

Johannes Brahms – Variationen und Fuge über ein Thema von Händel (op. 24)

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In this article we will study some variation techniques of the "Variationen und Fuge über ein Thema von Händel" of Johannes Brahms (1833–1897).

In 1861 when Johannes Brahms was 28 years of age, he left his maternal home and moved to a small room in Hamm. During that period of his life he wrote a couple works that would later take a very prominent position in his oeuvre. One of those works is "Variationen und Fuge über ein Thema van Handel", composed in 1861.

Writing variations wasn't a popular occupation in the late 19th century. This did not however stop Brahms from writing them, he even had a predisposition toward using old forms. Using his ingenuity and knowledge of modern harmony and melodic/rhythmic development he would give contemporary allure to these forms. Many of the techniques in this piece are still important tools for composers in the 21st century.

When writing a set of variations a composer starts by choosing thematic material. This can be somebody else's work but it can also be something the composer writes himself. In this case Brahms has chosen an aria from Handel's first harpsichord suite in B flat.

Listen to the performance of Brahms his work: [youtube.com/watch?v=c7oZfVs_lxw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7oZfVs_lxw)
You can find the score here: tinyurl.com/ljnvyn

Note that the techniques we will be discussing here are not restricted to the writing of variations, they are applicable to any situation where the composer is struggling with development of thematic material.

Aria from the third part of Handel's first harpsichord suite in B flat:

The image shows two systems of musical notation for an 8-measure aria. The top system contains measures 1-4, and the bottom system contains measures 5-8. The melody is in the right hand, and the accompaniment is in the left hand. Red dots are placed above the principal notes of the melody in every measure. Below the notation, Roman numerals indicate the harmonic structure: I - - I V - - I I - - - - I - - V for the first system, and V - - V I II6 V I - - I II6 V I for the second system.

We can't ascertain the exact reasons for Brahms to choose this aria. We can however, describe a few of its properties that might have played a role in the decision making. These properties can be something to look for when choosing thematic material yourself.

- The aria has clear structure. It is 8 measures in length with the first 4 measures ending with a musical comma and the last 4 finishing the musical sentence.
- The melodic range is restricted to an octave and that of the principal tones (made red in the example) is even restricted to a sixth.
- The underlying harmony is straightforward.

These properties make the aria an admirably neutral starting point for the composer.

When writing variations a composer often relies on the principal tones to give structure to his variations. This also makes variations recognisable as such.

In the example below the principal notes have been extracted from the theme.

This is how the first two measures of variation I look in Brahms' score:

Variation II

The second variation is in many ways a contrast to the first one. Everything is being played legato, the dynamics change to piano, the harmonies are enriched and chromaticism is added. The triads combined with the use of retardatio (prolonging a note when the harmony as shifted) provide much more emphasis on the horizontal structure, whereas variation I had a much more vertical feeling.

In the example below you can see the slightly changed principal notes with the harmonies that Brahms used to embellish this variation. (V) means applied dominant.

Now we will add the rhythm and fill in the harmony. Note that the rhythmical pattern in the upper voice can be seen as a variation on the rhythm employed in variation I, so a variation on a variation.

Applied to the melody:

Then we add chromaticism and passing notes:

I V6 (V) ->II6 (V) ->II6 V - - -

(V) IV I6 (V) ->I6 V

Lastly we will add the principle of retardatio, that is prolonging of one or more tones of a previous chord into the intermediate chord which follows. These notes have been made green in the example below.

If we then also add some phrasing we arrive at a copy of the original score by Brahms:

p *animato*

I V6 (V) ->II6 (V) ->II6 V

The image shows a musical score for Variation X, consisting of four staves. The top staff features a melodic line with four groups of triplets, each marked with a '3'. The second and third staves provide harmonic accompaniment. The bottom staff contains chord symbols: (V), IV, I6, (V) - - >I6, and V. A green dot is visible on the third staff, marking a specific note.

Variation X

In the first two measures of variation X Brahms explicitly uses the principal notes, he decided however, to change the register with each following note. He starts one octave higher than the original theme and every note after that is played an octave lower than it's predecessor. This causes a great feeling of movement in this variation.

The principal notes have been applied slightly varied:

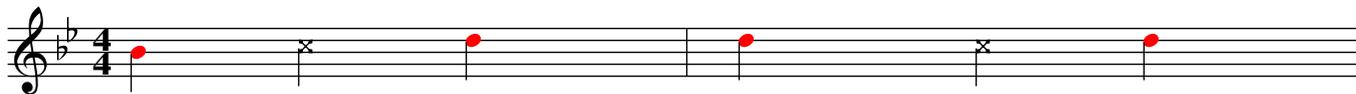
A single musical staff showing a sequence of six notes. The notes are marked with red dots. The sequence starts on a higher register and then descends, illustrating the variation technique described in the text.

The resulting score:

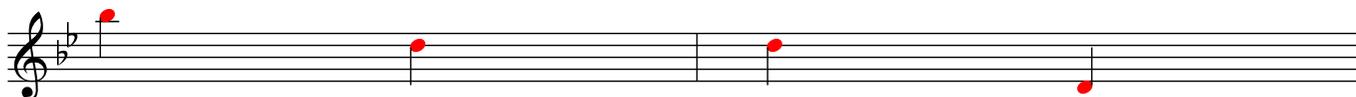
The image shows the resulting score for Variation X, featuring a piano accompaniment. The score is written for two staves (treble and bass clef) in 4/4 time. It includes various musical notations such as triplets (marked with '3'), grace notes (marked with '7'), and dynamic markings. The notes are marked with red dots, corresponding to the principal notes shown in the previous block.

