

BETWEEN ROMANTICISM AND FOLKLORE: ANALYSIS OF AMY BEACH'S *VARIATIONS ON BALKAN THEMES*, OP. 60

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SUMMARY. This article provides an in-depth analysis of Amy Beach's piano composition *Variations on Balkan Themes*, Op. 60 (1906), one of her most significant Romantic works. The four Balkan folk songs ("O Maiko Moya," "Stara Planina," "Nasadil e Dado," and a Macedonian plea) serve as source material for eight variations and a coda. Using Beach's own notes and scholarly sources, we identify each theme's role (e.g. "O Maiko Moya" opens the work and underlies Variations I–V; "Stara Planina" introduces Variation VI; etc.). We also consider the piece's publication history, noting its original 1906 solo-piano edition and later versions (1936 revised solo, 1942 two-piano, and a partial orchestration). The analysis shows how Beach begins with character-like variations closely following the theme, then gradually "opens up" into freer, rhapsodic writing, unifying the set through motivic development. This contribution enriches the literature on American women composers and suggests avenues for future research, such as performance practice and comparisons to related works (e.g. Dvořák's folk-song variations).

Keywords: Amy Beach; solo piano; variations; Balkan folk music; Romantic piano music; women composers

1. Introduction

Amy Beach (1867–1944) was a pioneering American composer and pianist, often called the first successful female American composer³. She was born on September 5, 1867, in Henniker, New Hampshire. A child prodigy

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³ Block, Adrienne Fried. *Amy Beach, Passionate Victorian: The Life and Work of an American Composer, 1867–1944*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 2.



on the piano, she married surgeon Henry H. A. Beach in 1885 (at age 18), after which her husband insisted she limit public performances to focus on composition. Beach's compositional output grew in this period, including her celebrated *Gaelic Symphony* (1896). After being widowed in 1910 and losing her mother the same year, she toured Europe before settling back in the U.S. to compose.⁴

By the early 1900s, Beach had established herself as a leading composer. In 1904 she composed *Variations on Balkan Themes*, Op. 60, completed in Germany and published in Boston in 1906. This piece, for solo piano, is written in C# minor and typically lasts 25–30 minutes. It is notable for its technical difficulty and scale; as one scholar notes, it is “her longest and most technically demanding work for solo piano”. The variation set is based on four folk songs from the Balkans, which Beach had learned from the missionary Sleeper family.⁵ These exotic melodies and the work's free-form variation structure make the piece a rich example of early 20th-century folk-influenced Romanticism. This article will analyze the structure, themes, and style of *Variations on Balkan Themes*, drawing on primary sources (the 1906 score) and relevant scholarship.

2. Literature Review

The most detailed existing analysis of Beach's *Variations on Balkan Themes* is by E. Douglas Bomberger, who studies its motivic development and form. Bomberger shows that the work belongs to the tradition of *free* or *fantasia* variations: it begins with a theme followed by variations that increasingly depart from the theme's original structure.⁶ He points out that Beach's early variations (I–V) adhere closely to the opening theme, but later ones introduce new thematic material and extended codas. Bomberger also transcribes Beach's source themes and traces how they appear in the piece (as detailed below). Bomberger's conclusion is that Beach gradually “opens up” her form, using a unifying three-note motif from the first theme to bind the set.

In correspondence regarding Beach's score, it is noted that Beach's thematic choices may evoke Beethoven's style of variation, suggesting a

⁴ Winzenried, Rebecca. “Amy Beach (1867–1944): Biography, Music + More.” *The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center*, accessed 10 March 2026, <https://www.chambermusicsociety.org/about-the-music/composers/amy-beach>

⁵ Bomberger, E. Douglas. “Motivic Development in Amy Beach's *Variations on Balkan Themes*, Op. 60.” *American Music* 10, no. 3, 1992: pp. 326–327.

⁶ Nelson, Robert U. *The Technique of Variation: A Study of the Instrumental Variation from Antonio de Cabezón to Max Reger*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1948, pp. 121–125.

classical influence. While this short note adds historical perspective, it does not contain a full analysis.

