

FORMAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL PROCEDURES IN
THE INDEPENDENT VARIATIONS OF
JOHANNES BRAHMS

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ABSTRACT

Within the decade, 1853-1863, Brahms composed seven sets of independent variations for the piano. The earliest works show a marked influence of his contemporaries, such as Schumann, while the later sets, although often composed as a homage to a particular composer, display the work of a more mature and original Brahms. Ten years after the composition of the last of these large-scale works, Brahms returned to the genre, and wrote his grandest and most successful variation set, the Variationen über ein Thema von Joseph Haydn Op. 56. This work exists in two versions: two pianos (four hands) and orchestral, and in many ways represents the culmination of Brahms's contribution to the genre of the theme and variation set.


Divided into three sections, this thesis explores the salient characteristics of Brahms's variation style through both a general overview and an in-depth examination of selected works. Chapter I deals with the genre of theme and variation as it existed up to the time of Brahms. It investigates various influences on the composer's style, both past and contemporary, and outlines the procedures Brahms employs to unify individual variations in such large-scale works.


Chapters II and III explore these techniques in depth using two

specific variation sets as examples: the Variationen über ein eigenes Thema Op. 21 No. 1, a relatively early work, and his final independent variation set, the aforementioned Haydn Variations.

These two works provide the source for an engaging study of Brahms's compositional techniques. Through study of these works, the development of the composer's style can be traced, and some insight into his creative process can be gained.

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This thesis is dedicated
with love to

Mrs. Laurie E. Lister

It would look like a high accomplishment
of intellectual gymnastics
if all this had been "constructed"
prior to inspired composing.

Arnold Schoenberg
"Brahms the Progressive"

CHAPTER I

Brahms and the Genre of Theme and Variation

The control of a musical idea--how it can be developed or disguised while retaining its individuality--constitutes one of the most basic concepts of musical structure. Herein lies the origin of the technique of variation, one of the oldest and most fundamental procedures in the music of Western culture. Brahms was assuredly aware of the venerable history of the variation form. His command of the procedure is manifested not only by a remarkable technical virtuosity in composition but also by clear insight into the creative process of previous masters of the art.

The genre of theme and variations has held notable importance as a musical form from the first half of the sixteenth century to the present day. It has existed in various guises: as ostinato variations (such as the Baroque passacaglia and chaconne where a repeating bass line forms the structure above which the variations are composed); as melodic variations (where the melody as well as general harmony and proportions of the theme remain fixed while other musical elements are varied); and as fantasia variations (where only individual thematic elements are constant--all others including form and

proportion are varied).¹ That Brahms was fully versed in earlier variation styles is evidenced by his collection of theoretical writings and music dating back to the sixteenth century.²

Three basic variation styles were common in Brahms's day. Especially popular were the flashy, improvisatory variations usually based on operatic melodies such as those by Kalkbrenner, Thalberg, Herz, Chopin, and Liszt. Uneven in quality, these pieces relied heavily upon pianistic virtuosity and were meant to entertain an audience well acquainted with the operatic excerpts. The frequent lack of musical substance in these bravura works even contributed to a decline in the reputation of variation as a genre in the nineteenth century. Also common at this time were fantasia variations which, although still virtuosic in style, were much freer than melodic variations with regard to form and treatment of the thematic melody.³ Examples are found in Liszt's Todtentanz: Paraphrase über "Dies irae" für Piano-forte und Orchester (1849) and his orchestral tone poem Les Préludes (1854), which, according to Kurt von Fischer, "combines the idea of programme music with a very liberal application of variation technique."⁴ The third contemporary variation style is that of ostinato variations such as Chopin's Berceuse Op. 57 (1843-44) and Liszt's Variationen über J.S. Bachs Kantata "Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen" (1862). This type, however, is less common than the first two.

Brahms decisively rejected the contemporary trends toward both fantasia and virtuoso variations in favor of a more concentrated approach indebted to earlier models, especially Bach and Beethoven. In a letter from August 1876 to Heinrich and Elisabeth von Herzogenberg,

he carefully noted the distinction between the free fantasia style of variations and the more rigorous treatment characteristic of Beethoven, which was an important inspiration and model for his own works:

Then perhaps I would have something to mention on the subject of variations in general. For instance, I wish people would distinguish between the titles: variations and other forms such as fantasia-variations, or whatever one may choose to call almost all of the newer variation works. I have a peculiar affection for the variation form and consider that we with our talent and our energy could probably tame it.

Beethoven treats it with extraordinary severity, and can rightly translate his variations: 'alterations.' All the later ones by Schumann, H.[sic], or Nottebohm are very different. I am, of course, objecting neither to the form nor the music. But I wish people would distinguish by name what is different in kind.⁵

As for the flashy, improvised variations on popular operatic tunes, Brahms, according to his contemporary Hermann Kretzschmar, "scorns on principle cheap and hackneyed effects." Kretzschmar continues:

He does not write scales running up and down, nor swarms of arpeggios with or without melodic basis; he deprives the virtuosi a series of their habitual "thankful" exercises. On the other hand he demands from them new, boldly technical performances, a versatility and elasticity of performing art that they up until now hardly would have expected--and all of this as if it were obvious and ordinary. Bravura has absolutely no opportunity to show itself in its full light, it does not step into the forefront and will not for its own sake be brought into play. The difficult passages, new sound effects, which will not for a decade yet become common of piano composition and piano virtuosity, are the products of motivic development⁶ and appear in the course of musical ideas as found by chance.

Indeed, in many respects, Brahms's style resembles the classical variation models of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. His themes follow binary, rounded binary, or ternary structures, and his variations al-

most always adhere strictly to the form, proportions, and general harmony of the theme. What he does within these essentially classical procedures, however, cannot be considered outmoded or conservative. Within the strict genre of theme and variation, Brahms demonstrates an intimate understanding of his thematic material along with new and original ways to vary it. He is not concerned with mere decoration of thematic melody but rather with the development of specific thematic elements--rhythms, motives, and the like. Because of the penetrating internal thematic development involved in his variation procedure, the works safely keep clear of the danger of sounding empty and repetitious. His themes are chosen not only because of their motivic and rhythmic possibilities, however, but also because of their character and poetic content. Furthermore, Brahms exploits the expressive character of his themes by evoking distinctive and often contrasting moods in his successive variations. Note, for instance, the uniqueness of each variation in the Variationen über ein Thema von Paganini Op. 35 Bk. II. Practically every range of expression is touched upon in this work, without destroying the sense of unity.

It is this technique of unification in the variation sets of Brahms that constitutes the focus of the present study. Brahms avoids the loose conventional succession of variations decorating a theme and instead creates totally independent works with an overall design analogous in scope to other large forms such as the sonata. He achieves this effect through careful control of the overall form as well as through the ordering and grouping of variations, with structural emphasis placed on specific musical elements of the theme.

A close examination of Brahms's works within the theme and variation genre reveals many notable features of his compositional technique. In particular, the structural and formal principles of the Brahms variations display a consummate understanding of unity and dramatic continuity in large musical forms. Each of these works provides new insight into the creative process, in the same sense in which Brahms himself claimed that there is something special to be learned from each of Schubert's six hundred songs.⁷ Yet, while each work is unique, a limited number of compositional techniques contribute to the overall form and unity characteristic of the Brahms variations. This study will emphasize musical techniques such as the manipulation of motivic and rhythmic cells, the pairing and grouping of variations, and the exploitation of the bass as a means of development. Attention will also be given to timbral registers employed, aspects of pianistic texture, and the structural importance of the variation finale.

While a comprehensive analysis of all Brahms's variations is beyond the scope of this thesis, a general overview showing past and contemporary influences on his style and summarizing the compositional techniques mentioned above as observed in selected works will provide an indispensable background for the detailed formal analyses that follow in Chapters II and III.

An Overview of the Variations

For Brahms, the genre of theme and variation provided a framework for the refining of many of his compositional ideas. In his early years, variations were employed in the slow movements of his first two piano sonatas, Opp. 1 and 2—following the practice established by Haydn in his chamber music⁸ and found in Mozart and Beethoven as well. The variations in these sonatas are strikingly similar in style. Their themes share the same character, texture, and format: the first variation represents a filled out version of the theme, the second adds a harmonic and chromatic flavour to the melody while allowing more liberty in the format, and the third presents a dramatic change of character which leads to a climactic close. The melodic contour of the theme is for the most part strictly maintained. Brahms takes his greatest liberties with the addition of measures in certain variations and the addition of interludes between variations or sections of variations. Both of these movements are effective within the larger context of the sonata but represent only a mere foreshadowing of the techniques that will dominate the larger independent variation sets to follow.

Brahms abandoned the genre of the piano sonata early in life, and during the ten years between 1853 and 1863 the only large form with which he concerned himself was the independent theme and variation set (that is, a variation set treated not as a movement in a larger composition, but rather as an autonomous work in its own right). Interestingly, all of his independent variations are written for the piano

(although the Variationen über ein Thema von Joseph Haydn Op. 56 were rewritten for orchestra as well). With the exception of Op. 56, which was finished in 1873, all of these independent variation sets were written during the decade prior to 1863, and provide valuable insights into the composer's stylistic development during his earlier years. A chronological list of the independent variations is presented below:

Figure 1

Brahms's Independent Variations⁹

Variationen über ein ungarisches Lied Op. 21 No. 2

Composed Spring or Summer 1853 [L], 1853/54 [M], published 1861.

Variationen über ein Thema von Robert Schumann Op. 9

Composed early Summer 1854, published Nov. 1854.

Variationen über ein eigenes Thema Op. 21 No. 1

Composed 1856 [L], 1857 [M], published 1861.

Variationen über ein Thema von Händel Op. 24

Composed Sept. 1861, published July 1862.

Variationen über ein Thema von Robert Schumann Op. 23

(Piano--four hands) composed Nov. 1861, published Apr. 1863.

Variationen über ein Thema von Paganini Op. 35 (Heft 1 & 2)

Composed Winter 1862-63, published Jan. 1866.

Variationen über ein Thema von Joseph Haydn Op. 56

Op. 56a (Orchestra) and Op. 56b (Two Pianos--four hands)
Composed Summer 1873, Op. 56a published 1874, Op. 56b
published 1873.

Brahms composed most of his variation movements later in his career with the notable exception of the aforementioned slow movements of the first two piano sonatas as well as those of the String Sextets Opp. 18 and 36. For a chronological list of all the variations-- independent sets as well as variation movements--see Figure 2. Stylistically these movements differ from the independent sets as they are generally more conservative in their treatment of the thematic melody and character (as is also the case in the Sonatas Opp. 1 and 2). Victor Luithlen has pointed out that these variation movements invariably assume an important formal responsibility within the overall multi-movement sonata design. Since they represent a certain type of movement within the total psychological progression of the work (i.e. slow movement or finale) these variation movements do not allow the same freedom of treatment that characterizes the independent sets of variations.¹⁰

The genre of theme and variation in Brahms represents a distinct manifestation of his characteristic conservatism with relation to other nineteenth-century styles. His compositional methods are not new, yet he never resorts to mere paraphrase of earlier techniques. Instead, he uses them as the starting point for new ideas. A notable example is found in the relationship between the Variationen über ein eigenes Thema Op. 21 No. 1 and the variations in Beethoven's late sonatas, Opp. 109 and 111. Despite the uncanny thematic, motivic, and rhythmic similarities between these works, the overall effect of Op. 21 No.1 is entirely different from that of the Beethoven works. Brahms absorbs Beethoven's techniques here to make his own unique,

musical statement. A detailed analysis of this relationship is provided in Chapter II, pp. 70-72.

Figure 2

Theme and Variations in Brahms's Music

- Piano Sonata Op. 1, Andante (II)
Composed Apr. 1852, published Dec. 1853.
- Piano Sonata Op. 2, Andante (II)
Composed Nov. 1852, published Feb. 1854.
- Variationen über ein ungarisches Lied Op. 21 No.2
Composed Spring/Summer 1853 [L], 1853/54 [M], published 1861.
- Variationen über ein Thema von Robert Schumann Op. 9
Composed Summer 1854, published Nov. 1854.
- Variationen über ein eigenes Thema Op. 21 No. 1
Composed Spring 1856 [L], 1857 [M], published 1861.
- String Sextet Op. 18, slow movement
Composed 1859/60, published Dec. 1861 or Jan. 1862 [M].
Piano arrangement composed 1860, published 1927.
- Variationen über ein Thema von Händel Op. 24
Composed Sept. 1861, published July 1862.
- Variationen über ein Thema von Robert Schumann Op. 23
Composed Nov. 1861, published Apr. 1863.
- Variationen über ein Thema von Paganini Op. 35, Bks. I & II
Composed Winter 1862/63, published Jan. 1866
- String Sextet Op. 36, slow movement
Composed 1864/65, published Apr. 1866.
- Variationen über ein Thema von Joseph Haydn Opp. 56a & 56b
Composed Summer 1873, Op. 56a published Jan. 1874, Op. 56b published Nov./Dec. 1873.
- String Quartet Op. 67, Finale
Composed 1875, published 1876
Piano arrangement (four hands) published Apr. 1877

Piano Trio Op. 87, slow movement
Composed 1880-82, published Dec. 1882.

Symphony No. 4, Op. 98, Finale
Composed 1885-85, published Oct. 1886.

Clarinet Quintet Op. 115, Finale
Composed Summer 1891, published Mar. 1892.

Clarinet Sonata Op. 120, Finale
Composed Summer 1894, published June 1895.

Peter Latham engagingly compares the two masters:

It was inevitable that they should compare him with Beethoven. The same lack of inches, the same habit of walking with head slightly forward and hands clasped behind the back, the same love of the countryside, the same inveterate bachelordom, the same bad temper! Even 'asses' were bound to notice these things. In the same way even 'asses' could not fail to recognize his musical affinities.¹¹

That the seeds of Brahms's style are found in Beethoven is not a new idea; nor is the notion of the close connection with Schumann or the contrapuntal and stylistic practices of Bach. What deserves closer study, however, is the way Brahms molds these influences to serve his own artistic purposes. The resulting stylistic synthesis led Louis Ehlert to write of Brahms's variations that they are "begotten by a classical father, the thirty-two variations of Beethoven; and a romantic mother, the *Études Symphoniques* of Schumann."¹² Likewise John Horton comments of the Haydn Variations Op. 56:

The variations and finale incorporate almost every conceivable device of contrapuntal ingenuity, together with combinations of rhythms recalling the "proportions" of the sixteenth century keyboard composers. Yet no work of its kind has ever sounded less pedantic, and one can only marvel how Brahms emulates and even surpasses Bach whose Goldberg Variations also run the gamut of technical virtuosity, while fulfilling¹³ their avowed purpose of entertaining the listener.

Close scrutiny of the Brahms variations reveals that he was substantially influenced, especially early in his career, not only by the musical giants of the past but also by more contemporary influences. It was after his first concert tour with the Hungarian violinist Eduard Reményi that Brahms wrote his first set of variations, the Variationen über ein ungarisches Lied Op. 21 No.2. Here a Hungarian folk song forms the basis of the theme, and the variations reflect the Hungarian style both in their boldly asymmetrical rhythmic construction (the theme and first eight variations contain alternating measures of 3/4 and 4/4 meter) and in the richly Hungarian czardas that is represented in the finale. Joseph Weiss goes so far as to suggest programmatic ideas for the variations. He sees:

. . . pictures from the life of a Magyar. Brahms rehearses the sad songs, the blazing, passionate pangs of love, the gaiety of wine, the czardas, marches, troops of dancing maidens, the wedding processions, till he finally opens a heaven of symphony above the whole company,¹⁴ and closes with the Hungarian theme in the form of a hymn.

Likewise, the influence of Schumann on the young composer is clearly observed in the Variationen über ein Thema von Robert Schumann Op. 9, from 1854. Brahms met Robert and Clara Schumann in 1853, and the close friendship that developed between them had a profound influence on all their lives. Brahms emulates Schumann's style in this early variation set—an influence can be seen not only in the use of a theme by Schumann for the work¹⁵ but also in the pianistic style of writing, the structural freedom of the variations (only five of the total fifteen variations follow the thematic proportions),¹⁶ and the borrowing of both compositional styles and material from

other works of Robert and Clara Schumann.¹⁷ In 1861 Brahms wrote another set of variations on a theme by Schumann, this time for piano duet (Op. 23). Robert Schauffler notes the following in his book The Unknown Brahms:

The four-hand Variations on a Theme of Robert Schumann (Op. 23) are based on a melody which had been given to Schumann--as he imagined--from the spirits of Schubert and Mendelssohn, who had bidden him vary it. In the midst of the fourth variation, the insane composer had cast away his pen and rushed forth to hurl himself into the Rhine.

This theme with all its tragic connotations, was actually the one which the tactless Johannes innocently chose as the basis for music which should bring joy and consolation to the dead master's dear ones. . . . He [Brahms] wrote Joachim that he felt as if Clara "had something against the work." The truth is, of course, that it aroused in the poor lady memories too poignant for tears.¹⁸

The Op. 23 Variations, although still reflecting a Schumannesque style, form a different perspective than the earlier set. In Op. 9, the young composer, emulating his mentor and friend, incorporated Schumann's style into his own¹⁹. Later, however, in a letter to Joachim, Brahms rejected it in favour of a stricter adherence to thematic proportions (see Chapter II, p. 64). This new outlook remained with Brahms throughout his career and is clearly witnessed in his succeeding works, the Variations Op. 21 No. 1 and Op. 24. The second set of variations on a theme of Schumann, Op. 23, also reflects this new attitude; unlike the Op. 9 variations, this set adheres more strictly to the proportions and harmony of the theme. Commentators have noted that the styles of both Schumann and Mendelssohn are carefully preserved in this work.²⁰ Now, however, the points of contact are more thoroughly integrated into Brahms's own idiom, and produce the sense of an intentional stylistic homage while avoiding the

somewhat awkward effect of the less subtle allusions contained in some of his earlier works.²¹ As Niemann notes, "from the first [variation] onwards they are pure Brahms,"²² and indeed, they manifest Brahmsian characteristics throughout (compare, for example, Var. 10 with Op. 24, Var. 24, and with Op. 35 Bk. II, Var. 10).

