

Investigation on Piano Variations in the 18th Century: Comparison Between Mozart's Variations "Ah, vous dirai-je maman" K.265 and Beethoven's c minor variations Wo.O.80

Chiao-Chun Chang

Qilu Institute of Technology, School of education, Jinan, Shandong 250200, China

ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: 19 November 2025

Accepted: 15 December 2025

Published Online: 30 December 2025

Keywords:

18th century

theme and variations

Beethoven

Mozart

piano

ABSTRACT

The variation form is one of the commonly used genres in Western classical piano music. Broadly speaking, in addition to the difficulty of playing technique, the most important thing is the characteristics of its creative composing. Theme & variations is a common variation form. The theme, the main theme, is represented in a different rhythmic pattern in each variation. Using different rhythmic patterns to create a theme requires the player's fundamental practice. This paper focuses on the origin, format, and composition of the variation form, and comparing Mozart's Variations "Ah, vous dirai-je maman" K.265 with Beethoven's c minor Variations Wo.O. 80.

Introduction: Theme and variations was the musical form popularly used in the musical compositions starting from the 17th century. Normally, the theme has no shorter than eight measures and longer than thirty-two measures.^① The elements of the theme are bass, chords, phrase structure, and the melody. The melody has been kept in the variations but being improvised in different rhythmic figures or added in the ornaments.

The background of the theme and variations can be traced back to the Baroque passacaglia and chrole variations.^② "The form arose in the work of C.P.E. Bach and

other mid-18th-century composers. J.S. Bach's Goldberg Variations, not based on an omnipresent theme, do not belong in this tradition."^③ "Haydn made important use of the form for movements in symphonies, quartets and sonatas, and also for independent works — notably his Variations in F minor for piano (1793), exemplifying his favoured variety of 'double variations', alternately on themes in major and minor modes."^④ Mozart's theme and variations was more brilliant. Beethoven's theme and variations, for example the notable piece in c minor Wo. O. 80, had been developed to be the greater work than his predecessors. This research takes Mozart's variations

① Sisman, Elaine. "Variations", New Grove Music Dictionary Online, January, 2001.

② Griffiths, P. "Theme and Variations", The New Penguin Dictionary of Music Online, 1st edition, 2006.

③ Ibid.

④ Ibid.

*Corresponding Author:

Chiao-Chun Chang (1982-), male, Taipei City, Taiwan Province, Han ethnicity, DMA (Doctor of Musical Art), research focus is the Piano Literature

K.265 and Beethoven's variations Wo.O. 80 as the comparative works to elaborate theme and variations.

I. Theme and variations as being a musical form

"The theme of a set of variations normally has a fairly straightforward structure, so as to provide a clear, easily memorable frame for the subsequent variations."^① This means, the theme has a solid structure, which is clear enough for the following variations to be composed. The theme provides clear melodic structure, clear rhythmic pattern, clear stimulated time signature, and clear harmonies. Classical music composers were challenged to write theme and variations, especially the longer works such as Bach's Goldberg Variations, Beethoven's Diabelli variations, and Brahms' variations on the theme of Handel.

In general, the special character of theme and variations is that the tempo of the variations change to be faster than the theme, though occasionally with some excepted variations. Also, usually, at the middle variation, the key changed to be the parallel key of the original one. The final variation is usually followed by the slow variation. In most of the theme and variations, the theme can still be audible although have some rhythmic and articulation changes. This research will begin with comparisons between Mozart's variations K.265 and Beethoven's c minor variations Wo.O. 80 to investigate theme and variations.

II. Historical outline of variations

a. The development of variation form

"Variations on a given theme was one of the most widely used compositional techniques in Baroque composition."^② "The basso continuo variations, including chaconne, passacaglia, English ground bass, and Italian follia, is frequently used in the 17th and 18th century."^③

Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven's variations' compositional techniques have some characters in common. First, they all wrote variations as independent pieces, or used it as the musical movement in symphonies, sonatas, or chamber works. The theme could possibly come from song-like melodies, or operatic arias.

