

## VARIATION FORM IN MOZART'S PIANO WORKS

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**SUMMARY.** This study presents the variation form in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's piano works. At first there is a short description of the variation form. From each genre, where the variation form appears in Mozart's piano works, I chose the most representative example: the "Je suis Lindor" Variations as an independent variational work, the first movement of the A major piano sonata KV 331 as a variational part of a solo piano work and the second movement of the E flat Major KV 482 piano concerto as a part of a concert. By analysing the works mentioned before I obtained a clear image about Mozart's harmonical language, form and structure, character and tonalities in his variational piano works.

**Keywords:** Mozart, piano, variation form, sonata, concert

### Variation Form

"A form founded on repetition, and as such an outgrowth of a fundamental musical and rhetorical principle, in which a discrete theme is repeated several or many times with various modifications ... A theme for variations, rarely shorter than eight or longer than 32 bars, may be a melody, a bass line, a harmonic progression or a complex of such elements."<sup>2</sup>

Variations can be independent pieces (mostly solo- but also chamber- or orchestral pieces), parts of a sonata, a symphony or a concert. The theme of these sets can be based on a melody borrowed from another composer (for example Mozart's "Je suis Lindor" Variations based on the most popular air from Antoine-Laurent Baudron's opera, Diabelli variations written by Ludwig van Beethoven, Brahms' variations on a theme by Joseph Haydn, Frédéric Chopin's Variations based on the air "La ci darem la mano" from Mozart's "Don Giovanni" or Paul Hindemith's Symphonic Metamorphosis of Themes by Carl Maria von Weber) or it can be an original theme.

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<sup>2</sup> Sisman, Elaine. 2006. "Variations". *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*

We can differentiate 8 type of variations:

1. Passacaglia and chaconne are based on an ostinato, having a repetitive harmonic basis and structure. Ostinato variations have two subgroups: tonic-providing (Pachelbel Canon in D major) and tonic-requiring (Johann Sebastian Bach Passacaglia in C minor), depending on whether the pattern includes its own final cadence with a return to the tonic pitch at the end.

2. Constant-melody or cantus firmus variations: usually uses a well-known melody which appears from voice to voice in the background. Composers from romanticism used the cantus firmus expression to identify the theme in other voices. (Weber Variations on Schöne Minka op.40 variations 4 and 7)

3. Constant harmony variations appear mostly in the 16-18<sup>th</sup> century and how their name shows – the harmonic structure is more important than the melody. We can include here the Goldberg variations by Johann Sebastian Bach.

4. Melodic-outline variations – the melody can be found in each variation even if it is decorated. This category could contain set of variations with the same harmonic structure or set of variations with different harmonic base.

5. Formal-outline variations are set of variations where just the structure remains. This type of variations is very famous in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

6. Characteristic variations – it can be a dance piece, national or programmatic style variation. Also the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> type can be used like a characteristic variation. (Herz: Variations caractéristiques sur un thème arabe op.137).

7. Fantasy variations: used especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. The variations are (mostly) developing the melodic elements of the theme. (Strauss' symphonic poem - Don Quixote 'fantastic variations on a theme of knightly character').

8. Serial variations: Modification of a serial theme in which figuration and accompaniment are derived from the row. The structure of the theme usually remains constant (Schoenberg, Serenade op.24, 3<sup>rd</sup> movement).

One of the oldest, probably the first set of variations appeared in the 16th century in Spain (Vihuela by Luis de Narváez). The most beloved forms of variations in Renaissance were the *divisions* in which the basic rhythmic beat is successively divided into smaller and smaller values. It was an important principle to begin with the easiest variations and continue with the more elaborate ones. The most important set of variations of this renaissance

– baroque age is the Goldberg variations composed by Johann Sebastian Bach. These set of variations were composed for cembalo with two manuals, first published in 1741 and considered one of the most important examples of variational works.