Brahms's incorporation of other composers' styles into his own is seen further in the Paganini Variations Op. 35. Detlef Kraus has compared this work with Paganini's Capriccios Op. 1 (the source of the theme), as well as other sets of transcriptions and variations on this work by Schumann (1832 and 1833) and Liszt (1838 and 1851).²³ In Op. 35 Brahms not only borrows the theme from Paganini (who uses it as a theme for eleven variations at the end of his Op. 1), but he also imitates techniques from other parts of Paganini's piece. Brahms's Var. 10 in Bk. II corresponds with Paganini's No. 17), for example. This technique has already been described in relation to the borrowing of styles in the Variations Op. 9 (see n. 15). Compositional style is not all that Brahms borrows in Op. 35, however. According to Kraus, Brahms recreates the actual sound effects of the violin in this work much more successfully than Liszt does in his transcription.²⁴ Here, then, even the idiomatic violin articulations of Paganini are absorbed by Brahms into the variation form.

Techniques of Unification

Three main structural elements are especially important in the study of Brahms variations: the overall organization of the variations within the sets to produce a larger formal structure, the pairing and grouping of adjacent variations, also for structural purposes, and the importance of the bass as a main unifying feature in all Brahms variation sets. In considering these elements, a number of specific compositional techniques will need to be evaluated in detail. These include the use of rhythmic diminution, control of dynamics, and the exploitation of motivic, contrapuntal, and textural possibilities of the themes to both unify and set variations apart from each other. With regard to the overriding structure governing the formal organization of the variations within a work, no general pattern or rule is evident, although a dramatic climax is placed at or near the end of most of the variation sets. This event is always carefully prepared within the musical architecture; the climax may occur in the variations preceding the finale or within the finale itself.

In the earliest set of variations, those on the Hungarian Lied Op. 21 No.2, a series a series of rhythmic diminutions lead up to the dramatic czardas²⁵ presented in the finale. Here the process begins in Var. 8, where a steady pulse of eighth-notes outline not only the thematic melody but also a tonic pedal point in the bass. In Var. 9, the eighth-note pulse is presented by a pedal trill in the inner voices. (The pedal moves unobtrusively back to the bass for Vars. 10

and 11.) More important in Var. 9 is the structural metric shift from the asymmetric construction of the theme and first eight variations to a steady duple meter (that of the rustic Hungarian czardas). In Var. 9, the beat is subdivided into three eighth-notes, with the soprano line drawing attention to the upbeat of the metric pulse, thus creating a rhythmic counterpoint with the soprano. Brahms now retains the new rhythmic bass of Var. 10 in Var. 11, substituting sixteenth notes for the triplet eighths in the soprano. The rhythmic intensification is then further intensified in Var. 12, as the quadruple rhythmic subdivision of Var. 11--now moved to the bass--is combined with triplet sixteenth notes in the soprano. Brahms sustains this rhythmic movement into the opening of the finale (Var. 13), where the soprano triplet motive is moved to the bass, with thirty-second notes superimposed above it (see Ex. 1). This procedure is foreshadowed in the first half of the work through rhythmic diminutions in the bass from Vars. 1 to 2 and 2 to 3, as well as through the further diminution and combinations of duple and triple subdivisions in Vars. 5 and 6. Note also Brahms's penchant for altering voices when a rhythmic or melodic idea from one variation is retained in the next. This can be clearly observed in the following variation pairs: 4-5, 5-6, 7-8, 9-10, 10-11, and 12-13.

One final note on structural organization in this work that cannot be overlooked is the importance of the fermata at the close of Var. 6. The rhythmic diminution and counterpoint of Vars. 1 to 6 has already been shown to create a premonition of the much grander effect in the second half of the work--the significance of the fermata,

Example 1 Variationen über ein ungarisches Lied Op. 21 No.2

Rhythmic Diminution in Variations 9 to 13

Var. 9 *dolce*

Musical score for Variation 9, featuring a piano (*p*) and *dolce* marking. The piece is in 3/4 time and consists of four measures. The right hand plays a melodic line with a *dolce* marking, while the left hand provides a steady accompaniment.

Var. 10 *legato*

Musical score for Variation 10, featuring a piano (*p*) and *legato* marking. The piece is in 3/4 time and consists of four measures. The right hand plays a melodic line with a *legato* marking, while the left hand provides a steady accompaniment.

Var. 11 *dolce*

Musical score for Variation 11, featuring a piano (*p*) and *dolce* marking. The piece is in 3/4 time and consists of four measures. The right hand plays a melodic line with a *dolce* marking, while the left hand provides a steady accompaniment.

Var. 12 *f* *capress.* *cresc.*

Musical score for Variation 12, featuring a forte (*f*) and *capress.* marking. The piece is in 3/4 time and consists of four measures. The right hand plays a melodic line with a *f* and *capress.* marking, while the left hand provides a steady accompaniment.

Var. 13 *con forza* *mf* *molto cresc.*

Musical score for Variation 13, featuring a mezzo-forte (*mf*) and *molto cresc.* marking. The piece is in 3/4 time and consists of four measures. The right hand plays a melodic line with a *mf* and *molto cresc.* marking, while the left hand provides a steady accompaniment.

then, is to draw more attention to the premature climax at the end of this section. To the surprise of the listener, the variation which follows (No. 7) presents a totally new texture, tempo, dynamic, and character. Marked poco più lento, piano, and dolce espressivo, this section brings back the original thematic melody in a single note pizzicato bass line, thus presenting a quiet, humble beginning to the second and much more majestic growth to the climactic finale. The return of the theme in its original form serves as a ritornello and produces the effect of large-scale unification which is then reinforced at the end of the work with the return to asymmetrical meter and the final recapitulation of the theme.

The intensification of dynamics leading towards a structural climax in the fugue of the Variationen über ein Thema von Händel Op. 24, is foreshadowed within the work by smaller crescendi between variations. This can be observed in the dramatic buildup of Vars. 7-9. Vars. 7 and 8 are paired rhythmically, Var. 8 representing an intensification of dynamics and mood. This leads then into the grand presentation of sforzando octaves and rhythmic counterpoint in Var. 9. Heinrich Schenker has observed that the grandeur of Var. 9 is prepared in the melodic upward sweep of the final measures of Var. 8.²⁶ The dynamic climax of Var. 9 subsides in the next three variations, and while other dynamic crescendi occur in the course of the work (such as Vars. 13-15), each of the climactic buildups is inconclusive, as if to prepare the listener for the final dynamic peak. Brahms builds to this climax by presenting yet another variation pair (Nos. 23 and 24), which increases intensity through rhythmic diminu-

tion.²⁷ This is followed in Var. 25 which, with its fortissimo chords leaping between registers, creates a level of excitement not yet attained in the piece. Schenker points out that the arpeggio in the last measure of Var. 24 further prepares this variation as it returns to a simpler form (a melodic arpeggio).²⁸ Following Var. 25 is a grand fugue exploiting many of the technical difficulties as well as characteristic musical elements of the variations and culminating the largest of Brahms's independent variation sets. In this work, a large overriding form is not as apparent as in Op. 21 No. 2, yet the importance of the finale and the careful preparation of it help to create continuity throughout the work.

Although one usually finds a large, cumulative finale culminating Brahms's variation sets, the lack of one in the Schumann Variations Op. 9 is compensated for by a tighter and more unified structure in the ordering of the variations. Brahms divides this work in half, and in a manner similar to that in Op. 21 No. 2, he structurally pairs each variation in the first half with a corresponding variation in the second half of the piece. This structural plan is illustrated in detail in Figure 3.

The concept of pairing and grouping variations together for structural purposes has already been mentioned. This is a common unifying feature in Brahms's variations and one that can provide the structural foundation for an entire work, as will be seen in the analysis of Op. 56 in Chapter III. Kathleen Dale points to this technique as a major unifying feature of the Händel Variations Op. 24,²⁹ and Hans Gal refers to it in accounting for the superior calibre of

Figure 3 Variationen über ein Thema von Robert Schumann Op. 9

Formal Structure Based on Pairing of Variations in Each Half

THEME 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16

Theme prominent
 1--theme in bass
 8--theme in bass and soprano

2--poco più moto, staccato, leggiero
 9--Schnell, staccato, leggiero

3--development of 1 (1 & 3--melody in bass), slower tempo
 10--development of 8 (8 & 10--canons), slower tempo

4--poco più moto, pianissimo, leggiero, ♩ .
 11--un poco più animato, pp, dolcissimo, ♩ .

5--f/ff. staccato, leggiero, Allegro capriccio
 12--f/ff. stacc., legg., Allegro, poco scherzando

6--Allegro, like a technical study
 13--Non troppo presto, toccata-like study

7--theme as ritornello
 16--theme as ritornello

14--canon
 15--canon
 (arpeggios as accompaniment)
 (like an interlude)

15--melody
 of theme
 16--bass
 of theme

the Variations Opp. 24 and 35:

His crowning achievements with the scope of piano music are the Handel and Paganini Variations. Both deal with the problem of using a theme in a small binary song form resulting in a procession of numerous short episodes. Beethoven in his C minor Variations and his Variations in E-flat major (Eroica), opus 35, has shown how this problem can be resolved through linking together two or three consecutive variations by a common, unifying idea and thereby freely organizing a large number of variations into contrasting groups. Brahms successfully attempted the same in his Handel and his Paganini Variations. In this manner the variation form offers the best and most stimulating possibility for clustering a number of shorter structures into a coherent whole.³⁰

In his comprehensive account of the historical development of the Paganini Variations Op. 35, Paul Mies has investigated the ordering and grouping of the variations by comparing the final published edition with an earlier draft. Mies recounts Clara Schumann's criticisms of both versions, showing how she at times both influenced Brahms and possibly misunderstood him.³¹ In comparing the two versions of the Paganini Variations (the first of which was a complete projected work comprising twenty-one variations), Mies not only shows how Brahms arrived at his final ordering but also outlines the specific groups of variations reproduced in Fig. 4. Mies notes that "Brahms intended a certain regularity for the final form [as] shown by the limitation of each book to fourteen variations. The fourteenth was completed both times in the form of a continuous movement."³² Mies also points out that in dividing the work into groups, as indicated by fermatas, Brahms prevents too fast a progression of variations in performance.³³

Figure 4 Variationen über ein Thema von Paganini Op. 35Grouping of Variations as outlined by Paul Mies³⁴

BOOK I

- Group 1 Var 1-3 2/4 — 2/4 — 6/8.
 Var 4 continuation of same progression (12/8).
 Var 5 2/4 + 3/8, conflicting rhythm—despite the fact that the motion is moderate and quite peaceful
- Group 2 Var 6-9 6/8 — 6/8 — 6/8 — 2/4 [bass in 12/8].
 Var 10 syncopation with eighth notes, similar to Var 5 as the close of Group 1.
- Group 3 Var 11-13. 2/4, Andante, A major, ♩ ; 2/4, A major, ♩ ; 2/4, A minor.
 Var 14 Finale in four sections.

BOOK II

- Group 1 Var 1-3 2/4 ♩ ; 2/4 poco animato ♩ ; 2/4 ♩ .
- Group 2 Var 4 new, 3/8, poco allegretto, A major.
 Var 5 new, 3/8, con grazia, A minor, ♩ .
 Var 6 new, 3/8, poco più vivace, A minor, ♩ .
 Var 7 2/4 + 3/8, a heightened progression from a peaceful variation preceding to Var 7 with the very strong conflicting rhythms. The three new variations show their correlation as they are in 3/8 time.
- Group 3 Var 8 6/8, allegro, arpeggios in contrary motion.
 Var 9 2/4. sixteenths in unison.
 Var 10 new, 6/8, feroce, energico, strengthened unisons.
 Var 11 2/4. vivace, unison runs in contrary motion. A technically uniform group. The contrary motion surrounds the unison variations. The new variation is an intensification of the preceding one.
- Group 4 Var 12 new, 6/8, un poco andante, piano dolce espressivo, F major, ♩ .
 Var 13 new, 2/4, un poco più andante, piano poco espressivo, ♩ .
 Var 14 new, 2/4, presto ma non troppo—beginning of Finale. Vars 13 and 14 are closely related. They originate from Var 12 with a suitably fast increase in movement. As in Bk I, the final group opens with a major variation. The "ma non troppo" by the "presto" certainly deserves notice. The greatest intensification does not occur until the Finale.

Detlef Kraus, on the other hand, has regarded the two books as one complete work. By asserting that both finales contain four totally worked out variations, Kraus compares the entire work with, as he claims, its total of thirty-two variations with Beethoven's C minor Variations (32) and Diabelli Variations (33), as well as Bach's Goldberg Variations (30).³⁵ In considering the two books as one complete work, certain performance difficulties arise (as predicted by Clara Schumann). Kraus discusses possible ways of performing the two books together (i.e., omitting the repeat of the theme, or first finale etc.), recalling Brahms's possibly facetious comment to Moriz Rosenthal: "Only pause at the end of the first book, and if the people have not had enough and will give you no rest, play on!"³⁶

The ordering of variations to form specific groups within a larger structure is a subject for fascinating study. Take, for example, Mies's grouping of the Paganini Variations (see Fig. 4). Luithlen reinterprets the division of this work, drawing an analogy between the ordering of the groups and a four-movement Sonata procedure.³⁷ In the first book, Luithlen likens Vars. 11 and 12 to a slow movement, and Var. 13 to a scherzo; he considers Vars. 12 and 13 to function as the slow movement in the second book, with the scherzo preceding them in Var. 11 (beginnings and endings of the sets corresponding to the Allegro and finale in Sonata procedure). The analogy is not as tenuous as other brave attempts to superimpose a Sonata structure upon variation forms;³⁸ however, in keeping with this analogy, one must not overlook the charming Minuet and Trio effect of Vars. 4 and 5 in Bk. II. A change of meter in Brahms is never

casual,³⁹ and the metric shift as well as complete change of character in Var. 4, followed by the livelier Var. 5, is certainly noteworthy.

The pairing and grouping of variations has been shown to help create a larger structural framework in the independent variation sets. An internal unity among variations is also created through the exploiting of specific musical elements of the theme; the quintessential element for Brahms is the bass. In a letter to Adolph Schubring in 1869, Brahms writes:

A theme for variations really means to me almost only the bass. This, however, is sacred to me: it is the firm foundation upon which I then build my story. . . . If I vary the melody, I cannot be more than ingenious or graceful, or to deepen a beautiful idea, even though I give it a nice atmosphere. Above the given bass I₄₀ invent truly new, I invent for it new melodies, I create.

Twelve years later, in a letter to George Henschel, he stresses the same point: "In writing songs . . . you must endeavor to invent, simultaneously with the melody, a healthy, powerful bass."⁴¹ One can indeed observe a particular fondness for the bass as an important unifying element in all the variation sets. In the early sonatas the thematic melody always appears in the bass either alone or alternating with the soprano. This dialogue technique of melodic representation is found in the Variations Op. 21 No. 2 (Vars. 2, 4, 5, and 12) and, as has already been seen, is but one of the many ways that Brahms incorporates thematic material in the bass of this work.

Similarly, Brahms assigns equal melodic importance to both the bass line and the melody of the theme in the Variations Op. 9,

Example 2 Variationen über ein Thema von Robert Schumann Op. 9

Interchanging of Soprano and Bass

Thema
Ziemlich langsam

Var. 1

Var. 2
Poco più moto

Var. 3.
Tempo di tema.

Var. 10
Poco Adagio

treating each as an independent melody (see Ex. 2). In Vars. 1 and 3 the soprano melody of the theme is transferred to the bass and a new countermelody composed above. Var. 2, however, presents the thematic bass line in diminution and rhythmic alteration, and in Var. 10 it is transferred to the soprano, the bass of Var. 10 presenting the same melody in inversion. Brahms adds complexity to the texture by bringing the inverted bass melody into the alto voice at measure 10, thus creating a modified canon in contrary motion from measures 10-16 (see Ex. 3). Niemann notes that this variation reflects "the style of the old masters of the Netherlands."⁴² Other interesting canons occur in this work such as in Var. 8, where Brahms pits the thematic melody against itself at the octave in soprano and bass, and again in Var. 15 at the sixth and in rhythmic augmentation. A canon at the second based on the thematic alto line is placed in the soprano and alto of Var. 14 (these passages are shown in Ex. 3). The effect is particularly beautiful because of the placement of the canon above an arpeggiated bass line which outlines the original thematic bass. The final tribute to the thematic bass occurs at the end of the work, in Var. 16. Here Brahms isolates it, presenting it in rhythmic augmentation beneath fragmentary references to the thematic melody, harmony, and texture. This reflective variation, along with its structural counterpart, No. 7, is a reminder of the "Eusebius" side of Schumann's musical character.

Later in his career, Brahms relied less on the bass for melodic purposes and more for its harmonic and structural possibilities. This practice can be observed in all his variation sets beginning

with Op. 21 No. 1. But the bass is not the only thematic element used by Brahms to create homogeneity and coherence among variations in his works. Other methods of unification include the development of melodic (or motivic), contrapuntal, rhythmic, and textural qualities of the theme; examples of these techniques abound in prac-

Example 3 Variationen über ein Thema von Robert Schumann Op. 9

Canons in Vars. 8, 10, 14, and 15

Var. 8, mm. 1-4

Andante (non troppo lento)
espressivo

p
col Pedala sempre
dolce

Var. 10, mm. 9-16

p
col Pedale

Var. 14, mm. 1-4

Andante
p espressivo
stacc. e legg.

Var. 15, mm. 1-4

espressivo
p
sempre col Ped.
poco marcato il basso
pp.

tically every variation and will also be explored in detail in the formal analyses to follow.

The process of varying a theme or an element within it is as varied itself as the forms into which it may fall. The concept of variation, after all, is only a structurally larger application of the concept of development. Therefore, the manipulation of a musical idea within the genre of theme and variation may take several forms and guises. In his independent variation sets, Brahms explores many

of the avenues open to him with masterful results. He was a consummate master of contrapuntal procedure. His love of rhythmic complexity manifests itself anew in every work. That he conceived of the piano in orchestral terms, although perhaps too broad a generalization,⁴³ is certainly evident. Schumann writes of Brahms in 1853:

Sitting at the piano he began to unveil wonderous regions. We were drawn into a continually more magical circle. Moreover he gave a brilliant performance, where, out of the piano, he created an orchestra of wailing and jubilant voices. There were sonatas, or rather, veiled symphonies, . . .