The recent DMA dissertation by Yiwen Zhang covers *Variations on Balkan Themes* comprehensively.⁷ Zhang's abstract confirms that four versions of the work exist (the original 1906 solo, a 1936 revised solo, a 1942 two-piano version, and an orchestral arrangement in fragments). Zhang analyzes these versions and provides historical background on the Sleeper songs. Our study focuses on the original version but notes these editions for completeness.

Biographical sources help contextualize Beach's late-Romantic style. According to Winzenried (Chamber Music Society biography), Beach was known as a gifted composer who had to subsume her performance career after marriage. Her capacity for dramatic, richly colored music is evident throughout her works. No prior studies in Romanian have treated this specific piece, so our literature review draws mainly on English-language scholarship.

3. Methodology

This study uses a musicological analysis approach, combining score analysis with historical research. The primary source is Beach's 1906 piano score (Arthur P. Schmidt edition). We identify thematic material by comparing Beach's score with published folk song sources (as cited in Beach's preface). Secondary sources include Beach's own notes, scholarly articles, and dissertations.

4. Analysis of Variations on Balkan Themes

4.1. Thematic Material and Sources

Beach's variation set is built on four Balkan folk tunes, all relayed to her by Rev. W. W. Sleeper and his family. The four themes, in the order they appear, are:

- **"O Maiko Moya"**: The first theme, in C# minor, of five four-measure phrases. It "opens the work" and forms the basis of Variations I–V (and again Variation VII).
- **"Stara Planina"**: A slower theme in F# minor, introduced as a prelude to Variation VI.

⁷ Zhang, Yiwen. *An Analysis of Amy Beach's Variations on Balkan Themes*, Op. 60. DMA diss. West Virginia University, 2021.

- “**Nasadil e Dado**”: A lively tune, quoted at the end of Variation VI.
- “**Macedonia**” (untitled plea): A sorrowful melody (Beach’s “Macedonian appeal for help”) that begins Variation VIII.

Beach’s published preface describes these tunes as “of unknown origin” and ubiquitous in the Balkans, passed down by generations. We accept Beach’s crediting of Sleeper’s collection as the source.

4.2. Form and Structure

Variations on Balkan Themes takes the form of a theme (Adagio) followed by eight variations and a coda².

E.g. 1



Amy Beach, *Variations on Balkan Themes*, Op. 60, mm. 1–4

The structure is: Theme (mm. 1–20), Variations I–V, Variation VI (double-section dance), Variation VII (Andante-like), Variation VIII (Adagio finale), then a brief *Da capo*.

In the early variations (I–V), Beach treats the initial theme *O Maiko Moya* in a *character variation* manner. For example, Variation I (*Poco allegro*) speeds up the rhythm, Variation II (*Ritardando*) slows it, Variation III (*Tempo primo*) recapitulates it, Variation IV (*Poco sostenuto*) provides a broad, sustained take, and Variation V (*Poco animato*) turns into a spirited Hungarian-style dance. Only the original three-note motive of “*O Maiko Moya*” remains constant in all these variations, though Beach frequently alters the harmony and texture.

After Variation V, Beach introduces the second theme. An Andante “*Stara Planina*” in F# minor serves as a slow prelude to Variation VI. Variation VI is essentially a long dance (Hungarian *lassu-friss* form). Bomberger notes its two fast sections: the first is based on the original “*O Maiko Moya*” motive,

and the second (in F# major) is the only appearance of “Nasadil e Dado”.⁸ The slow *Stara Planina* reappears as a frame around this dance. Thus Variation VI links themes II and III together seamlessly.

E.g. 2



Amy Beach, *Variations on Balkan Themes*, Op. 60, Variation VI, mm. 1–4

Variation VII returns to the style of the opening theme: it is a slow waltz (*Andante*) that, after a brief upbeat, evolves harmonically and thematically to recall *O Maiko Moya* in a lyrical form.

E.g. 3



Amy Beach, *Variations on Balkan Themes*, Op. 60, Variation VII, mm. 1–9

Finally, Variation VIII (*Adagio*) expands the fourth theme (“*Macedonia*”) from Beach’s vocal model. In this last variation, Beach employs a funeral-march character and broad recapitulations.

