The Performance of Beethoven's "Diabelli Variations"

Continuity, Discontinuity, Cyclic Integration, Irony[1]

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This essay explores the performance challenges of Beethoven's "Diabelli Variations"; it is paired with the author's own studio recording of the work coordinated with the musical score. The commentary seeks to address issues of compositional genesis, motivic development, musical character, and formal shaping, while keeping aesthetic matters in view. Beethoven's transformations of Anton Diabelli's waltz — which the composer described in a letter as a "SchusterFleck" ("cobbler's patch") — indulge in persiflage, irony, and parody, qualities that invite critical scrutiny. Beethoven was sometimes compared during his lifetime to Jean Paul, whose concept of humor as "the inverted sublime" and notion of a tensional duality of the Great and the Small applies well to Beethoven's most paradoxical composition. How can we best shape this cycle as a whole in performance, while doing justice to its vivid contrasts and rich allusiveness? Numerous performance recommendations emerge from the integrated consideration of historical documents, musical analysis, and aesthetic reflection. Since the subject concerned here is animate rather than inanimate, it is not well grasped from just an objectivist, factual perspective.

Dieser Beitrag untersucht die interpretatorischen Herausforderungen von Beethovens ›Diabelli-Variationen‹; er ist eng bezogen auf die mit der Partitur synchronisierte Studioaufnahme des Werkes durch den Verfasser. Der Kommentar behandelt Fragen der kompositorischen Entstehungsgeschichte, der motivischen Entwicklung, des musikalischen Charakters und der formalen Gestaltung des Zyklus, wobei ästhetische Gesichtspunkte ebenso im Blick behalten werden. Beethovens Veränderungen des Walzers von Anton Diabelli – den der Komponist in einem Brief als ›SchusterFleck‹ bezeichnete – schwelgen in Persiflage, Ironie und Parodie, Qualitäten die einer kritischen Untersuchung bedürfen. Zu Lebzeiten wurde Beethoven manchmal mit Jean Paul verglichen, dessen Konzepte des Humors als ›umgekehrtes Erhabenes‹ und eines spannungsvollen Dualismus zwischen dem Großen und dem Kleinen sich gut auf Beethovens paradoxeste Komposition anwenden lassen. Wie kann der Zyklus als ganzer in der Interpretation bestmöglich gestaltet werden unter Berücksichtigung der lebendigen Kontraste und seines Anspielungsreichtums? Zahlreiche Empfehlungen zur Interpretation ergeben sich aus einer integrierten Betrachtung historischer Quellen, musikalischer Analyse und ästhetischer Reflexion. Insofern der betrachtete Gegenstand eher belebt als unbelebt ist, lässt er sich nicht aus einer bloß objektivistischen, sachlichen Perspektive erfassen.

Schlagworte/Keywords: compositional genesis; Diabelli Variations op. 120; Diabelli-Variationen op. 120; Interpretation; inverted sublime; Ironie; irony; Jean Paul; kompositorische Entstehung; Ludwig van Beethoven; performance; umgekehrtes Erhabenes

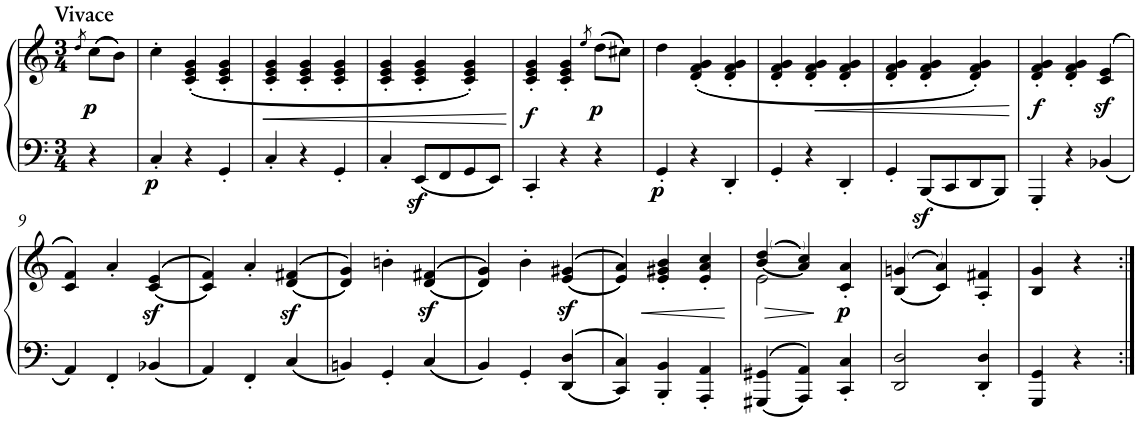
1 The present essay builds upon and augments earlier publications devoted to this work and its genesis, including my book *Beethoven's Diabelli Variations* (Kinderman 1987), my essay (in English and German) "The Evolution of Beethoven's Diabelli Variations" (Kinderman 2010) in the facsimile edition of the autograph score, as well as my essays "Von der ironischen Karikatur zum genialen Kunstwerk: Beethovens Diabelli-Variationen" (Kinderman 2008) and "Die Diabelli-Variationen von 1819. Die Skizzenbefunde zu op. 120. Eine Studie zum kompositorischen Schaffensprozeß" (Kinderman 1984). My CD recording of Beethoven's "Diabelli Variations," first issued by Hyperion Records (CDA66763), is currently available as a two CD set (studio recording and lecture recital) with Arietta Records (Arietta ART-001). A recording of the lecture-recital at the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz on 11 March 2020, from which this essay emerged, can be viewed at https://youtu.be/4Py8EneReaM. My performance of the "Diabelli Variations" on the same day and during the same event is available at https://youtu.be/4vquJ_pHV7c.

Introduction

How can insight into the artistic creative process prove useful to the interpretation and performance of a challenging cyclic musical composition? An example of such an undertaking is offered by Beethoven's largest piece for piano, the *33 Variations on a Waltz by Diabelli*, op. 120. This cycle, written between 1819 and 1823, displays an unsurpassed range of musical character, embracing contrasts and polar dualities. The aesthetic field of the work reaches well beyond conventional models.

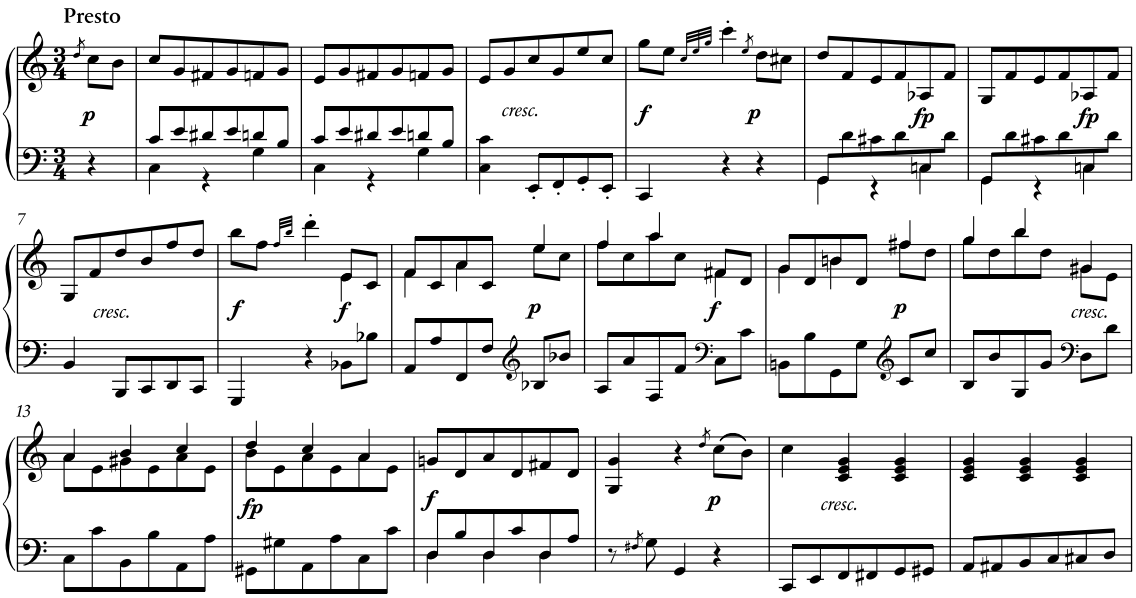
The present essay is closely linked with my own performances and recording of Beethoven's work. This study took shape as a lecture paired with my live performance at the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz (University of Music and Performing Arts Graz; KUG) on 11 March 2020, days before the pandemic curtailed such events. My commentary is bound up with an experience of seeking to convey aesthetic meanings through sound; awareness of historical and analytical issues can contribute to this goal. My studio recording from 1994, coordinated with the score, using the older complete edition from Breitkopf & Härtel, is available on YouTube.[2] Any divergences from that printed text (variations 12, 15) are addressed in my studies cited in footnote 1 below.

