

THE ECLECTIC VIOLIST

WALKING IN MOZART'S SHOES: MASTER THE ART OF THE IMPROVISED VARIATION

by David Wallace

In earlier eras, musicians like Mozart, Beethoven, and Paganini commonly improvised variations on popular tunes and opera arias to showcase their technical, creative, and expressive powers. Theme and variations made perfect crowd-pleasing encores, and, fortunately, quite a few virtuosos published examples so that we can learn their approach.¹

I believe the ability to extemporize variations is well within the reach of any dedicated violist. Moreover, variation provides one of the easier entry points to composition and improvisation.

To begin exploring spontaneous variation, find some simple tunes to serve as themes. Books of folk songs, children's songs, patriotic tunes, or hymns provide great material, but you can vary melodies from popular music and other genres as well. Having four-part harmonizations or piano accompaniment in front of you will make your explorations easier.²

First, play the tune, memorize it, analyze the harmonies, play the chord progression, and practice the harmonies as arpeggios. Write the chord changes above the melody for reference. Once you've completely internalized the theme, you're ready to start improvising on it.

To take you through some of the most common variation techniques, I will start a variation on the French folk tune *Ah! Vous dirais-je Maman* (*Twinkle,*

Twinkle, Little Star).³ Play the example, then improvise the rest of the variation!

Ornamenting

Simply ornamenting the melody is one easy way to vary a theme. You can add trills, turns, grace notes, and other ornaments, but you can also fill in leaps with passing tones or decorate static pitches with neighbor tones (ex. 1).

Practice ornamenting many melodies. Get a tune book, and ornament tune after tune. Try ornamenting in different styles: Baroque, Romantic, R & B, or other genres. Eventually, ornaments will become a ready resource for all of your variations.

Rhythmic Subdivision

During the Classical period, composers relied on rhythmic subdivision as a standard variation technique. Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert commonly would compose variations in eighth notes, then triplets, then sixteenths (exs. 2–4).

When you explore this approach, try different ways of using the subdivision. You can arpeggiate chords, or you can use extra notes as neighbor tones, passing tones, escape tones, or changing tones. Reiterating pitches with the subdivision can be effective, especially in spiccato. Of course, if you feel an occasional need to play longer notes or different subdivisions, go right ahead.

Example 1: Ornamenting a Theme:

Example 2: Varying a Theme with 8th notes:



Example 3: Varying a Theme with triplets:



Example 4: Varying a Theme with 16th notes:



At first, you may find it easier to play a theme's original melody notes in the same spot where they occur rhythmically within the bar. As you get more comfortable, try playing melody notes sooner or later than usual. You can even skip a note or two altogether for the sake of an interesting shape.

See how much fun it is? But wait, we're not done with rhythmic variation yet! You should also explore varying the theme with rhythmic motives. Example 5 is a variation using one of Schubert's favorite rhythmic devices.

Varying rhythm alone can provide hours of inspiration.

Double Stops

Double stops also provide extensive possibilities. You can focus on a single interval (thirds, sixths, octaves, etc.), mix different intervals, or even try your hand at varying the theme with chords (exs. 6–8).

String-specific Techniques

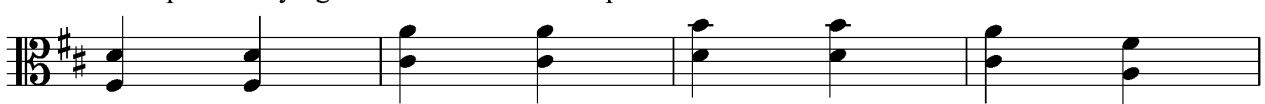
As string players, we have a vast number of instrumental techniques that we can showcase as variation techniques: string crossings, bariolage, harmonics, pizzicato, open-string drones, and so on (ex. 9).

Check out the variations of Paganini, Wieniawski,

Example 5: Varying a Theme with a Rhythmic Motive:



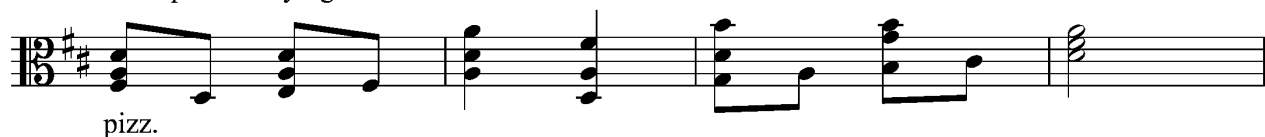
Example 6: Varying a Theme in Double Stops of a Fixed Interval:



Example 7: Mixing Double Stops of Different Intervals within a Variation:



Example 8: Varying a Theme with Chords:



Example 9: Varying a Theme with Ricochet String Crossings:



Example 10: Varying a Theme by Changing the Mode:



Ernst, and other composers for inspiration. For more violistic examples, consult scores of Campagnoli (*Caprices*, op. 22, nos. 17 and 25), as well as works for viola and orchestra or piano (e.g., Joachim's *Variations on an Original Theme*, op. 10; Alan Shulman's *Theme and Variations for Viola and Orchestra*; Benjamin Britten's *Lachrymae*).

