

BEETHOVEN'S DIABELLI VARIATIONS OP. 120 AND BAGATELLES OP. 126

Often cited as one of the very greatest of all piano works, Beethoven's Diabelli Variations (1819-22) will perhaps never be counted among clear audience favourites. An 'easy' music this is not, however rewarding in the long-run. Artur Schnabel famously wrote to his wife after a concert in Spain how he pitied the audience during a performance of the Diabelli Variations: "I am the only person here who is enjoying this, and I get the money; they pay and have to suffer."

But even a relative new-comer will find it hard to deny the volcanic potency that the work exudes, not least through its extravagant treatment of the sonorities of the instrument. Immense variety is subordinated to a palpable organising hand. Delicacy of touch, sophisticated, at times unfathomable details of craft, ideas lovingly wrought, sit alongside abrupt changes and juxtapositions, incongruities, the rough and gruff, the outright un-beautiful. And yet it all appears unquestionably exalted in intention and execution, enigmatic and abstruse features only enhancing this impression.

Some might well find all of that so immediately gripping that they simply (especially with repeated listening) accept the work as 'given truth' (its 'odd' aspects thus relativised), in other words without much thought for the origins, or for an exegesis, of this provocative music. Others may be intrigued to explore Beethoven's evidently limitless resourcefulness at exploiting individual rhythmic, melodic, textural and timbral elements of the theme. And to some a sane analytical study such as William Kinderman's scrutiny of Beethoven's sketchbooks to gain insight into the reasoning behind many of his compositional decisions, revisions and additions may be particularly satisfying in that it suggests *what* we are listening to by showing *how* it was put together.

But Maynard Solomon's portrayal of the work as a kind of Pilgrim's Progress from homely beginnings (the crude German waltz of the

theme) to a state of grace (the *Menuetto* and transfigured coda of the last variation) offers perhaps the most powerful way into the heart of the work for those who find it difficult to 'understand' at first. Most of the individual variations are characterised by a distinct kinetic profile – much of their identity is bound up with the repeated iteration of a surface rhythmic figure or a clearly perceptible rhythmic 'gait'. In other words, many of the variations can be heard as forms of motion.

Continuities result when the type of movement evolves from one variation to the next, or with perceptible tempo relationships or gradual tempo changes between variations. Crucially a sense of driving towards a goal is written *internally* into many of the variations because of the striking upward progression towards their endings (melodically or registrally). This striving is one of the aspects of the theme (its infamous repeated rising sequences culminating in a somewhat crass high final phrase) that resonate throughout the work as a whole. So often we have the sense that whatever the *onward* nature of motion of a particular variation, the general direction is also *upward*: a rush upward, a momentous effort, a strain, a drag, an easy climb, a smooth ascent, a leap, or a sudden burst. But this idea is extended to the larger scale too, both through multiple cycles of starting, bearing upwards - and starting yet again with renewed effort (after all, variation forms have built into them the notion of repeatedly going back, setting off afresh in a new light); and, at the level of the work as a whole, by exploiting the concept of *low* styles and *high* styles of expression in music. In the final variation the crude German waltz of the theme is transcended: through the traditionally aristocratic minuet we look back to an idealised past of enlightened and civilising order, now ecstatically adorned with elaborate filigree; but not before the test of the strictures and struggles of fugal argument (variation 32) and not before the emotional catharsis of three successive minor key slow variations (variations 29 to 31).

But throughout, the purposely banal and the elevated are juxtaposed. Reference to the musical past and to other composers may be humorous or serious: the sequence from Variation 22-24 is telling – Beethoven quotes Mozart's *Notte e giorno faticar* ("Day and night I toil") from *Figaro* in what seems like buffoonery, and follows it with a

raucous pastiche of the kind of piano exercise that was current in the early 1800s. The next variation suddenly takes us into a world reminiscent of Bach at his most distilled: a luminosity and emotional purity attained through the straights-and-narrows of contrapuntal discipline. This imaginative sequence on the theme of 'work' segues directly into an open parody of Diabelli's theme (variation 25).

The ironic, even sarcastic, is a recurring preoccupation. A single figure may form the basis for an entire variation, to be repeated beyond our natural musical endurance; sometimes considerable tension is generated this way (for example variations 9 and 28). But another memorable group of variations are slow: those extraordinary moments of rest or waiting (variations 11 and 29), or of solemnity or sepulchral quiet (variations 14 and 20), of calm undulation (variation 8), of gentle allure (variations 18), or of reflection and sadness (variation 31). Important signposts on the way, they contrast unforgettably with sequences of accumulating momentum (like variations 2-7), or with jagged discontinuities in activity (variations 19 and 21).

The chain of variations which exploit dotted rhythms (13-14, 16-17) is severed by the shortest variation of all (no. 15, *Presto scherzando*). Kinderman argues that this curious late insertion from 1822 (a mocking reference to the theme) followed by the hell-bent, relentless march-like rhythms in variations 16-17 creates a parallel between the opening theme and first variation (also a march, and also a late addition). It is typical that there should be a sense of overlapping and intersecting concerns (the apotheosis of dotted figures, but also renewed reference to where we started from) – we are not presented with a simply appreciable design that would yield to abstract analytical schemes. More detailed examination presents us with more anomalies – in not all the variations are both halves repeated, in some variations bars seem to be 'missing': such things strike us as especially meaningful *because* they stand out. If they really could be clearly rationalised they would of course cease to be anomalies. But nevertheless we feel compelled to inquire, with greatest curiosity, into precisely those areas where we know conclusive answers cannot be offered. Therein lies part of the

magnetism of the Diabelli Variations.

