

MUSC 3541 – Midterm Project

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In this paper, I will analyze Variation VI of Brahms' Variations on a Theme of Haydn, Op. 56a and how it compares with the original theme. I will refer to these as the "theme" and "variation" throughout the paper. Since the theme and variation follow the same AB form, I will refer to these sections as sections A and B.

Overview

There are several characteristic differences between the theme and variation. One of these differences is tempo. The theme, marked *andante*, has a steady assuring pace, while the variation, marked *vivace*, moves quicker and livelier. A difference in the main melodic and rhythmic motives highlights this quick pace. In the A section of the theme, the rhythm is mostly eighth notes and quarter notes with the occasional sixteenth notes, which provides an almost classical voice-leading feel. In the variation, the main melody can still be heard almost precisely as it is in the theme but is surrounded by a quick sixteenth-note interval ostinato that highlights the underlying chord mixed with neighbor tones. This quick sixteenth-note ostinato repeats over and over in the A section. It continues into the B section of the variation and is one of the main motives that make it distinct.

The orchestration between the theme and the variation is distinct as well. In both the antecedent and consequent phrases of the theme, the bassoons, and oboes take charge of the melody and principal foreground harmony (supported by the horns, which highlight the harmony, and cellos and contrabasses for the bass). While in the antecedent phrase of the variation, mainly the horns, supported by the bassoons, are in the foreground. This changes in

the consequent phrase where almost every instrument other than the horns is in the foreground. This gives the A section of the variation the distinct feeling it's building up towards something, while the theme sounds stagnant. In the B section, the orchestration in the variation is much fuller. Almost all the instruments are present throughout, giving it a much more intense and climactic texture. The use of dynamics throughout the theme and variation is consistent, though. I found the emphasis was on the same sections in both; each part of the piece played the same role regardless of its underlying differences.

The A section of the theme and variation are very similar harmonically. The most significant difference is how the antecedent and consequent phrases end. In the theme, the antecedent phrase ends with a half cadence, while the consequent phrase ends with a perfect authentic cadence. In the variation, the antecedent phrase ends in a half cadence but in the relative minor, g minor, where the V is preceded by an augmented sixth. The consequent phrase ends in a deceptive cadence where a V/vi precedes the VI. The melody, rhythm, and dynamics are also distinct in the cadence of these phrases. These cadences are the emphasis of the A section, as dynamics move from piano to forte, and they stand out starkly against the original theme. In the antecedent phrase of the B section, I found that Brahms experimented more with harmony based on chords in both Bb major and the parallel minor, Bb minor. Although there are some similarities, which I will explore later, this section sounds very different due to arpeggiation runs. The ending of the consequent phrase of the B section is similar in harmony and conclusiveness of the theme but still varies in rhythm and melody.

Comparison of Theme and Variation

The A Section (Theme m. 1-10, Variation m. 264-273)

The underlying harmony between the theme and the variation in the A section is similar, other than two significant deviations, which give variation VI its character. As seen in *Fig. 1*, the harmony up to the cadence (theme m.1-4.2, variation m.264-267.2) is similar, other than an added 7th in the V in m.266, and the ii in the first inversion in m.267. As seen in *Fig. 2*, the violin section, playing pizzicato, follows the exact harmony as the theme in a similar voice-leading style. Although these minor changes exist, everything about the harmony is functionally the same. The listener is introduced to something new harmonically at the end of the phrase, where there's a striking half-cadence in G minor, the relative minor of Bb, utilizing an Aug6 – V. This phase structure – keeping the same harmony as the theme until the cadence – continues in the antecedent phrase. As seen in *Fig. 3*, the harmony until the cadence is functionally identical. The variation introduces another striking end to the phrase, a deceptive cadence. The secondary dominant V/VI leads into VI, which is functionally distinct from the perfect authentic cadence seen in the theme.

In the A section of the variation, the melody is still present as initially presented in the theme. It is presented differently, though, as an apparent ostinato motive embellishes it. In *Fig. 4*, the two motives can be seen. The first is a measure of sixteenth notes that repeat the main melody note of D but also include an unaccented chromatic neighbor tone, which is not present in the theme. The next motive, starting at m.265, consists of an eighth note, followed by two sixteenth notes, which repeat twice a measure. The accented tone usually includes the melody

note, while the sixteenth-note tones are some arpeggiation of the underlying chord. This repeats in the consequent phrase, as seen in *Fig. 2*. The first motive also finds its way into the most distinct part of the A section, the cadences. As seen in *Fig. 6*, the first motive is what is heard on top of the harmony unique to the variation. Compared with the melody and rhythmic motive from the cadences in the theme in *Fig. 1* and *Fig. 3*, you can see that this effect is unique to the variation.

