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## Masterpiece

“Diabelli Variations”, OP. 120 (1819-23) by Ludwig Van Beethoven

### Transforming the Slight Into the Sublime

Beethoven created a virtuosic showpiece out of a mundane tune with his “Diabelli Variations.”



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by Stuart Isacoff

Among Ludwig van Beethoven's prodigious gifts was an ability to transform the most mundane materials into something exquisite. Perhaps the most famous example of this is his "Diabelli Variations," Op. 120. Even the composer disdained the piece's commonplace melody, calling it a mere "cobbler's patch." Yet in his hands, the silly became the sublime. The work is one of the two greatest sets of piano variations in the history of classical music (along with J.S. Bach's "Goldberg Variations"). It is also treacherously difficult and rarely played.

Its genesis can be traced to 1819, when Anton Diabelli, one of Beethoven's principal publishers, sent his own undistinguished waltz melody to every important composer he could find in Austria, requesting a variation on it from each. He received 50 affirmative replies from the likes of young Franz Schubert, a preteen Franz Liszt, and other formidable musicians of the day. Diabelli included them all in his collection—along with a contribution by Mozart's son Franz Xaver, billed more enticingly as "Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (son)." There was a coda written by Carl Czerny, who was Beethoven's most important pupil and a teacher of Liszt. Most of the contributors took the easy way out, writing a quick 32 measures and decorating the theme with running figures and other obvious compositional devices. We never hear these variations performed today.

At first, Beethoven demurred. He had been unhappy with the way things had gone in 1808, when he contributed a setting of "In questa tomba" to a similar conglomeration by 63 composers (only Beethoven's entry is still remembered). But after thinking it over, he agreed to compose a special set of variations all his own. And four years later, in May 1823, Beethoven delivered 33 spectacular variants on the original waltz theme.

He had taken no shortcuts. In the words of pianist Alfred Brendel, the composer began with Diabelli's prosaic dance tune and "improved, parodied, ridiculed, disclaimed, transfigured, mourned, stamped out and finally uplifted" it—in effect, turning it into a series of dramatic character pieces. The finished work proved to be one of his most fertile compositions, and among the 19th century's most stunning virtuosic showpieces. Composer Arnold Schoenberg declared it Beethoven's "most adventurous work."

The project was created in two phases—the first 23 variations were finished in 1819. Then Beethoven paused to work on his "Missa Solemnis" and the late piano sonatas. The remaining 10 variations were completed in 1823.

But Diabelli almost didn't receive the right to publish them, because the two men became embroiled in a bitter fight. Diabelli was one of several possible publishers for Beethoven's "Missa Solemnis," and something went awry in the negotiations—as they usually did with this composer. As a result, Beethoven wrote to his friend and biographer, Anton Schindler: "My brother knows a party who will take both works [the Mass and the "Variations"]. Therefore, one can talk matters over with him." Things were bound to go wrong. Beethoven's young student Ferdinand Ries described this man as "the greatest skinflint in the world; for a ducat he would go back on his promised word fifty times over, and in this way he is making all sorts of enemies for his good brother." When the deal fell apart, Beethoven somehow managed to put the blame on Schindler, "an arch-scoundrel."

Beethoven and Diabelli patched things up. But nothing involving Beethoven was ever less than tumultuous. He dedicated the "Diabelli Variations" to Antonie Brentano (purportedly his "Immortal Beloved"), after having informed Ries that the honor would go to Ries's wife, Harriet. Ries, having already arranged to have the variations printed in London with the dedication to his wife, felt humiliated, and told Beethoven to have his affairs attended to in London by someone else from then on. The composer pleaded with Ries for forgiveness. "I can dedicate to your wife some other work," he wrote. Eventually, it all blew over. The great "Diabelli Variations" mimic in some ways the high drama of those interactions.

The set begins with Diabelli's original waltz, as unsophisticated as any beer-hall ditty, with a trite melody and typical oom-pah-pah accompaniment. Pianist András Schiff, whose recent recording of the work bristles with energy, gave a lecture in New York last year at which he demonstrated that the Diabelli theme comes alive only when a pianist dives in full force, highlighting the rough-and-tumble quality of the music. The same can be said of the entire piece. It invites boldness.

Perhaps that is why pianist Hans von Bülow added titles to most of the variations, though he changed his ideas about them from year to year: "Echo" for variation 13, "Secret" or "Intimate Message" for variation 18, "Topsy-Turvy" or "Explosion" for variation 23. Musicologist William Kinderman gets closer to the mark in his "Beethoven's Diabelli Variations," where he notes the importance of parody to the structure of this masterpiece. Beethoven even included a humorous takeoff on an aria from Mozart's "Don Giovanni" (variation 22) and on a Johann Baptist Cramer finger exercise (variation 23). As in much Beethoven, the key to understanding this music is keeping a good sense of humor.

An elegant, ruminative melody, the original idea for the first variation, was eventually moved to the third spot. Instead, the set leads off with a march—“pompous” and “mock-heroic,” claims Mr. Kinderman. This variation, so different from the opening waltz, upends our expectations as facilely as Beethoven throws the music off-balance with odd accents and radical shifts of dynamics.

And thus the story begins. There are exhilarating moments, variations filled with constant jostling or flights of fancy, times of mysterious stillness. Variation 20—dubbed “Oracle” by von Bülow—is, wrote musicologist Donald Francis Tovey, “one of the most awe-inspiring passages in music.” Its slowly shifting chords evoke mammoth church bells sounding in the heavens. It is followed immediately by a fast and light excursion across the keyboard in a variation Mr. Brendel calls “Maniac and Moaner.”

Three dark variations toward the end (numbers 29, 30 and 31) are in minor keys. There is a rapid triple fugue (variation 32), leading to a tender minuet (variation 33). Biographer Maynard Solomon describes that final variation as a “songful, profound nostalgia, a vantage point from which we can review the purposes of the entire journey.” At which point there is clearly nothing more to say.

Diabelli added an introductory note to the publication, pointing out the music’s “original structures and ideas,” and its “boldest musical idioms,” promising that it would “astonish all friends and connoisseurs of serious style.” And it has.

—Mr. Isacoff’s latest book is “A Natural History of the Piano” (Knopf/Vintage).

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