

MONDAY AUGUST 19, 2002

ANNA GOLDSWORTHY

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
33 Variations on a Waltz by
Diabelli, Op. 120

THE FIRM

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Piano

Ludwig van Beethoven

33 Variations on a Waltz by Diabelli

In 1819 the composer and publisher Anton Diabelli sent a waltz theme to fifty composers, asking them each to submit a variation for publication. Beethoven's former student Carl Czerny was one of the first to respond, in May of that year. Beethoven was not as prompt. He considered the theme to be a "cobbler's patch," and tinkered with it a little before putting it away. It was only in 1822 that he returned to it, and completed this extraordinary set.

Beethoven may have been disparaging of the theme, but the theme's creator, Diabelli, was not disparaging of Beethoven. "A great and important masterpiece," he declared as he published it in 1823, "worthy to be ranked with the imperishable creations of the classics."

Brendel suggests that the theme suffers from an identity crisis: it is not a waltz at all, but more of a minuet masquerading as a bagatelle. Beethoven's lack of respect for this waltz/minuet/bagatelle may have afforded him a paradoxical freedom. These variations are not in the reverential spirit of classical variations. Beethoven satirises the theme, veers away from it wildly, and works on it a miraculous alchemy. We witness Beethoven's transformative art as he turns this modest material into music of the greatest transcendence, thereby transforming the variation form also.

The variations fall loosely into three main sections: Variations 1 to 10, 11 to 24, and 25 to 33. Beethoven announces his subversive intentions immediately, with variation 1. Traditionally the first variation is related to the theme, but the pomposity and quadruple meter of this variation deviates markedly from Diabelli's material. The next three variations grow out of each other, and the variations increase in virtuosity (with the exception of number 8) until the dazzling Presto of number 10.

Variations 11 and 12 return to a more liquid tranquillity, and from this point on the work almost becomes a study in contrasts. The transcendence and harmonic innovation of variation 20, for instance, in which Beethoven is at his quietest and most spiritual, gives way to the farcical variation 21. Variation 22 is a parody of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. William Kinderman suggests an implied reference here to Leperello's relationship with his master. Like Beethoven's relationship to Diabelli's theme, this relationship is "critical but faithful." The parodies continue with variation 23, which pokes fun at Cramer. The sublime fughetta of variation 24 leaves parody far behind, and invokes Bach to conclude these middle variations.

Variation 25 heralds the final section with a comic reappearance of the theme. Variation 29 assumes on a new seriousness with the appearance of c minor. This *gravitas* continues through 30, and the heart-rending Largo of 31. The Fuga of 32 arrives energetically in the key of E flat major. The work concludes in a Minuet that alludes to Beethoven's Op. 111 Arietta, written the year before, and again lifts its hat to Mozart.

Unlike traditional variation practice, in which one element of the theme is explored – a bass-line, say, or melody – Beethoven deconstructs different elements of the theme in different variations, moving from its turn figure to its phrase structure. This creates the variety needed to sustain such a long structure.

Schindler claimed that the composition of these variations "amused Beethoven to a rare degree." The Diabelli variations are encyclopedic in the scope of their reference, the range of their technical demands, and their depiction of human experience. There is tragedy here as much as comedy. But perhaps in the end Schindler is right, when he talks of Beethoven's "rosy mood." The work concludes with a *grazioso* that far transcends mere gracefulness, arriving at spiritual grace.

Anna Goldsworthy

Anna Goldsworthy has given numerous solo recitals in Australia, the United States and Canada, including an acclaimed performance at the Modern Art Gallery of British Columbia, Victoria, as part of the Victorian Arts Festival.

She has enjoyed concerto appearances with the Adelaide Symphony and Adelaide Chamber Orchestra, under Sir William Southgate and Roderick Brydon.

Anna is a founding member of the Seraphim Trio, which has toured throughout Australia, and enjoyed repeat invitations to the International Barossa Music Festival. Her playing has been broadcast many times on national radio. She has worked extensively with young Australian composers.

Anna Goldsworthy recently completed a Masters of Music degree at Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, U.S.A., where she held the F. Howard and Mary D. Walsh Graduate Piano Scholarship. She previously graduated with First Class Honours from the Elder Conservatorium.

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