A conventional reply to Anton Diabelli's call for variations on his theme is readily illustrated by some of the other composers who responded to his project. The variation by Beethoven's declared rival Joseph Gelinek (1758–1825), for instance, is confined to figural elaboration of the waltz. The beginning of Diabelli's theme and Gelinek's response are shown in Examples 1 and 2. Gelinek responds to Diabelli with decorative embellishment. Much stays unchanged: the key, meter, and basic harmonic structure with the "cobbler's patch" sequences remain intact. Gelinek adds some chromatic spice in a continuous rhythmic texture of running notes; an upward registral expansion marks the *forte* arrival point at measure 4. When the first half of the theme is repeated, Gelinek retains Diabelli's repeated chords, slipping a rising chromatic scale into the bass. At the close of the first part, the notes in the left hand are rendered as after-striking octaves (mm. 9–16). Gelinek's variation technique is limited to such figurative elaboration. It is as if the attire is adjusted while the individual remains the same. Diabelli remains the master, but dons a purple vest.



Example 1: Beethoven, *33 Veränderungen über einen Walzer von A. Diabelli* op. 120, Theme by Anton Diabelli, mm. 1–16

2 https://youtu.be/mlR89BMvQT0.



Example 2: Vaterländischer Künstlerverein, *Veränderungen für das Piano-Forte über ein vorgelegtes Thema componirt von den vorzüglichsten Tonsetzern und Virtuosen Wien's und der k.k. österreichischen Staaten*; variation by Joseph Gelinek (variation 11), mm. 1–18

By contrast, Beethoven's approach is radical and transformational, and indulges in humor and irony. According to Jean Paul, the novelist and aesthetic philosopher whose work was sometimes compared to Beethoven's, humor is understood as the "inverted sublime […] [which] lowers the sublime, while raising up the trivial, and […] sets the trivial beside the sublime and so annihilates both, since in relation to the infinite everything is the same and nothing."[3] The passage in the original German is as follows: "Der Humor, als das umgekehrte Erhabene, [...] erniedrigt das Große [...] und erhöhet das Kleine [...], um ihm das Große an die Seite zu setzen und so beide zu vernichten, weil vor der Unendlichkeit alles gleich ist und nichts."

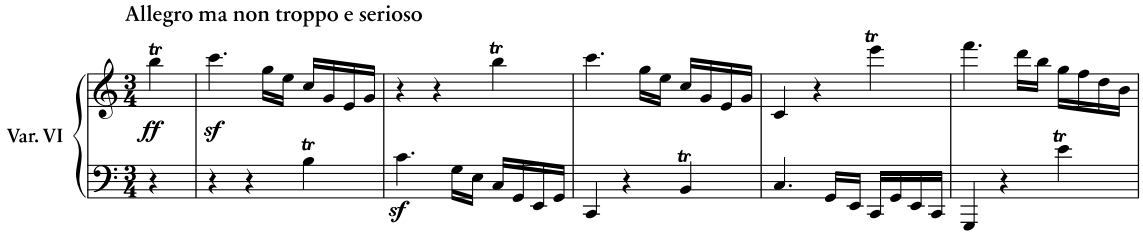
Jean Paul's tensional duality of the Small and the Great ("das Kleine" and "das Große") fits with Beethoven's engagement with Diabelli's theme. In a letter, Beethoven described the waltz as a "Schusterfleck" or "cobbler's patch," pointing thereby to the mechanical sequences with all the voices moving in the same direction in measures 9 to 13.[4] In viewing Diabelli's waltz critically, indulging in ironic distance while seeking numerous far-reaching transformations of the theme, Beethoven exploits its motivic possibilities while departing from its model in many of his variations. These variations are rebellious. They decide what they wish to take from the waltz.

The nature of Beethoven's approach is illustrated by his handling of the turn figure from the outset of Diabelli's theme. For Diabelli – as for Gelinek – this gesture is a conventional ornament. For Beethoven in his variation 6, it becomes an emphatic trill on the leading tone, delivered *fortissimo* (Ex. 3). Its importance is underscored by the presence of the trill sounding contrapuntally in different registers throughout the variation. At the same time,

3 Jean Paul 2015, 181 (translation by the author). On Beethoven as "Jean Paul of music," see Geck 2017, 30–31.

4 In his bitingly humorous letter to Diabelli of 20 July 1825, Beethoven refers to the waltz as a "Schuster-Fleck," writing that "Es Lebe dieser euer Österr. Verein, welcher [einen] SchusterFleck – Meisterl.[ich] zu behandeln weiß –" (Beethoven 1996b, 115, Nr. 2017). In the eighteenth century, the term "Schusterfleck" was broadly used for such rising sequences (as in Riepel 1755, 44), so the somewhat pejorative implication does not originate with Beethoven, despite the sarcastic tone of his letter.

this potent transformation of Diabelli's conventional turn figure appears as an outcome of a motivic development stretching across several variations. In variation 3, for instance, the decorative upbeat figure from the waltz becomes a three-note descending turning motive and in variation 4 a rising two-note idea in a slightly faster tempo. Repeated eighth notes mark this upbeat in variation 5, preparing for the brilliant trill motive in variation 6 and the coordinated gestures in both hands in variation 7. This unfolding series of five variations brings a gradual quickening in tempo and increasing brilliance of sonority.



Example 3: Beethoven, *33 Veränderungen über einen Walzer von A. Diabelli* op. 120, variation 6, mm. 1–5

What served as a possible model for Beethoven's use of driving trills in his sixth "Diabelli" variation? Among his own earlier piano works, one thinks of the fugal finale of the "Hammerklavier" Sonata, op. 106. At the threshold to the finale of this sonata he reshapes the ascending motivic leap of a tenth from the opening *Allegro*, the first movement. Endowing that gesture with fiery brilliance, Beethoven crowns the destination pitch with a trill on the leading tone – A moving to B♭. In various passages of the "Hammerklavier" finale, Beethoven develops this trill motive in *stretto* passages, with a strident ringing of sound. This figure of a rising tenth and trill leads to the culminating cadence at the close of the fugue.

