

Variations Without a Theme

Composer: Avner Dorman

Year: 2001

Duration: 15 min

Orchestration: 4(pic).3.3(Ebcl,bcl).3(cbn)/4331/timp.3perc/hp.pf(ce1)/str (min 16.14.12.10.8)

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Program Note

Composer Note

Back in the summer of 2001, when I set out to compose Variations Without a Theme I decided on a specific challenge for myself as a composer. Since my early composing days I had studied the variations of the masters, such as Bach, Beethoven, Prokofiev, and Lutosławski, and was always very much taken by their ability to use very limited materials and create great masterpieces. I wanted to take on this challenge myself, but with a twist. Instead of using a lyrical theme as the basis of Variations, I decided to use some of the basic elements of music: the repetition of a note, an ornament, scales, and the half-step interval.

Since my musical taste covers a wide range of 'styles', I explored how these basic elements are used in various musical genres: Jazz, Middle-Eastern Music, Avant-Garde, Indian Music, Rock, and, of course, the Romantic symphonic tradition. For example, the opening part of Variations uses a short ornament based on half steps using the pitches E, Eb, F, and Gb. This motive is similar to Middle-Eastern ornamentation, yet later in the piece, when it's inverted and transposed it becomes one of Bach's favorite motives Bb-A-C-B (or in German B-A-C-H). Later in the piece I used the inversion of these intervals (as major 7ths) to create a sound world much closer to that of Shostakovich and Schnittke.

The form of the piece is as follows:

Variation 1- The first variation opens with a wild thrust of oriental gestures in the

woodwinds over a persistent repeated note. The short ornaments are used in a canon and gradually become falling oriental scales. During this opening variation, Jazzy rhythmic elements slowly take over the simple repeated note of the accompaniment.

Variation 2 - In this variation the bass continues the Jazzy feel by playing a “walking bass” while the woodwinds continue to explore the opening ornaments only in a sparser version, adding silences in between the entries of the motives.

Variation 3 - This variation is based exclusively on rising scales in the harp, celesta, woodwinds and solo strings.

Variation 4 - In this variation, the repeated notes move to the foreground played by the flutes, clarinets, and small bell-like instruments. In the background the opening oriental gestures are played very slowly by the strings.

Variation 5 - All the elements of the opening section come together, building up to the culmination of the first part of the piece.

Variation 6 - This is the first of several slow variations. Based on ornaments and scales, it is ambient in nature, exploring different soundscapes of the orchestra.

Variation 7 - The seventh variation is a flute cadenza. The original ornamental figure is used here by the flute, and as an echo effect in the orchestra.

Variation 8 (the tingly variation) - This variation is inspired by Bartók’s idea of Night Music. However, this night is in the city, not out in the country, so gradually the peaceful quiet becomes a haunting city night scene.

Variation 9 - The ninth variation is the longest, most elaborate, and most passionate in the entire piece. The half step is inverted into a major seventh fall (in the trumpets) and begins an expressive section. In hindsight, I think that this variation is the one most influenced by the events that happened in the world as I was composing the piece (the Intifada in Israel, and later 9/11) and has a doomsday feel to it.

Variation 10 - Before the recapitulation, an almost tragic static variation recalls different sections of the piece, with solos in the piano and horn, and tutti recollections of earlier sections.

Variation 11 - The recapitulation is a multi-partite fugue which brings together elements from all of the variations. The ending is expressive and energetic. All the musical realms come together yet each preserves its identity.

— Avner Dorman

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