Overall, in section A, the main features that make the variation different from the theme are the rhythmic motives surrounding the melody, the harmonic differences in the cadences, and the quicker pace. It is strongly tied back to the theme due to sounding almost the same melody and harmony leading up to the cadences. However, the difference in the cadences is enough to keep this variation unique and exciting in its first section.

The B Section (Theme m. 11-29, Variation m. 274-292)

The antecedent phrase of the B section in the variation sees a more significant departure from the theme harmonically than the A section. As seen in *Fig. 7*, the variation's B section moves to the parallel minor, Bb minor. This modulation is achieved by common chord modulation, as the dominant in Bb major and Bb minor is shared. The first four bars of the section see a similar harmonic motive – where a chord, somewhat equivalent functionally, is sandwiched between two dominants, which leads to an authentic cadence (Bb major in the theme, Bb minor in the variation). What changes completely here is the accompaniment or melody line, shown in *Fig. 7*. There is a distinct and drastic arpeggiation that outlines the harmony, which starts at m. 275 and repeats every so often throughout the rest of this section. This sort of arpeggiation is not seen in the theme. Interestingly, the rhythmic motif seen in

section A – the second motif in *Fig. 4* – is the same in this arpeggiation: an eight-note followed by two sixteenth notes that repeat. The difference is that section A has no arpeggiated run like in section B.

The following four bars of the antecedent phrase introduce a new harmony with an interesting melodic relation to the theme. In *Fig. 8*, it can be observed that the harmony, functionally, is different between the theme and variation but serves the same purpose. That purpose is to bring the new ideas introduced at the beginning of the antecedent phrase towards a half cadence, leading to the restatement of the original harmony from section A. The accompaniment or melody in this section is interesting because the theme and variation have a rhythmic motive that moves by some step or leap in the same direction every measure. In the theme, this rhythmic motive moves down every measure while it moves up every half measure in the variation. This idea can be seen in the top treble clef of the measures in *Fig. 8*. By m. 281 in the variation and m. 18 in the theme, there is a half cadence. In the variation, this is a secondary dominant, whose purpose is to help facilitate the transition back to Bb major.

Next is the start of the consequent phrase, where the theme and variation are harmonically very similar. In *Fig. 9*, the variation starts on V to resolve the V/V that came before it, but after this, it follows the same harmony as the theme, which is the initial harmony from section A. The rhythmic and melodic motive in the variation is also the same as in section A, highlighted in *Fig. 4*, where all the melody notes are on accented beats but are ornamented with sixteenth-note chord tones. This melodic embellishment is what differentiates this section from the theme when the harmony is otherwise the same. The last part of the B section in both the theme and variation involves restating the antecedent phrase of the B section. This can be

seen in *Fig. 10*, where we see a *vi* between two arpeggiation runs (as seen in *Fig. 7*). The harmony here is different as it's in Bb instead of Bb minor, which serves to bring conclusiveness to this idea by bringing it in the primary key of the tune. This section in the variation is still similar in structure to the theme, as there is a repeating ABAB pattern in the four measures (m. 286 – 289 variation, m. 19 – 22 theme), as seen before. The piece concludes with three bars emphasizing the tonic, as seen in *Fig. 11*. Although the harmony is the same between the theme and variation, the unique motive introduced in section A (first motive in *Fig. 4*) is repeated in the outro, giving the ending a character unique to the sixth variation.

While the B section of the variation may initially appear distinct from the theme, it's primarily the antecedent phrase that introduces harmonies unique to the variation. The structure of both the antecedent and consequent phrases remains broadly consistent. However, the melodic ornamentation diverges significantly: motives from section A of the variation are employed, with no traces of the motives from the original theme.