Much as Beethoven's later style with its totally idiosyncratic appropriation of improvisatory styles, liturgical material, Bachian and Handelian techniques, with its untroubled acceptance of old musical stock-in-trades that in the heroic 'middle period' he had avoided (the sometimes simple clarity of those conventions in their new context now imbued with higher meaning), with its energetic juxtaposition of the sublime and the ridiculous, the 'strangeness' of its quirks of voice-leading and weakened cadences, its visionary eccentricities of texture and register (after all Beethoven's hold on the physical world of sound was tenuous by 1822), all the while still gravitating towards strong esemplastic inclinations – much as this is the kind of heady mixture that continually begs questions - much as this is music that calls to be explained, 'interpreted', to be read as 'meaningful' – in the end any one reading inevitably excludes or diminishes possibilities we may in honesty want to retain. There may for instance be much truth in portraying the work as a masterpiece of humour, 'quirky' or otherwise, but such a view is in danger of lessening the immediate visceral impact of its Promethean energy – even if some of us may hold that creation itself looks like a kind of sublime joke; and there are moments when we want to accept the boundless slow variations simply at their face value. Moving as the idea of a Pilgrim's Progress from innocent and untrammelled beginnings to a state of wisdom undoubtedly is, it is undermined by the early appearance in the work of elements of caricature and of musical esoterica (even the notion that the march of variation 1 is a simple, confident setting out is profoundly put into doubt by the eccentrically colourful ways its contours of voice-leading and its harmonies undermine simple four-square shapes).

By realising the work not as a verbal reading of its supposed meaning, or the meaning of its forms, or its meaningful emanation from an originating milieu, but by realising it in sound, the performer can rejuvenate its purely musical existence in a way that in turn defies clear explication. However much he may be informed by 'interpretative' considerations of the text and its contexts in his performance, ideally his

realisation has the power to obfuscate, even to deny, those very considerations – at the very least it is not at all a given that his own intentions will be read back as such by those who listen to his performance. How easily music and its performance can be not only directly contradictory things to different people, but indeed contradictory things simultaneously (a cautionary thought when it comes to critique)! Subtle mastery of the physical tools of pianism and musicianship can meet some of the very same competing demands we may read into the work. The performer can characterise the rhythm and gait wittily and vividly, but with an energising potential built into those very characterisations precisely to create forward momentum – humour and volcanic power not incompatible. He does not need to feel he has to 'tone down' his virtuosity for the seriousness and intellectuality of the work: indeed, because the enthusiasm and fluency of virtuosity are here constantly arrested by a proliferation of irregularities, by minutiae of accentuation, idiomatic phraseology and diction, accomplishing speed and thrust without glibness becomes the true virtuoso challenge; careful detailing without stodginess or staidness the true intellectual one. And when dealing with the length of the work he does not necessarily have to resort in his mind to the architectonic metaphor with its inevitable implications of hard materials, solidity, straight lines: indeed sheer *range* of colour and shape, a personality that encompasses the wayward and wild as well as the disciplined and contained and moderate, the power to contain chaos within the enormous span of this work, may convey a grander impression, a more resonant sense of higher 'organisation', than the thoughtless imposition of classicising constraints. In other words, the large-scale view and the immediacy of human concerns are not mutually incompatible either...

In the Bagatelles Op. 126 (1824), Beethoven's only significant piano work after the Diabelli Variations, the small is allowed to *imply* the large. So often subject to cosmetic treatment, these 'trifles' are just as steeped in the complex prosody of a richly referential late language as any of the 'great' works. Unlike Beethoven's other sets of Bagatelles these six pieces were conceived as a group and carefully executed as such (for instance key-relations between the individual pieces are in thirds, slower and

faster alternate consistently, slower movements are in triple or compound metre, faster ones in duple time). But here we don't have the sense of an immensity forged out of the insignificant. The calmer pieces breathe naturally without the magnification of slowness or stillness, grandeur of experience, that distinguish the great slow variations of Op. 120 – and in these Bagatelles, as in the last piano sonatas, Beethoven permits himself some of that memorable melodic sweetness which is almost entirely absent from the Diabelli Variations. But there is evidence in the Bagatelles too of enormous emotional scope in the abrupt contrasts between the minor and major sections of no. 4 and its sudden ending, and in the breathtaking panache with which the reckless *Presto* phrase that begins and finishes the final piece in the set encloses material of almost naked sincerity. Maybe such a conclusion puts into question the very notion of ethereal endings, certainly of consoling ones. Or perhaps, while in no way seeking to gainsay the epiphanies of the Diabelli Variations (or of the Piano Sonata Op. 111 for that matter) Beethoven remains nevertheless simply too unflinchingly honest not to show the other side of the coin too.

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2012