Beethoven's original model for this idea was likely the fugue in F♯ major from the second book of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* by Johann Sebastian Bach. Strikingly, Bach employs a leading tone trill to launch his fugue, with resolute effect. The use of such a figure at the outset of a fugal subject corresponds to Beethoven's op. 106. In the sixth "Diabelli" variation, a hard brilliance is conveyed through the *fortissimo* trill leading to an accented downbeat. The rugged insistence of the gesture is reinforced by close canonic imitations and through registral contrast, with a wide spacing of the dominant chord reached in the second phrase (G1–F6, mm. 5, 7).

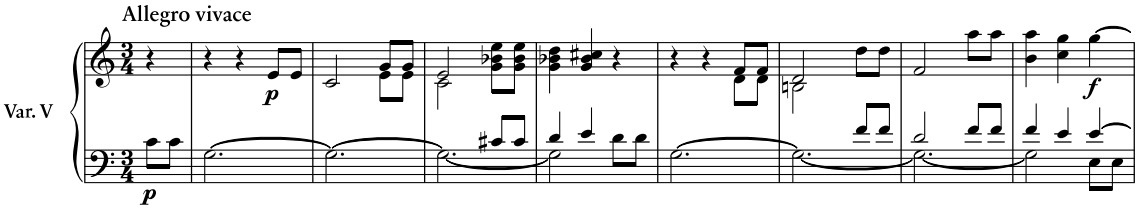
This motivic transformation carries implications for performance. With weight and gravity – the variation is marked *serioso* – Beethoven replaces the conventional turn figure from the original waltz by a vibrating tensional shift emphasizing the semitone rise from upbeat to downbeat. The trill motive is not merely a vacillation between tones, but an incisive gesture, rising to an accented downbeat. Its opening pitch marked *fortissimo* is not yet the most intensive sound; the momentum and biting arrival from the first to the second note need to be conveyed. Register plays a role in this gestural articulation. This *Allegro ma non troppo e serioso* is the first of the variations to begin in the higher treble register, a position that is maintained in the ensuing variation 7, *Un poco più allegro*.

A challenge to performance of this music is the need to adequately render vivid details while maintaining control of the larger artistic context. In assessing these performance challenges, we shall first examine the narrative progression from one variation to the next, and then consider the pacing and architecture of the whole cycle of thirty-three variations, whose vast scale embraces nearly an hour of performance time.

The Continuity of the Variations

The progressive connection between successive variations is illustrated by the sequence of variations 3 to 7, which has already been summarized above. Each of these five variations engages with Diabelli's upbeat figure, contributing to a pattern of increased animation and intensity. Study of the genesis of the "Diabelli Variations" reveals that this series originally was to have launched the work. Variation 3 was first planned as the very first variation, as shown in Beethoven's draft of the piece from 1819. Variation 4, like variation 3, is marked *dolce*, but carries the direction *Un poco più vivace*. It is livelier than the preceding variation, enriched by contrapuntal voices, a thickening of texture, an ascent in register, and a prolonged *crescendo*, reaching *forte* at the end of each variation half.

Variation 5, marked *Allegro vivace*, ingeniously reasserts and transforms Diabelli's awkward emphasis on G as the highest pitch of tenfold repeated chords (Ex. 4). Beethoven here makes G the *lowest* pitch at the outset, prolonged through four measures in each of the opening phrases. The falling fourth C-G and falling fifth D-G thereby provide the harmonic foundation for the ensuing imitative phrases, with their increasing density of voices. A conversational aura emerges. This variation engages in active dialogue with Diabelli's waltz. By shifting the falling fourth and fifth to fall on downbeats, Beethoven unleashes rhythmic energy, enlarging these gestures; the three-note upbeat figures fill four measures each. An acoustical performance consideration rests in the prolonged resonance of these Gs as basis of the harmony. These pitches need to be rhythmically placed and rendered distinctly, lest they be overshadowed by the ensuing imitative phrases above them. A character of wry wit emerges, which becomes more pointed through the sharp contrasts in the second half of the variation.



Example 4: Beethoven, *33 Veränderungen über einen Walzer von A. Diabelli* op. 120, variation 5, mm. 1–8

If variation 5 has made its mark, the trills of variation 6 can be heard as a still more acute rendering of the upbeat figure. The coiling figuration in sixteenth notes of this variation is somewhat reminiscent of the contrapuntal textures in the opening movement of Beethoven's last piano sonata, op. 111. Its *serioso* character distances this variation from the more jocular variation 5, reinforcing the contrapuntal gravity of the canonic textures. The two-voiced textures of variation 6 then give way to more elaborate sonorities in variation 7, as Beethoven reinforces the downbeats in the opening phrases with accented octaves, falling through three octaves. The swirling triplet figuration in the right hand conveys an agitated character, as contrapuntal lines emerge out of these rhythmic textures. The tempo, *Un poco più allegro*, represents an intensification from variation 6.

A remarkable aspect of the "Diabelli Variations" resides in Beethoven's overall shaping of the immense chain of transformations. If variations 3 to 7 display aspects of continuity connected to their original role as the first five members of the cycle, other parts of the work emphasize contrast and non-adjacent affinities. Variation 8, for instance, recaptures the *dolce* character from variation 3, with fuller, almost Brahmsian harmonies and a

rich registral treatment. Variation 9 shifts the meter to 4/4 time, and the mode to C minor, while placing a stubbornly humorous stress on the turn figure extracted from the outset of Diabelli's waltz. These elements of contrast in variations 8 and 9 precede the most virtuosic of the variations in this part of the cycle: the *Presto*, variation 10. Through the swift brilliance of its light *staccato* chords, tremoli, and trills, and heightened by extremes of dynamics and register, variation 10 brings the larger initial section of the work to a culminating point, clearing the way for a new quiet beginning in the ensuing variations. Heard in context, variation 10 intensifies the brilliance of variation 7 while prefiguring aspects of variations 16, 17, 23, or 27. In its immediate environment, on the other hand, the climactic effect and *fortissimo* cadence in extreme registral position of variation 10 signal an outcome of the progressive development from variations 3 to 7.

In considering such expressive affinities between variations separated in the unfolding continuity, we confront issues urgently relevant to performance. Elsewhere in this issue, Martin Zenck has shown how Eduard Steuermann drew attention to certain of these relationships in his annotations in the score and analytical sketches.[5] Steuermann perceived an expressive kinship between variation 5 and the *Presto scherzando*, variation 15. Both variations rhythmically shift the initial falling fourth from Diabelli's waltz such that the lower pitch G falls on the downbeat, heightening the tension of the gesture. Another affinity that drew Steuermann's attention was that between variations 9 and 28, a kinship based on rhythmic and motivic parallels. A less obvious parallel noted by Steuermann is the affinity between the variation pairs 11–12 and 18–19, where his attention was drawn to Beethoven's use of imitative and canonic textures in successive variations.

In my recording, cuts were avoided between the successive variations: the progression from one variation to the next was always included during the takes. The timing and character of these transitions between variations are crucial, forming an integral part of the audible conception or *Klangvorstellung*. An arbitrary separation between successive variations — as resulting from the use of discrete digital files — would damage the psychological continuity. The ways in which the variations emerge in a continuity — or sometimes clash through contrast or contradiction — are important. Nuanced transitions between variations should not be sacrificed on account of technical expediency.

The Genesis of the Cycle

The manuscript sources for the "Diabelli Variations" offer a fresh platform for assessing the formal build of the work. Tables 1 to 3 display important aspects of the compositional genesis, which took place in two distinct temporal phases:[6] the first half of 1819, and from late 1822 until April 1823. The manuscript sources are listed in Table 1, with a draft from 1819 encompassing twenty-three variations shown in Table 2, and a comparison of this preliminary draft with the finished piece displayed in Table 3.