Conclusion

When I first heard the sixth variation, I was intrigued more than any others because of its quick tempo and striking harmonic changes in both cadences in section A. It was shocking how much similarity can be hidden underneath melodic embellishment, tempo change, and orchestration differences. Even after listening to the piece a few times, I couldn't recognize the almost identical harmony and melody in section A and the return to it in section B. After comparing the theme and variation more closely, it gave me an appreciation for just how much orchestration, tempo, and melodic embellishment can change the sound and feel of the same tune. The new material introduced in the antecedent phrase of section B was just different

enough to keep the variation exciting and make it unique from the others. Still, I found that it kept enough from the theme to keep the listener close to the recognizable.

Figures

Thank you to Prof. Godfrey for the reduction/analysis of the theme.

m.1 Andante (♩ = 72)

p

I IV I V vi 6 ii 7[♭]/V cad. V

m.264

p

B♭: I IV I V⁷ vi ii⁶ g: Aug⁶ V

Figure 1: Harmonic reduction of antecedent phrase in theme and variation

1.Viol. pizz. arco
 2.Viol. pizz. arco
 Br. pizz. arco
 Vcl. pizz. arco
 K-B. pizz. arco
 p
 Vivace

Figure 2: Violin section in the antecedent phrase in variation

m.6
 I IV I V vi 6 cad. V I
 ii 6/4

m.269
 p sempre p
 Bb: I IV I V⁷ vi ii V/vi VI

Figure 3: Harmonic reduction of consequent phrase in theme and variation

m.264

m.265

Figure 4: Two melodic motives in section A of the variation

m.1

m.2

Figure 5: Melody from theme

m.268

m.273

f

p

g: Aug⁶ V

V/vi VI

Figure 6: Ostinato motives in cadences of section A of variation

m. 274

Piano

f *sf* *sf*

Bbm: V VI V i

m. 11

p

V ⁷ vii/V V I 3

Ped. _____

Detailed description: The image shows two musical excerpts. The top excerpt, labeled 'm. 274', is in B-flat major (Bbm) and 2/4 time. It features a piano part with dynamics *f* and *sf*. The bottom excerpt, labeled 'm. 11', is also in B-flat major and 2/4 time, marked *p*. It includes a 'Ped.' (pedal) line and chord symbols: V, ⁷vii/V, V, and I 3.

Figure 7: Harmonic reduction of the first part of the antecedent phrase of variation and theme

m. 278

Piano

sf *sf* *f*

iv III VI V i Bb: ^{sus4}V/V V/V

m. 15

2

susps.

IV passing 6/4 ii V

Figure 8: Harmonic reduction of the second part of the antecedent phrase of variation and theme

m. 282

The image displays a musical score for piano, consisting of three systems of staves. The first system shows the right-hand part (treble clef) with a melodic line and a left-hand part (bass clef) with a bass line. The second system shows a harmonic reduction of the first part of the consequent phrase of variation and theme, with Roman numerals indicating the chords. The third system shows the continuation of the harmonic reduction, including a cadence.

System 1: Treble clef, 2/4 time, key signature of two flats (B-flat major). The right hand plays a melodic line with accents. The left hand plays a bass line. Dynamic marking: *Piano* (top left), *ff* (middle).

System 2: Treble clef, 2/4 time, key signature of two flats. The right hand plays chords. The left hand plays a bass line. Roman numerals: m. 19 V I IV I V⁷ vi IV I V.

System 3: Treble clef, 2/4 time, key signature of two flats. The right hand plays chords. The left hand plays a bass line. Roman numerals: I IV I V vi 6 ii cad. V 6/4.

Figure 9: Harmonic reduction of the first part of the consequent phrase of variation and theme

#23 m. 286

Piano

f *sf* *f* *sf*

vi N⁶ vi iv

m. 19

I embellishing 6/4 I embellishing 6/4

Figure 10: Harmonic reduction of the second part of the consequent phrase of variation and theme

m. 290

Figure 11 shows a musical score for measures 290-293. The top staff contains a complex melodic line with many beamed notes and slurs. The middle and bottom staves show a harmonic reduction consisting of chords and single notes.

Bb:I

m. 23

Figure 11 shows a musical score for measure 23. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of two flats (Bb). The bottom staff is in bass clef. The score shows a harmonic reduction with chords and single notes. A dynamic marking of *pp* is present. The letter 'I' is written below the bass staff.

Figure 11: Harmonic reduction of the outro