

Variation Forms

Theme and Variations

- A theme and variations composition consists of a **theme** followed by any number of **variations** on that theme
- The “theme” is either written by the composer (an original theme) or borrowed from sources such as opera tunes, folk or popular songs, or a theme written by another composer

The Variations

- The variations might alter any of the following aspects of the theme:
 - Harmony
 - Melody
 - Structure
 - Accompaniment
 - Rhythm patterns
 - Figuration
 - Texture
 - Articulation
 - Instrumentation
 - Key
 - Mode
 - Tempo
 - Meter
 - Dynamics
 - Register

Common Types of Variations

- In an *ornamenting variation*, the melody is embellished with ornaments
- In a *figural variation*, a particular type of figuration is applied to the theme
- A *character variation* resets the theme in the character of a familiar genre, such as a march, a waltz, a gigue, etc.
- *Contrapuntal variations* apply some kind of contrapuntal technique to the theme

Fixed Elements

- In order for the variations to bear some relation to the theme, some elements must remain fixed
- A variation is *harmonically fixed* if the basic harmonic framework of the theme is kept
- A variation is *melodically fixed* if the melody remains basically unaltered
- A variation that has the same phrase structure as the theme is *structurally fixed*

Organization of the Variations

- Sometimes successive variations that have similar features are perceived as a *group*
- Groups of variations can create large-scale formal patterns
- More recognizable variations might create a sense of return
- Sometimes successive variations present gradual increases in textural density, rhythmic complexity, dynamics, etc.