5 See Martin Zenck's contribution to this issue.

6 All three tables are taken from Kinderman 2010, 48–50.

Manuscript	Location	Date
1. leaf at head of autograph	Bonn, Beethoven-Haus	1819
2. Paris MS 58B (= No. 2), fols. 1r–2v	Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France	1819
3. Paris MS 77A (2 leaves)	Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France	1819
4. Paris MS 77B (2 leaves)	Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France	1819
5. Wittgenstein Sketchbook, fols. 3v–9r, 10v–11r	Bonn, Beethoven-Haus	1819
6. Landsberg 10 Sketch Miscellany, 165–176	Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz	1819
7. Montauban leaf fragment, esquisse No. 30	Montauban, France, Musée Ingres	1819
8. Artaria 180/200, 35	Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz	1819
9. Artaria 201 Sketchbook, 123–125	Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz	1822
10. Paris MS 57, fol. 1r, 2r	Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France	1823
11. Paris MS 96, fol. 1r, 1v, 2r	Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France	1823
12. Engelmann Sketchbook, 1–7, 16–18, 30, 37	Bonn, Beethoven-Haus	1823
13. Autograph	Bonn, Beethoven-Haus	1823

Table 1: Sources of Beethoven's "Diabelli Variations"[7]

source	pages	contents (variations)
Autograph, fol. 1		Theme
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS 77	1–2	Var. 3 (1)*
		Var. 4 (2)
lost bifolio, originally part of the Paris-Landsberg-Montauban draft		Var. 5 (3)
		Var. 6 (4)
		Var. 7 (5)
		Var. 8 (6)
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS 77	3–4	Var. 9 (7)
		Var. 10 (8) beginning
Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Landsberg 10**	165–166	Var. 10 (8) continuation
		Var. 11 (9)
		Var. 12 (10)
	167–168	Var. 12 (10) continuation
		Var. 13 (11)
		Var. 14 (12) beginning
	169–170	Var. 14 (12) continuation
		Var. 16 (13)
		Var. 17 (14) beginning
	171–172	Var. 17 (14) continuation
		Var. 18 (15)
		Var. 19 (16) beginning
	173–174	Var. 19 (16) continuation
		Var. 20 (17)
		Var. 21 (18) beginning
	175–176	Var. 21 (18) continuation
		Var. 22 (not numbered by Beethoven)
		Var. X (not used; 19)
Montauban leaf fragment	recto	Var. 27 (20)
		Var. 30 (21)
		Var. 32 (22) (fugue)

Table 2: The Paris-Landsberg-Montauban Draft of 1819;
* the variations are given their final numbering, with the original number in parentheses;[8]
** for a description of this manuscript see Beethoven 1975, 144–145.

7 Kinderman 2010, 48.

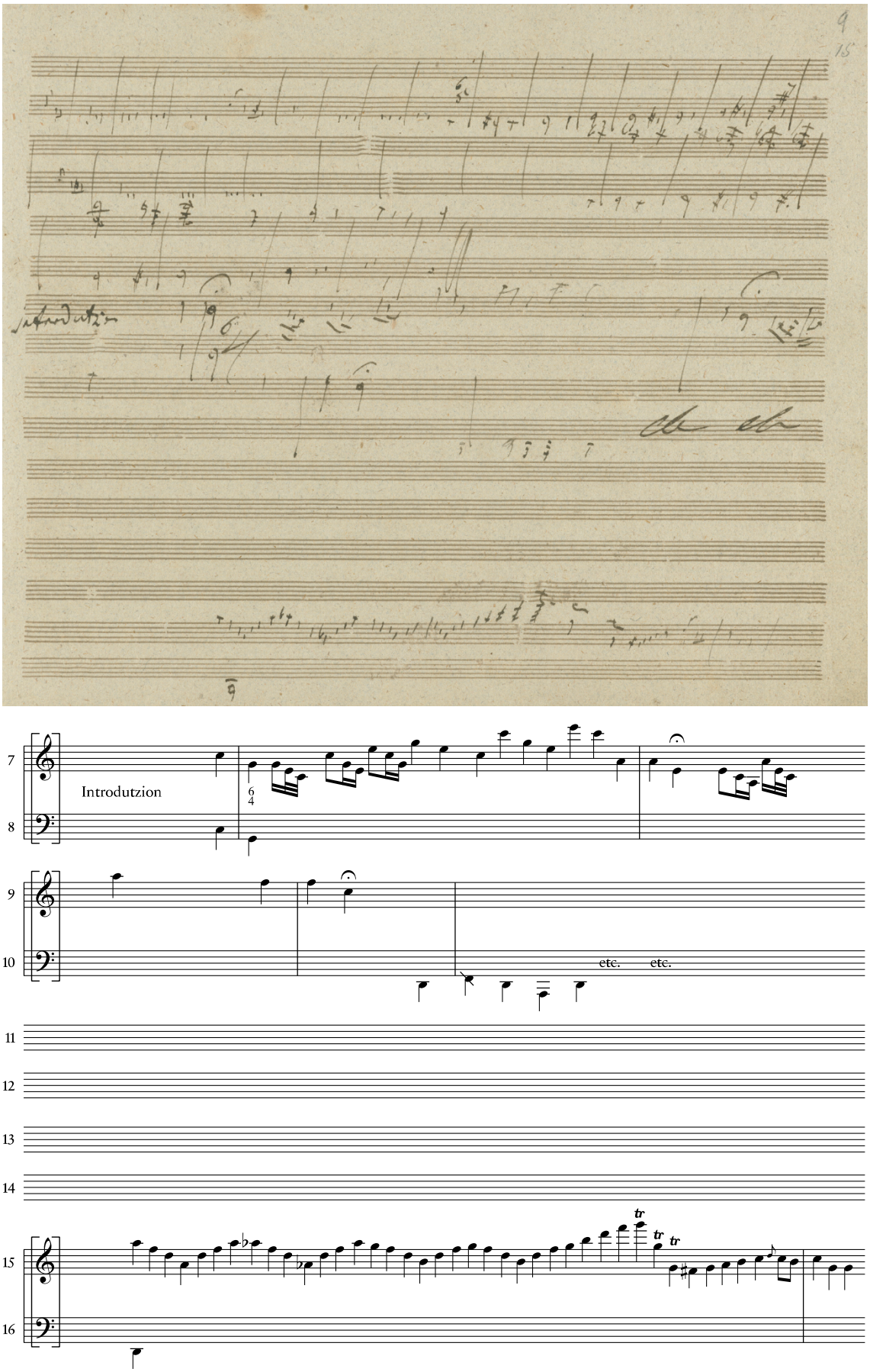
8 Ibid., 49.

draft (1819)	finished work (1823)
	1*+
	2+
1	3
2	4
3++	5
4++	6
5++	7
6++	8
7	9
8	10
9	11
10	12
11	13
12	14
	15*+
13	16
14	17
15	18
16	19
17	20
18	21
19	22
unused variation	–
	23+
	24+
	25+
	26*+
20	27
	28*+
	29+
21 ("minore")	30
	31+
22 (fugue)	32
	33+

Table 3: A comparison of the early plan for the "Diabelli Variations" with the finished work;
* variations absent from draft for which related material occurs in the Wittgenstein Sketchbook and in Paris MS 77B;
+ variations (eleven in all) missing from the 1819 draft;
++ variations presumably sketched in a missing bifolium[9]