In the classical age, Mozart wrote numerous sets of variations, some of them with foreign themes like: 8 variations on a Dutch theme “Laat ons juichen, Batavieren!” KV 24, 12 variations on a French theme “Ah, vous dirai-je, maman” KV 265, 6 variations in G major on the Theme “Mio caro adone” from the opera “La fiera di Venezia” KV 180; some of them without any special title, theme composed by him. Joseph Haydn specialized in sets of double variations, in which two related themes, usually minor and major, are presented and then varied in alternation. The variation form has an important role also in Beethoven’s art. He wrote a lot of sets of variations (Same way as Mozart, he loved to use foreign themes as well). His most famous set of variations is the Diabelli variations - 33 Variations on a waltz by Anton Diabelli.

In Romanticism, like the other musical forms, the variations developed as form, melodic and harmonic material. Franz Schubert wrote five sets of variations using themes composed by him (e.g. Death and the Maiden D810 variations on a song composed by him with the same title). Frédéric Chopin wrote the Variations on "La ci darem la mano" from Mozart's opera Don Giovanni, Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy composed the "Variations sérieuses". Johannes Brahms composed the Variations and fugue on a theme by Haendel and the variations on a theme by Haydn, Antonín Dvorák wrote his Symphonic Variations, Edward Elgar his Enigma Variations.

This fantastic musical form lives with the same intensity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sergei Rachmaninoff composed his Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini for piano and orchestra. He also composed variations for piano solo as well on themes by Chopin and Corelli. Igor Stravinsky composed Pulcinella (XV Gavotta con due variazioni) – his neoclassical ballet.

Mozart loved this musical form, he composed sixteen sets of variations for piano solo, and this form appears also in his other piano works, like in his piano sonatas (Sonata in d minor KV 284, 3<sup>rd</sup> movement – Thema mit zwölf Variationen, A major piano sonata’s first movement) and in his piano concerts (B flat major piano concert: KV 450, 2<sup>nd</sup> Movement, c minor piano concert’s final movement).

### **12 Variations on Theme “Je suis Lindor” K 354/299a**

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart composed a set of variations in E flat Major KV 354/299a based on Antoine-Laurent Baudron’s air – theme „Je

suis Lindor” from the opera “The Barber of Seville”. The libretto of this opera is written by Pierre Beaumarchais (The same Pierre Beaumarchais, who wrote the libretto of Mozart’s famous opera, the „Marriage of Figaro”).

In the variation form in Mozart’s time the theme needs to be varied – modified in every variation. The theme can be a bass-line, a structure, a harmony or even a melody – as in our case. In this set of variations Mozart keeps the harmonies presented in the theme, the tonality of the composition remains till the end E flat Major (one of Mozart’s favourites) only once introducing a variation in e flat minor (in the key of the tonic minor).

Mozart preferred the major tonalities and even more the tonalities with flats than with sharps. The tonality of this set of variations (E flat major) is considered by Mattheson „pathetic, suitable only to express serious things, unrelated to any richness, sumptuousness. Considered by Schubart the tonality of love, of the intimate dialogue with God. The three flats symbolise the Holy Trinity.”<sup>3</sup>

The construction of the theme is a simple, binary form. Both sentences are repeated. The first sentence of the theme begins in E flat Major and modulates to the dominant tonality (in our case to B flat major). In the second sentence returns back to E flat Major. Among the compositional processes, we can find repetitions like *anaphora* and *repetitio*. The second part of the second sentence is longer with six bars because the last five bars are repeated and varied.

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<sup>3</sup> Bera, Adriana: *Retorică și afect în discursul pianistic mozartian*. Arpeggione, Cluj-Napoca 2007. page 75. (Bera, Adriana: Rhetoric and affect in Mozart’s pianistic discussion)

*Thema* Entstanden Paris, 1778

*Allegretto*

The structure of the first variation is the same as the theme's. It is a melodic variation with modification methods like: *variatio*, *coloratura*, *diminutio*, *passaggio* ( the names of the methodes taken from "*Handbuch der musikalischen Figurenlehre*" of *Dietrich Bartel*").<sup>4</sup> The main notes of the theme are kept and they can be found between other notes in the first variation. The eight notes from the theme changes in sixteenth notes which ones can be identified as passing tones, anticipations, neighbouring tones or suspensions.