Beethoven's later variations started to deviate from the usual variations. The ambiguous change is that the theme

has been changed to be non-audible in the variations. In other words, the theme never returned to its original one, and the best example is his variations on a waltz by Diabelli op.120 (1823).

Compositional technique of the variations began to serve as the character pieces during the Romantic era. Schumanns Carnivals, Papillions, and Schubert's Wanderer Fantasy, were perfect examples of Romantic character variations. "After Schumann, there was a revival of the classical form ideal combined with Romantic stylistic elements and renewed emphasis on the bass theme, especially in the works of Brahms and Reger."^④

III. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart 1756-1791

a. Brief biographical introduction

Mozart, born in 1756, Salzburg, Austria, was a child prodigy and began to compose and gave his first public concert at age six. The first touring of performing, he went to as far as France and England. Mozart wrote 21 operas, 41 symphonies, 27 piano concertos, 15 masses, 23 string quartets, 17 piano sonatas, 19 variations, and other works. Mozart's variation "Ah, vous dirai-je maman" K.265 was composed in 1787.

b. Musical Analysis on Variations "Ah, vous dirai-je maman" K.265

Mozart's choices of theme came from different sources. Many of Mozart's variations' theme employ popular melodies of the day, especially minuets and arias from the operas.^⑤ The theme Mozart's variations "Ah, vous dirai-je maman" K.265 was from the French aria.^⑥

There are 24 measures in the theme of Mozart variations K.265. The harmonic progressions of the first eight measures are as follow: I- I⁶-IV-I⁶-V⁶⁵-vi-ii-V-I. The harmonic progressions follow very much from the tradition strictly. The next eight measures' harmonic progressions, are: I-V7-I-V-I-V7-I-V back and forth. Then the first eight measures' melodies returned. The compositional form used rounded-binary form. The theme is still audible in the first variation. However, the theme has been rhythmically changed, but the harmonic progressions remain the same.

The theme re-exists very clearly in the second variation. The melodies are at the top voice, and the melodies started to be tied from measure three with lower tied voice as well. The left hand accompaniment has bass tones,

① Alan Belkin. "Variation Form." In *Musical Composition: Craft and Art*, 91–104. Yale University Press, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2867gb>, p.1

② Linda Dale Kennedy. "Mozart's Keyboard Variations", Master's Thesis, Southeastern Louisiana University, July, 1975, p.5.

③ Ibid, p.5.

④ Ibid, p.8

⑤ Ibid., p.10

⑥ Ibid., p.17

which determines the harmonies of each measure. The theme has been improvised to expose in triple rhythmic format. The quarter notes at the bass line for the left hand defines what the harmonies are. In the aspect of performing difficulty is that there are required trills to be added in the triplet melodies.



Figure 1. Mozart's K.265, theme, Fischer edition.



Figure 2. Mozart K.265, Variation II. Measures 1-6



Figure 3. Mozart K.265, Variation III. Measures 1-6

The theme in variation IV appears at the top voice. The tied notes function very much like the stretto of the fugue. The arpeggio figures in the left hand retrieve the idea from variation III. In the left hand, the first pitch of every measure determines the harmony. The harmonic progressions remain the same as the theme.



Figure 4. Mozart K.265, Variation IV. Measures 1-6

Variation V has interesting rhythmic setting for the theme. The eighth note, in the second half beat, to the quarter note downbeat help build the dynamic level (see figure 5). The left hand part, seen in figure 5, characterize the conversational-like playing to respond the right hand melodies.

The theme in variation VI is still audible but with some changes in the second section (figure 6). Measures 9-16, the basso continuo figures take place in the right hand part. The circle notes in figure 7. are the melodies. The

harmonic progressions remain the same as the theme. In the aspect of performance and practice, the left hand requires careful voicing to bring out the circled melodies.