Some striking implications of this revelation of the work's genesis relate to larger dimensions of its form. Beethoven weighed certain compositional options which he eventually set aside. For example, he considered including an improvisatory prelude to the piece preceding Diabelli's theme (Ex. 5). This sketch for an "Introdutzion" is found toward the end of the extended series of entries for the Variations in the *Wittgenstein Sketchbook* used in 1819. The spatial disposition of this sketch in the original manuscript is revealing. Beethoven develops here the falling fourth interval from the head of Diabelli's waltz. This descending fourth interval is stated five times, with the pitch levels of the second, third, and fourth statements generated through a chain of descending thirds: C-G, A-E, F-C, D-A, returning to C-G at the beginning of the theme. Each appearance of the motive is punctuated by a bar line, but a specific quality of the introduction's initial gesture is conveyed through a metrical repositioning of the figure; unlike in Diabelli's waltz, the falling

9 Ibid., 50.



Example 5: Beethoven, Improvisatory prelude "Introdutzion" (above: manuscript; below: transcription of staves 7 to 16)

fourth from C to G is positioned between upbeat and downbeat of measure 1, and Beethoven specifies the resulting 6/4 harmonic position of the chord on the downbeat. In the subsequent appearances, an upbeat precedes the two pitches of the falling fourth motive, as in Diabelli's theme. Fermatas over the first three sustained pitches mark junctures for rhetorical elaboration and improvisation. Not all of the implied notes are written out.

Beethoven plays here with the registral disposition of the falling fourth motive and makes its appearance on D-A stand out by utilizing the lowest register in the bass. This moment calls for extensive improvisatory elaboration, as is signaled by Beethoven's twofold "etc." indication, as well as by the conspicuous gap on the page itself, with space for two systems left empty. This gap is meaningful and implies the need for temporal expansion on D, the dominant of the dominant. If Beethoven leaves ample room for elaboration, he nevertheless provides an overall map for the progression. For as the lowest system indicates, D becomes an extended pedal point; the upward projection of the fifth of the D minor triad from stave 10 marks a reemergence of notated music. The figuration written here traces a descent from A through A♭ to G, supported by a dominant-ninth harmony, and then further emphasizes the dominant of C major through trills played in different registers, leading to Diabelli's theme. As this sketch shows, the falling fourth interval drawn from the waltz assumes primacy, while Beethoven already envisions the most important structural and registral relations of his material. His blueprint has blank spaces to be filled out with figuration, but it is not just an abstract matrix. It clearly has been imagined in sound.

Although Beethoven did not decide to begin with such an introductory preface to Diabelli's theme, he did utilize some of these ideas in his completed work. The repositioning of the initial falling fourth to coincide with the downbeat is a feature of variation 5, as we have seen, and this recurs in other variations of diverse character, such as the *Andante*, variation 20, the final minuet variation, and the penultimate variation – the fugue. The fugue most powerfully explores the artistic potential of the motivic falling fourth, whose rhythmic impact is reflected in the repeated impulses and continued stepwise melodic descent of the musical texture, while the contrapuntal density of interwoven voices generates an almost explosive tension, a power far beyond what Diabelli envisioned.

The most conspicuous implication of the work's genesis for an understanding of its overall shape lies in Beethoven's insertion of ten new variations at strategic points when he completed the work in 1823. As Table 3 shows, these inserted variations included variations 1–2, 15, 23–26, 28–29, 31, and 33. The presence of these variations strengthens the relation between the original theme and the bewildering diversity of transformations, on the one hand, while building up culminating groups of variations in the last third of the piece, on the other. In the remaining sections of this essay, I shall consider how these added variations offered opportunities for shaping the work into a whole greater than the sum of thirty-three transformations of Diabelli's beer-hall waltz.

Ironic Parody: The Small and the Great

Let us return to Jean Paul's tensional dichotomy of the Small and the Great, a duality reflected in Diabelli's theme, on the one hand, and Beethoven's formidable array of transformations, on the other. Beethoven seems to have recognized an aesthetic problem in his draft version of twenty-three variations from 1819, inasmuch as the waltz was still

insufficiently integrated in the work as a whole. Beethoven's means of addressing this shortcoming was to insert several fresh variations in 1823 that display a particularly direct relation to the original waltz: variations 1, 15, and 25.

If a performer is to convey this tension between the Small and the Great, a character of engagement with Diabelli's waltz needs to be vividly conveyed in sound. Qualities of connection and disjunction, assimilation and transformation, are in play. What Beethoven had generally avoided until his incorporation of these variations was the repetitious pattern of rather chunky chords emphasized in Diabelli's opening phrases: tenfold tonic and dominant sonorities with highest tone G in the right hand. The repeated chords carry *crescendo* markings, but these gestures are weakly motivated in intrinsically musical terms. It is conspicuous that Beethoven departs from Diabelli's model in most of his variations. In the inserted variations 1, 15, and 25, however, he restores and stresses precisely these features, thereby evoking our recollection of the original waltz.

In performance, it is fitting to underscore the resolute quality of these chords in launching the march, variation 1. With a display of pomp even foreshadowing Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, Beethoven reproduces the sounding substance of the waltz while casting his glance beyond it. The march is majestic yet stilted, as befits the tension between the Small and the Great. Diabelli would hardly have anticipated that his modest request for a single variation would trigger such a rich artistic harvest. Variation 1 sets forth a majestic transformation of the waltz not untouched by mockery. It is noteworthy that Beethoven conceived this music as an addition to his plan only in 1823, when he knew that his composition had assumed such expansive dimensions.

The player does well not to beautify the march, not soften its edges, but allow for audacious exposure of its Janus face. Already in the initial moments, Beethoven sets forth a dissonant clash between the octaves in the bass spelling out the falling fourth from the waltz and the repeated C major chords in the right hand. The mood is confident and expansive, yet somewhat brusque. This march is coupled with Diabelli's "cobbler's patch" whereas variation 3 – the original opening variation of the cycle – leaves Diabelli behind. In variation 1, a certain overextension bordering on the pompous is blended with muscular strength, conjuring an impressive opening salvo of Beethoven's monumental cycle.

Variation 15 is a miniature, the shortest of all thirty-three variations, and likely the last one composed. This *Presto scherzando* displays unmistakably comic features. Its brevity conveys wit, as does its curious harmonic plan – conspicuous augmented chords at the outset, with an absence of modulation, for the first half closes on the tonic. The striking leap of the lowest voice into the bass in the second half of (m. 21) has provoked attempts at correction by misguided editors. Here, as in variation 1, Beethoven restores the register and repetitious sonorities of Diabelli's theme, recalling the waltz after far-reaching transformations in the preceding variations. Variation 15 references Diabelli theme as a kind of comic hallucination, with elements of distortion. For instance, the augmented triads including D♯ (mm. 2/4) stand out. Such comic touches need to be given their due.