The following analyses illustrate how Brahms intricately combines all of these procedures. Focussing on the specific formal and structural principles of two representative sets: Op. 21 No.1 and Op. 56, emphasis will be placed on the thematic elements Brahms chooses for variation and his control of the form by welding variations together. Opp. 21 No. 1 and 56 exhibit interesting features unique unto themselves but are also illustrative of Brahms's characteristic techniques. Chronologically, they are important works, as each represents a turning point in the composer's style. Therefore these two sets are worthy of study—both individually and comparatively. The following analyses will illuminate further and in more detail the procedures outlined in this chapter.

CHAPTER I

NOTES

¹Robert Nelson outlines various specific groups variations fall into. The genre, however, is not so cut and dried: many variation sets contain elements of different categories and cannot be labelled as one specific type. See Robert Uriel Nelson, The Technique of Variation: a Study of the Instrumental Variation from Antonio Cabezón to Max Reger (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962.)

²Brahms had a very extensive library. Books on early music include histories, almanacs, and theoretical writings such as Fux's Gradus ad Parnassum (1725), Kellner's Treulichen Unterricht im Generalbass (Hamburg, 1743), and Albrechtberger's Schriften über den Generalbass (Wien, c.1791) and Anweisung zur Composition (Leipzig, 1790). Brahms's private music collection contained among many others a considerable number of works by Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven (including Beethoven sketchbooks), the complete works of J. S. Bach and Heinrich Schutz (as they appeared in print), works by Scarlatti and Sweelink (including variations) and even the Souterliedeckens of Jacopo Clemens (1540—showing early styles of three-part polyphony). See Kurt Hofmann, Die Bibliothek von Johannes Brahms: Bücher- und Musikalienverzeichnis (Hamburg: Karl Dieter Wagner, 1974).

³Throughout this thesis the term "thematic melody" will refer strictly to the parameter of the soprano melodic contour of the theme.

⁴The New Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians, s.v. "Variations," by Kurt von Fischer, p. 550.

⁵. . . Dann würde ich vielleicht über Variationen überhaupt schwatzen, und dass ich wünschte, man unterschiede auch auf dem Titel: Variationen und etwas anderes, etwa Phantasievariationen oder wie man denn sonst—fast alle neueren Variationenwerke nennen wollte. Ich habe eine eigene Liebhaberei für die Form der Variation und meine, diese Form könnten wir wohl mit unserm Talent und unsrer Kraft noch zwingen.

Beethoven behandelt sie ungemein streng, er kann auch mit Recht übersetzen: Veränderungen. Was nach ihm kommt, von Schumann, H.[sic], oder Nottebohm, ist etwas anderes. Ich habe gegen die Art so wenig wie, selbstverständlich, gegen die Musik. Aber ich wünschte, man unterschiede auch durch den Namen, was der Art nach verschie-

den ist. From Max Kalbeck, ed., Brahms im Briefwechsel mit Heinrich und Elisabet von Herzogenberg I, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Deutscher Brahms-Gesellschaft m.b.H., 1908), pp. 7-8.

⁶Brahms verschmährt prinzipiell die billigen und abgebrauchten Effekte. Er schreibt keine auf- und abrennenden Skalen hin, keine Arpeggienschwärme mit und ohne Melodiekern, er entzieht den Virtuosen eine Reihe ihrer gewohnten 'dankbaren' Aufgaben. Auf der anderen Seite verlangt er von ihnen neue, kühne technische Leistungen, eine Vielseitigkeit und Elastizität der Spielkunst, die ihnen bisher kaum zugemutet wurde--und dies alles, als wäre es etwas Selbstverständliches und Gewöhnliches. Die Bravour hat gar keine Gelegenheit, sich in ihrem vollen Lichte zu zeigen, sie tritt nicht auf den Vordergrund und wird nicht um ihrer selbst willen herangezogen. Die schwierigen Partien, die neuen Klangeffekte, die erst in einigen Jahrzehnten Gemeingut der Klavierkomposition und der Klaviervirtuosität sein werden, sind Produkte der motivischen Entwicklung und erscheinen im Gange der musikalischen Ideen wie beiläufig gefunden. Cited in Gerhard Puchelt, Variationen für Klavier im 19. Jahrhundert: Blüte und Verfall einer Kunstform (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1973), pp. 133-34.

⁷Tovey, "Brahms," p. 159.

⁸Eighteen of Haydn's sixty-four string quartets are formal variation movements, and others combine variation technique with forms such as ternary and rondo.

⁹Sources disagree on certain dates of composition or publication. Therefore, the insertion of [L] indicates the information in from the following source:

Victor Luithlen, "Studien zu Johannes Brahms Werke in Variationsform," Studien zur Musikwissenschaft 14 (1927):286-320.

The insertion [M] refers to the following source:

Margit L. McCorckle, Johannes Brahms: Thematisch-Bibliographisches Werkverzeichnis (München: G. Henle, 1984).

¹⁰Luithlen, "Studien," p. 312. Tovey also addresses this fact in his article on Brahms's chamber music:

In the sonata style we feel our way by identifying the themes as melodies; hence a set of variations as part of a Sonata should not, in Brahms' opinion, treat the mere harmonic and rhythmic scheme as equivalent to the melody in the ways which are so interesting and desirable in independent variations.

Donald Frances Tovey, "Brahms," in Cobbett's Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music, 2nd ed. Compiled and edited by Walter Willson Cobbett, with supplementary material edited by Colin Mason. (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 176.

- ¹¹Peter Latham, Brahms (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1948), p. 91.
- ¹²Ernest Markham Lee, Brahms: the Man and his Music (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), p. 105.
- ¹³John Horton, Brahms Orchestral Music, BBC Music Guides (London: BBC, 1968), pp. 31-32.
- ¹⁴Joseph Weiss, "Johannes Brahms; The Interpretation of his Music," The Century Library of Music Vol. VIII, ed. I. J. Paderewski (New York: The Century Co., 1911), p. 245.
- ¹⁵The theme of the Op. 9 variations comes from Schumann's Bunte Blätter Op. 99 No.4 (Albumblatt No. 1). Clara Schumann also composed a set of variations on this theme with the original intention being that the two sets be combined and presented to Robert to cheer him in his illness. The styles of the variations, however, were found to be too contrasting, so the two sets of variations were published separately and likewise presented separately to Robert. See Robert Schauffler, The Unknown Brahms: his Life, Character and Works; Based on New Material (New York: Crown Publishers, 1933), p. 361.
- ¹⁶The term "thematic proportions" refers to the size and structural outline of the theme, i.e., the number of measures in each period or phrase, the number of phrases, the presence or absence of repeats, and so on.
- ¹⁷Variation 9 copies the style of Schumann's Op. 99 No. 5 and Variation 10 (mm. 30-32) incorporates the melody from Clara Schumann's Romance Variée Op. 3 (which was also used by Robert as the theme for his Impromptus über ein Thema von Clara Wieck Op. 5).
- ¹⁸Schauffler, The Unknown Brahms, p. 362. For the letter see Max Kalbeck, ed., Johannes Brahms: Briefe mit Joachim Vol 5, (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1974), p. 331.
- ¹⁹Brahms's success in emulating Schumann's style is reiterated by scholars such as Edwin Evans who states that the piece cannot be properly heard or appreciated without the knowledge of "the general style of Schumann of which it is an echo," and H. C. Colles who states, "By so much is it Schumann rather than Brahms in spirit." See Edwin Evans, Handbook to the Pianoforte Works of Johannes Brahms (London: William Reeves, 1936), pp. 105-6, and H. C. Colles, Brahms (New York: Brentano's, 1908), p. 32.
- ²⁰Walter Niemann, Brahms, trans. Catherine Alison Phillips. (New York: Tudor Publishing, 1937), p. 231, and Schauffler, The Unknown Brahms, p. 362.

²¹An example of one of Brahms's earlier, more awkward allusions to Beethoven is found in the first movement of his Sonata Op. 1 which roughly parallels the latter's Sonata Op. 106.

²²Niemann, Brahms, p. 231.

²³Detlef Kraus, "Die Paganinivariationen Op. 35--ein Sonderfall?!" Brahms Studien 4 (1980):55-62.

²⁴Ibid., pp. 58-59. Kraus gives the following examples where Brahms effectively interprets Paganini's intended violin articulations: 1) Bk. II, Var. 11 (using alternating octaves and single tones to recreate the arco/pizzicato alterations in Paganini's Var. 9 of No. 24; 2) Bk. II, Var. 8 (similar technique); 3) Bk. II, Var. 14 (a spiccato effect); 4) Bk. II, Var. 6 as well as Bk. I, Var. 3 (creating "empty string and flute-like tones").

²⁵A Czardas is a rustic Hungarian peasant dance from the nineteenth century. It reached its height of popularity from the 1850s to 1880s, and Brahms probably came into close contact with it during his friendship with Eduard Reményi.

²⁶Heinrich Schenker, "Brahms: Variationen und Fuge über ein Thema von Händel, op. 24," Der Tonwille IV (April-Sept., 1924):40.

²⁷Oswald Jonas, in his discussion of Op. 24, notes that Schenker outlines the procedure whereby variations grow out of each other through diminution. See Oswald Jonas, "Die Variationen für eine Liebe Freundin von Johannes Brahms," Archiv für Musikwissenschaft XII/4 (1955):321.

²⁸Schenker, "Brahms," p. 27.

²⁹Kathleen Dale, Nineteenth Century Piano Music (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 117.

³⁰Hans Gal, Johannes Brahms: his Work and Personality, trans. Joseph Stein (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), pp. 171-72.

³¹Mies proposes that Clara Schumann's objections to the Finale of Book II are perhaps the result of the fact that she did not clearly understand the development from Variations 12 to the end of the work. See Paul Mies, "Zu Werdegang und Strukturen der Paganini--Variationen op. 35 für Klavier von Johannes Brahms," Studia Musicologica 11 (1969):330.

³²Ibid., p. 327.

³³Ibid., p. 329.

³⁴This chart is a reproduction of the same presented Mies, "Zu Werdegang und Strukturen," p. 330. Mies also includes a comparison between this order and that of the earlier draft.

³⁵Kraus's overall comparison of the enormity of this work compared to other such monumental variations is correct from the point of view of sheer size. It is not generally accepted, however, that the Op. 35 Variations can be compared on a musical basis with works such as Beethoven's Diabelli Variations or J. S. Bach's Goldberg Variations. In this regard, Brahms's Variationen über ein Thema von Handel Op. 24, would more fittingly fall into such a category. Furthermore, Kraus errs in his examination of the Op. 35 Finales as containing four complete variations. The Finales are more concisely described as follows:

Book I, Var. 14: Var. A, mm. 1-16.
 Bridge, mm. 17-32.
 Var. B, mm. 33-36 (partial variation).
 Bridge, mm. 37-43.
 Var. C, mm. 44-68.
 Coda, mm. 69-91.

Book II, Var. 14: Var. A, mm. 1-16.
 Var. B, mm. 17-40.
 Var. C, mm. 41-64.
 Bridge, mm. 65-73.
 Var. D, mm. 74-81.
 Bridge, mm. 82-88.
 Coda, mm. 89-101.

(Note: these variations are shorter than the theme.) See Kraus, "Die Paganinivariationen op. 35," pp. 56-57.

³⁶Machen Sie nur nach dem 1. Heft eine Pause, und wenn dann die Leute noch nicht genug haben und keine Ruhe geben sollten, so spielen Sie weiter! From Kraus, "Die Paganinivariationen op. 35," p. 59.

³⁷Luithlen, "Studien," p.312.

³⁸Chapter III, p. 84 outlines Kalbeck's attempt to apply a symphonic design to Op. 56. Similar attempts have been made for other large variation sets such as Beethoven's Diabelli Variations. For a more extended discussion of these matters related to the Diabelli Variations see William Kinderman, Beethoven's Diabelli Variations: A Study of its Evolution and Significance (Oxford, forthcoming).

³⁹Note the importance of the shift from irregular to duple meter in Op. 21 No.2; an equally important metric shift occurs in Op. 21 No.1 as will be outlined in Chapter II, and similarly Brahms uses metric shifts to set apart his two structurally most important variations in Op. 56 (Variation 5 and the Finale) by preceding them with variations in triple meter.

40 . . . bei einem Thema zu Variationen bedeutet mir eigentlich, fast, beinahe nur der Bass etwas. Aber dieser ist mir heilig, er ist der feste Grund, auf dem ich dann meine Geschichten baue. . . Variiere ich die Melodie, so kann ich nicht leicht mehr als geistreich oder anmutig sein oder, zwar stimmungsvoll, einen schönen Gedanken vertiefen. Über den gegebenen Bass erfinde ich wirklich neu, ich erfinde ihm neue Melodien, ich schaffe. Max Kalbeck, ed. Johannes Brahms: Briefe an Joseph Diktor Widman, Ellen und Ferdinand Detter, Adolph Schubring Vol. 8 (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1974), p. 217.

41 George Henschel Personal Resollections of Johannes Brahms (Boston: R. G. Badger, 1907), p. 44.

42 Niemann, Brahms, p. 231.

43 Brahms states in a letter to George Henschel (1881) that he differentiates between piano, orchestral, chamber, and vocal music: . . . I should not like to be persuaded again to arrange Chamber Music for the orchestra. A few times I have done it, but at once repented and put the thing aside. Were it not for everything possible I should be inclined to think we wrote only confusedly nowadays anyhow.

Mind I do not mean to try to dissuade you from doing it yourself--the thing seems to be the general fashion.

I myself, however, prefer to retain my ears and know what is a pianoforte piece and what an orchestral piece; what a song and what an aria; what a solo quartet and what a chorus.

Henschel, Personal Recollections, p. 80.

44 Am Clavier sitzend, fing er an wunderbare Regionen zu enthüllen. Wir wurden in immer zauberischere Kreise hineingezogen. Dazu kam ein ganz geniales Spiel, das aus dem Clavier ein Orchester von wehklagenden und lautjubelnden Stimmen machte. Es waren Sonaten, mehr verschleierte Symphonien, . . . Robert Schumann, "Neue Bahnen," Neue Zeitschrift für Musik 39 (28 Oct. 1853):185.

CHAPTER II

Variationen über ein eigenes Thema

Op. 21 No. 1

Composed in the spring of 1856, two years after the highly Schumannesque variations, Op. 9, (with the only intervening piano works being the Four Ballades Op. 10 and two Gavottes), the Variations on an Original Theme Op. 21 No. 1 show a marked stylistic change from their predecessors. Gone, for example, are the robust rhythms and folk elements of Brahms's first variation set, Op. 21 No. 2. Although traces of Schumann's influence can still be found (the bass figure in Var. 1 which returns in the Finale recalls his Romanze in F-sharp Op. 28 No. 2), in this work, we can see not only an expansion of Brahms's originality but also a new influence in his variation writing--that of the late style of Beethoven.

In his dissertation on Brahms's solo variations, A. C. Brandes comments that in Op. 21 No. 1, "Brahms was beginning to arrive at a new technique, both of composition and in his approach to keyboard writing." Brandes observes "the mature 'symphonic' Brahms in this comparatively early work,"¹ echoing the sentiment of Joseph Weiss in an earlier study:

In these variations may be discovered a Brahms by turn epic, lyric, and in the nineteenth century variation,² gigantic, all happily united into one clear symphonic whole.

Orchestral texture is, in fact, more evident in this work than in the Op. 9 set (as achieved, for example, in the effect of a dialogue between the piano registers in Var. 9), and a convincing case can also be made for an overall three-part, quasi-symphonic, structural plan for the work, as will be seen later.

Critics have long been divided on the effectiveness of this work. Peter Latham, for example, finds that despite "the pensive charm of its eighteen-bar theme and its poetical coda, this music is not altogether convincing."³ Ernest Hutcheson considers neither of the Op. 21 variation sets to show "Brahms at his best,"⁴ and Robert Schauffler even expresses surprise at their actual publication:

The fact that he consented to publish it [Op. 21 Nos. 1 and 2] at all would suggest that his judgement, usually so austere⁵ly self-critical, must have been under a momentary cloud.

Closer examination of this relatively early work, however, reveals a sophisticated variation procedure and an intelligent synthesis of the styles and material of other highly respected composers with that of his own—all presented in an expressive, poetic, and musical style. This work seems to have been frequently underestimated, as Rudolph Ganz has pointed out. "It is strange," states Ganz, "that Dr. Hutcheson does not think of Brahms 'at his best' in the two variation works, Op.21. The original theme of his first set is one of his most beautiful utterances . . . Though the pieces are

technically very interesting, the [performing] difficulties of both sets are mostly musical."⁶ William Murdoch, furthermore, sums up the poetic content of the music very fittingly as he notes a "mysterious spirituality pervading these Variations and a sense of subdued calm [reigning] supreme."⁷ The evocative poetic character of the Variations Op. 21 No. 1 can only be confirmed upon hearing them; Brahms's refined variation procedure and stylistic techniques will be substantiated in the following analytical discussion.

The Theme of Op. 21 No. 1

In order to understand Brahms's developmental and formal procedures in the Variations Op. 21 No. 1, a detailed look at the theme and its salient musical qualities is essential. This work is the only set of independent variations composed on an original theme by Brahms. The melody of the theme is of great lyric breadth, and is supported by a very full, harmonic texture rich in motivic interest. No wonder Ganz describes this theme as "one of [Brahms's] most beautiful utterances."⁸

The form of the theme is at once conventional and unique. Typical is the basic periodic construction, that is, two periods of equal length, each of which is repeated. Not so typical, however, is the unbalanced construction of these periods (see Fig. 5). Each consists of two asymmetric phrases, the second of which breaks down

Figure 5 Form of the Theme

$$\begin{array}{ccc}
 \underbrace{2+2} & \underbrace{2+3} & \underbrace{2+2} & \underbrace{2+3} \\
 \underbrace{4+5} & & \underbrace{4+5} & \\
 \underbrace{9} & + & \underbrace{9} &
 \end{array}$$

further into two asymmetric sub-phrases.⁹ The structural grouping of measures here is unusual in that the unbalanced effect is produced by the addition of a measure in the middle of the consequent phrase of each period. Measures 8 and 15 are both melodically sequential imitations of the preceding measures (see Ex. 4), thus prolonging the anticipation of cadential resolution. The asymmetry here produces a sense of romantic longing and a rhythmic thrust that provides much of the character of the theme. Walter Niemann overlooks this important fact when, in referring to the periodic construction of the Op. 21 No. 1 and Op. 21 No. 2 themes, he labels them as "not only among the harshest of Brahms' creations, but also among those in which the constructive and analytical intelligence says the last word."¹⁰ Yet the asymmetry in the Op. 21 No. 1 theme is far from harsh in its effect. Rather, it reflects one of Brahms's predilections--that of rhythmic deviation--which is evident not only in this theme but also in the slow movements of the Piano Sonatas Opp. 2 and 5, the aforementioned theme of Op. 21 No. 2, and countless other works, variations or otherwise, composed after the Op. 21 No. 1 set. Nor is

Example 4 Variationen über ein eigenes Thema Op. 21 No. 1

Theme



Poco larghetto
molto espressivo e legato

poco forte

Ped. sempre

Brahms alone in the use of this technique. Haydn features irregular phrase shapes with masterful results in his Variations in F minor, Hob.XVII/6 as well as in the Variations Hob.XVII/3 and Hob. XVII/5. This technique can also be observed in three of Mozart's sets of variations--K.179, K.354, and K.398--and Beethoven's Twelve Variations on a Russian Dance (from the ballet, Das Waldmädchen).