Figure 5. Mozart K.265, Variation V. Measures 1-8



Figure 6. Mozart K.265, Variation VI. Measures 1-6



Figure 7. Mozart K.265, Variation VI. Measures 9-16

The theme of variation VII has been improvised in different ways: Measures 1-4, the theme has been improvised as the scale passage, and the theme is a part of the harmony starting from measure 5. At the end of variation VII, the fermata is marked because the next variation's key changes. Typically, about the middle variation, the key changes to be the parallel key of the theme.

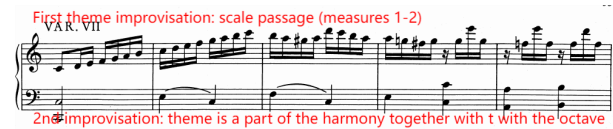


Figure 8. Mozart K.265, Variation VII, measures 1-5

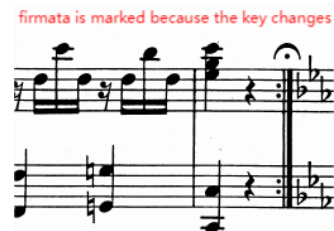


Figure 9. Mozart K.265, Variation VII, measures 23-24

Variation VIII is composed as a fugue and canon. This variation is in c minor, which is the parallel key of the theme. The first subject begins at the alto voice. The mel-

odies continue appearing at the soprano voice. Starting from the third measure, the theme that appears at the tenor voice imitates the theme of the alto voice in measures 1-2. The bass octaves, which take place from measure 13 to measure 17, in terms of auditory effect, bring a sense of solemnity and heaviness. Although it does not have tempo requirement in this variation, most performers would play this variation much more slower in general. (seen in figure 10)



Figure 10. Mozart K.265, Variation VIII.

The theme in Variation IX and variation IV has been idealistically composed in the same way. Anyhow, the accompaniment has been simplified. The setting is to initiate at the new fresh beginning after the minor key variation. Thus, many performers take few seconds' break after the minor key variation, and reboot variation IX just like the theme. The performers normally play variation IX with the gentle touch on the piano (see figure 11). The following Variation X turns the them in a part of harmonies again (see figure 12).



Figure 11. Mozart K.265, Variation IV & Variation IX (comparison)



Figure 12. Mozart K.265, Variation X.

Variation XI is a slow variation with tempo mark *adagio*. This variation takes imitative compositional writing. The right hand begins with dotted eighth and sixteenth rhythms followed by left hand with the same rhythmic figures starting from the third measure. Then, the final Variation XII is the virtuoso variation in the aspects of tempo (*allegro*) and other techniques such as rapid moving sixteenth notes for the left hand and the trills in the right hand melodies.



Figure 13. Mozart K.265, Variation XI. Measures 1-7



Figure 14. Mozart K.265, Variation II. Measures 1-3

IV. Ludwig van Beethoven 1757-1827

a. Introduction of Beethoven's Piano Variations

Beethoven's thirty-two theme and variations in c minor Wo.O.80 requires more techniques than Mozart's K.265 theme and variations. The theme of Mozart's K.265 is mostly audible, but Beethoven's Wo.O.80 has been improvised as more complicated figures. "Beethoven applied four of these in his compositions: (1) Constant-harmony variation, (2) Constant-melody variation, (3) Melodic-outline variation, (4) Formal-outline variation. The other three types of variations are found in

three different music period."^① Mozart's K.265 belongs to both melodic-outline variation and formal outline variation. Unlike Beethoven's variations, Mozart's theme has not been changed much in the variations.

According to Grove's dictionary, regarding the Melodic-outline variation "The theme's melody, or at least the 'outline' of its main notes, is recognizable despite figuration, simplification or rhythmic recasting. Types of figuration may be pleonastic (the addition of 'superfluous' notes within the melody or as a countermelody) or periphrastic (the original notes replaced by a more ornate line, though with sufficient resemblance to the original, especially at cadences). Many variation sets of the 18th and 19th cen-

① You-Min Lee. "Pedagogical Approach to Variation Form in Beethoven's Music", Master's Thesis, Northwestern Illinois University, July, 2016, p.6.

turies mix this type with constant-harmony variations.”^① Mozart’s K.265 belongs to this type of variation.

