



LUDWIG VAN
BEETHOVEN

*33 Variations on a Waltz by
Anton Diabelli in C Major,
Op. 120*

Beth Levin, piano



THE DIABELLI VARIATIONS

In 1819 Beethoven was hard at work on his masterpiece, the *Missa solemnis*. Earlier that year, he had received a request to write a variation on a short waltz composed by the publisher Anton Diabelli. Beethoven's initial reaction to this idea was scorn, deriding the waltz as a "cobbler's patch." But as work on the *Missa solemnis* became more difficult, Beethoven turned to Diabelli's waltz. By the end of 1819, he had sketched out two-thirds of 33 *Variations on a Waltz by Anton Diabelli*, Op. 120, more commonly known as the *Diabelli Variations*, which the pianist Alfred Brendel has called "the greatest of all piano works."

Like *Don Quixote*, the *Diabelli Variations* can be seen as a series of comic adventures, with Beethoven tilting at the windmill of this silly waltz and trying every strategy he can think of to conquer it. The first variation is a pompous, majestic guide through the waltz's harmonic structure; we can hear Beethoven barely suppressing a laugh as he contemplates the simplistic progression in an exaggeratedly academic fashion. The second variation is an etude in rapid hand-alteration.

There is a flow to the first eight variations that allows the listener to get caught up in Beethoven's laboratory. While there are some enigmatic

moments (like the asymmetry and off-kilter rhythms of variation 2, the extended murky bass rumbling in the second half of variation 3, the unexpected harmonic twists of variation 5, the dramatic use of the full range of the keyboard in variation 6, and what Kinderman calls the "Brahmsian" bass line of variation 8), the energy propels forward with each variation.

The deliberate nature of the minor key variation 9, which explores the first rhythmic figure of the theme, is our first indication that the easy flow we've been enjoying thus far will not last, and that the listener should start paying more attention to the variations as individual statements. The fleet, scherzo-like tenth variation is the first to dispense with both repeats, and is over almost before we've had a chance to register its existence.

The eleventh variation seems to be itself a variation of the ninth variation, with the clipped eighth notes turned into flowing triplets and the minor turned back to major. The twelfth variation takes up where the fourth variation left off, the canon's voices inverted and the rhythmic pulse changed to a steady stream of eighth notes in an easy-going *molto perpetuo*. There is also a reference to that murky bass moment in the third variation. Now we're far enough along the trail that we're looking back as well as forward.

The pregnant pauses in the 13th variation appear designed to give us the space for such assessment, as does the *Grave* tempo of the 14th variation, the slowest tempo so far. The 15th variation is a curiously restrained scherzo. The 16th and 17th variations constitute one large double variation; the first has running sixteenth notes in the left hand, the second has them in the right hand.

The next two variations also constitute a sort of pair, exploring call and response of short, cell-like phrases. The sense of playfulness and fun is palpable; the ship seems to be in full sail—which makes the effect of the 20th variation so affecting and enigmatic.

The 21st variation continues this new attitude towards the theme in a very different way: the second phrase in each half is in a different tempo and meter than the first. The 22nd variation adapts the beginning of *Don Giovanni* to the theme. Having paid tribute to Mozart, he now looks even further back, to Bach. Beethoven's 23rd variation is rhetorically reminiscent of #29 of the Goldberg set with its emphatic downbeats and figures of rapid hand alteration, and there are also some Bach-like phrases in contrary motion. But it is in the 24th variation that the older master's influence is made explicit. Marked "*una corda*" to emulate the limited dynamics of the harpsichord, the piece is a slow fugue in four voices that manages to evoke some of the aura of Bach's *Aria*.

The next four variations find Beethoven back in piano-method mode; the 25th tests the player's left-hand agility, the 26th and 27th require the pianist to invest similarly-shaped phrases of sixteenth-note triplets with a variety of expressive attitudes, and in the scherzo-like 28th variation Maestro Beethoven wants to make certain his pupils can make the listener hear the difference between sforzando, forte and piano attacks, all in rapid staccato eighth notes. The final five variations seem to form an extended coda, five ways of saying farewell to the theme. The 29th variation manages to be both a compression and expansion of the theme at the same time; whittling down the harmonic rhythm of the 32-bar theme to twelve bars while uttering halting, ponderous phrases of eighth and thirty-second notes. The 30th variation revisits the *una corda* sonority and counterpoint of the 24th variation, but here in the service of music that looks forward as well as backward, its Bachian material invested with Schumannesque longing.

The 31st variation continues the sense of historical juxtaposition, being both a tribute to Bach's famous "Black Pearl" variation (Goldberg #25) and an evocation of Beethoven's own recently composed final sonata op. 111, it takes the concepts of parody and self-parody to a place of the very deepest contemplation and reflection. For variation 32 he launches into an exuberant fugue, rather straightforward by

late-Beethoven standards, reminiscent of a Mozartian *opera buffa* finale.

The final variation turns out to be a stately minuet: the last dance of the evening. Beethoven can be more beautiful, more ecstatic, bolder and cleverer than this, but nowhere in his entire output is he as mature, wise and conscious as he is in the 33rd variation.

