Variation Forms

Variation forms offer a different take on musical organization. They invite the listener to actively compare and trace changes between variations. These forms are strongly tied to historical periods and stylistic norms. Each period tends to have its own form of variation, but we will classify variations according to the technique of variation rather than their historical period.

Some forms (like rondo and ternary) have seemingly similar structures to variations, but they focus on *recurrence* of themes. Variations forms focus on *repetition* of something, like a bass line, a harmonic plan, a melody, or even a motive. Analysis of variations forms does not rely on cadences, tonal plans, or thematic material, but on tracing constants and observing differences between each successive variation.

Techniques of Variation

Ostinato Bass Variations (*Passacaglia/Chaconne)*

This technique features a continuously repeating *Ground Bass* that remains unaltered throughout the piece. With each iteration of the bass line, you will see changes in orchestration, melody, texture, rhythmic density, or other musical features. The bass line might include a built-in cadence, but the melody may or may not align with the cadence or rhythm of the ground bass.

Some common features: the bass line is usually heard by itself before any other voices enter, and there will be no clear separations between each iteration of the bass line. This form was popular in the baroque era and had a revival in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The *lament bass* is a common bass line in ostinato variations.

Examples: Bach, Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor BWV 582
Pachelbel, Canon in D[1]
Purcell, 'Dido's Lament' from *Dido and Aeneas*

Cantus Firmus variations

In these variations, a melody appears like a *cantus firmus* for each variation, like the ground bass in ostinato bass variations. The melody can appear in any upper voice and will be the same (or slightly altered) every time. The surrounding harmony or texture will change with each variation, and the melody may change voices between variations. You may or may not see any clear separation between each variation in this style. These variations were popular in the Renaissance era.

Examples: William Byrd, *Walsingham*
Sweelinck, 6 Variations on 'Mein junges Leben hat ein End'

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[1] This piece is not actually a canon, but an ostinato bass variations using canonic technique!

Harmonic variations

In harmonic variations, you will find a harmonic progression that is consistent between each variation. These should not be confused with ostinato bass variations, as they are quite different. In harmonic variations, a theme will be presented and subsequently varied any number of times. Unlike ostinato bass variations, each harmonic variation will be compartmentalized with double bars or clear demarcations at the end of each section; variations may also be numbered.

The melody of each variation will likely not have any clear relationship to the theme or any other variations. Melodies also usually follow the structure of the harmony. These variations saw popularity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Some common harmonic variation progressions include the *Folia* and *Romanesca*.

Examples: Marais, *La Folia*
　　　　　Bach, *Goldberg Variations*, BWV 988 (also fixed form, see below)

Melodic variations

These are usually the first thing that come to mind when someone mentions theme and variations form. They begin with a theme followed by any number of variations. In each variation, you can find a background melody that matches the initial theme. The melody will be altered embellished with each variation, sometimes to the point of being almost unrecognizable. Like harmonic variations, they will be clearly compartmentalized or separated and often numbered. The harmonic progression of the theme may be varied or may be constant between variations, and occasionally these variations will feature changes in mode (major to minor, or vice versa).

Examples: Arban, Fantasy and Variations on 'The Carnival of Venice'
　　　　　Brahms, Variations on a Theme by Haydn, Op. 56a (also fixed form)
　　　　　Mozart, Variations on "Ah, vous dirai-je, Maman" K.265 (also fixed form)
　　　　　Rzewski, *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*[2]

Harmonic and Melodic Variations may also have the following features:

Fixed form: the form of the theme is consistent with each variation, usually a rounded binary form.

　　　　Example: Beethoven, *33 Variations on a waltz by Anton Diabelli*, op. 120

Character variation: Each variation takes on a different stylistic character (i.e. March, fugue, minuet, etc.)

　　　　Example: Britten, *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*, op. 10

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[2] These also fall into the category of *Fantasy Variations*, in which motives from the theme are used rather than the entire melody.