Beethoven’s thirty-two variations in c minor, Wo.O. 80 was composed between 1806-1807. According to the date, when Variation Wo.O.80 was composed, this variation was probably during Beethoven’s middle to late life time period. Different from Mozart’s K.265 variation, Beethoven’s Wo.O.80 variation’s has improvised the theme in the variations thoroughly different from the original. In other words, in some variations, the theme still can be audible, but not in all variations.

b. Music Analysis-Variation in c minor, Wo.O.80

The theme has only eight measures in length. The theme in the following variations are improvised much more differently, but the harmonic progressions basically remain the same. The theme has been improvised to be virtuoso melodies beginning at the first variation . To play piano variation, in general, the tempo setting of the theme must remain the same while playing variations, except the key-changed variation. Therefore, the challenge to play the first variation of this piece is that performers have to remain the tempo at the same time playing constant moving sixteenth notes. Variation II has switched Variation I to be played by different hands. The harmonic progressions remain the same as the theme, but the left hand takes the fast moving sixteenth notes. However, the melodies are in the right hand top voice . Beethoven, as being a genius music composer, has combined the technical passages from Variation I and Variation II to expose as Variation III Performers usually play Variation I to Variation III through without a stop, and then take a few seconds’ pause before playing Variation IV.

The melodies of Variation IV appear alternatively in both clefs . The circled pitches are the melodies. The harmonies are the inner voice together with the bass. The harmonic progression is the same as the theme. Beethoven invented this variation Wo.O.80 to be harmonic-wise consideration. Melodies are being improvised as different patterns, in the aspect of rhythms and different performing techniques.

The resolution cadence of Variation XI falls on the tonic chord in the parallel key in C Major triad . Like the typical theme and variation, the key changes, in about the middle variation, to be the parallel key of the original one from the theme. The Italian term *maggiore* means bigger, larger, greater. Variation XII is a re-existed them but in the key C Major. Beethoven required the performer to play

variations XII, XIII, and XIV all together through. There are several borrowed chords in variation XII.

Interestingly, variation XIII and variation XIV, the melodies exist in the left hand part. The harmonies in variation XIII are composed as being like another beautiful melodies. The compositional technique in variation XIV is in staccato parallel thirds. The melodies exist in the bottom voice of the left-hand thirds.

Variations XV and XVI are being performed together as a set not only because the similarities of being composed as octave figures, but also it is in common that both variations still stay with the parallel key in C Major. Unlike what mostly the octaves are being played in powerful dynamic, both variations XV and XVI require soft dynamic. The idea of the improvised octave melodies in variation XVI probably came from variation XV. Variation XVI functioned to be an extension of variation XV.

Variation XVII uses contrapuntal composition technique. There are 5 voices imitating throughout the variation. The subject begins at the second voice marked as number 1., and the subject has borrowed the theme. The compositional idea uses the scale pattern to extend the harmonies. Each scale pattern is not only the extension of the harmony but also the the improvisation.

Omitting variation XIX, the melody-harmony mixed variation, variations XX and XXI improvised the melodies in triplet rhythms. The harmonies are in syncopated rhythms. Then, variation XXII are all composed in octaves. Variation XXIII is back to the harmonic progressions’ composition followed by variation XXIV with through staccato playing.

The melodies are hidden in the right hand sixteenth notes’ figures in variation XXV. Variations XXVI and XXVII are written in the idea of extended harmonies in parallel thirds . Variation XXVIII has an apparent single melodies and alberti bass harmonies followed by rapid triplets for both hands in variation XXIX.

Variation XXX is formed to be continuous harmonic progressions. Variation XXXI has a clear theme in the right hand part being formed as octaves mostly. Variation XXXI requires soft touch playing, and the final measure is a connection to the final variation. The left hand part has been kept to flow softly at the same time the theme in the right hand has been audible. The final variation combines all the compositional techniques of all the variations such as triplet rhythms, octaves, voicing, and melody-harmony mixed.

