

The music

Ludwig van Beethoven *Diabelli variations*

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) *Thirty-three Variations on a Waltz by Diabelli* (1823)

The origin of the Diabelli variations has passed into legend. Anton Diabelli, a music publisher, wrote a simple waltz theme and sent it to all the important composers in Austria, asking them to write one variation each to be published as a set. Some 50 composers complied, including Schubert and the 8 year old Liszt. Beethoven did not submit the requested variation, allegedly dismissing the theme as a “Schusterfleck” (cobblers patch).

But the idea must have wormed its way into his composing brain because he kept returning to it over several years, eventually producing this towering set of 33 variations which boil with invention, transcending everything else in the genre except Bach’s marvellous *Goldberg Variations*. Brendel called it “the greatest of all piano works”. Thus do mighty plants grow from unpromising soil.

Beethoven and Bach were both consummate masters of variation, but their approach was different. Bach wants to analyse the theme and unpack its musical content, but Beethoven tends to use it as a springboard for his own invention. He is more interested in the ideas the theme sparks in his mind than in working out its musical properties in a rigorous way. He can draw inspiration from small fragments of the theme, or its rhythms and harmonies. For example, some of these variations are based on the tiny ‘turn’ figure which recurs in the theme. Diabelli’s little waltz has been much derided, but it contained the ingredients Beethoven needed to fire his imagination.

This vast piece is an astonishing summation of Beethoven’s art. It touches spiritual heights, but also sparkles with wit and humour; virtuosity rubs shoulders with spare textures; now he ennobles the theme, now he pokes fun at it. The flow of invention is inexhaustible.

There is no space for detailed analysis of each variation, but the list below may help to locate them.

Tema. Vivace

- 1 *Alla marcia maestoso*: A rather stiff-legged march.
- 2 *Poco allegro*: A hesitant limping theme.

- 3 *Listesso tempo*: More flowing, uses counterpoint.
- 4 *Un poco più vivace*: Related to 3, but more animated and with more insistent rhythms.
- 5 *Allegro vivace*: Skips along.
- 6 *Allegro ma non troppo e serio*: Flourishing trilled ornaments followed by downward runs.
- 7 *Un poco più allegro*: Left hand chords with florid right hand figuration.
- 8 *Poco vivace*: Chordal melody in the right hand, figuration in the left.
- 9 *Allegro pesante e risoluto*: More powerful, drawn from Diabelli’s opening grace-note and turn.
- 10 *Presto*: Faster. Descending chords in the bass, figuration above, becoming animated.
- 11 *Allegretto*: Again based on Diabelli’s ‘turn’.
- 12 *Un poco più moto*: Flowing development of 11.
- 13 *Vivace*: Lean halting chords with pregnant pauses.
- 14 *Grave e maestoso*: Slow and solemn, the “sublime arches of a Gothic cathedral” (von Bülow).
- 15 *Presto scherzando*: A brief German dance.
- 16 *Allegro*: Trills usher in a virtuoso variation.
- 17 *Allegro*: Galloping bass chords, melodic figuration above.
- 18 *Poco moderato*: Slower. Melodic fragments pass from hand to hand.
- 19 *Presto*: Flies along. Voices echo and imitate in canon.
- 20 *Andante*: Extremely slow-moving, low and solemn chordal melody in minims, big contrast to 19 and 21.
- 21 *Allegro con brio – Meno allegro – Tempo primo*: An exaggerated parody of Diabelli’s theme. Starts fast, slows and speeds up again.
- 22 *Allegro molto, alla ‘Notte e giorno faticar’ di Mozart*: A parody of Leporello in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*.
- 23 *Allegro assai*: Explosively fast, parodies virtuoso études.
- 24 *Fughetta (Andante)*: Calm simple fugue. A tribute to Bach?
- 25 *Allegro*: The waltz becomes a comic German dance over a running bass.
- 26 *Piacevole*: Gentle rising figures pass from hand to hand.
- 27 *Vivace*: Energetically twinkling semiquaver triplets compress and parody aspects of Diabelli’s theme.
- 28 *Allegro*: Another German dance, harsh dissonances on strong beats, rhythmically compressed. “Must be hammered out with well-nigh raging impetuosity” (von Bülow).
- 29 *Adagio ma non troppo*: The last five variations leave the world of Diabelli’s waltz far behind and enter a transfigured realm, serious and sometimes melancholy. 29 moves into dark C minor, very slow, with almost funereal beauty.