The melodic contour of the theme is significant not only in its motivic makeup but also in its intrinsic overall shape. Motivically it is composed of two important units--a falling three-note motive which appears throughout, in both its original and inverted forms, and the opening interval of a rising fourth with its counterpart, the rising fifth, at the beginning of the second phrase in measure 5 (see Ex. 4). The falling three-note motive, in both its original and inverted forms, takes precedence and becomes a main unifying factor in the variations to follow. The upward leap of a fourth at the outset of the theme precedes many other upward leaps in the melody, but its structural importance is also observed in the harmony where open intervals of a fourth and fifth are clearly evident. The horizontalization of this opening interval of the theme assumes more prominence in the ensuing variations, as will be observed later.

The overall linear shape of the thematic melody reflects Brahms's ability to exploit motives to the utmost and yet create a refreshingly new sound with every measure. The structure behind the melodic contour of the theme is isolated in Example 5. Note the larger linear importance of the ascending fourth, A - D, altered to a fifth (A - E) in measure 5: the basic line is raised another fourth leading subsequently to the upper octave a in measures 6-7 and the intensification of the rhythmic motive  to  in measure 7. The melody of the first period then falls to the opening A position. The second period follows the same linear design, rising sequentially to the upper octave A at measure 14 and falling to the tonic, D, at measure 18. Within this linear design Brahms intri-

Example 5 Variationen über ein eigenes Thema Op. 21 No. 1

The Linear Design of the Thematic Melody

cately weaves his structural three-note motive, binding successive motives together in a manner that creates a melody out of one germinal motivic shape. Such melodic construction has been described by Schoenberg as the technique of "developing variation."¹¹ In the theme of Op. 21 No. 1 this technique is clearly evident not only in the melody but also in the inner voices as well. Brahms shapes his melody by initiating the falling three-note motive on a higher pitch with each successive phrase in the first period and the opening of

the second period (following the linear design outlined in Ex. 5). He then exploits the inversion of the opening perfect fourth interval to bring the melody back to its original position.

The refined complexity of this theme becomes increasingly apparent when one attempts to divide up the phrases and sub-phrases. Each period is heard as two phrases, but in both cases the phrases are elided, rendering distinct separation of the two units impossible. In the first period, at measure 5, the melodic *a* represents both the end of the first phrase (the final note of the falling three-note motive) and the beginning of the second phrase (the first note of a rising fifth). The two phrases of the second period are combined in the same way at measure 13, and this identical elision technique serves to connect the smaller sub-phrases of measures 1-2, 2-3, and 5-6. Similar overlapping motives connect the sub-phrases at measures 10-11, 11-12, and 15-16 (see Ex. 6, brackets), reflecting what Frisch describes as "a typically Brahmsian [sense of melodic] ambiguity."¹² Brahms interweaves his phrases further by combining his melody and countermelodies in a way referred to by Schenker as the Knüpftechnik (or "linkage technique").¹³ In Op. 21 No. 1, this is apparent at measures 2-3 in the soprano and alto voices, and again in the alto at measures 4-6 (see Ex. 7, brackets).

Highly important in this theme and the variations to follow is the bass and its supporting harmony. Brahms undermines his harmonic progressions and cadences, thus creating a sense of ambiguity not only at the outset but also at points of repose. He achieves this effect in three ways. First, he underlines the opening and closing

Example 6 Variationen über ein eigenes Thema Op. 21 No. 1

Melodic Linking Techniques

Three staves of musical notation in treble clef, key signature of one sharp (F#). The music consists of a single melodic line with various phrasing and linking techniques. The first staff shows a series of eighth and sixteenth notes with slurs and ties. The second staff continues the melody with similar rhythmic patterns and includes a double bar line. The third staff concludes the phrase with a final cadence.

Example 7 Variationen über ein eigenes Thema Op. 21 No. 1

Knüpftechnik Within the Contrapuntal Lines

Thema

Poco larghetto

molto espressivo e legato

Three systems of piano music in treble and bass clefs, key signature of one sharp (F#). The music is a contrapuntal setting of a theme. The first system includes the tempo marking 'Poco larghetto' and the performance instruction 'molto espressivo e legato'. Dynamic markings 'poco' and 'forte' are present. The second system continues the contrapuntal texture. The third system concludes with first and second endings, marked '1.' and '2.' respectively, with dynamic markings 'p' and 'p'.

harmonies of the theme with a pedal point. This pedal, which is present in many of the variations to follow, is one of the single most important elements in the work. This becomes evident in the Finale. Second, as Brandes points out, cadence points are undermined by the melodic and rhythmic sequential nature of the theme.¹⁴ Third, the only time the dominant harmony appears independent of the tonic pedal (m.9--the end of the first period) it moves either to the tonic minor or the relative major of the tonic minor, thereby denying the listener a firm authentic cadence in the tonic major. Victor Luithlen has drawn attention to Brahms's use of more remote sonorities in the harmonies of his variation themes.¹⁵ The Op. 21 No. 1 theme is a prime example of this wider range of modulation: indeed, the shift to D minor and F major in the second period of the theme is harmonically rich. Brahms retains this pattern in all of the variations. It is only in the variations already set in the tonic minor key that the opening of the second period does not create as expressive an effect.

The original theme of Op. 21 No. 1 exemplifies a very characteristic Brahmsian texture--that of full chords and interweaving contrapuntal lines.¹⁶ Differing from all of Brahms's other variation themes, the inner voices further exploit the motivic possibilities inherent in the opening three-note motive (see Ex. 4). Brahms takes advantage of contrary motion whenever possible--a technique that carries on into the variations. The thick chords underlining the melody along with the tempo marking poco larghetto and the expressive marking molto espressivo e legato create a solemn chorale-like character. In fact, one cannot help but notice similarities in style with

the theme of Beethoven's variations in the Finale to Op. 109. This theme, also in triple meter, is strikingly similar in its contrapuntal and motivic relationships, texture (although Brahms, on the whole, is much fuller), harmonic rhythm, and poetic character. Also parallel, and of particular importance, is the rhythmic motion of the two themes: Op. 109, in 3/4 meter, moves continuously in quarter notes whereas Op. 21 No. 1, in 3/8 time, contains a basic motion of eighth notes. As will be seen later, Brahms uses similar techniques to those in Beethoven's Op. 109 in the development of rhythm in the Op. 21 No. 1 variations.

How Unity is Achieved

The theme of Op. 21 No.1, as has already been observed, is in itself a highly integrated unit comprised of many interdependent harmonic, rhythmic, and motivic elements. Brahms sets out in the ensuing variations to exploit these elements to their fullest, although not necessarily in common or traditional ways. While each variation is individual in its presentation, texture, and mood, a strong sense of unity nevertheless pervades the piece. Many musical elements combine to create this effect, but it is possible to isolate several of the most important devices which contribute to the structural unity of the work. These are observed in the overall formal structure of the work, the pairing and grouping of variations toge-

ther, the use of the bass as an essential structural element, and the apotheosis of the most significant musical elements of the work in the Finale.

The overriding structure of Op. 21 No.1 can be seen roughly as a three-part form in which the dynamic climax appears in the middle but the height of emotion is reserved for the end. Brandes argues for a two-part division of the work, citing the fermata placed by Brahms over the final note of Var. 7.¹⁷ The fermata does not serve, however, merely to separate the work into two large sections, but rather to prepare the listener for an abrupt change of atmosphere in the variations to follow. Figure 6 represents a schematic diagram of the work showing the changes of metre, tonality, and expression in the successive variations. It will be seen that the tonality shifts at Var. 8 to the minor, and the tempo and dynamics measurably increase in this and the following variation to bring about an abrupt change of character. This new, agitated spirit, a direct antithesis of the preceding Var. 7, grows in intensity in Var. 9 only to return slowly to a reflective reminiscence of the opening theme at the outset of Var. 11--the Finale. A sense of recapitulation is further enhanced by a return to the opening metre (3/8) and tonality (D major). Thus a more focused look at the overall structure of the work reveals not two but three major sections outlining a long crescendo (Vars. 1-7), dynamic climax (8-10), and dénouement (the Finale--see Fig.6).

How then, as asserted earlier, can Brahms reserve the true emotional climax for the end of the piece? Is not the emotional peak reached at the height of agitation in Var. 9? Perhaps an analogy may

Figure 6 Variationen über ein eigenes Thema Op. 21 No.1

Theme	D; 3/8; poco forte; poco larghetto; molto espressivo e legato
Var.1	D; 3/8; molto piano e legato; teneramente
Var.2	D; 3/8; più moto; piano; espressivo
Var.3	D; 3/8; piano; dolce
Var.4	D; 3/8; piano; dolce
Var.5	D; 3/8; piano; teneramente; molto espressivo; Tempo di Thema; forte (at the end)
Var.6	D; 3/8; piano; legato; più moto
Var.7	D; 2/4; piano; dolce; Andante con moto
Var.8	d; 2/4; poco forte to fortissimo; Allegro non troppo
Var.9	d; 2/4; sempre forte to fortissimo with sforzandi
Var.10	d; 2/4; forte; espressivo agitato; diminuendo at end
Var.11a	D; 3/8; piano dolce; Tempo di Thema, poco più lento
b	piano to crescendo molto and accelerando back to ritard and pianissimo
c	piano; Tempo I; crescendo to forte and diminuendo to pianissimo

be drawn between the dramatic conclusion to this work and Brahms's personal life. Although still young, he had, by this time, already lived through the mental illness and attempted suicide of one of his dearest friends and most respected colleagues, Robert Schumann.

Brahms knew all too well of the pain of reflection on happier times mixed with the necessary acceptance of that which cannot be changed, and these are the very emotions that are embodied in the Finale. The

effect of pain is produced through the exploration of new avenues of chromatic harmony, rhythmic complexity, and motivic isolation; reflection occurs in the Coda as a fragmentary reminiscence of a Schubert song, Der Wanderer, appears; acceptance of the inevitable is revealed in the final measures where the key motives and harmonies of the piece are even further isolated.

Brahms's concern for order and classical formal proportion is observed not only in the overriding structure of Op. 21 No. 1 but even more so in the format of the individual variations, which closely follow the period structure of the theme, with its two nine-measure periods, each repeated verbatim.¹⁸ Brahms has, in fact, been called "der geordnete Romantik" because of his classical formal leanings.¹⁹ Although he is not nearly as strict in his earlier Variations Op. 9 (only four out of the sixteen variations follow the outline of the theme), Karl Geiringer notes the extent and importance of the obviously conscious formal plan of Op. 21 No. 1:

Adherence to the melody of the theme (or even to its bass), which was characteristic of the variations of his first period, is now completely neglected, whereas in this astringently flavored work, he adheres strictly, in all the variations, to the periodic structure and harmonies of the theme.²⁰

Of even more importance, however, is the formal freedom Brahms eventually allows himself in the Finale (Var. 11). This final section opens with a regular nine-bar period, but here Brahms chooses to vary the repetitions of each period (mm. 10-18 and 28-36). Following this double variation is an extended Coda which subdivides into three sections as outlined in Figure 7. Relaxation of strict adherence to

the periodic structure of the theme here allows Brahms greater freedom to mold his material.

Figure 7 Variationen über ein eigenes Thema Op. 21 No.1

Coda of Var. 11

	A		B		C
	a ¹	a ²	b ¹	b ²	c(Codetta)
mm:	<u>37-46</u>	<u>46-57</u>	<u>58-66</u>	<u>66-78</u>	<u>78-89</u>
# of mm:	21		21		12

It has already been shown how strict proportions provide a sense of regularity among the variations, whereas the overall three-part structural outline governs the dynamics, spirit, tonality, and metre of the work. An inherent unity among the individual variations is achieved, on the other hand, through the pairing and grouping of variations, thus providing larger structural units which contribute to the overall design. Related rhythmic and melodic motives, texture, and dynamics serve to link the variations so that one variation appears to evolve naturally from the previous one. Through this procedure, the variations not only relate to the original theme but they also relate intrinsically to each other.

Such a group can be clearly observed in the first four variations, beginning with an actual "variation pair" (Vars. 1 and 2). The first variation is based upon a bass figure which serves both a melodic and harmonic function (see Ex. 8). Clearly this bass figure

outlines the harmony of the theme, yet, as Brandes points out, it is also an "ornamental form of the melodic theme"²¹ (see circled notes in first line of Ex. 8). When the melody appears in measure 4 it parallels the pattern of the bass, but now it points melodically to the three-note falling motive of the theme (see Ex. 8—brackets). An

Example 8 Variationen über ein eigenes Thema Op. 21 No.1

Variation 1

The musical score for Variation 1 is presented in four systems. The first system begins with the tempo and articulation marking *molto piano e legato* and the instruction *col Pedale*. The second system includes the dynamic marking *pp teneramente*. The third system includes the dynamic marking *pp*. The score is written for piano and includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and fingering numbers (1, 2, 3). The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4.

interesting symmetrical question and answer occurs in the phrasing of the second period of Var. 1. Here the prominent melodic notes of the opening bass line rise from an F in measure 10 to a C-sharp in measure 13. The C-sharp is then picked up in the soprano at measure 16 and resolves chromatically down to A (see circled notes, line 3, Ex. 8). Brahms also shifts the metric accent in these final measures with a hemiola.

The spirit of the first variation carries through to the second: Brahms links the first two variations by continuing the bass pattern of Var. 1 through to the first period of Var. 2. Now, however, the bass pattern incorporates the falling three-note motive from the outset (see Ex. 9). Furthermore, the harmony is altered slightly from that of the theme, resulting in a richer, fuller sound: Var. 2 is the only variation not to make use of a pedal point (a tonic pedal underlines the theme at mm. 1-6 and 14-18 while the harmonies of Var. 1 are placed above a dominant pedal in mm. 5-7²² and a tonic pedal in mm. 14-18). The change of harmony at measure 2 in this variation and the resulting absence of a tonic pedal is indeed expressive, and Brahms adds to this effect by composing above the undulating bass pattern a beautifully lyrical melodic line rich in suspensions and grand upward sweeps.

But he is not finished yet. Thematic development continues in the second half of the variation as the three-note motive, now shortened to two notes, permeates the entire bass texture (see Ex. 9). Again the harmony deviates from that of the theme and the first variation--the minor and diminished harmonies above a chromatically

Example 9 Variationen über ein eigenes Thema Op. 21 No.1

Variation 2

The musical score for Variation 2 is presented in three systems. The first system is marked *Più moto* and *p espressivo*. The second system is marked *p cresc.*. The third system is marked *p dolce* and includes first and second endings. The bass line in all systems features a prominent falling eighth-note pattern.

falling bass evoke a feeling of sadness reminiscent of the analogous Baroque affect, as for instance, in the Adagiosissimo of J. S. Bach's "Capriçcio sopra la lontananza del fratello diletissimo," B.W.V. 992.

The tone of resignation concluding Var. 2 is continued in the third variation. These two cannot be considered variation pairs but are nonetheless closely related through motivic similarities. The two-note motive from Var. 2 is now developed contrapuntally and rhythmically. Brahms opens the third variation with a motivic link to

the cadence of Var. 2: the falling fifth (A to D) in measures 17-18 is reinterpreted here in two ways. First, in the soprano, A falls a third to F-sharp, thus integrating the two principal motives of the theme (the falling three-note motive and the opening interval of a fourth). Second, the falling fifth is inverted to a rising fourth--the opening interval of the theme--in the bass (see Ex. 10). Note how the motives are rhythmically displaced as the soprano is tied over the bar line. This adds contrapuntal interest to the variation. Both soprano and bass motives are reduced in measure 5 to the interval of a second, thus recalling the semitone motive of Var. 2, Period 2. Brahms rhythmically displaces the soprano and bass, producing the effect of a dialogue between the two. Furthermore, the shifts of re-

Example 10 Variationen über ein eigenes Thema Op. 21 No. 1

Variation 3

The image shows a musical score for Variation 3 of Brahms' Variations on a Theme by Schumann, Op. 21 No. 1. The score is in G major and 3/4 time, consisting of two systems of piano accompaniment. The first system is marked 'p dolce' and the second system is marked 'dim. sosten. - pf'. The second system includes annotations 'A' and 'G' with arrows pointing to specific notes in the soprano line, and 'F#' at the end of the system.

gister in both treble and bass not only represent a development of the octave displacement of the two-note motive in Var.2, but also add an orchestral colour to the variation as, from measure 5 onward, the effect of dialogue is heard not only between the treble and bass motives but also between the tone colours of the various registers of the piano. The shifting of registers here also draws attention to the linear design of the theme. The reader will recall that twice the theme rises melodically to a'' in the second half of each period. In this variation, the pitch, a'', is exploited through isolation, the melodic line in the second period (A to G) being resolved on F-sharp at the outset of Var. 4.

Syncopation in the soprano combined with the resolution of both motives on the second beat of the measure produces rhythmic ambiguity throughout this variation. Brahms adds to the effect by rhythmically shifting the bass pattern to the preceding upbeat at measures 13-18. These rhythmic configurations are not without precedent. Brahms produces the same effect in Var. 7 of the Op. 9, set and the seeds of this technique are clearly observed in the fourth variation of the first movement of Beethoven's Sonata Op. 26.

The fourth variation of Op. 21 No. 1, although still reflective in character, is animated rhythmically by continuous sixteenth notes, lifting the mood of Var. 3. The two-note motive, initially heard inverted as F-sharp to A, forms the rhythmic and melodic impetus for the entire variation. Brahms combines both the expanded form of the motive (intervals of a third, fifth, or larger) and the contracted form (semi- and whole tones) with a tonic pedal in the bass. Rhyth-

mic diminution of both motives and the repeated Ds of the pedal point add to the forward thrust of the variation, yet the triple metre is still undermined through the use of hemiola (see Ex. 11).