V. Comparison between Mozart’s K.265 and Beethoven’s Wo.O.80

Mozart’s variation K.265 basically has clear and audi-

^① George Grove, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (Oxford University Press, 1879), 939- 940.

ble theme from theme to the rest of the variations. Beethoven's c minor variation Wo.O.80 had more harmonic ideas to make the theme involved. The performance and practice-wise, Beethoven's variation demand more solid fundamental techniques. However, it is not being said that Mozart's K.265 does not require demanding techniques, but Mozart's K.265 has a more unique theme throughout the entire theme and variations. Beethoven extended the middle key-changed variations longer than Mozart not only in consideration of the length but also to authorize himself to improvise more, before changing back to the original key in c minor. Overall, Mozart's variation K.265 is more standard. In comparison to Mozart's K.265, Beethoven's variation Wo.O.80 has a lot of improvisations and harmonic progression arrangements.

VI. Conclusion

Theme and variations, as a musical form, is an improvised composition. Theme and variations begin with the short theme, which has eight to thirty-two measure in length. Theme and variations can be traced back as early as Baroque era, for example: passacaglia, chorale variations, or J.S. Bach's Goldberg variations. The theme has clear and memorable melody. However, composers improvised the theme melodies differently. For instance, Mozart's idea of improvising the theme in the variations was to compose the theme in different rhythms in his K.265. However, the theme is basically all audible as the same as it is in the variations. Fairly, the theme melody has not been changed much in Mozart's K.265. Different from Mozart's variation K.265, Beethoven bravely improvise the theme in variations in another way. First, Beethoven improvise the theme in by engaging it as a part of the harmonies. The harmonic progressions remain the same in Beethoven's Wo.O.80. The fundamental techniques of Beethoven's Wo.O.80 are required more than Mozart's K.265. Beethoven's idea of improvising the theme in his variations was to extend the harmonies in different patterns such as scale passages, triplet rhythms, and irregular rhythms (for example: seven against four) in the final var-

iation. Johannes Brahms followed very much of Beethoven's idea of composing theme and variations, for instance Brahms's theme and variations on the theme of Handel. Overall, the goal of this research was to investigate the development of theme and variations by taking Mozart's K.265 and Beethoven's Wo.O. 80 as the examples.

References

Journals, Master's Thesis, and Doctoral Dissertations

- [1] BELKIN, ALAN. "VARIATION FORM." In *Musical Composition: Craft and Art*, 91–104. Yale University Press, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2867gb> pp.1-14.
- [2] Grove, George. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Oxford University Press, 1879.
- [3] Griffiths, P. "Theme and Variations", *The New Penguin Dictionary of Music Online*, 1st edition, 2006.
- [4] Kennedy, Linda Dale. "Mozart's Keyboard Variations", Master's Thesis. Southeastern Louisiana University, July, 1975.
- [5] Levy, Sharon Gall. "Developing Variation, Mozart, and the Classical Style", Doctoral Dissertation, The University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, August, 1991.
- [6] Lee, You-Min. "Pedagogical Approach to Variation Form in Beethoven's Music", Master's Thesis, Northeastern Illinois University, July, 2016.
- [7] Petersen, Peter. "Das Variationen-Finale aus Brahms'e-Moll-Sinfonie und die c-Moll-Chaconne von Beethoven (WoO 80)", *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft*, 2013, 70. Jahrg., H. 2. (2013), pp. 105-118.
- [8] Sisman, Elaine. "Variations", *New Grove Music Dictionary Online*, January, 2001.
- [9] Worman, Regina Marydent. "The Effects and Roles of Unity and Contrast as Implemented by Composer and Performer of Four Different Periods with Special Emphasis on a Variation Set Representative of Handel, Beethoven, Brahms, and Copland", D.M.A. paper, The University of Alabama, 1993.