⁸ Bomberger, E. Douglas. “Motivic Development in Amy Beach’s *Variations on Balkan Themes*, Op. 60.” *American Music* 10, no. 3, 1992: pp. 328–329

E.g. 4



Amy Beach, *Variations on Balkan Themes*, Op. 60, Variation VIII, mm. 1–2

The piece concludes with a short *Da capo* of the first theme in C# minor, bringing back the original melody one final time.

4.3. Harmonic and Motivic Development

Beach's variations are "free" or *fantasia* variations: apart from the initial passages, she often abandons strict metric and harmonic constraints of the theme. As Bomberger explains, frequent changes of mode (minor keys), added tones, and extended codas are present throughout.⁹ For example, the many appoggiaturas and altered chords give color beyond the simple folk melody. The unifying element of the cycle is a short germinal motive from "O Maiko Moya" (three ascending notes), which Beach weaves into various variations to tie the work together. By Variation VI and beyond, development of these motives becomes essential, as the original theme is sometimes only hinted at. In sum, the work starts like a set of character variations but gradually transforms into a more rhapsodic structure, exemplifying what Bomberger terms a transcendence of formal restraint.

5. Performance and Reception

Beach's Variations have historically been seldom performed, but they gained renewed attention in the 21st century. James Bennett praises Claire Huangci's 2024 recording, calling *Variations on Balkan Themes* a "major work worthy to stand alongside the Gaelic Symphony or Piano Concerto," noting it "needs a virtuosic artist to do it justice".¹⁰ He highlights the piece's rich, Lisztian writing and technical demands. Bennett also mentions Martina

⁹ Bomberger, E. Douglas. "Motivic Development in Amy Beach's *Variations on Balkan Themes*, Op. 60." *American Music* 10, no. 3, 1992: pp. 328–329

¹⁰ Bennett, James. *MusicWeb International*, 22 Oct. 2024 (review of Huangci "Made in USA").

Frezzotti's 2023 recording of the Variations, and he finds both Huangci's and Frezzotti's versions excellent. This modern praise indicates a growing appreciation. Early 20th-century sources show little documented reception; likely Beach's busy career and changing tastes limited performances of Op. 60 in her lifetime. Today's performers (Kanneh-Mason, Huangci, Frezzotti) continue to explore Beach's solo piano works, often highlighting Op. 60 in recital or recordings. Pianists note that the piece's chromatic writing and virtuosic passages (double-sharps, wide leaps) demand mature technique, suggesting why it remained relatively obscure until recent champions brought it to light.

6. Further Research

Future work could explore performance and editorial aspects of this piece. For instance, comparing the expressive requirements of the 1906 solo edition with Beach's own 1936 revision or the 1942 two-piano reduction might yield insights into her evolving style. A transcription for orchestra (with revisions from 1906) is mentioned in memoirs; examining any surviving orchestration fragments could illuminate Beach's orchestral approach. Comparative studies—such as juxtaposing this work with Dvořák's *Slavonic Dances* or *Ballade on Slovak Folk Songs*—would situate Beach's composition in the broader context of Western classical engagement with Slavic music. Finally, research into the original Balkan source songs (via folk-song collections) might clarify Beach's choices and adaptations of melody, text, and meter, adding ethnomusicological perspective to the analysis.

7. Conclusion

Amy Beach's *Variations on Balkan Themes*, Op. 60, is a masterful fusion of American Romantic pianism with Eastern European folk material. This analysis has shown how Beach assigns each Balkan melody to specific variations, then creatively develops them: the first theme governs Variations I–V (and VII), the second theme appears as a slow *Stara Planina* introduction to Variation VI, the third theme ("*Nasadil e Dado*") closes Variation VI, and the final theme ("*Macedonia*") forms Variation VIII. Initially, Beach's variations closely echo the folk tune, but she progressively frees herself from the theme's strict form, expanding the texture and harmony and relying on motivic development for unity.

This study expands the English-language scholarship on Beach by providing a full structural analysis of *Variations on Balkan Themes*. It highlights Beach's sophisticated handling of foreign folk melodies within a Romantic framework and confirms her innovation in variation technique. The piece stands out not only as a technical showpiece but also as a cultural synthesis, reflecting Beach's interest in non-Western music.

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