Example 11 Variationen über ein eigenes Thema Op. 21 No. 1

Var. 4, first period

This variation represents a synthesis of preceding musical ideas, for the continuous rhythmic motion of the sixteenth-notes from Vars. 1 and 2 is combined in this section with the fuller chordal texture of Var. 3. In fact, a thickening in texture has been observed throughout all the first four variations—providing yet another unifying feature of the work.

The opening group of four variations is followed by three distinct variation pairs, two of which overlap. Here rhythm, texture, and mood become the main unifying factors. The first pair in this

group, Vars. 5 and 6, represents a rhythmic development of the texture of Var. 4, involving a diminution of the subdivisions of the beat from duple to triple. The fifth variation opens simply with a duple subdivision, but rhythmic complexity soon arises in measure 3 as Brahms superimposes the duple rhythmic subdivision over a triple sub-division in the bass. This rhythmic counterpoint serves harmonic and textural purposes as well, and it also helps to hide the canon at the fifth in contrary motion contained in this variation (see Ex.12).

Example 12 Variationen über ein eigenes Thema Op. 21 No. 1

Var. 5, opening

Tempo di tema
molto dolce

teneramente
p

molto espressivo

legato

sempre col Ped.

Canone in moto contrario

Brahms was especially fond of the canon technique: previous to this set, one finds a canon in the Finale of Op. 21 No. 2 (mm. 73-84) and three canons in Op. 9 (Vars. 8, 14, and 15) as well as countless examples of imitation. Frequently these canons are disguised within

the texture of the piece; here rhythmic complexity combined with a pedal effect on the second note of each bass triplet produces a three-part contrapuntal texture as well as a rhythmic dislocation of the second canonic voice, thus obscuring its relationship with the soprano melody.²³

The period structure of the theme is adapted in this variation to accommodate the imitative entrances of the canon; nevertheless, the total number of measures is thirty-six, as in the theme.²⁴ Not all measures, however, are repeated exactly. Note that the counter-melody in the alto and tenor registers in measures 1-3 outlines the falling three-note motive, whereas its structural counterpart (mm. 10-11) continues in canonic imitation of the soprano.²⁵

In Vars. 5 and 6 Brahms abandons the duple subdivision of the beat that originated in Var. 4 and assigns the triple subdivision to both soprano and bass. The texture, however, is still in three parts--the soprano presents a melody in broken octaves while in the bass, as in Var. 5, the first and third note of each triplet is melodic and the middle note, harmonic (usually the middle note falls on a pedal point, as in mm. 1-5 and 23-27).²⁶

Following Var. 6 is the sparse and ethereal seventh variation. Here Brahms simplifies the texture and rhythm, leaving behind the rhythmic energy of the previous three variations. The bass and treble registers are integrally linked in this variation, and both are important melodically. This can be seen in Example 13 in which notes belonging to the thematic melody are circled. The rhythmic

Example 13 Variationen über ein eigenes Thema Op. 21 No. 1

Var. 7, opening

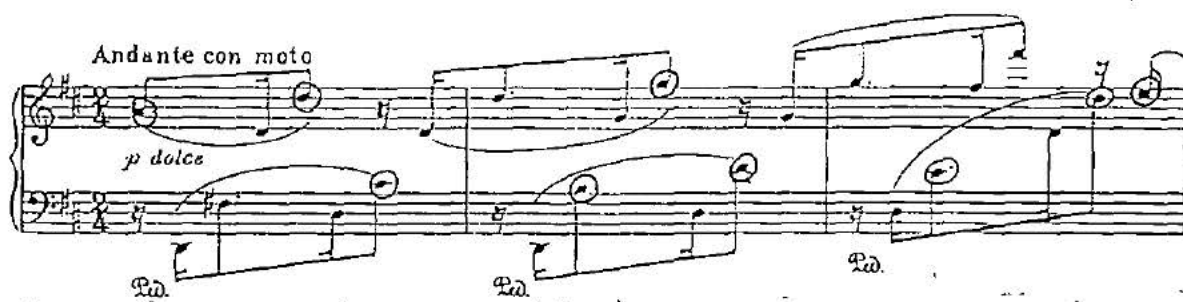


Figure 8

Rhythmic Grouping of Treble and Bass in Vars. 7 & 8



grouping of treble and bass notes is of great structural importance (see Fig. 8). Murdoch singles out this rhythmic grouping as a "style peculiar to Brahms."²⁷ Brahms did, in fact, use it again in his Händel Variations Op. 24, in the climactic prelude to the fugue in Var. 25). Murdoch errs, however, when he states that this particular rhythmic configuration had never been used before: Beethoven uses the identical idea in the second variation of the last movement of Op. 109. This parallel assumes interest here in view of the striking similarities already observed between these two variation sets.

The structural importance of this particular rhythmic grouping in Op. 21 No. 1 becomes clearer when Var. 7 is compared with Var. 8.

In these two variations Brahms creates a unique variation pair—he unites the two through rhythmic parallels, yet he separates them by means of contrasting tempo, texture, dynamics, and character.

Brandes asserts that Vars. 7 and 8 are not a pair, citing the structural fermata placed at the end of Var. 7, the change of tonality from major to minor, and the radical change of character between the two variations.²⁸ One definitely cannot overlook the structural division at the end of Var. 7: not only does the fermata articulate the middle point of the work, but it also prepares the listener for the tempestuous variations to follow. It appears, however, that unity in the work is just as important here as is variety: the rhythmic pairing of Vars. 7 and 8 cannot be denied on any grounds, as it is indeed an important thread in the overall musical fabric. Vars. 7 and 8 are indeed paired, yet at the same time they present a vigorous expressive contrast. While Var. 8 is rhythmically paired with Var. 7, it is also paired with Var. 9 by virtue of their similar dynamics, character, and texture which resembles an orchestral style. In addition, a motivic connection also exists between the two. The two-note motive from Var. 2 is found throughout Var. 8 in both voices, and is emphasized on the downbeat of most measures in the ninth variation. The falling three-note motive is also outlined in the melodies of both of these variations (see Ex. 14, A and B).

The dynamic climax created by Vars. 8 and 9 gradually subsides at the end of the tenth variation. Opening forte, with the additional marking, espressivo agitato, this variation indeed carries on the character of its predecessors. The character begins to change in

Example 14 Variationen über ein eigenes Thema Op. 21 No. 1

A Var. 8, opening

Allegro non troppo

poco forte *cresc.* *ff*

The musical score for the opening of Variation 8 consists of two systems of piano music. The first system is marked 'Allegro non troppo' and begins with a 'poco forte' dynamic. The right hand features a melodic line with eighth-note patterns, while the left hand plays a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes. A 'cresc.' marking is placed above the right hand. The second system continues the piece, marked with a fortissimo 'ff' dynamic. The right hand has a more complex melodic line with slurs, and the left hand maintains the eighth-note accompaniment.

B Var. 9, opening

sempre f *cresc.*

The musical score for the opening of Variation 9 consists of two systems of piano music. The first system is marked with a fortissimo 'f' dynamic and the instruction 'sempre f'. The right hand has a complex, multi-measure melodic line with many slurs, and the left hand plays a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes with some slurs. The second system continues the piece, marked with a 'cresc.' dynamic. The right hand has a melodic line with slurs, and the left hand maintains the eighth-note accompaniment.

the second period, however, and a diminuendo and ritenuto in the final measures bring about a change of character and pace preparing the listener for the Finale which is at once the most profound and the most highly integrated section of the work. Motivically, Var. 10 contains in interesting blend of forms of the three-note motive: it is presented in its inverted form (m. 3) as well as in rhythmic augmentation (mm. 1-3) and diminution (m. 1 et seq.—see Ex. 15).

Example 15 Variationen über ein eigenes Thema Op. 21 No. 1

Var. 10, mm. 1-4



Two principal methods of striving for unity within the variation genre remain to be examined: the importance Brahms places on the bass (be it the actual bass line or the supporting harmony) and the structural significance of the Finale. Both of these techniques can be most concisely observed together. Tracing significant elements of the bass throughout the Variations Op. 21 No. 1 reveals one of the most important unifying and structural elements in the work, and certainly a key to understanding the Finale is found in the tonic pedal point which appears in almost every variation to a significant degree. Presented on the downbeat at both the outset and the conclu-

sion of the theme, the pedal moves to the second beat of the measure in Var. 1 (mm. 5-7 on the dominant and 14-18 on the tonic). This helps accommodate the thinner texture of this variation as the downbeat is reserved for the melody. Missing altogether from Var. 2, the pedal returns on the downbeat of the third variation and again in rhythmic diminution on every beat in Var. 4. In both Vars. 3 and 4 the pedal is removed at specific moments for harmonic interest (mm. 9 and 12-13 in Var. 3 and mm. 8-9 and 12-13 in Var. 4).

No longer as domineering but nonetheless present is the pedal point in Var. 5. It opens in measure 3 on the subdominant (the resolution of the falling three-note motive in m. 2--see Example 12, p. 56) but only lasts two measures and returns at the end of the second period on the dominant (mm. 19-21). The idea of a pedal point on the middle note of a bass triplet is expanded in Var. 6. Here the tonic pedal returns at the outset of the first period and conclusion of the second (as in the theme, Vars. 3 and 4, and to a lesser extent Var. 5). The pedal also appears briefly in the soprano at measure 9. Continuing in Var. 7, it is discarded in the tempestuous eighth variation, in favour of a pedal on the submediant, B-flat (mm. 13-15). Here the purpose of the pedal is strictly harmonic as it creates tension leading up to the climax of the variation (m. 17).

Returning in its structural role in Var. 9 (that is, underlining the harmony at the opening of the first period and the close of the second), the tonic pedal in Var. 9 appears alone, low in the bass register, its fast broken octaves creating a sinister effect. By isolating the pedal here, Brahms draws more attention to it. This

technique continues in Var. 10 as at the outset the pedal is presented in alteration with the soprano melody. But a new and important development occurs here. Brahms decorates the pedal point with upper and lower neighbouring tones, thus creating a melodic fragment that serves a harmonic purpose (see Ex. 15). Furthermore, the emphasis here on the adjacent semitone to the pedal note prepares for the trill in the next variation.

The pedal effect of this fragment does not return at the end of the variation: the harmony leading into the Finale has a stronger dominant pull. The final cadence of Var. 10 is, in fact, elided with the opening of the Finale (Var. 11) where the pedal at once returns in yet another new form--that of a trill. Although this is the first time since Var. 7 that the pedal has fallen on the downbeat (with a brief exception in Var. 9, m. 11) its purpose is not at all rhythmic. Brahms instead uses the trill technique to suspend the tone in a manner similar to Beethoven's variations in both Opp. 109 and 111. The tonic pedal here assumes the same structural position it holds in the theme and many of the variations (from mm. 1-6, 10-15, 23-28, and 32-36), but here, even when the pedal is altered, the trill is maintained. Above the trill Brahms presents two melodic parts in counterpoint--the soprano recalling the melody of Var. 2 and the alto reminding us clearly of the theme. This is the first direct reminiscence of the thematic melody that Brahms has allowed: all previous variations have been based entirely on other thematic elements, whether rhythmic, harmonic, or motivic.

In this sense, Op. 21 No. 1 marks a significant stylistic shift

from Brahms's previous variation sets, Op. 21 No. 2 and Op. 9.

Luithlen notes that in Op. 21 No. 1 the melody of the theme no longer rules over the variations as it previously did.²⁹ This change of perspective is also expressed in a letter to Joseph Joachim in June 1856 (written, therefore, shortly before if not during the composition of Op. 21 No. 1). Brahms comments on a composition by Joachim:

I do like the canon in the variations very much, however particularly the first, second, fourth and last. The last is magnificent! In the third, as well as in the March, I cannot find enough connection with the theme. I often reflect on the Variation form and feel that it must be stronger and more clearly bound. Our predecessors strictly maintained the bass of the theme--their own theme--throughout. In Beethoven, the melody, harmony, and rhythm is beautifully varied. However I must admit sometimes that I feel we, the new composers, probe more deeply into the theme (I cannot find the right expression). We fearfully maintain the melody but do not treat it freely; out of it we create essentially nothing new, but only burden it. But the melody is therefore unrecognizable.³⁰

According to Luithlen, the Variations Op. 21 No. 1 exemplify precisely what Brahms expresses in this letter. Luithlen claims that Brahms eventually recognized in Schumann's variation style all too great a freedom of form. He returned to the styles of the older masters--Bach and Beethoven--yet was nonetheless original in his ideas on the handling of thematic material. While Beethoven adhered more closely to the original theme, especially its rhythmic aspects, Brahms preferred to transform the theme into something new out of the fundamentals of periodic construction and the harmonic basis of the theme. Luithlen writes:

--At the same time as Brahms wrote the letter to Joachim, he realized the underlying ideas of his practice: in the spring of 1856 he produced the Variations on an Original Theme Op.

21 No. 1 in which the handling of variation form is radically different from that in Op. 9.³¹

Luithlen goes on to say that Brahms later recognized that he had gone too far in the endeavour to depart from the thematic melody and that the melody should, in fact, remain a larger part of the formal process of variation.³² For evidence, Luithlen points to the two subsequent variation sets, the slow movement of the String Sextet Op. 18 and the Händel Variations Op. 24. Here the melody continually evolves but nonetheless still retains a clear connection with the theme.

In Op. 21 No. 1 the reference to the thematic melody in Var. 11 is left behind at the repetition of the first period, where, in fact, even the soprano line of the opening melody is further developed. To enrich the texture in this section, Brahms writes a new countermelody in triplet sixteenth-notes—recalling the rhythmic diminution of Vars. 5 and 6 where the same alternating of duple and triple subdivision occurs in the second period and its corresponding repetition. This rhythmic diminution serves two purposes: first, it assimilates important structural elements of previous variations into the Finale; second, it starts up a pattern of rhythmic diminution that continues into the Coda of the Finale.

The Coda is marked by the return of an important motivic figure, heard earlier as the bass pattern of Vars. 1 and 2. This serves to preserve the tonic pedal point as well as to remind the listener of previous thematic developments. Above the bass, Brahms writes a relatively sparse melodic line employing the two most important the-

matic motives--the rising fourth and falling three-note pattern (the opening interval, F-sharp to A, represents a synthesis of both motives; see Ex. 16).

Rhythmic complexity is increased in this section as Brahms retains the triple rhythmic subdivision in the treble (soprano melody and alto accompaniment) and combines it with the bass figure comprised rhythmically of a duple subdivision (therefore recalling the rhythmic counterpoint of Var. 5). At the repetition of this section the triplets are discarded and the bass pattern is reduced to thirty-second notes, with the resulting effect of faster motion. Thereby Brahms builds to an exciting climax which resolves in measure 53. The tonic note, D, once again assumes special importance as a persistent melodic point of repose in measures 53-57 (accented with hemiola in mm. 56-57; see Ex. 16).

In this final section of the Finale the tonic is presented in a kind of veiled allusion to its previous representation as a trill. The two notes of the trill are played together in the alto, and they form the melody in the soprano (a subtle reminder of the two-note motive from Var. 2--see Ex. 17A). Out of this rather static melodic representation of the tonic grows a tender melody taken from Schubert's Der Wanderer (1828; see Ex. 17B). At the repetition of this section the two-note motive is presented in dialogue between soprano and tenor, the inner chords now filled out harmonically. This time it is the expressive two-note motive in the tenor that takes up the Schubert melody while in the soprano, Brahms composes a lyrical countermelody, expands it over a dominant pedal, and brings it to a

Example 16 Variationen über ein eigenes Thema Op. 21 No. 1

Finale, mm. 37-57

The musical score is written for piano and consists of five systems of music. The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 3/4. The piece is marked *molto espressivo* and begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The first system shows the initial melodic and harmonic material. The second system continues the development. The third system features a *cresc. molto* (crescendo molto) marking and an *acceler.* (accelerando) instruction. The fourth system includes a *rit.* (ritardando) marking. The fifth system concludes with a *poco a poco dim.* (poco a poco diminuendo) marking and a final *rit.* and *pp* (pianissimo) dynamic. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and fingering numbers (e.g., 2, 3, 5, 8).

Example 17 Variationen über ein eigenes Thema Op. 21 No. 1

A Finale, mm. 58-66

Tempo I

p

cresc.

cresc.

B Franz Schubert, Der Wanderer

Final passage

66

mir zu-rück: „Dort, wo du nicht bist, dort ist das Glück.“

sp

cadence at measure 78.

The final Codetta reveals the key motives which have provided the thematic basis of the entire work. In the bass we hear once again the pattern of Vars. 1 and 2 above which Brahms only allows two melodic fragments—the rising third which, as has been seen, represents a synthesis of the two germinal thematic motives, and a falling semitone (the two-note motive originating in Var. 2—Ex. 18). The

Example 18 Variationen über ein eigenes Thema Op. 21 No. 1

Finale, Codetta (mm. 78-89)

The image displays three systems of musical notation for the finale codetta of Brahms's Variations on an Original Theme, Op. 21 No. 1. Each system consists of a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The first system (measures 78-82) features a complex texture with many beamed notes in the right hand and a more active bass line. Dynamic markings include *p* and *pdim.*. The second system (measures 83-87) shows a similar texture, with a *dim.* marking. The third system (measures 88-89) concludes with a *pp* marking and a fermata over the final chord. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 3/4.

thematic material is further simplified in measure 82 as the inner chords are replaced with an octave tonic pedal in the soprano. Heard in connection with the bass pattern, the tonic now appears on every beat until the end of the piece. In the final measures a hemiola in the lower parts draws the work to a very quiet close on D, thus confirming the ever-present but never domineering pedal point as the most important unifying and structural element in the work.