Other Techniques

Of course, we should also study theme and variations movements written for other instruments and ensembles. Note general variation techniques, like changing key or mode (ex. 10) or changing the meter (ex. 11).

You can also create variations in the style of a specific genre or school of composition (Baroque, Blues, Romantic, Second Viennese School) (ex. 12).

For that matter, it's possible to throw in a quotation of another tune.⁴

Once you become more comfortable with the various techniques, begin to combine multiple techniques within a single variation (ex. 13).

As your skill grows, consider how all the variations unfold in the context of your entire improvisation or composition. While most sets of variations treat variations as a succession of separate vignettes, together they should comprise a satisfying whole. With a little practice, you can even create transitions between your variations so that your work has a more through-composed feeling.

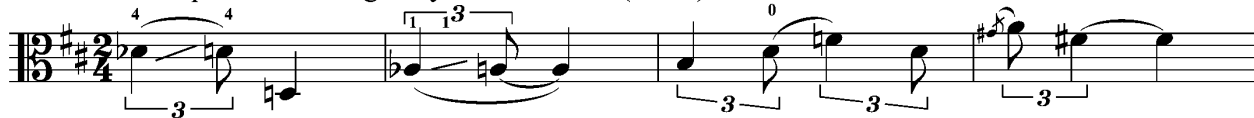
Composing your own variations away from the instrument will naturally strengthen your ability to improvise variations extemporaneously. Initially, just generate material; it doesn't have to be perfect.⁵ The more you create, the easier and more natural it becomes. If in doubt, focus on variation techniques that showcase your personal strengths.

As an example, I'm including the sheet music and a recording of a viola caprice that I composed on the

Example 11: Varying a Theme by Changing the Meter:



Example 12: Creating a Stylistic Variation (Blues)



Example 13: Combining Double Stops and 16th Notes:



spiritual *Were You There?*.⁶ See what techniques I'm using and how the variations fit together. Use this theme to improvise or compose some additional variations of your own.

Above all, have fun!

Teaching artist, musician, and composer Dr. David Wallace teaches at Juilliard, Nyack College, Mark O'Connor/Berklee Summer Strings Program, Mark Wood Rock Orchestra Camp, and the New York Philharmonic's many educational programs while maintaining his active performing career. Learn more at his new website www.docwallacemusic.com and watch the THEME AND VARIATIONS playlist on his YouTube channel for further examples and ideas (www.youtube.com/docwallacemusic).

Notes

¹ This is an active article; go get your viola before reading any further!

² It's relatively simple to vary a theme using a harmony line as a basis for double stops or failsafe arpeggiation.

³ After working with the theme for a while, see Mozart's *Twelve Variations on Ah! Vous dirais-je Maman*, K. 265/300e to learn from his variations. Then go to a Suzuki seminar and wreak havoc by teaching kids to improvise their own original variations.

⁴ Back when I was in graduate school, violinist Uli Speth and I had a marathon session of trading "Twinkle, Twinkle Variations." About an hour into the session, I started weaving *Wozzeck* quotes into my improvisations. Uli parried with Puccini. (You probably already caught the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto quote in the minor-mode example above.)

⁵ To improvise and compose good variations, you must be willing to risk creating some bad variations.

⁶ Sheet music available at: <http://americanviolasociety.org/resources/scores/javs-scores/>; recording available at <http://americanviolasociety.org/resources/recordings/>.

Eastman to Host 2014–15 “From the Studio” Blog

Join us in the fall as we welcome the Eastman studios of Carol Rodland, George Taylor, and Phillip Ying for our third season of “From the Studio.” These teachers and their students, along with teaching assistants and recent alumni, will address a range of issues facing the twenty-first century violist including technique, repertoire, interpretation, and pedagogy. Their thoughts, experiences, and discussions on specific topics will appear throughout the academic year. To submit questions for consideration, please write to Adam Cordle, AVS Media Coordinator, at usviolasociety@gmail.com. Readers can continue to enjoy posts from our first two years, hosted by the “ACHT” studios at Juilliard and the viola studios at Rice University, at: <http://americanviolasociety.org/education/>.