- James David Jacobs

BETH LEVIN

Beth Levin is an acclaimed recording artist, recitalist, concerto soloist and chamber musician. "A pianist of rare qualities and the highest professional caliber," states pianist Paul Badura-Skoda of Levin. Throughout her celebrated career she has approached both the Romantic repertoire and contemporary composers with equal facility and grace.

At age 12, Levin made her debut with the Philadelphia Orchestra, and soon after was selected to study with Rudolf Serkin at the Curtis Institute of Music. "Mr. Serkin was an inspiration the moment he walked into a room," Levin recalls, "A single word evoked the eloquence of a poem."

In 2007, Levin performed Johann Sebastian Bach's Goldberg Variations at Steinway Hall in New York City, a return for her to a composer in "the first repertoire I had studied as a child." Her celebrated recording of that work was released on Centaur Records in 2008.

In July 2010, Bargemusic, "New York's floating concert hall," hosts Levin's performance of the Diabelli Variations. That same month sees her appearance at the Mannes College The New School for Music International Keyboard Institute and Festival's tribute to Leonard Shure.

As a concerto soloist, Levin has appeared with The Philadelphia Orchestra, the Boston Pops Orchestra, the Boston Civic Symphony, the Seattle Symphony Orchestra, and numerous other symphony orchestras throughout the Americas, working with noted conductors such as William Smith, Arthur Fiedler, Benjamin Zander, Tonu Kalam, Sidney Rothstein, Milton Katims, Silas Huff and Joseph Silverstein.

Chamber music festival collaborations brought her to the Marlboro Festival, Casals Festival, Harvard, the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, the Ankara Music Festival and the Blue Hill Festival. As a "Music From Marlboro" artist, she toured the United States and Canada.

A founding member of the Gramercy Trio, the

American Arts Trio and Vista Lirica, Levin has also collaborated with the Audubon Quartet, the Vermeer Quartet, The Reykjavik Woodwind Quintet, the Daniel Quartet, the Boston Artists Ensemble and the Saratoga Chamber Players, as well as touring Europe extensively with Trio Borealis.

In 2004, Levin traveled with Poetica Musica under the auspices of the U.S. State Department, performing and giving master classes in Croatia, Serbia and Turkey.

Levin's recordings include Schubert's Wanderer Fantas, Scott Wheeler's Artist Proofs, the Hummel Quintet in D Minor, and the Bach Goldberg Variations. Her performances have been broadcast on National Public Radio, WGBH (Boston), WFMT (Chicago) and WNYC, WNYE and WQXR (New York).

As a soloist, chamber musician and interpreter of contemporary music, Levin has performed and recorded works by Alan Campbell, Marc Eychenne, Brian Fennelly, Steven R. Gerber, Alexander Goretzky, Louis Karchin, Michael Rose, Allen Shearer, Scott Wheeler David Del Tredici, Andrew Rudin, Carol Worthey, Mohammed Fairouz and Richard Cameron-Wolfe.

Beth Levin's musical education began with Maryan Filar at the Settlement Music School in Philadelphia,

and in addition to Rudolf Serkin, her teachers included Leonard Shure at Boston University and Dorothy Taubman in New York City.

Beth Levin would like to dedicate this recording of the Diabelli Variations to the memory of Leonard Shure.

PRAISE FOR BETH LEVIN:

"...Ms. Levin kept the ear engaged with boldly inflected readings and an impressive ability to convey emotion without exhibition. Her technique was solid, and better still, her organic approach made it feel like an afterthought." Jeremy Eichler, The New York Times

"Over the years, Levin has transformed herself. The flame within still burns with undimmed intensity, but now there is warmth as well as blinding light." Richard Dyer, The Boston Globe

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1 Theme: Vivace	0:57	20 Variation 19: Presto	1:09
2 Variation 1: Alla Marcia, maestoso	2:01	21 Variation 20: Andante	2:29
3 Variation 2: Poco allegro	0:52	22 Variation 21: Allegro con brio	1:31
4 Variation 3: L'istesso tempo	1:59	23 Variation 22: Allegro molto	0:44
5 Variation 4: Un poco piu vivace	1:23	24 Variation 23: Allegro assai	1:03
6 Variation 5: Allegro vivace	0:56	25 Variation 24:	
7 Variation 6:		Fughetta – Andante	4:12
Allegro ma non troppo e serio	1:57	26 Variation 25: Allegro	0:51
8 Variation 7: Un poco piu allegro	1:14	27 Variation 26: [Piacevole]	1:29
9 Variation 8: Poco vivace	1:45	28 Variation 27: Vivace	1:08
10 Variation 9:		29 Variation 28: Allegro	1:13
Allegro pesante e risoluto	2:14	30 Variation 29:	
11 Variation 10: Presto	0:36	Adagio ma non troppo	1:46
12 Variation 11: Allegretto	1:05	31 Variation 30:	
13 Variation 12: Un poco piu mosso	1:12	Andante, sempre cantabile	2:09
14 Variation 13: Vivace	1:03	32 Variation 31:	
15 Variation 14: Grave e maestoso	3:49	Largo, molto espressivo	4:51
16 Variation 15: Presto scherzando	0:44	33 Variation 32: Fuga – Allegro	3:33
17 Variation 16: Allegro	1:12	34 Variation 33:	
18 Variation 17	1:12	Tempo di Menuetto, moderato	4:00
19 Variation 18: Poco moderato	2:02		Total Time: 60:38



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