Op. 21 No. 1 as it Relates to
Brahms's Development as a Composer

In the course of this discussion of Op. 21 No. 1, several references have been made to similarities between Brahms's variation style and that of Beethoven. The parallels between the two composers' styles are most noticeable in the following techniques: rhythmic diminution and the structural use of a pedal point. The Finale of the variations in Beethoven's Op. 109 uses the technique of successive rhythmic diminutions to increase tension in a grand build-up towards a climáx while at the same time adhering closely to the thematic proportions and melody. The return of the original theme at the culmination of this progression at the end of the Finale makes both a fitting and profound close to the piece. In the Arietta of Op. 111, rhythmic diminution is employed on a still larger scale throughout all the variations, and it plays an even more important role in the

overall unification and structure of the work. Twice in that work Beethoven builds up rhythmic diminutions culminating in a trill which represents at once the fastest rhythmic motion and a state of suspended motion. In compositions such as these two variation movements of Beethoven, the ancient technique of employing "divisions" of the rhythmic texture in succeeding variations is exploited to assume an unprecedented importance and profundity. It is not surprising, therefore, that Brahms should have emulated aspects of this technique in Op. 21 No. 1.

Another similarity between these three works is the use of a pedal point. In Op. 109 Beethoven employs a dominant pedal throughout the final variation. In fact, it is on this pedal point that the rhythmic diminutions take place. The pedal is finally lifted at measure 36--at the return of the original theme. In the Arietta of Op. 111 a dominant pedal is presented in the theme as well as the first variation (mm. 17-21), and while bass pedals are evident in Var. 4, the dominant pedal does not return as an obvious statement of the pedal from the original theme until its dramatic entry as a trill in measure 163. Here it hovers over the final melodic statement of the theme in a manner unmistakably similar to that in Op. 109. In Op. 21 No. 1 Brahms does not attempt to copy Beethoven in his use of trills and larger systems of rhythmic diminution, but nonetheless the similarities between these works are too prominent to be overlooked. That Brahms would choose to present his tonic pedal in the form of a trill in the bass at the moment his melody most closely resembles that of the theme is indeed effective, but not wholly original, for

this moment of the work is unmistakably reminiscent of the corresponding passage in the final variation of Beethoven's Op. 109.

Throughout his career Brahms changes considerably in his treatment of a theme in a variation form, and in this regard the Variations Op. 21 No. 1 can be seen as a work exemplifying a transition in his compositional style. The structurally free Schumannesque forms as emulated in Op. 9 are replaced here with a strict adherence to thematic proportions. Brahms retains this procedure in all of his subsequent variation sets.

The same drastic departure from the original thematic melody as achieved in this set, however, is unique to this composition. This is not to say that he returns to the simpler thematic restatements as seen in several of the Op. 21 No. 2 and Op. 9 variations. In later variations the thematic melody may in fact return but always at a structurally important moment and with a particular formal purpose, as, for instance, occurs in the final variation of the String Sextet Op. 18. The importance of the return of the theme as a climactic point of the Variations Op. 56 will be examined in Chapter III.

One wonders then, why Brahms departs so radically and consistently from the thematic melody in Op. 21 No. 1. The theme is unique in its rich harmony and texture as well as in its rhythmic ambiguity and certainly provides a wealth of musical elements to exploit; the melody need not be one of them. Perhaps more to the point, however, is the observation that Brahms purposely sets out from the start of this work to undermine the melody--by breaking it down at once into moti-

vic fragments and using them in turn as the material for variation. As opposed to the eighteenth century variation style where so often the thematic melody becomes increasingly ornamented and embellished as the piece progresses, in this work Brahms does the opposite and the effect is profound. By literally taking his theme apart, Brahms uses the variations to explore and reexamine the material, extracting from it the barest essentials comprising the theme (in this case the most important thematic motives and the tonic pedal point) and ultimately presenting these essentials as the paramount elements of the piece. Given these parameters, there is no compelling technical or musical need for the theme to return once this procedure has taken place.

CHAPTER II

NOTES

¹A. C. Brandes, "The Solo Variations of Johannes Brahms," (D. M. A. dissertation, Boston University, 1967), p. 122.

²Joseph Weiss, "Johannes Brahms; The Interpretation of his Music," The Century Library of Music, Vol. VIII ed., I. J. Paderewski (New York: The Century Co., 1911), pp. 233-53, cited in A. C. Brandes, "The Solo Variations," p. 122.

³Peter Latham, Brahms (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1948), pp. 113-114.

⁴Ernest Hutcheson, The Literature of the Piano: a Guide for Amateur and Student, 3rd ed. revised and brought up to date by Rudolph Ganz (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), p. 259.

⁵Robert Haven Schauffler, The Unknown Brahms: his Life, Character and Works; Based on New Material (New York: Crown Publishers, 1933), p. 362.

⁶Hutcheson, The Literature of the Piano, p. 259.

⁷William Murdoch, Brahms with an Analytical Study of the Complete Pianoforte Works (London: Rich and Cowen, 1933), p. 230.

⁸Hutcheson, The Literature of the Piano, p. 259. Also, Schauffler considers the theme to be one of the highest points in the entire work. (His charge that the theme and fourth variation are the only memorable moments in the piece is, however, not substantiated). Schauffler, The Unknown Brahms, p. 361.

⁹This technique is not new. Judith L. Schwarz outlines it as one of the methods Haydn uses to create irregular phrases in his early symphonies. She states, "Periodicity based on odd multiples of a subordinate unit appears to have been a strong alternative to regular periodicity at the time." See Judith L. Schwarz, "Thematic Asymmetry in First Movements of Haydn's Early Symphonies," Haydn Studies: Proceedings of the International Haydn Conference, Washington D. C., (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), p. 503.

¹⁰Walter Niemann, in Brahms, trans. Catherine Alison Phillips (New York: Tudor Publishing Co., 1937), p. 232, writes:

This is already revealed even in the unusual scheme of the periods forming the theme. That of the 'original theme' consists of 9, instead of 8 bars, and that of the Hungarian theme is a combination of 3/4 and 4/4 time, of four- and five-bar periods.

¹¹In his dissertation on "Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation," Walter Frisch describes techniques by which Brahms devises such highly integrated and well developed themes. Although Frisch is concerned only with themes from genres other than variation form, the techniques he describes are easily observed in the original theme of Op. 21 No. 1. Frisch defines the concept of developing variation, as Schoenberg originally titles it, as the "continuation of a theme by continuous modification of one or more features (intervals, rhythms) of a basic idea, according to certain recognized procedures, such as inversion, fragmentation, extension and displacement." Such techniques are, of course, evident not only in the melody of the Op. 21 No. 1 theme but also in the inner voices as well (see Exs. 1 & 2). See Arnold Schoenberg, Letters, ed. Erwin Stein, trans. E. Wilkins and E. Kaiser (New York, 1965), pp. 240-42, cited by Walter Frisch, "Brahms Sonata Structures and the Principle of Developing Variation," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 1981), p. 1. See also Frisch, "Brahms Sonata Structures," p. 13.

¹²Ibid., p. 21.

¹³According to Oswald Jonas, this technique--a particular favorite of Brahms--occurs when "a new phrase takes as its initial idea the end of the immediately preceding one and then continues independently. See Oswald Jonas, Introduction to the Theory of Heinrich Schenker: the Nature of the Musical Work of Art, trans. and ed. John Rothgeb (New York: Longman, 1982), p. 7.

¹⁴Brandes, "The Solo Variations," p. 127.

¹⁵Victor Luithlen, "Studien zu Brahms Werke in Variationsform," Studien zur Musikwissenschaft 14 (1927):294.

¹⁶Examples of this texture are found in works such as the Klavierstücke Op. 118.

¹⁷Brandes, "The Solo Variations," p. 154. See also discussion, p. 59.

¹⁸(A minor exception occurs in Var. 8 with an added measure (m.15) which, according to Brandes, serves to extend the B^b pedal point from measure 14 to the arrival of the dominant on the second beat of measure 16.) Ibid., p. 156.

¹⁹Gerhard Puchelt, Variationen für Klavier im 19. Jahrhundert: Blüte und Verfall einer Kunstform (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1973), p. 124.

²⁰Karl Geiringer, Brahms: his Life and Work (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 213.

²¹Brandes, "The Solo Variations," p. 130.

²²Brandes curiously overlooks this in his analysis. Ibid., p. 132.

²³Ibid., p. 144. (Brandes' comment on this passage that "the function of the middle note of each triplet of the left hand is to preserve a continuous motion" obviously misses the point.)

²⁴Brandes' calculations are incorrect when he states that two extra measures are added to this variation in order to adjust to the canonic treatment employed. Ibid., p. 144.

²⁵An error appears in the printing of this piece in the Complete Edition of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde. The first ending of the second period should begin at measure 21, therefore on the repeat of the period, the performer should go from measure 20 to the second ending.

²⁶Again one must disagree with Brandes in his assertion that the texture of Variation 6 is "exclusively two-part". Ibid., p. 147.

²⁷Murdoch, Brahms, p. 229.

²⁸Brandes, "The Solo Variations," p. 155.

²⁹Brahms sieht deutlich die Mängel seiner früheren Variationenwerke, in denen die Melodie des Themas über alles herrscht. Luithlen, "Studien zu Johannes Brahms," p. 314.

³⁰In den Variationen gefällt mir auch der Kanon sehr. Hauptsächlich aber die 1te Var., die 2te, 4te und die letzte. Die letzte ist prächtig!

Bei der 3ten kann ich nicht genug Beziehung zum Thema finden, auch beim Marsch nicht.

Ich mache manchmal Betrachtungen über die Variationenform und finde, sie müssten strenger, reiner gehalten werden.

Die Alten behielten durchweg den Bass des Themas, ihr eigentliches Thema, streng bei.

Bei Beethoven ist die Melodie, Harmonie und der Rhythmus so schön variiert.

Ich muss aber manchmal finden, dass Neuere (wir beide!) mehr (ich weiss nicht rechte Ausdrücke) über das Thema wühlen. Wir

behalten alle die Melodie ängstlich bei, aber behandeln sie nicht frei, schaffen eigentlich nicht Neues daraus, sondern beladen sie nur. Aber die Melodie ist deshalb gar nicht zu erkennen.

From Max Kalbeck, ed., Johannes Brahms Briefwechsel V, (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1974), p. 150.

³¹--Gerade zu der Zeit, als Brahms jenen Brief an Joachim schrieb, setzte er die diesem zugrundeliegenden Gedanken in die Praxis um: im Frühjahr 1856 entstanden die "Variationen über ein eigenes Thema" op. 21/1, in denen die Behandlung der Variationenform eine durchgreifend andere ist als im op. 9. Luithlen, "Studien zur Johannes Brahms," p. 315.

³²Ibid.

CHAPTER III

Variationen über ein Thema von Joseph Haydn Op. 56b

"Chorale St. Antoni"

In 1872 Brahms accepted the position of artistic director of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna and for the next three years conducted its orchestral and choral concerts. This position brought about invaluable experiences for Brahms, and out of it he developed a close circle of friends which, according to Donald McCorkle, "became an extraordinary aggregate of professional musicians, musical and literary scholars, physicians, writers and critics who empathized with the man and his music."¹

It was within this professional and social milieu that the Variationen über ein Thema von Joseph Haydn Op. 56 were composed. Originally written for two pianos (four-hands), Brahms later rewrote the piece for orchestra, publishing it a year later in 1874². Although the two-piano version was not performed until 1882, the orchestral version was first performed in Vienna on Nov. 2, 1873, and was received with overwhelming acclaim. It is still acclaimed today—not only by audiences but also by musical scholars: the Haydn Variations are considered among the foremost monuments of Brahms's art and of the nineteenth century in general.

A decade had elapsed since Brahms had written an independent set of variations. In those ten years, he composed many significant works: the F minor Quintet Op. 34, the Cello Sonata Op. 38, the Horn Trio Op. 40, and the cantata Rinaldo Op. 50, as well as many other vocal and instrumental pieces, yet the only intervening work containing variations is the String Sextet Op. 36, composed in 1864-65. It is interesting that after having abandoned the genre of the independent variation set for ten years, Brahms returned to the genre once again to produce one of his most impressive and important works. Luithlen has noted that the compositional technique in these variations reflects the views Brahms had formed already by 1856 as manifest in his letter to Joachim (q.v., p. 64) and which are further attested to in his letter to Schubring thirteen years later (q.v., p. 23)³ His insistence on the importance of retaining a clear bass and composing anew above it is certainly evidenced in the Variations Op. 56. Although the original bass line is not copied verbatim in any of the variations, the structural essence of the bass part--the supporting harmonies, as well as its characteristic motives--supply the framework for every variation.

One notices in the Haydn Variations a more conservative approach to the treatment of the thematic melody than can be seen in Op. 21 No. 1. No longer abandoned in its entirety, the melody or perhaps, more appropriately, the ghost of the melody, hovers over every variation, sometimes clearly discernible (as in Var. 6), sometimes cleverly hidden (as in Var. 5).

Unity among the variations is achieved through the linking of motives and rhythmic configurations. Also a specific order to the presentation of the variations serves to outline an overriding structure as well as govern the emotional development of the piece.

Clearly one of the most striking characteristics of this work is the economy of material used. Whether he is dealing with an extended melody (which through constant transformation influences not one but several variations), or a short motivic fragment (which through ingenious contrapuntal writing develops into an entire variation only to be expanded further in subsequent variations), Brahms is frugal with his material but generous in his development of it.

As in the Op. 21 No. 1 Variations, the culminating point of the work is the Finale. Here, however, the purpose of the final variation is not one of dissection but rather one of accumulation. The theme is not merely broken down into its essential motives but instead is built up to a new height of affirmation. One can clearly understand how Brahms's contemporary, Hermann Kretzschmar, could write in 1884, "The art form of variation is singularly indebted to Brahms . . . one cannot overstress how much [he] has done for the spiritual growth of the form."⁴

The Theme of Op. 56

The true origin of the theme for this set of variations is unknown. Brahms first came into contact with it when his friend, C. F. Pohl, a noted Haydn scholar of the time, gave him two transcriptions of works attributed to Haydn, one of which (the source of the theme for this work) was a wind divertimento titled "Chorale St. Antoni." Modern scholarship has disputed both the authorship and compositional date of this work, and it is highly unlikely that the divertimento was, in fact, written by Haydn at all.⁵ (Karl Geiringer suggests that the theme "was probably based on an old Burgenland pilgrims' chant".)⁶ The title, Variationen über ein Thema von Joseph Haydn, is Brahms's own, and, since the question of authorship has not conclusively been settled,⁷ the abbreviated title, Haydn Variations, will be used in the following discussion.

Upon hearing the "Chorale St. Antoni" theme, one is at first struck by its relative simplicity—especially when comparing it to the theme of Op. 21 No. 1. The texture is much thinner; the counterpoint, less complex; and the harmony, more straightforward. Brahms presents the theme in its eighteenth-century style, and his orchestration of the orchestral version closely resembles that of the original divertimento,⁸ but this style is soon left behind as Brahms, beginning with the first variation, imbues the music with his own style.

Structurally the theme follows a three-part song form. The phrases are both symmetrical and asymmetrical, as in Op. 21 No. 1,

but here they are presented side by side in a balanced fashion, and therefore do not obscure the metre or hide the cadences. An analysis of the phrasing structure of the theme is shown in Figure 9. In contrast to Op. 21 No. 1, the second period of the Op. 56 theme is twice the length of the first and recalls the second phrase of the first period (A^2 represents only a slight modification of A^1). An analysis of the phrasing structure of the theme is shown in Figure 9.

Figure 9 Variationen über ein Thema von Joseph Haydn Op. 56

		Theme									
		A	A^1	B	B^1	A^2	+	Codetta			
# of mm:		5	+	5	4	+	4	+	5	+	7
		<u> </u>		<u> </u>		<u> </u>		<u> </u>		<u> </u>	
		(3+2)		(3+2)		(3+2)		Im.elided		(2+2+3)	
Total # of mm:		10				19					

The melody of the "Chorale St. Antoni" consists mostly of step-wise motion within a very narrow intervallic compass--A lies within the compass of a tritone and A^1 ---a perfect fourth). Phrase B, although contrasting with A structurally and harmonically, expands the melodic compass only slightly (up to a major sixth) and is closely related to A in its motivic and rhythmic construction.

The melodically and rhythmically outlined motive upon which the theme is based is a small three-note cell which returns in interesting guises in the variations (see Ex. 19--bracket a). The theme

Example 19 Variationen über ein Thema von Joseph Haydn Op. 56b

Theme, mm. 1-5, melody

Chorale St. Antoni
Andante

Pianoforte I

consists of the motive in its original form, rhythmically augmented (bracket b) as well as melodically expanded (c) and altered (d).

The development of rhythm plays an extremely important role in the Op. 56 variations, but one would not expect that upon only hearing the theme. Its straightforward duple metre is not interrupted or obscured in any way, the most rhythmically complex figure of the theme being the opening dotted eighth- and sixteenth-notes (m. 1). The stately andante tempo and basic quarter-note motion of the Chorale sets the theme clearly apart from the variations to follow.

Another element presented inconspicuously in the theme yet widely employed and developed in the variations is the bass line with its supporting harmony. The opening bass figure (see Ex. 20) recurs throughout the work in various guises as does the tonic pedal point in the closing measures (mm. 23-29). Leon Stein points to the harmony of measures 11-14 (the opening of the second period) as being even more important than the melody as it, rather than the melody, is used consistently as the basis for the variation in the variations to follow (see Ex. 21).⁹

Example 20 Variationen über ein Thema von Joseph Haydn Op. 56b

Theme, mm. 1-5

Chorale St. Antoni
Andante

Pianoforte I

Andante

Pianoforte II

Example 21 Variationen über ein Thema von Joseph Haydn Op. 56b

Theme, mm. 11-14

I

II

How Unity is Achieved

According to Herbert Antcliffe, "von Bulow said of the 'St. Anthony' variations, [that] the theme [has] not much more relation to the variations than a title of a book to its text."¹⁰ Von Bulow's comment is, of course, unjustified. The theme with its harmonic outline as well as melodic and rhythmic motives provides not only the impetus for the individual variations but also the source of strong unifying elements for the entire work. Unlike Op. 21 No. 1, most of these variations contain quite audible references to the thematic melody, which, in fact, returns in its original form at the climax of the Finale.

There is more to the structural unity of this piece, however, than just the continued use throughout of thematic material drawn from the Chorale. As in Op. 21 No. 1, an overriding formal structure governs the ordering and presentation of the individual variations. In the Op. 56 variations two forms can be discerned, involving the suggestion of a four-movement symphonic plan as well as, more clearly, that of a two-part arch form.