The humorous reprise of elements drawn from the "cobbler's patch" in variation 15 precedes an imposing pair of march-variations in variations 16 and 17. These three variations are counterpoised to the theme and variation 1, introducing a march with a different, more stilted character. The powerful rhythmic drive of the march-pair and their contrapuntal mirroring effect – with the roles of the hands inverted in variation 17 – opens new vistas of creative interpretation as we move into the large central section of this vast cycle. In this instance, the adjacent variations are bound up tightly into an organic se-

quence. If variations 16 and 17 form a tight double-variation, some of the following numbers involve expressive opposition, involving polar contrasts. Variations 19 and 20 represent a pair of canonic variations, yet in character they are utterly disparate. The headlong swift drive of the *Presto*, variation 19, yields to almost motionless mystery in the *Andante*, variation 20. Some performers elect to pause conspicuously at the end of variation 20, which marks the midpoint in performance time of the entire cycle. Yet that decision seems questionable, since Beethoven delivers a shock with the parodistic eruption of loud trills and ostinato rhythms in the *Allegro con brio*, variation 21, while the idea of sharp contrast is developed further in this variation, with each half split between the bold outburst of the *Allegro* and the changes in key, meter, and texture brought by the *Meno allegro*. It seems preferable to allow the variations to collide with one another; the unexpected impact of variation 21 delivers energy by ambush, through a shock effect. The first four measures of variation 21 form a grotesque exaggeration of the primitive chord repetitions in the waltz and its conventional turn at the end of the melody. The chords repeat each harmony sixteen times, the turns multiply themselves down three octaves. The juxtaposition of this passage with the ensuing *Meno allegro* in 3/4 meter is an instance in which the notes speak with rhetorical significance. It is as if Beethoven meant to say, after the *Schreckensfanfare* of the first four bars, "nicht diese Töne."

Such drastic contrasts as between variations 19, 20, and 21 invite comparison to ironic strategies in literature, in which a protagonist seeks protective seclusion through subjective inwardness while nevertheless remaining open to the demands of society and the world-at-large. One example among many stems from *Marius the Epicurean*, Walter Pater's 1885 philosophical novel set in antiquity, in which the hero "was become aware of the possibility of a large dissidence between an inward and somewhat exclusive world of vivid personal apprehension, and the unimproved, unheightened reality of the life of those about him […]. To move […] in that outer world of other people, as though taking it at their estimate, would be possible henceforth only as a kind of irony."[10]

Another comic reincarnation of elements from the waltz comes in variation 25, in which the consistent sixteenth-note figuration in the bass develops Diabelli's initial turn figure, while the pattern of repeated chords is reasserted in its original register. This variation brings a return of the commonplace following the ethereal *Andante*, the Bachian *Fughetta* (variation 24). The humorous character of variation 25 takes shape as a kind of German dance, with a stumbling effect at the end of the first half of the variation, where Beethoven pushes the music forward by deleting a measure from the pattern of four-bar phrases. In the opening phrases, the dissonances in the left hand, with B, D♯, B, and F♯ grating against C major chords in the right hand, foreshadow those harmonic clashes that will reach a peak in variations 27 and 28.

The Form as a Totality

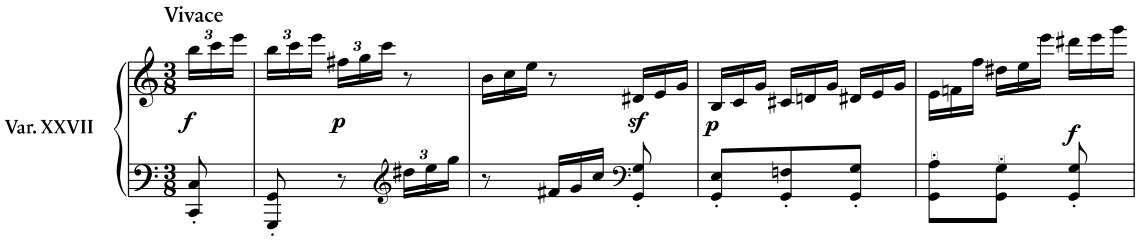
Of the group of four interrelated fast variations 25 to 28, only variation 27 was included in the 1819 draft. Working backwards from this swift *Vivace* in 3/8 meter in perpetual-motion triplets, Beethoven devised the two preceding variations and one succeeding vari-

10 See Muecke 1969, quotation on 237, and the entire concluding chapter of Muecke's study "Irony and the Ironist," 216–247.

ation to shape a grouping of four interconnected pieces. This section marks the beginning of a consolidation of the overall form of the whole, leading to a grouping of three slow variations in the minor (variations 29 to 31), which lead without a break into the penultimate fugue and the final minuet variation and coda. In my interpretation, these nine variations form the concluding large section of the cycle, following the diverse, radical contrasts contained in the middle of the work, from variation 11 to 24.

Many pianists tend to play variation 25 too fast, foreclosing a building up of gradual intensity across these variations. That the tempo of this *Allegro* should approximate that of variation 26 is implied by the lack of a separate tempo indication for variation 26, which is marked only *piacevole*; this variation prolongs the texture of continuous sixteenths from variation 25. The rhythmic texture in variation 25 derives from Diabelli's turn figure; Beethoven spreads this continuous motion across all the pitch registers in variation 26. The *piacevole* assumes the character of a free improvisation, displaying increasing definition and density as its voices are combined and doubled. The 3/8 meter from variation 25, which emphasizes each upbeat and downbeat of the 3/8 meter, carries over to variation 26, which has a hemiolic grouping with two pronounced beats per bar. The opening notes of each six-note phrase should not be accented, as is done in many performances. A more rounded rhythmic shaping in connection with the direction *piacevole* provides a subtle characterization. It is best if the tempo and length of measures in variations 25 and 26 are approximately equal.

Prepared through these two interconnected pieces, variation 27 assumes a role as a biting persiflage of Diabelli's "cobbler's patch" (Ex. 6). The mechanical sequences of the waltz employ the three-note figure E-F-A (mm. 9–10), which is reproduced as F♯-G-B and G♯-A-[B-]C in the ensuing bars. In Beethoven's variation 27, this figure of a semitone and third is spread across the musical texture continuously in triplet sixteenths, appearing more than a dozen times just in the initial four-bar phrase. Although derived from Diabelli's initial rising half-step and third, E-F-A, Beethoven heightens the dissonance through rapid three-note figures such as D♯-E-G. This compressed distillation of the "cobbler's patch" motive, with dissonances placed relentlessly on strong beats throughout, contributes to the wild intensity of this variation, which is even heightened in its second half, with striking registral disparities.



Example 6: Beethoven, *33 Veränderungen über einen Walzer von A. Diabelli* op. 120, variation 27, mm. 1–4

Through progressive rhythmic intensification, we move gradually from the reincarnation of Diabelli's waltz as a comic German dance in variation 25 to the cathartic effect of variation 28, in which the music is dominated by accented dissonant chords (or octaves) placed on every strong beat. A further telescoping of rhythm is promoted through the use of 2/4 meter. This last of the four interconnected fast variations seems to obliterate the image of the waltz evoked in variation 25. For this dramatic progression to be conveyed, the player needs to grasp how one variation yields to the next, with the dissonant appog-

giaturas derived from the theme in variation 27 heightened by the full-voiced abrasive chords of variation 28.

Remarkable about the later "Diabelli Variations" is how the music develops and evolves, both within individual variations and across groups of interconnected pieces. In the slow minor variation group (variations 29 to 31), the mournful, muffled *una corda* textures of variation 30 were envisioned first, as is shown from its presence in the 1819 draft (see Tables 2 and 3 above). Beethoven expanded this single variation into a virtual slow movement by adding variations 29 and 31. In their character, these variations seem to look forward and back, lifted out of time. Both pieces display a Bachian aura: variation 29 evokes the atmosphere of the prelude in E♭ minor from Book 1 of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, whose lamenting melodic character also somewhat foreshadows the variation with solo flute in 3/2 meter in the finale of Brahms's Fourth Symphony. Variation 31 is reminiscent of the decorated minor variation, the chromatic variation 25 of the "Goldberg Variations," while also prefiguring the melodic style of Chopin. The expanded proportions of variation 31 take up five minutes of performance time, making it the longest of all thirty-three variations.