<sup>4</sup> Bera, Adriana: *Retică și afect în discursul pianistic mozartian*. Arpeggione, Cluj-Napoca 2007. page186-190 (Bera, Adriana: Rhetoric and affect in Mozart's pianistic discussion)

## E.g. 2

The second variation has the same construction principles. The ornamented melodic passage can be find at this time in the bass line. The theme appears in the higher voice with small differences.

## E.g. 3

The third variation is an unique method to process the theme by ornamenting it with „trillo”. The main rhythm disappears at all, and it is replaced with ornamentation figures. The harmonical structure of this variation is the same as the theme’s.

## E.g. 4

The 4<sup>th</sup> variation is a polyphonic variation. The harmonical structure is the same. The composer uses the crossed – hands technique, which creates a dialogue-effect. The theme is presented sinusoidal: it appears in three lines: the middle one is for the harmonical base, the bas and the soprano lines are representing the melody.

**E.g. 5**



The fifth variation presents the theme in the octavs of the sopran.

**E.g. 6**



In the sixth variation the sopran theme is accompanied with octavs in the bass. At the end of the second sentence we can observe an imperfect cadence (I-IV-V-VI) which in the other variations was an authentical cadence.

**E.g. 7**



The seventh variation is the most untypical variation from all with his arpeggiated chords and his sixfourth notes called tirata<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Bera, Adriana: *Retorică și afect în discursul pianistic mozartian*. Arpegiione, Cluj-Napoca (Bera, Adriana: Rhetoric and affect in Mozart's pianistic discussion)

## E.g. 8

VAR. VII  
Tirata

The 8th variation represents the middle of this set of variations. It is totally different than the other ones: it has a different character, the main tempo *Allegretto* is changed to *Tempo di Menuetto*, the 2/4 measure is changed to  $\frac{3}{4}$ , the whole variation seems to be more balanced and calm than the others. This variation ends with a “*Presto*” cadence, the measure changes from 3/4 to 4/4.

## E.g. 9

VAR. VIII  
Tempo di Menuetto

The next variation is the typical minor part of the classical variation form. The change of the main tonality means the change of the character, even if the tempo and the measure remains the same. Usually the minor movement in a major composition is in the key of the tonic minor (in our case in e flat minor) or in the relative minor tonality. We can meet again with the rhetoric figures of Dietrich Bartel: **tmesis**, **sectio** (abrupt stops or the fragmentation of the melody with breaks) or **exclamatio**, **ecphonesis**: (a musical exclamation, usually associated with poetical exclamations).

## E.g. 10

VAR. IX <sup>ca</sup>



The ten<sup>th</sup> and the eleven<sup>th</sup> variations are constructed on the same principles. One of the registers is a tremolo in octaves (**tremolo, bombus, bombi, bombilans**) in the other register is the theme. In the ten<sup>th</sup> variation, the theme comes in the bass, in the eleven<sup>th</sup> variation comes in the soprano.

E.g. 11

VAR. X  
Allegretto

The image shows the musical score for Variation X, labeled 'VAR. X Allegretto'. It consists of two systems of staves. The top system has a treble clef staff with a tremolo in octaves and a bass clef staff with a theme. The bottom system continues the same. Red boxes highlight specific notes in both hands across the first few measures.

E.g. 12

VAR. XI

The image shows the musical score for Variation XI, labeled 'VAR. XI'. It consists of two systems of staves. The top system has a treble clef staff with a theme in the soprano and a bass clef staff with a tremolo in octaves. The bottom system continues the same. Red boxes highlight specific notes in both hands across the first few measures.