Kalbeck describes the Haydn Variations as a "Symphony in Variations," pointing to Vars. 5 and 6 as standing for a Scherzo and 7 as corresponding to a "mixed type of slow movement."¹¹ Following this train of thought, one could consider the eighth variation an Intermezzo leading to the Finale while the theme and Vars. 1-4 would comprise an extended first movement. Indeed, the return of the tempo and character of the theme in Var. 3 could be considered recapitula-

tory, but nevertheless the analogy is not without its flaws. (How, for example, does Var. 4 fit in?) Perhaps Brahms had this concept in the back of his mind, but it does not appear to have been a major concern for him. If he had intended a four-movement symphonic form condensed into one piece (as in the compelling Finale of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony) Brahms would have certainly made his intent clearer.

The formal role of the fifth and sixth variations cannot be overlooked. They certainly stand out from the other variations in their character as well as in their relationship to the theme. Rather than fitting in as the second movement of a four-movement plan, they fall more neatly into the mid-point of an arch form governing the overall order and presentation of the variations. The arch form is reflected not merely in specific technical features of the music (i.e., motivic, rhythmic, or other such compositional techniques) but more in its overall character. Vars. 5 and 6 serve as a particularly expressive midpoint for the arch as they present a dynamic excitement and impetuosity peculiar to this section of the piece. The present analysis of the overall form, therefore, will begin with these variations and work outwards, symmetrically.

Unlike the practice in Op. 21 No. 1, or for that matter, almost all of Brahms's sets of variations, a clear pairing of variations occurs only once in this piece--between these two middle variations, Nos. 5 and 6. Var. 5 is based on the opening thematic motive in inversion (see Ex. 31, p. 98). Played poco presto, this toccata-like variation exploits rhythmic ambiguity to the utmost (as in mm. 15-16, 17-20 and similar passages), creating an exceedingly lively character

continued in full force through Var. 6. The inverted thematic motive from Var. 5 continues as the motivic basis for the sixth variation, though the original thematic melody is still clearly in evidence. The excitement of Var. 5 is further enhanced through rhythmic diminution (the pulse, subdivided into three in Var. 5, is now subdivided into four). Var. 6 is not as complex rhythmically as its predecessor but does contain a marked intensification in its textural density.

Framing the paired Vars. 5 and 6 are the two slowest variations in the work, No. 4, a tragic movement in the tonic minor, and No. 7, the graceful Siciliano-like variation (recalling No. 10 of J. S. Bach's Christmas Oratorio)¹². The variations preceding and following these pieces also bear comparison, furthermore; Vars. 3 and 8, despite their different characters, share a similarity in their melodic construction. Both have long, winding melodies almost akin to Wagnerian "endless melody," especially Var. 3.

The eighth variation leads directly into the Finale whose stately fugal opening culminates in a grand chordal fanfare at measure 21. The excitement of the fanfare as well as the changes of register in the parts find a direct counterpart in the second variation—thus further supporting the arch form. Moreover, in the orchestral version, the contrasting piano and forte sections in Var. 2 are emphasized through the orchestration, as is the dialogue effect between the registers in the Finale fanfare.

Enveloping these two sections are Var. 1 with its rhythmic counterpoint of two against three (the first rhythmically complex section of the work) and its counterpart, the dolce section of the

Finale (mm. 41-65) which is rhythmically the most complicated part of the piece. In both sections in the orchestral version, the rhythmic counterpoint begins in the strings in the first phrase and move to contrasting tonal colours (strings and winds) in the second (compare Var. 1, mm. 1-5 and 6-10 with the Finale, mm. 41-45 and 46-50 et. seq.).

Completing the arch, of course, is the theme. Presented in its original eighteenth century style at the outset, it returns to conclude the Finale in full force and with a dynamic purpose—for now the theme is emphatically reasserted as the controlling factor of both the individual variations and the structure of the complete set.

The effect of the arch form in this piece is indeed striking. It reflects, perhaps, Brahms's assimilation of the Baroque preference for symmetrical design, as embodied in works such as J. S. Bach's Goldberg Variations—a piece Brahms knew intimately.¹³

Coexistent with this structure, however, is a two-part design similar to that observed in Op. 21 No. 2 and Op. 9 (see, for example, Figure 3, p. 19). In Op. 56 Brahms pairs certain variations with a structural counterpart in the second half of the work. Figure 10 below shows the two-part symmetry of the work. Note the grouping of similar tonalities as well as the grouping of the double variations (that is, variations with written out repetitions) with the three tonal areas of the Finale (A, mm. 1-65; B, 66-80; C, 81-111).

Figure 10 Variationen über ein Thema von Joseph Haydn Op. 56

Formal Structure Based on Pairing of Variations in Each Half

Theme 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Finale: A B C

┌──────────────────────────────────┐

Theme--stately, processional, B-flat, 2/4

Var 6--March-like, B-flat, 2/4

┌──────────────────────────────────┐

1--B-flat, 2/4 with triple subdivision

7--B-flat, 6/8

┌──────────────────────────────────┐

2--b-flat minor

8--b-flat minor

┌──────────────────────────────────┐

3--B-flat, 2/4, double variation

A--B-flat, 2/4

┌──────────────────────────────────┐

4--b-flat minor, double variation

B--b-flat minor

┌──────────────────────────────────┐

5--B-flat, double variation, scherzando

C--B-flat, recapitulation of theme,
dynamic climax

The variations in Op. 56 relate not only to other structural counterparts in a multiple two-part arch form, but they also relate intrinsically to each other as they proceed in succession. Although Brahms minimizes overt pairing of variations in Op. 56, he still uses highly sophisticated methods of linking them together. Var. 1, for example, opens with a repetition of the bass pedal in the final measures of the theme--the Schenkarian Knüpftechnik on a larger structural level (see Ex. 22--A and B). Moreover, the final measures of Var. 1 foreshadow the opening of the second variation. The leaps of

Example 22 Variationen über ein Thema von Joseph Haydn Op. 56b

A Conclusion of Theme, mm. 27-29

B Opening of Var. 1, mm. 1-3

a perfect fifth in the bass in Var. 1 (second piano; strings in the orchestral version) are immediately reinterpreted as octave leaps at the outset of Var. 2. An even more important motivic connection, however, exists in the melodies of these two variations. The opening melody of Var. 1 (mm. 1-5) is thematically derived, yet it undergoes several modifications as the section progresses. Immediately after appearing as a melody, it is reinterpreted as a bass line (mm. 6-10)

and returns in an harmonically altered form in the second period (mm. 21-24). So far this melody has been confined to the second piano (strings and bassoons in the orchestral version), but the composer now fragments it and moves it into the upper region of the first piano for the final codetta (mm. 35-37; flutes and clarinets).

In order to link Vars. 1 and 2 together, Brahms brings back the original form of this melodic motive in the bass of the second piano (or lower strings—Var. 2, mm. 1-2), expanding it into yet another melody which is played against itself in contrary motion (see Ex. 23B). The relationship between these two variations goes still deeper. Var. 1, opening with the same quarter-note movement as the theme, immediately adds rhythmic complication with a combination of duple and triple metric subdivisions (see Ex. 22B). This rhythmic

Example 23 Variationen über ein Thema von Joseph Haydn Op. 56b

A Conclusion of Var. 1, mm. 35-39

tive outlines a diminished seventh and German sixth chord respectively—leaving the memory of its original form all but forgotten. Yet Brahms brings it back immediately at the outset of Var. 3. Here it is combined with the original bass of the theme as well (m. 3), thereby providing structural coherence not only with the preceding variations but also with the theme (see Ex. 24). This bass melody

Example 24 Variationen über ein Thema von Joseph Haydn Op. 56b

Var. 3, mm. 1-5

appears throughout the entire third variation as an exquisite contrary motion counterpoint to the soprano melody.

Note that at the outset of Var. 3 a descending scale pattern is prefixed to the bass, thus altering its original shape slightly. This descending scale is isolated and developed in the second period. First presented in a dialogue fashion between parts (mm. 21-24), it moves up to the treble in the first piano (oboe) at measure 25. Brahms now weaves this passage directly into the repetition of the opening A¹ section, where it is heard in the second piano (or

strings) in three parallel octaves (see Ex. 25). The development of this motive is by no means finished here. Two melodic developments of it bring the second period to a close on a minor plagal cadence which prepares the listener for the change of mode to minor in Var. 4 (see Ex. 26). Then, just as in the linking of Vars. 2 and 3, Brahms brings back the original descending scale motive in the new B-flat minor tonality at the outset of Var. 4 (see Ex. 27). The linking

Example 25 Variationen über ein Thema von Joseph Haydn Op. 56

Var. 3, mm. 21-33

The musical score for Example 25, Variation 3, measures 21-33, is presented in three systems. Each system consists of a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The key signature is two flats (B-flat major), and the time signature is 3/4. The first system (measures 21-26) features a descending scale motive in the right hand, with a first ending bracket over the final two measures. The second system (measures 27-32) continues the development of the scale motive, with a first ending bracket and a double bar line. The third system (measures 33-33) concludes the passage with a first ending bracket and a double bar line.

Example 26 Variationen über ein Thema von Joseph Haydn Op. 56

Var. 3, mm.54-58

The musical score for Example 26, Variation 3, measures 54-58, is presented in two systems. System I (labeled 'I') consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble staff contains a melodic line with a 'rit. dim.' marking above it. The bass staff contains a supporting line. System II (labeled 'II') also consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble staff begins with a 'p' marking and contains a melodic line with a 'rit. dim.' marking above it. The bass staff contains a supporting line. The music is in a minor key and features a stepwise motive.

Example 27 Variationen über ein Thema von Joseph Haydn Op. 56

Var. 4, mm. 1-4

The musical score for Example 27, Variation 4, measures 1-4, is presented in two systems. System I (labeled 'I') consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble staff is marked 'Andante dolce e semplice' and 'p'. The bass staff contains a supporting line. System II (labeled 'II') also consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble staff is marked 'Andante' and 'p dolce'. The bass staff contains a supporting line. The music is in a minor key and features a stepwise motive.

technique here is perhaps not as audibly apparent as in the previous examples, for Brahms is saving a more obvious reference to Var. 3 for the second half of the variation. Here, the stepwise motive appears ascending and descending in a dialogue fashion between the voices, and it is even more emphasized at the end of the second period as

Brahms isolates it in an added measure (mm. 39 and 59). The effect of hearing this repeated descending motive at the end of the variation subtly recalls the same effect presented at the end of Var. 3 (compare Exs. 26 and 28). In both cases the descending pattern, repeated for emphasis, falls to the mediant (in Var. 4 it falls to the mediant of the relative major).

Example 28 Variationen über ein Thema von Joseph Haydn Op. 56

Var. 4, mm. 57-60

Var. 4 marks the end of a major section leading up to the middle of the work. This opening group of variations is linked together in two ways. First, as already outlined, a melody derived from the theme appears in all variations and undergoes a gradual metamorphosis in each¹⁴ (see Ex. 29). At the same time, these first four variations, unlike the variations to follow, also exploit the melodic shape of the original theme (see Ex. 30). In the orchestral version, the melodies of the opening variations, with the exception of Var. 1 (the melody of which least resembles the theme), always appear in the

Example 29 Variationen über ein Thema von Joseph Haydn Op. 56

Vars. 1-4, Melodic Metamorphosis

Var. 1

Andante con moto

Var. 2

Var. 3

Con moto

Var. 4

Andante

Example 30 Variationen über ein Thema von Joseph Haydn Op. 56

Vars. 1-4, Melodic Relationship with the Theme

Var. 1

Andante con moto

Var. 2

Vivace

Var. 3
Con moto
p dolce e legato

Var. 4
Andante
dolce e semplice
p

winds at the outset of the variation, providing a timbral reminder of the thematic melody--also presented in the winds. (In Var. 1 the melody is moved to the winds in the repetition of the period to emphasize further the rhythmic counterpoint.)

The variations in the second half of Op. 56 no longer follow this pattern; they are based instead on the inversion of the opening motive from the theme (see Ex. 31). This larger formal principle, together with the absence of any overt thematic linking technique between the middle variation pair and the surrounding variations (Nos. 4 and 7) further supports the arch-like structure of the work as a whole.

Example 31 Variationen über ein Thema von Joseph Haydn Op. 56

Vars. 5-8, The Inverted Thematic Motive

Var. 5
Poco presto
sfz p sfz sfz

Var. 6



Var. 7



Var. 8



Although Brahms sets Var. 7 apart from the preceding variation pair with a radical change of character, he still provides a subtle connection between the two. The opening mordent on F follows the motivic pattern of Vars. 5 and 6 (the inversion of the thematic motive), and the descending broken chords in the melody answered in contrary motion in the bass recall the simultaneous presentation of contrary motion broken chords in Var. 6 (mm. 12, 14, 24, and 26).

In Var. 8 there is little evidence of such connecting devices with either the previous variation or the Finale. The opening inverted motive is still present but understated, and a slight reference to the metric ambiguity of the close of Var. 7 occurs in the contrary motion canon at measures 21-29. (In both cases the ambiguity is created by hemiola.) Brahms clearly sets this variation apart from its musical surroundings, and his purpose in doing so is doubtlessly related to the emotional character of the piece. Stein's observation that "the technique is but the medium for emotion"¹⁵

could be most appropriately applied to this variation. The serene beauty of Var. 7 and the majesty as well as inner profundity of the Finale would lose some of their novel appeal if presented side by side. Brahms uses the contrasting character and dark minor tonality of Var. 8 as a buffer between them. Opening in the second piano (or lower strings) on the identical notes that closed Var. 7, this variation appears to grow out of the final cadence in an almost sinister fashion. By abruptly altering moods through the intricate contrapuntal weaving of lines, Brahms deepens the poetic effect of Var. 8. The stage is now aptly set for the Finale.

Stein notes yet another significant purpose in the placement and style of Var. 8, which represents for him the intellectual climax of the entire work:

Technically the eighth is the most ingenious of the variations before the Finale, and in this sense, it represents a kind of climax, but certainly one which escapes most listeners. It is as though the composer, realizing that the ultimate dynamic climax must come at the very end of the work, and must not be anticipated here, achieved a kind of culmination to satisfy at least himself; that culmination is an intellectual one, one that in no way disturbs the necessary dynamic plan of the whole, and yet brings the series before the Finale to a point of repose and a height of achievement at the same time.¹⁶

It should also be noted that the eighth variation caused Brahms considerable difficulty in its composition. The few surviving sketches of Op. 56 show Vars. 5 and 8 (the two furthest removed from the theme) to have been the most problematic in composition as they contain the most revisions. One notes, for example, that the sketches for Var. 8 are in 3/8 metre, but Brahms, not wanting it to be played

too quickly, changed the metre in the fair copy to 3/4.¹⁷ In comparing the two-piano and orchestral versions of the work, one notes further that one of the greatest deviations between the two occurs in Var. 8. In the two-piano version the final measure leading to the repetition of the first period (m. 10) continues melodically through the double bar line, eliding the two phrases. Brahms changes this in the orchestral setting by bringing the phrase to an end on the tonic in measure 9. It is apparent from an early sketch of this variation (drafted between the sketches of Vars. 3 and 4) that the cadence on the tonic in measure 9 was Brahms's original idea for the two-piano version as well. He subsequently altered the elided phrases in a later sketch, and although the elision was kept in the two-piano score, he reverted to the earlier cadence for the orchestral setting.¹⁸

In a letter to Schubring from 1869, Brahms fervently reiterated his conviction, as originally set forth in 1856, that the bass comprised the structural foundation of the variation procedure (see letters, pp.23 and 64 respectively). This claim is certainly substantiated in the Haydn Variations, especially in the five-measure *passacaglia* bass line of the Finale.

The repetitions of this ground bass, whose roots lie in the melody of the Chorale, alter the formal presentation of the Finale. Instead of continuing the periodic structure of the theme, as in Op. 21 No. 1, Brahms restates the ground bass seventeen times to present a series of short variations which are combined in turn into a larger

structural divisions. On only one other occasion does Brahms so free himself from the periodic structure of the theme in the Finale--in the fugue following Var. 25 of the Händel Variations Op. 24. It is interesting to note that in both of these cases, the structure of the Finale follows a formal procedure commonly associated with the Baroque period. In the variation movement closing the Fourth Symphony, a structural plan closely analogous to the Finale of the Haydn Variations is employed yet again, and the affinity with Baroque techniques is perhaps even more obvious in that work.

The bass and supporting harmonies of the theme provide structural continuity not only in the Finale but also in the eight preceding variations. Brahms's economy with his use of musical materials is clearly shown in his use of the bass for both harmonic and motivic delineation. Rarely does the composer depart from the basic harmony of the theme, although it is masterfully disguised in places through the use of passing and neighbouring tones (see Vars. 3, 5, 7, second period, and 8).¹⁹ Minor harmonic substitutions such as the sequence of diminished-seventh chords in Var. 2 (mm. 22-24) or the German sixth chord in the same variation (m. 36) add tone colour but in no way weaken the solidity of the overall tonal design.

The bass, then, fits convincingly into this rigidly structured scheme. It has already been shown how motivic linking devices contribute to the texture and coherence of the work, such as, for instance, the tonic pedal from the close of the theme which is carried into Var. 1, in exact rhythmic imitation, or the transplantation of melodic motives into the bass and vice versa. Brahms also shows an

acute sense of timbral balance as he alternates not only the various registers on the piano but also, in a subtle way, the tone colour between the two pianos themselves. Indeed, the shift of the opening bass melody in Var. 3 from the second piano in measures 1-10 to the first piano (mm. 11-20--the repeat of the first period) is as much a technique of orchestration as it is one of convenience, involving the retention of all the musical materials of the first period yet with a countermelody doubled at the octave. The frequent exchange of thematic material between the two pianos, as in Var. 7 as well as in the second period of Vars. 3 and 6, produces the same effect.

Here, as in the Variations Op. 21 No. 1, Brahms assigns special structural significance to a pedal point. In the theme the pedal appears on the dominant at the outset of the second period and on the tonic at the close. Although the dominant pedal is often abandoned, the tonic pedal is strictly maintained in the codettas of variations (sometimes, however, reserved for only the final measures) and also appears at the outset of Vars. 1, 3, 5, and 7. Unlike the Op. 21 No. 1 set, Brahms assigns no extra significance to the pedal point in the course of the Finale, however. Instead he reserves it for the close of the work, in the extended codetta which reaffirms the tonic key centerⁱ following the climax of the work.