The consolidation of form in the last nine "Diabelli Variations" involves a culminating two-part fugue in E♭ that resolves into a closing minuet variation and coda. Alfred Brendel described variation 32 as Beethoven's "most personal contribution to contrapuntal writing: the explosive fugue."[11] Its first part unites two subjects exploiting the falling-fourth and repeated impulses, on the one hand, with sequential motion, on the other, utilizing a sequential pattern that descends instead of ascending, as in the waltz. Once a third contrapuntal subject joins—one derived from Diabelli's turn figure (m. 116)—the music reaches its highest peak of dramatic and rhythmic intensity. Expanding to four voices, the cumulative power of the swinging repeated notes and harmonic sequences discharges its energy onto a *fortissimo* diminished-seventh chord over a pedal point, the strongest structural downbeat in the entire work (m. 160). A challenge in performance is to guide the swirling contrapuntal developments of the fugue into this culminating gesture, which serves in turn as springboard for the impressive mysterious transition to the final variation, as the high C♭ of the colossal dissonance (mm. 160–161) is transmuted to B natural —leading tone of the tonic C major—in the *pianissimo* sonority of the *Poco adagio* (m. 165–166). These last variations lead directly into one another. As we have seen, Beethoven did not readily envision in 1819 how to conclude this huge cycle of variations. Only in 1823 did the final variations take shape.

The Importance of Irony

Irony is a state of affairs that seems intentionally contrary to what is expected and which in consequence can be amusing. Beethoven was a highly ironic artist. It was likely this ironic reflex that helped motivate him to undertake such an obsessive response to Diabelli's call – a request for just a single variation! Once his own set of thirty-three variations was complete, the composer wrote to Diabelli in 1823, congratulating the collective group of respondents to Diabelli's call on their excellent handling of his "cobbler's patch" ("SchusterFleck"), a gesture that was itself richly laden with irony.

11 Brendel 1990, 39.

Wherein lies this ironic capacity? In an essay on "Goethe and Tolstoy," Thomas Mann refers to the "indispensable value of reserve in art" while identifying this restraint with irony. Alluding to music, Mann espouses

> a type of irony which glances at both sides, which plays slyly and irresponsibly – yet not without benevolence – among opposites, and is in no great haste to take sides and come to decisions […]. […] the real goal to reach is not decision, but harmony, accord. And harmony, in a matter of eternal contraries, may lie in infinity; yet that playful reserve called irony carries it within itself, as the sustained note carries the resolution.[12]

In the "Diabelli Variations," Beethoven indeed "plays slyly […] among opposites," exploring "eternal contraries" while enlarging the scope of what the sturdy, rough-hewn waltz might trigger. Overreacting to Diabelli's modest invitation, Beethoven's creative response surpassed the entire collective project that the publisher had envisioned.

A precursor to the "Diabelli Variations" is his "Prometheus" Variations, op. 35, from 1802. Although these variations are based on the contredanse from the allegorical ballet *The Creatures of Prometheus*, op. 43, Beethoven begins not with that preexisting theme, but just its bass-line, which is fragmentary and grotesquely funny: in its humor of contrasts and expressive silences, this *basso del tema* bears comparison with the thirteenth "Diabelli" variation. The point of Beethoven's approach in op. 35 is twofold: the stiff awkwardness of the clay figures or proto-humans in the ballet is reflected by the rough fragmentary quality of the bass-line, while the rich development of this elemental musical material becomes a metaphor for creativity.[13] In the "Diabelli Variations," Beethoven's response to Diabelli's rough-hewn "cobbler's patch" theme follows a parallel path, and as in op. 35, it is deeply touched by humor.

In 1814, the critic Karl Blum observed that "[i]n the works of the greatest poets there is often an irony that hovers gently above the whole but that breaks through incisively at times." He names Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Goethe in this regard, but continues that "Beethoven's compositions have not been considered nearly enough from this perspective; yet only in this way will that which is *seemingly* unpleasant and alien be recognized as exquisite and necessary."[14] Blum's words capture the spirit of Beethoven's "Diabelli Variations," the most extreme of which indeed "break [] through incisively" in unrestrained exploitation of motivic figures drawn from the unsuspecting waltz. The sharp wit of many variations arises as a pointed response to the naiveté of the theme, involving transformation of its motivic elements and exploration of its latent expressive potential.

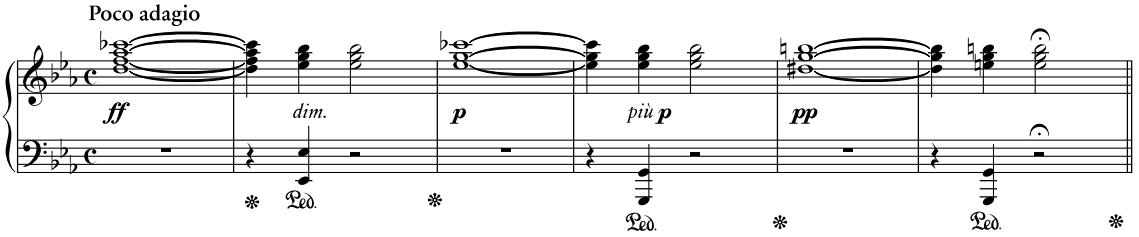
That irony "hover[ing] gently over the whole" embraces a range of musical styles, from the Bachian *Fughetta* (variation 24) and the *Largo, molto espressivo* (variation 31) to the Handelian opening of the climactic triple fugue (variation 32), the Mozartian reference to *Don Giovanni* in the Leporello parody (variation 22), and the final minuet variation. The player here confronts challenges of allusiveness, of a layered subtlety of aesthetic meaning. Glib adherence to the notes alone is inadequate. In the fugal subject of variation 32, for instance, Beethoven unpacks the power of the falling fourth to a downbeat, energizing

12 Mann 1947, 109.

13 For a discussion of Promethean symbolism in these works, see my study *Beethoven: A Political Artist in Revolutionary Times* (Kinderman 2020, 79–84; 96–109; in the German edition, 75–78; 94–106).

14 Quoted in Bonds 2017, 309; and Bonds 2020, 87. Original quotation from Karl Blum, "Miscellen," *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* 16 (8 June 1814): 505–506.

the pattern of repeated impulses to generate the descending sequence of pitches, four measures long. Only at the climactic end of the fugue – after three subjects are combined – does this rhythmic pattern discharge its energy onto an accented dissonance, the strongest downbeat of the entire work, as we have seen (m. 160). The ensuing transition from the fugue to the minuet variation demands heightened sensitivity (Ex. 7). The tremendous accented dissonance marking the fugue's abrupt termination has suddenly absorbed and concentrated its rhythmic drive; the *Poco adagio* transition then looks back at its key of E♭ major before opening a new harmonic path to C major, clearing the air for the final variation.



