Arnold Schoenberg
Born September 13, 1874, Vienna, Austria.
Died July 13, 1951, Brentwood, a suburb of Los Angeles, California.

Variations for Orchestra, Op. 31

Schoenberg began this work in May 1926 and completed it in August 1928. The first performance was given on December 2, 1928, in Berlin, with Wilhelm Furtwängler conducting. The score calls for four flutes and two piccolos, four oboes and English horn, four clarinets, E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, four bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, four trombones and tuba, timpani, bass drum, snare drum, tam-tam, triangle, tambourine, glockenspiel, xylophone, flexatone, two harps, celesta, mandolin, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-one minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Schoenberg's Variations for Orchestra were given at Orchestra Hall on October 8 and 9, 1964, with Jean Martinon conducting.

Schoenberg didn't expect to be controversial. He didn't court scandal and hostility. But as long ago as 1910, with much of his toughest music still ahead of him, he began to understand that this was the price he would pay:

I am conscious of having broken through every restriction of a bygone aesthetic; and though the goal toward which I am striving appears to me a certain one, I am, nonetheless, already feeling the resistance I shall have to overcome; I feel now how hotly even the least of temperaments will rise in revolt, and suspect that even those who have so far believed in me will not want to acknowledge the necessary nature of this development...I am being forced in this direction...I am obeying an inner compulsion which is stronger than any upbringing.

The next years were filled with Schoenberg's ongoing revolution and a growing opposition to it. Music lovers did not easily accept the new concept of atonality. The riot that disrupted the concert on March 31, 1913, which presented music by Schoenberg and his students Alban Berg and Anton Webern, was even more violent than the famous one at the premiere of Stravinsky's The Rite of Spring just two months later. The years after 1910 were a time of crisis, both for music and for Schoenberg. For a while he turned to painting (mostly portraits of strange, troubled faces), not because he had lost his way as a musician, but as a way of warming up, in the neutral ground of a different medium, for the difficult work that lay ahead.

They were also years of silence. After 1913, Schoenberg wrote only the Four Songs for Orchestra, which he completed in 1916. But although he did not finish another work until 1923, he was not idle. By 1921 Schoenberg had found his solution—his way of blending the outcome of the revolution he had launched around 1910 with the grand tradition of Western music. Serialism is a word even less loved and understood by the public than atonal, but it named a compelling system for composing music no longer based in the familiar tonal language. It offered a way to rescue music from the precipice where Schoenberg had left it more than a decade before.

Schoenberg broke his silence with two works for piano and a serenade for seven instruments and male voice, all written simultaneously between 1920 and 1923. Though all three are atonal, they are not entirely serial and rarely strictly twelve-tone. (Any piece constructed according to Schoenberg's manipulation of tone rows, or series, is serial; it is only a twelve-tone work if the row contains all the notes of the chromatic scale.) Though Schoenberg's new serial system understandably caused a considerable stir, it is no less important to notice that this novel language was first presented in the basic classical forms. The five Piano Pieces conclude with a waltz. The Piano Suite includes standard baroque dances: a gavotte, a minuet and trio, and a gigue. The first movement of a wind quintet written in 1924 is in sonata
form; the finale a rondo. In his Third String Quartet of 1927, Schoenberg quite literally took Schubert's well-known A minor string quartet as a skeleton, an empty form which he then filled in with new music—strangely close to that unsavory concept of "new wine in old bottles." Tradition here accommodates the new and the revolutionary, and form transcends language.

The Variations for Orchestra, begun in May 1926 and finished in August 1928, is Schoenberg's first orchestral score written according to his new rules. It takes one of the great, essential forms of Western music and proves its compatibility with atonal music, and specifically, with serialism. This is, in the truest sense, neoclassicism, though it bears no relation to the eighteenth-century facade of Stravinsky's music that more often wears this label. When Schoenberg set out to write variations, he understood the word in much the same way as Beethoven or Brahms, two of the composers he most loved, did.