The twelfth variation is again a typical one: the slow movement (in our case in *Molto Adagio*). It is rich-ornamented and we can find numerous rhetoric elements like **bombus, bombi, bombilans; anaphora, repetitio; ribatutta, tenuta**).

VAR. XII  
Molto Adagio Cantabile

At the end the theme reappears as an Epilogue, having a conclusive character by ending the whole set of variations.

Except one, both sentences of each variation are repeated - "If the repetitions today are considered as some non-illustrative suggestions, exists strong arguments to calculate the fact, that Mozart required from every performer every repetition. Because he erased the repetition of the exposition of the "Haffner" symphony KV 385, he shows us: a repetition never can be useless or non-illustrative"<sup>6</sup>

### Variation Form in Mozart's Piano Sonatas

The most famous variation form in Mozart's piano sonatas is the first movement of the A major sonata KV 331. This sonata has been written in Paris, in 1778. It is the most unusual but at the same time the most awesome sonata, not only because the first movement is a set of six variations, but also because the whole sonata is written on the variation form's principles. (Mozart introduced this innovation with variation form in sonata movements, and probably this sonata is the first example). The tonality of this sonata is also individual: Mozart's only sonata in A major. This tonality is analysed by Mattheson – he found it bright, transposing sad than happy feelings at the same time. Schubart associated this tonality with innocent love, gratitude, hope, cheerfulness and faith in God.

<sup>6</sup> Studii mozartiene II. Omagiu lui Robert Levin. Arpeggione, Cluj-Napoca 2007. Pag. 13-14 (Mozart studies II. Robert Levin's tribute)

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The theme of this variational movement is written in 6/8 measure – a pleasant, soft dance melody, an original German folk song “Freu’ dich Mein Herz! Denk’ an kein Schmerz”.

E.g. 14

Entstanden in Wien (oder Salzburg), 1783

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system (measures 1-6) features a treble clef with a melody in A major and a bass clef with a rhythmic accompaniment. The tempo is marked 'Andante grazioso'. The second system (measures 7-12) includes a first ending bracketed 'ozzra.' and a second ending. The third system (measures 13-18) continues the melody and accompaniment. Dynamics include piano (p), sfz (sforzando), and forte (f).

This Air has a simple binary form. The first sentence (8 bars) is in A major – the first phrase ends on a half-cadence; the second phrase is the almost identical with the first phrase modified in the end with a full cadence. The second sentence (10 bars) is also in A major – the new phrase ends on a half cadence; the second phrase repeats the second phrase of the first sentence. Both sentences are repeated. The Sicilian rhythm together with the lightness of the tonality gives the theme a naive but in the same time a melancholic atmosphere.

The first variation is characterized by semiquaver figures, especially in the treble part, which contains sigh motives in which the second of every two semiquavers are the tones of the melody.

## E.g. 15

VAR. I

The second variation is a continuous movement of semiquavers in triplets. The construction of this variation is the same as the theme's. The theme appears in the treble part but not in the original form – it is ornamented.

## E.g. 16

VAR. II

The third variation is the minor variation (in the key of the tonic minor). In this variation, the semiquaver figures are sustained simultaneously both in treble and bass. The melodic form of the employed minor scale can be found in the 8<sup>th</sup> bar (repeated in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> bars). This variation refers to the third movement – the Turkish March with this melodic atmosphere. The form of this variation is similar with the previous ones, but in both sentences the second phrase is a varied: the treble part is doubled – appears in octaves.

E.g. 17

VAR. III

The image shows two systems of musical notation for Variation III. The first system consists of three measures, and the second system consists of three measures. Red boxes highlight specific notes in the right hand melody. The second system includes a 'simile' marking and a dynamic change to 'f'.

The fourth variation, written in A major, is rendered very distinctive by the continual crossing of the left hand over the right hand. The right hand just accompanies the melody.