Variation XIV

Variation XIV is a good example of how a composer can give color to a melody. Brahms used the following principal notes for his melody, the ones with an "x" are left out.



Changing the octave of some of these tones results in the structure given below:

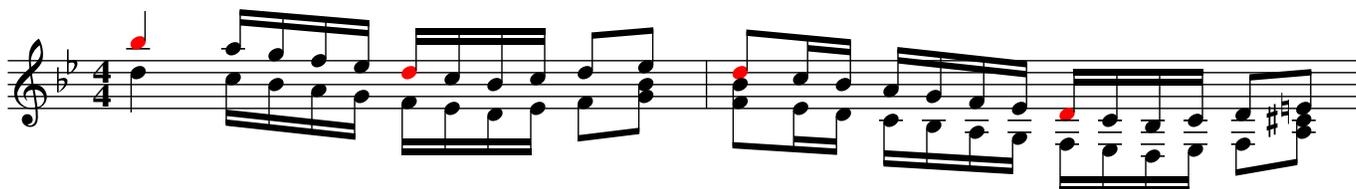


Brahms then filled the space between the b and the D, the same goes for the gap between the d and the D. The space between the d and the d have been filled with embellishments.



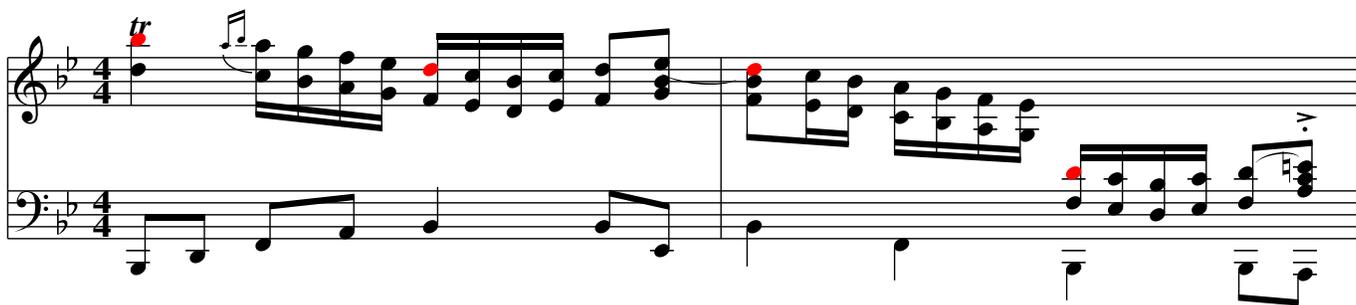
Note that despite leaving out some of the principal notes, Brahms has maintained the original position in the measure for the ones that he did use.

To give this melody more color Brahms simply placed another note a sixth below each note in the melody:



On specific beats Brahms has added an extra chord tone. This gives more emphasis to those beats.

Next we will add the lefthand accompaniment. Based on the functions used in the aria, Brahms has constructed a melody for the bass that is in counter movement with the righthand melody in the first measure. In the second measure both voices move downward.



To give the lefthand the same energie as the righthand, Brahms then applied a 16th motive in octaves to this melody.

A musical score in 4/4 time, featuring a treble and bass clef. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The score consists of two staves. The first staff begins with a trill (tr) over a quarter note. The second staff contains a vibrato (v) over a quarter note. The music is characterized by complex rhythmic patterns and dynamic markings.

Conclusion

To conclude this article I've added a list of variation techniques derived from Brahms' "Variationen und Fuge über ein Thema von Handel". You can probably find more techniques if you study this work closely yourself. This list is meant as a toolbox for anyone writing music who is trying to find new ways of developing their melodies.

For more inspiration on variation techniques listen to:

Bach– Goldberg variations
Beethoven – Diabelli variations
Messiaen – Theme and variations
Cage – Variations (I–II–III–IV)

The roman numerals indicate the variations in which the technique can be found. Many techniques are used throughout the whole piece.

Melody

Adding chromatics: II – IX
Exploiting melodic segment: Fuge
Diminution: XXIV
Transposing (whole melody or separate tones): IV – XXII
Inventing new material based in the bass: Fuge – everywhere really
Stretching principal tones (like a cantus firmus)
Omitting principal notes: XIV

Harmony

New tonic (tonic minor, minor parallel): XXI – XIII
Reharmonising: II – IX
Coloring melody using sixths/thirds: XIV – XX
Appoggiatures (resulting from melodic mutation): II
using the melody as bass (changing the inversion): VII

Rhythm

Exploiting rhythmic building stone: VII – VIII
Antimetrics: IX – II – XXI
Complementary rhythm: I – III
Syncopated rhythm/accents: I – IV – V – VIII
Changing rhythmic density

Style

Staccato: I
Legato: II
Arpeggio's: XIII
Phrasing: XVI – XXIII
Register changes: XXII – XXIII
Additive materials: XV
Dynamics

Texture

More density(rhythmic/harmonic): I – III – IV – XIII
Less density(rhythmic/harmonic): VI
increased polyphony: XVI
Pedal: VII – VIII

About the author:

Ward Meijer is student at the ArtEZ Conservatorium Netherlands and participates in an educational research on learning processes. Special thanks to Reinier Maliepaard for critical feedback and inspiration.

This article has been typeset with MC Musiceditor 8.0.0 (www.mcmusiceditor.com – www.bestmusicteacher.com)