The two basic compositional resources most skillfully employed in the Haydn Variations--rhythm and counterpoint--reach their height of development in the Finale. This conclusion to the work is so unified and compelling, however, that it betrays not the slightest sense

of merely technical writing. Fuller-Maitland marvels at this achievement in his discussion of the Finale:

The increasing elaboration of the workmanship up to the climax . . . is among the most powerful of musical impressions of any date, and while all the variations are a delight to the ear, . . . the best is kept till the last, and the learning displayed is only used to enable the master to make the effect he wants upon his hearers.²⁰

All the musical materials presented in this section are derived in part, if not completely, from the opening ground bass motive. This is most obvious at the outset where the fugal subject in the first piano is presented in canonic imitation with the ground bass motive (see Ex. 32). The countermelody in the soprano line of the first piano (mm. 4-6) is taken directly from the subject and provides the basis for the ensuing countermelodies (second piano, mm. 5 et. seq.). Out of these contrapuntal lines grows a short ascending motive (beginning at m. 10) which leads forcefully into the triumphant fanfare at measure 21. A forward impetus is generated here through the contrapuntal weaving of contrasting duple and triple rhythmic subdivisions (this is also shown in Ex. 32).

The fanfare is based motivically on the opening perfect fourth of the ground bass, with the eighth-note countermelody in measures 25-30 recalling the inversion of the four-note motive. At measure 31 the fugal subject returns in stretto, and, just as in the first section, Brahms uses rhythmic complexity to build up to a dynamic climax. This time, however, it does not stop. At measure 39 he combines quarter-notes with triplet eighth-notes (a cross-relation of two, three, and six), and although at this point the piece

Example 32 Variationen über ein Thema von Joseph Haydn Op. 56b

Finale, mm.1-21

Andante

p *legato* FUGAL SUBJECT

Andante

p *legato*

cresc.

cresc.

V

V

V

V

dynamically subsides, the section beginning at measure 41 (marked piano and dolce) is, as has been noted, the most rhythmically complex portion of the entire work. Triplet half-notes combine with quarter-notes and triplet eighths, producing a metric combination of 3/4, 4/4, and 12/8. This height of rhythmic activity is contained only in the two-piano version of the work, however. (The alternate soprano line, which considerably reduces the rhythmic complexity here, is the melodic line employed by Brahms in the orchestral version. Unfortunately, it minimizes the effect of dynamic repose coupled with extreme rhythmic and harmonic activity.) The next five variants above the ground bass further exploit this technique as increasing contrapuntal activity is added to the musical fabric, while the dynamic character of the piece remains soft and graceful (the final variant is marked, in fact, molto dolce). In this set of five variants above the ground bass, the melody becomes increasingly ornamented with chromatic auxiliary notes and altered by rhythmic displacement. Added to this complex texture are countermelodies and melodic fragments such that, were it not for the steady framework of the ground bass, all direct connection with the theme would be obscured.

Brahms then abruptly returns to the theme by "interrupting" the progression with a section in the tonic minor (m. 66). Marked by a notable change of character, the passacaglia bass line migrates to the soprano voice under which alternating fragments of the four-note motive are coupled with a countermelody over a syncopated tonic pedal. The descending four-note motive evolves into a lyrical melodic line in measure 71 which further grows in significance as the music

builds to yet another climax. Brahms prepares the return of the theme by presenting the opening motive in stretto on the tonic and dominant (mm. 76-79--see Ex. 33). The texture is thickened considerably at this point; in the orchestral version Brahms adds piccolo for the first time in the Finale (mm. 76-78).

Example 33 Variationen über ein Thema von Joseph Haydn Op. 56b

Finale, mm.76-79

The image shows a musical score for two staves, labeled I and II. Staff I is in the upper register and contains a piano part with a dynamic marking of *più f*. Staff II is in the lower register and contains a piano part with a dynamic marking of *f ben marcato*. The score is in a minor key, indicated by a key signature of two flats. The music features a complex texture with many notes, including some with accidentals. The notation includes various rhythmic values and articulation marks.

A sudden shift from forte to piano and from the tonic minor back to the tonic major key marks the harmonic recapitulation of the theme. This is further articulated in the orchestral version as Brahms brings in the triangle for the first time in the entire work in m. 81 (see Ex. 34). The theme is so artfully concealed within the contrapuntal fabric of the music, however, that its exact point of entry can easily be overlooked.

The obscuring or stretching-out of the point of recapitulation in a work is a common nineteenth-century compositional device, one of which Brahms was especially fond. By toying with the listener's

expectations, a composer can diffuse a recapitulation over an extended period of time, as in Brahms's Sonata Op. 1 from 1852,²¹ or present a series of false thematic recapitulations, as in Schubert's B-flat Sonata from 1828).²² Brahms is also very subtle in his recapitulation of the Chorale in Op. 56, and, in this regard, the work presents a particularly interesting case in point. Stein, for example, misses the point of recapitulation altogether in his analysis as he places the exact point of thematic return at measure 88.²³ This neglects the highly important harmonic return and the presentation of the first half of the thematic melody divided between the voices at measure 81, as is shown in Example 34.

Nevertheless one cannot underrate the concluding presentation of the complete Chorale theme (mm. 88-97) as this lengthening of the recapitulatory process serves to enhance further the weight of the Chorale in its final presentation. The recapitulation, up to this point, is purposely ambiguous. Brahms obscures the thematic melody in measures 81-85 not only by dividing it between voices but also by combining it with stretto presentations of the opening motive (see Ex. 34, brackets). The soft dynamic level and lighthearted character (the two-piano version is marked poco più animato sempre) also serve to trick the unwary listener into overlooking the point of return. After this momentary resolution, however, Brahms breaks off the continuation of the Chorale with two overlapping "false starts" of the theme (mm. 86-87 and 87-88). At this point the ground bass, which has provided the framework for the entire Finale so far, is cut off. Marked fortissimo, ben marcato, these measures usher in the recapit-

tulation of the full Chorale theme, now heard in an utterly new context--as the apotheosis of all that has preceded. With full chords and rushing scales, Brahms thus saves his greatest climactic gesture for the very end of the work, in order to enhance the impact of this unifying recapitulatory synthesis.²⁴

Concluding the Op. 56 Variations is an extended codetta of fifteen measures. Following the plan and melody of the thematic codetta, this section serves to relax the pulsating momentum of the final climax, yet Brahms reserves a critical burst of energy for the closing measures--a reminder of the power inherent in the theme.

84 P

Xi. Fl.
Fl.
Ob.
Klar. (B)
Fag.
K. Fag.
(B)
Hr.
(Ea)
Trpt. (B)
Pk.
Trg.

f marc.

60

1. Viol.
2. Viol.
Br.
Vcl.
K. B.

f marc.

f ben marc.

f marc.

P

Detailed description: This page of a musical score contains measures 84 through 87. The top system features woodwind instruments: XI Flute, Flute, Oboe, Clarinet in Bb, Bassoon, and Contrabassoon. The middle system includes Horn in Bb, Horn in E-flat, Trumpet in Bb, Trombone, and Trombone. The bottom system covers strings: Violin I, Violin II, Brass, Violoncello, and Kontrabaß. The score is written in 8/4 time. A dynamic marking of *f marc.* is present in measures 85 and 86. A P marking is located at the beginning of measure 84 and at the end of measure 87. A rehearsal mark '60' is placed below the woodwind staves at the start of measure 85. A downward-pointing arrow is above the Violin I staff in measure 85.

90

Kl. Fl.
Fl.
Ob.
Klar. (B)
Fag.
K. Fag.
Hr.
Trpt. (B)
Pk.
Trg.
1. Viol.
2. Viol.
Br.
Vcl.
K. B.

95

460

Kl. Fl.

Fl.

Ob.

Klar. (B)

Fag.

K. Fag.

(B)

Hr. (Es)

Trpt. (B)

Pk.

Trg.

1. Viol.

2. Viol.

Br.

Vel.

K.-B.

mf

f

CONCLUSION:

Compositional Techniques of the Variation Genre:

Brahms's Contribution

In his discussion on Form in Music in "Brahms the Progressive," Arnold Schoenberg lists the elements that bring about coherent organization in a musical work:

Evenness, regularity, symmetry, subdivision, repetition, unity, relationship in rhythm and harmony and even logic--none of these elements produces or even contributes to beauty. But all of them contribute to an organization which makes the presentation of the musical idea intelligible. The language in which musical ideas are expressed in tones parallels the language which expresses feelings of thoughts in words, in that its vocabulary must be proportionate to the intellect which it addresses, . . .²⁵

Indeed, Brahms's music speaks to the intellect, and yet it goes further. Perhaps Schoenberg was correct in suggesting that elements of musical organization alone neither produce nor contribute to beauty, yet in the hands of Brahms the beauty of the musical thought is certainly enhanced by the organization and unity within the form.

Schoenberg continues his thoughts on musical organization:

Great art must proceed to precision and brevity. . . . This is what musical prose should be--a direct and straightforward presentation of ideas, without any patchwork, without mere padding and empty repetitions.²⁶

It is this very conciseness in Brahms's style that elevates his music

to the level of Schoenberg's "great art." And that it is indeed.

Probably the greatest single factor contributing to overall unity in Brahms's works is the economy of musical material employed. The terseness, which was so characteristic of the composer's personality, manifests itself resourcefully in his music. Whether he is dealing with the structural placement and reinterpretation of thematic elements, or, the control of musical ideas on a large scale, Brahms has repeatedly proven his command of the variation procedure, as seen in the works studied here.

By isolating the independent variation sets of Brahms, one can trace a development in his compositional style. Op. 21 No. 1 has been found to represent a turning point in Brahms's methods of variation. New structural significance is given to the bass, and the variations are connected in a more "organic" manner as one variation appears to grow out of the preceding one. The Finale of Op. 21 No. 1 assumes greater structural significance than those of the previous sets as it represents both the apotheosis of the most important musical elements of the theme and variations and embodies a convincing, logical end point for the motivic and rhythmic development of the work. This is not to detract from the Finales of Op. 9 and Op. 21 No. 2 as they are indeed impressive in very different ways (the final variation of Op. 9, with its quiet, almost spiritual manner, provides a very fitting conclusion to this intentional homage to Schumann, while the turbulent Finale to Op. 21 No. 2 certainly brings the Hungarian spirit to life).

After Op. 21 No. 1, Brahms further refined his compositional

ideas, especially with regard to the importance and function of the melody and bass of the theme. The Variations Opp. 24 and 35 show a closer connection to the thematic melody than Op. 21 No. 1, and the bass is employed more as an harmonic than motivic reference to the theme. One notes, for example, that the theme of Op. 35 is mostly comprised of parallel octaves--no separate bass line even exists here. Yet the harmonic structure of the theme is almost exactly followed in the variations, with the bass providing the framework (as in Bk. I, Vars. 1, 8, 10, and 14, and Bk. II, Vars. 2, 4, 5, and 8-14). The extended structural Finale of Op. 21 No. 1 is recalled in these works: the fugue of Op. 24 restates important musical ideas from the variations, and the Finales of Op. 35 Bks. I and II round off the overall form.

Finally, in surveying the independent variations sets, one comes to Op. 56. Standing apart from the previous works in this genre by its late date of composition and its duality of purpose (both keyboard and orchestral), this final set of variations presents a very subtle and refined development of the variation procedure. In the Haydn Variations one witnesses a culmination of compositional techniques developed through experimentation in earlier works in the genre. Rhythmic development, for example, can be seen as a primary element in all the variation sets, yet in this work it reaches unprecedented levels of complexity. Similarly, the function of the bass reaches a new level of sophistication in Op. 56. No longer echoing the melody of the theme or some similar derivative, here it is incorporated into the total musical texture while all the time

retaining its structural identity.

Although his reliance on the models of Schumann and Beethoven has faded in this work, the model of Bach is more clearly evident than in earlier variation sets. Gerhard Puchelt has acutely observed that the succession of variations above the ostinato bass in the Op. 56 Finale is "clearly learned from Bach and inspired with a romantic sound, . . . [and it] is a novel enhancement of the variation principle."²⁷ It is this technique, in fact, that returns in the Finale to the Fourth Symphony, in which a chaconne bass forms the structural framework.

Walter Frisch has recently commented on how wonderfully and endlessly rich Brahms's works are and how each rehearing offers the attentive listener new rewards: "More than any other composer, Brahms demonstrated how music can be logical--how one idea can grow inexorably from another--and yet [be] continually fresh and stimulating."²⁸ Brahms, "der geordnete Romantik,"²⁹ shows in his variation sets how "orderly" and "progressive" are not mutually exclusive.

CHAPTER III

NOTES

¹Donald M. McCorckle, "Brahms and Vienna in Transition," Johannes Brahms: Variations on a Theme by Haydn Opp. 56A and 56B ed. Donald M. McCorckle (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), p. 14.

²It is incorrect to consider the two-piano version of this work a preparation for the orchestral version, or for that matter, to consider the orchestral version a mere setting of the original two-piano work. Op. 56b is as pianistic in its construction; Op. 56a is orchestral.

³Victor Luithlen, "Studien zu Brahms Werke in Variationsform," Studien zur Musikwissenschaft 14 (1927):316.

⁴Die Kunstform der Variation verdankt Brahms ausserordentlich viel . . . Besonders hervorzuheben ist, wieviel Brahms für das geistige Wachstum dieser Form getan hat. Hermann Kretzschmar, "Die Klaviermusik seit Robert Schumann," Gesammelte Aufsätze über Musik, (Leipzig, 1910), p. 167, cited in Gerhard Puchelt, Variationen für Klavier im 19. Jahrhundert: Blüte und Verfall einer Kunstform, (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1973), p. 133.

⁵For a more comprehensive discussion see Donald M. McCorckle, "On the Significance of the Haydn Variations" and "Genesis and the Creative Process," Johannes Brahms, ed. Donald M. McCorckle, pp. 3 and 27-30 respectively. See also H. C. Robbins-Landon, "Haydn's 'St. Anthony' Divertimento," Musical Times 101 (July 1960):433 and "True and False in Haydn," Saturday Review of Literature 34B (August 5, 1951):35-38.

⁶Karl Geiringer, Brahms: his Life and Work (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 251.

⁷McCorckle, "On the Significance," p. 3n.

⁸The original orchestration of 2 oboes, 2 horns, 3 bassoons, and serpent is closely matched in Brahms's orchestration with piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon (to replace the outdated serpent). Cellos and double basses were conventionally used in a divertimento or serenade as well. It is

important to note, however, that in the second half of the second period of the theme, Brahms adds flutes to the texture, thus preparing for the larger orchestral sound that appears in the variations to follow. See John Horton, Brahms Orchestral Music, BBC Music Guides (London: BBC, 1968), p. 31.

⁹Stein, "Analysis," p. 172.

¹⁰Antcliffe, "Poetic Basis," p. 100.

¹¹Max Kalbeck, Johannes Brahms, 3rd ed. (Berlin: Deutsche Brahms Gesellschaft, 1908-14), vol. II/2, p. 471.

¹²This was pointed out to me by Professor William Kinderman, University of Victoria.

¹³The symmetry of the Goldberg Variations is eloquently described by Ralph Kirkpatrick in his introduction to the Schirmer edition of the music:

The form of the variations as a whole may be shown by comparison . . . to that of a rosary, or perhaps better explained by an architectural analogy. Framed as if between two terminal pylons, one formed by the Aria and first two variations, the other by the two penultimate variations and the Quodlibet, the Variations are grouped like members of an elaborate colonnade. The groups are composed of a canon and an elaborate two-manual arabesque, enclosing in each case another variation of independent character. Following upon the pylon-like group which terminates this rhythmic procession, the Aria, repeated, closes the great circle.

Johann Sebastian Bach, The "Goldberg" Variations, ed. Ralph Kirkpatrick (New York: G. Schirmer, 1938), p. viii.

¹⁴It is important to note that the timbre as well as the register placement of the melody is masterfully duplicated in the orchestral version of the piece. Not only does this further justify its structural purpose, but it reliably confirms that Brahms was acutely aware of the audible timbral differences between two pianos and contrasting registers on one piano.

¹⁵Stein, "Analysis," p. 169.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 181.

¹⁷McCorckle, "Genesis," p. 55. See also "The Sketches," pp. 137-48, for a photographic facsimile of Brahms's sketches for the Haydn Variations. (This particular reproduction is poorly produced and very difficult to read.) For a more comprehensive discussion of the sketches, see Alfred Orel, "Skizzen zu Joh. Brahms' Haydn-Variationen," Zeitschrift für Musikwissenschaft 5 (March 1923):296-315.

- ¹⁸Ibid., p. 44, as well as "The Sketches," pp. 140 and 145.
- ¹⁹The harmonic suspensions in Var. 7, mm. 11-14 recall the technique of Chopin in his Prelude Op. 28 No. 4 and Mazurka Op. 17 No. 4.
- ²⁰J. A. Fuller-Maitland, Brahms (New York: Kennikat Press, 1911), p. 136.
- ²¹For a more comprehensive discussion of this recapitulation, see Philip Friedheim, "A Problem in nineteenth-century musical structure: The Approach to the Tonic," Music Review 33 (1972):87-89.
- ²²See Donald Francis Tovey, "Franz Schubert," Essays and Lectures on Music (London, 1949), pp. 119-20.
- ²³Stein, "Analysis," p. 183.
- ²⁴Stein, Ibid., p. 184, notes a formal plan in the Finale which accounts in part for the successful impact of the final climax:
The plan of this Finale is a remarkable example of emotional and dynamic pacing. There is an organic live quality in the distribution of tension and relaxation. Like any gradual emotional development, it begins with longer swells of rise and fall, which become increasingly shorter until the final climax is attained.
- ²⁵Arnold Schoenberg, "Brahms the Progressive," Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg, trans. Leo Black (New York: St. Martins Press, 1975), p. 399.
- ²⁶Ibid., pp. 414-15.
- ²⁷Folge von Variationen über einen ostinaten Bass gearbeitet, der sich ganz zum Schluss das Haydn-Thema gesellt: eine deutlich an Bach geschulte mit romantischem Klang erfüllte neuartige Steigerung des Veränderungsprinzips.
(Puchelt, Variationen für Klavier, p. 133.)
- ²⁸Walter Frisch, "Brahms's Developing Variation: Continuity and Innovation in a Musical Tradition," The American Brahms Society Newsletter II/2 (Autumn 1984):2.
- ²⁹Puchelt, Variationen für Klavier, p. 124.

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FORMAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL PROCEDURES IN
THE INDEPENDENT VARIATIONS OF
JOHANNES BRAHMS

Author


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