- 30 *Andante, sempre cantabile*: Slow and expressive, with falling motifs. Harmonically adventurous.
- 31 *Largo, molto espressivo*: The longest variation, a very beautiful, slow and tender chromatic melody, full of unexpected harmonic twists. Looks back to Bach and forward to Chopin.
- 32 *Fuga: Allegro*: An energetic Handel-like triple fugue in E flat. It rises to a huge climax when the three fugue subjects combine, dissolving into a dissonant chord and a pensive ending.
- 33 *Tempo di menuetto moderato*: The final variation opens with a gentle Mozartian theme, developed harmonically and rhythmically before the work closes with an ethereal coda, very like the fourth variation of the op 111 piano sonata’s *Arietta*. He’d been working on both pieces in parallel, and cross-fertilisation is apparent.

Notes by Alan Hedges

The artist

Imogen Cooper *piano*

Regarded as one of the finest interpreters of Classical and Romantic repertoire, **Imogen Cooper** is internationally renowned for her virtuosity and lyricism. Recent and future concerto performances include the Berliner Philharmoniker with Sir Simon Rattle, Sydney Symphony with Simone Young, the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra with Ryan Wigglesworth and the Aurora Orchestra with Nicholas Collon, the latter including performances in London and at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. Her solo recitals this season include performances in the UK, Austria, Spain and the Netherlands.

Imogen has a widespread international career and has appeared with the New York Philharmonic, Philadelphia Philharmonic, Boston Symphony, Cleveland Orchestra, Vienna Philharmonic, Royal Concertgebouw, Leipzig Gewandhaus, Budapest Festival, NHK and London Symphony Orchestras. She has also undertaken tours with the Camerata Salzburg, and the Australian and Orpheus Chamber Orchestras. She has played at the BBC Proms and with all the major British orchestras, including particularly close relationships with the Royal Northern Sinfonia and Britten Sinfonia, playing and directing. Her recital appearances have included Tokyo, Hong Kong, New York, Singapore, Paris, Vienna, Prague and the Schubertiade in Schwarzenberg.

As a supporter of new music, Imogen has premiered two works at the Cheltenham International Festival: *Traced Overhead* by Thomas Adès (1996) and *Decorated Skin* by Deirdre Gribbin (2003). In 1996, she also collaborated with members of the Berliner Philharmoniker in the premiere of the quintet, *Voices for Angels*, written by the ensemble's viola player, Brett Dean.

Imogen is a committed chamber musician and performs regularly with Henning Kraggerud and Adrian Brendel. As a Lieder recitalist, she has had a long collaboration with Wolfgang Holzmair in both the concert hall and recording studio. Her discography includes Mozart concertos with the Royal Northern Sinfonia (*Avie*), a solo recital at the Wigmore Hall (*Wigmore Live*) and a cycle of solo works by Schubert recorded live and released under the label *Schubert Live*. Her recent recordings for *Chandos Records* feature music by French and Spanish composers, Beethoven, Liszt and Wagner.

She received a DBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours in 2021. The honour adds to Imogen's many awards and accolades, including the Queen's Medal for Music (2019), Royal Philharmonic Society Performers Award (2008), CBE (2007), Doctor of Music at Exeter University (1999) and Honorary Membership of the Royal Academy of Music (1997). Imogen was the Humanitas Visiting Professor in Classical Music and Music Education at the University of Oxford for 2013. The Imogen Cooper Music Trust was founded in 2015, to support young pianists at the cusp of their careers and give them time in an environment of peace and beauty.

www.imogen-cooper.com

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4pm and 8pm
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Programme Notes