition, dedicated to Clara Schumann. Unknowingly, Schumann reused a theme he had previously employed in earlier works. Clara Schumann blocked its publication - possibly for personal or artistic reasons - and it remained unpublished until 1939. Notably, Johannes Brahms wrote his own variations on the theme in 1861, well before Schumann's version was made public.

Analytical notes on the theme

The theme of the Geistervariationen (Ghost Variations) is lyrical, with a graceful and simple melody, basically in a stepwise movement, which gives it a smooth, flowing quality. The simplicity of the theme is a crucial element, as it creates space for rich and imaginative development in the variations that follow - a principle that often seems to function as a kind of unwritten law in theme-and-variations design.

Although appearances are deceiving. Behind the seemingly simple theme lies an intriguing design, in which a primitive melodic cell, say a motive, is repeated and varied in an astonishing way. The result is a very coherent melody that gives the piece a clear and unified character.

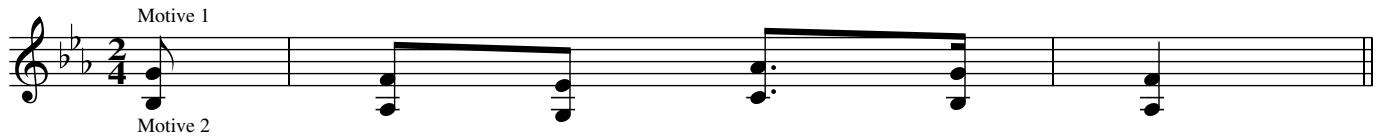


This melody in E-flat major is in reduced form an elaboration of a descending linear progression G-F-Eb



Bar 1 and 3 are elaborations of the tones F and Eb.

Schumann's harmonization includes a parallel motion at the interval of a sixth below (let's call it motive 2):



In the Romantic style, parallel motion in thirds and sixths is to be expected. As a test of tonality, we could combine the two motives and observe that together they form a filled-in interval from Bb to Eb, from Dominant to Tonic:



It is, however, astonishing to see how Schumann explores the melodic possibilities of these two motives: the second motive Ab-G-C-Bb-Ab appear augmented, i.e. in double note values.



And as if that weren't enough, Schumann also uses a varied double augmentation in bars 17-24: motive 2 is split and each part is expanded with a descending stepwise movement (notice bar 3 and 4!):



The follow-up in bars 25-28 concludes the piece with a varied form of motive 1 and a leading-tone cadence 1-7-1.



Now the question is: how does Schumann create the form? Well, it's simple -by appending one idea after another! Thus, the form can be easily described as: A (bars 1-8) - A' (bars 9-16) - B (bars 17-18) - repetition of B. This outlines a simple binary form, characteristic of short Romantic pieces.

Last remarks

Schumann's Theme demonstrates how the development of a motive can give rise to an entire musical form. The motivic techniques are simple: repetition (literal, slightly varied rhythmically, or sequential), single augmentation, and expanded augmentation - accomplished by splitting a motive and inserting additional material. For me, it's a striking insight into how brilliantly Schumann makes so much out of a single melodic idea.

The annotated score in the appendix should provide clarity and support for this analysis.

THEMA MIT VARIATIONEN

Komponiert im Februar 1854

Clara Schumann gewidmet

TEMA **A**

Leise, innig

First system of the musical score (Measures 1-6). The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is 2/4. The music is in treble and bass staves. The first measure starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The melody in the treble staff features several notes highlighted with colored circles: blue, purple, pink, red, and light blue. The bass staff provides a simple harmonic accompaniment.

A'

Second system of the musical score (Measures 7-13). The melody in the treble staff continues with notes highlighted in blue and purple. The bass staff continues with its accompaniment. The system concludes with a repeat sign.

B

Third system of the musical score (Measures 14-22). The key signature changes to two flats (B-flat, E-flat). The melody in the treble staff features notes highlighted in blue, purple, pink, and light blue. The bass staff continues with its accompaniment. The system concludes with a repeat sign.

Fourth system of the musical score (Measures 23-30). The melody in the treble staff features notes highlighted in red, blue, purple, and green. The bass staff continues with its accompaniment. The system concludes with a repeat sign and a first ending (1.) and second ending (2.) marked above the staff.