E.g. 18

VAR. IV

The image shows a single system of musical notation for Variation IV. The right hand features a melody with demisemiquaver figures and ornaments, highlighted by red boxes. The left hand provides a simple accompaniment.

The fifth variation is the slow variation written in Adagio. This part can be characterized by demisemiquaver figures. The notes of the main melody are frequently displaced with auxiliary notes. In this part, we can find a lot of ornamentation which gives a phantasy – atmosphere to this variation. It contains a lot of rhetoric elements. In the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> bars there is a modulation to the key of D major. This is the only modulating variation.

## E.g. 19

VAR. V  
Adagio

The last variation is in Allegro. The combined change of time signature and tempo entirely alters the character of the melody in this variation (4/4). The harmonic structure remains unchanged, but near the two sentences comes a third one, which is a kind of cadence.

## E.g. 20

VAR. VI  
Allegro

I just mentioned before the fact that the whole sonata is written on the variation form's principles. We can find strict connections between the variations and the other two movements. The second movement of the sonata (written also in A major, what is totally unusual) is a minuet. The trio part of this movement refers to the fourth variation with its crossed-hands technics. The famous third part (similar atmosphere with the third variation), the Turkish March is not the first movement with oriental influences in Mozart's works (Le gelosie del Seraglio KV. 109 or the A major violin concert KV 219).

### Variation Form in Mozart's Piano Concertos

The variation form conquered Mozart's piano concerts as well. This much beloved form can be found in five piano concertos of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: the second movement of the E flat Major KV 482 piano concerto, the second movement of the B flat Major KV 450 piano concerto, the second movement of the B flat Major KV 456 piano concerto, the third movement of the G Major KV 453 piano concerto and the third movement of the c minor KV 491 piano concerto. This variation form differs from the other ones presented before, being accompanied by the orchestra, which means changes and new possibilities.

Mozart finished the E flat Major KV 482 piano concerto in 16<sup>th</sup> of December, 1785. This is the first piano concerto of Mozart which includes clarinets. This concerto is scored for solo piano, flute, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani (in D and A), and strings. The second movement, composed in c minor begins with the presentation of the theme by the strings. These first 32 bars have similarities with the second movement of C major KV 467 piano concerto (same colour and atmosphere realized by the strings). The movement has a mixed form - amalgamation between the rondo and the variation form.

The movement begins (how I mentioned before) with the presentation of the theme by the strings.

E.g. 21

The image displays a musical score for the beginning of the second movement of Mozart's Piano Concerto in E-flat major, KV 482. The score is in 3/4 time and C minor. It features four staves: Violino I, Violino II, Viola I, II, and Violoncello e Basso. The first system shows the initial theme with dynamics like 'p con sordini' and 'sf p'. The second system continues the theme with 'Bassi' indicated at the bottom.

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The first variation is presented by the piano. It has the same dimension (32 bars) and the same tonality as the theme. The composer uses passing tones, anticipations, suspensions and neighbouring tones to decorate the theme. After this variation comes an interlude played by the woodwind instruments and horns. This interlude is in the relative major tonality of the movement (the main tonality of the piano concert), in E flat major.

E.g. 22



The second variation is played by the piano and accompanied by the strings. The theme can be found in the soprano, the bass accompanies with thirty-second notes. From the 125th bar begins the second interlude. It is in C major (the parallel tonality of the movement). This interlude contains dialogues between the flutes, bassoons and strings.

E.g. 23





The third variation begins from the 144th bar. The first part of this variation is dominated by the orchestra and mostly just accompanied by the piano. The second part of the variation is presented by the piano and accompanied by the orchestra. The first part of this variation is in c minor, the second part in E flat major, in the end again in c minor. The movement ends with a coda.

E.g. 24

The image shows a musical score for the third variation of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 23, starting at bar 144. The score is in C minor and 4/4 time. It features a piano part and an orchestra. The piano part is highlighted with red boxes, showing specific melodic and harmonic elements. The score is arranged in a grand staff with two piano staves and two orchestra staves.

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