The day he finished the score, Schoenberg wrote to Wilhelm Furtwängler, who was scheduled to conduct the premiere with the Berlin Philharmonic, warning him that "the individual parts are for the most part very difficult, so that in this case the quality of the performance depends on the musicianship of the players."

This was a central leitmotif of Schoenberg's career—"My music is not modern," he once said, famously, "it is only badly played"—and he expected musicians to perform his works not only as precisely and faithfully as they played Beethoven, but with the same intensity of expression. He constantly fought to get both performers and listeners to ignore his reputation, look beyond all the dissonances on the page, and find music. "When I compose," he once wrote, "I try to forget all theories and I continue composing only after having freed my mind of them." But with his invention of the system that would be forever linked with his name, he faced a new, even more formidable obstacle. "My works are twelve-tone compositions," he now protested, "not twelve-tone compositions."

Schoenberg's orchestral variations begin not with the theme itself, but with an introduction of thirty-three measures—less than two minutes of music—that opens quietly and grows to envelop the whole orchestra. Following a massive climax, the trombone intones four notes—B-flat, A, C, B-natural—that spell out the name Bach in German notation, invoking the master Schoenberg admired above all others. (The same year that he completed the variations, he transcribed Bach's Saint Anne Prelude and Fugue for orchestra.) When The New York Times critic mistakenly wrote that Bach's name was the theme of the entire piece, Schoenberg was quick to set the record straight, pointing out that this passing, "sentimental" gesture was no different from Beethoven quoting Mozart's Don Giovanni in the Diabelli Variations.

After a pause, the work's true theme appears—an elegiac, arching melody played by the cellos and surrounded only by slow chords. Nine variations and a finale follow, and in each the theme reappears in a different guise—turned upside down, cut apart and respliced, tightened or elaborated, and often, in the process, completely transformed. The variations are all brief: the longest one (7) lasts scarcely three minutes; the shortest (8), half a minute. Each is clearly differentiated from the others through color and texture as well as tempo and mood. The first calls on the entire orchestra for music that is often quiet and airy. The second is a thinly woven piece of chamber music texture for single wind and brass players with two solo strings.

As in some of the greatest sets of variations that Schoenberg knew (he admiringly mentions Beethoven's Eroica Variations and Brahms's Haydn Variations) there's a masterful sense of pace and progression. In variations 3 through 5 the tempo quickens as the music builds to a wrenching climax. Variations 6 and 7 form a slower interlude; variation 7 is the quietest of all, opening pianissimo and seldom rising above that dynamic, even in the most intricately scored passages. Yet, despite its mild demeanor, this is music of complex, rapidly shifting sonorities: "sound in my music changes with every turn of the idea—emotional, structural, or other," Schoenberg wrote, referring to the volatility of this delicate variation.

The last two variations lead straight into the finale, by far the longest stretch of music in the score and richly varied in tempo and color. "I want to explain to you what a finale is," Schoenberg said in a radio broadcast in 1931, before the first Frankfurt performance of the score, "and I looked it up in a number of books, but all to no avail." Schoenberg, however, understood exactly what his finale needed to do. Variations, he pointed out, are "placed one after another, juxtaposed." But symphonic thought
conventionally runs in a different direction: “the musical images, the themes, shapes, melodies, episodes follow one another like turns of fate in a life story—diverse but still logical, and always linked: one grows out of another.” Schoenberg’s finale transforms his set of variations into a work of symphonic stature. It ties things together and draws conclusions—like a panorama in which the pictures that we have viewed separately suddenly appear to be “closely linked and merge into each other.” This makes for a densely packed final chapter, a grand sweep of music rich in incidents and cross-relationships. Not once do we hear the theme played from beginning to end; it is “broken down into fragments which are put together in a different way.” Even the finale—one last “bird’s-eye view of our panorama”—is yet another variation.

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