Example 7: Beethoven, *33 Veränderungen über einen Walzer von A. Diabelli* op. 120, variation 32, mm. 161–166

If this impressive transition already exemplifies the "indispensable value of reserve in art" (in Thomas Mann's words), the Finale of the "Diabelli Variations" goes further still. The impressive two-part fugue has already formed part of a larger coherent process, not just an additive link in a chain of events. Immediately following, we hear a kind of spiritualized reminiscence of Diabelli's country dance as a minuet, with all the grace of the classical minuets of Mozart. More lies behind this Finale than an evocation of the classical minuet, however. There is a parallel with Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, the opera cited by Beethoven in variation 22. At the beginning of the Finale to the second act of the opera, Mozart cites a series of popular tunes from other operas, from Martín y Soler's *Una cosa rara,* Giuseppe Sarti's *Fra i due litiganti il terzo gode*, and finally from his own *Le nozze di Figaro*. These excerpts, played by the band on stage, provide the pretext for humorous commentary by Leporello, who remarks ironically that the tune from *Figaro* sounds "very familiar." *Don Giovanni* was written for Prague in 1787 after the success of *Figaro* a year earlier: Mozart's witty allusions to *Figaro* were aimed at the original audience. We know that Beethoven's initial visit to Vienna in early 1787 lasted longer than previously recognized, and would have enabled the sixteen-year-old composer to encounter Mozart at around the time he began work on *Don Giovanni*.[15]

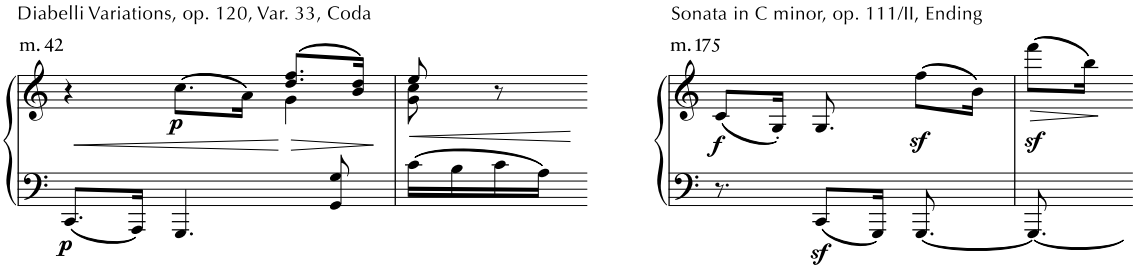
It is remarkable how Beethoven follows Mozart's artistic strategy towards the conclusion of the "Diabelli Variations," where, however, he alludes to the styles of other composers rather than quoting them directly, as Mozart did. As in *Don Giovanni*, there is a series of allusions to other composers leading ultimately to the self-quotation of a work written a year earlier: in Beethoven's case the *Arietta* movement from his final Piano Sonata in C minor, op. 111. Furthermore, there is an additional point of contact between the "Diabelli Variations" and *Don Giovanni* at the beginning of the Minuet finale, which shows a kinship to the opening of the G major minuet from the Finale to the first act of

15 Important documentation of Beethoven's three-month stay at Vienna in 1787 – correcting earlier scholarship – is offered by Haberl 2006.

the opera. Beethoven's reference to *Don Giovanni* is more extensive than is implied by the parody of "Notte e giorno faticar."

It is in the context of these allusions to Mozart and the historical vision embodied in the last variations that we may view the most fascinating relationship of all: how Beethoven's own last piano sonata becomes the subject of the coda. Even at the beginning of the minuet finale, the op. 111 *Arietta* is close at hand. In this variation, as in variations 29 and 31, Beethoven foreshortens the proportions of the first measures of the waltz, making the melodic parallel with the *Arietta* more evident. As Beethoven's sketches for the sonata show, the *Arietta* theme was itself influenced by his preoccupation with the waltz.[16] The initial sketches for the *Arietta* theme do not yet contain the melodic falling fourth and fifth that conspicuously parallel Diabelli's theme. In the end, the variation movement concluding op. 111 became a kind of extension of the compositional project of the "Diabelli Variations," which remained unfinished during the period when the sonata was composed, between 1820 and 1822.

The affinity between the endings of these two weighty C major variation works is far-reaching. Both pieces utilize a framework of rhythmic diminutions leading to a high, ethereal, suspended texture, as occurs in variation 4 of the *Arietta* movement and in the coda of the "Diabelli Variations" (from measure 34). In their conclusions, the two pieces nearly quote one another while dwelling on the thematic descending fourth (m. 42 of the "Diabelli Variations" coda; m. 175 of op. 111; Ex. 8). Both works have open endings, but op. 111 assumes a more contemplative aura, whereas the "Diabelli Variations" are touched by wit: even the final syncopated chord is a surprise. The ascending scalar figure in the bass in the penultimate measure of the "Diabelli Variations" is an idea conceived for the final sonata but cancelled in its autograph score.[17] Another subtlety of that penultimate measure lies in the repeated dyad G-E leading to the *pianissimo* C major chord and then to the upward leap of a sixth in the final sonority of the work, played *forte*. Beethoven incorporated this gesture of repeated impulses into his autograph score of the Variations, thereby preserving a memory of the original context – the chord repetitions of the original waltz.



Example 8: Beethoven, *33 Veränderungen über einen Walzer von A. Diabelli* op. 120, variation 33, m. 42 (left), Piano Sonata C minor op. 111/ii, m. 175 (right)

There is something wonderfully paradoxical in Beethoven's open ending. The long-range backward glance to the waltz and conclusion on a weak beat conveys a sense of unfinished business, a smiling gaze, suggesting perhaps that the creative process is not ex-

16 See in this regard Kinderman 1987, 117.

17 See the sketch on the bottom stave of the penultimate page of the facsimile edition Beethoven 2011. This penultimate page was covered over by Beethoven with a revised version, with the original page concealed by a new page glued with sealing wax, but this original version is revealed in the facsimile edition.

hausted after all, that even more variations *could* have followed. The close of the "Diabelli Variations" is pregnant with implications. It ends in the middle of the thematic structure, poised before an open door, a door which leads, if it leads anywhere, into the midst of the *Arietta* movement of op. 111. So it is that Beethoven drew upon the substance of the last movement of his last sonata in completing the final section of the Variations, his last such extended work for piano.

The performance challenges of Beethoven's "Diabelli Variations" require moving beyond the bare notation to convey broader aspects of aesthetic interpretation. One is reminded of Friedrich Schiller's recommendation in the ninth of his *Aesthetic Letters* of 1796, that the artist endeavors to promote an "ideal" by "uniting the possible and the necessary […] stamp illusion and truth with the effigy of this ideal […] apply it to the play of imagination and […] to all sensuous and spiritual forms."[18] This work is an enduring monument to the principle that creative potential lies in the transformation of the commonplace. In these "extensive transformations of a familiar German dance" ("Grosse Veränderungen über einen bekannten Deutschen"), as Beethoven described them,[19] he extracted a nebula of associations from the waltz, finding riches even in its awkward sequences and repetitious chords. An irony that "hovers gently [but] breaks through incisively at times" (Blum) corresponds to Jean Paul's duality of the Small and the Great – the commonplace and the sublime – as embodied between Diabelli's "cobbler's patch" on the one hand, and Beethoven's colossal composition, on the other. In confronting this tension, the performer may play "slyly and irresponsibly – yet not without benevolence – among opposites" (Mann), thereby seeking to adequately realize Beethoven's vivid characterizations. The special meaning this piece assumed for the composer may be signaled by his dedication of the Variations to his intimate friend Antonie Brentano. How astonished Diabelli must have been at the outcome of his humble request for a single variation! In providing the real-life springboard, his "cobbler's patch" was indispensable, yet the brainstorm that ensued conformed to Beethoven's favorite saying: "Ars longa, vita brevis" ("Art is long, life is short").

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18 Kinderman 2020, 29; in the German edition, 32. In his original text, Schiller envisioned an "Ideal" whereby the artist "strebe, auf dem Bunde des Möglichen mit dem Notwendigen, das Ideal zu erzeugen. Dieses präge er aus in Täuschung und Wahrheit, präge es in die Spiele seiner Einbildungskraft, und in den Ernst seiner Thaten, präge es aus in allen sinnlichen und geistigen Formen und werfe es schweigend in die unendliche Zeit" (Schiller 2008, 35).

19 Letter from Beethoven to Peter Joseph Simrock, 10 February 1820 (Beethoven 1996a, 363, No. 1365).

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