The Piano Variation of Carl Czerny

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Abstract: Positioned between Beethoven and Liszt in the golden period, Carl Czerny (1791-1857) played a significant historical role in the area of piano pedagogy. In the eighteenth century, Carl Czerny devoted much of his life to piano pedagogy, creating and organizing textbooks to teach piano technique. His technical exercises are still widely used throughout the world. In addition to these well-known études, Czerny composed more than a thousand piano works, such as eleven piano sonatas, twenty-eight piano sonatinas, seventy-eight textbooks of exercises and 180 titled variations. Moreover, he published outstanding treatises that present in an organized way his complete thoughts about composing in various genres. These works include his Systematische Anleitung zum Fantasieren auf dem Pianoforte Opus 200[1] (A Systematic Introduction to Improvisation on the Pianoforte, Opus 200) [2], and Die Schule der praktischen Tonsetzkunst[3].

Even though Czerny’s compositional prowess garnered international acclaim in his own time, his capacity as anything other than a technical taskmaster remains largely unrecognized today. In part, this attitude has to do with a bias against decidedly virtuosic, showy music. However, because Czerny's emphasis on technique was only in service to creativity and expression, the Czerny of the concert hall demands the attention of those who are only familiar with the Czerny of the practice room. It is regrettable that we ignore so many of his advanced works. Exploring them more earnestly could lead to a valuable expansion of the piano repertoire.

Most of Carl Czerny’s 180 sets of variations are unknown or forgotten works. The present study will examine one of his variations: “Variations brillantes sur un thème original,” Opus 292. Its theme is Czerny’s own. In this work, Czerny shows the variety that is possible in creating variations.

Czerny’s Opus 292 is a virtuosic expansion on a simple, dance-like Theme. This original Theme is transformed through a series of variations in different tempi with elaborate figurations added to the basic framework. In total, the work consists of a sixteen-measure introduction followed by the Theme and six variations. There is essentially a seventh variation in slow tempo, then an Allegro vivace movement that greatly expands the Theme. Finally, a Presto coda.

1. Introduction

Similarly, Czerny set an attention-grabbing Introduction. The rhythmic figure at the start of the Introduction foreshadows the horn-call motive in the Theme. The music begins quietly and mysteriously, as if the horns are in the distance. The F presented alone at the beginning is slowly shown to be the fifth scale degree of Bb minor, but only after it is surprisingly pushed up to G⁰ and a ff arpeggiation of the C¹-Major Neapolitan chord ensues. The short detour (mm. 5-6) foreshadows sudden changes of dynamics, tonality and rhythm in the Theme and variations to follow.

The ff outburst falls back to a pp stop on bb: V in m. 8, again quiet and tentative.

The second half of the Introduction begins with an abrupt change of key to Db Major, the relative major (mm. 9-16). A long, legato melody that continually rises is accompanied by a walking bass in staccato eighth notes that are an outgrowth of the repeated eighth notes in mm. The melody in mm. 9-13 consists entirely of leaps, thus anticipating the many leaps in the melody of the Theme. The descending leaps in particular anticipate similar falls in the melody of the Theme. After the Db-Major melody, mm. 13-15 recall the rhythm of the opening horn call and serve to prepare a grand flourish on V⁰ in m. 16, where a rising arpeggio shoots up to e-flat⁴ and falls back to the bottom of the keyboard. This flourish suddenly transforms the mysterious character of the Introduction into a burst of energy. As introductions normally do, this one ends on V⁰ to set the stage for the thematic material to follow, but with a gesture so grand that it seems almost incongruous with the rustic character of the upcoming Theme.

2. Theme

The Allegro theme begins in a contredanse style with the horn call that was foreshadowed in the Introduction.

Structurally, the theme is in binary form in twenty-four measures, with both parts repeated. The first part, in B-flat Major, is a 4+4 period. After completing a half cadence in m. 4, the simple, basic harmony and phrasing of this first part are dressed up by the rise in register through mm. 5-8, with a big plunge downward at the end. This melodic contour will become the basis for elaborate variation. After modulating to F Major and affirming the key with a perfect authentic cadence in m. 8, an abrupt move in m. 9 to a Db-Major chord launches the second part of the form. Similar tonal shifts in the Introduction foreshadowed this sudden move, and it is so distinctive that it will be a point of identification in the variations.

The digressing b phrase is a sequence that falls in thirds, from a Db-Major triad to a Bb-minor triad to a Gb-Major triad that is converted to a German Sixth chord to quickly restore V of Bb Major. At m. 17, where a return of the opening would conventionally be expected, Czerny offers a new melody that features the falling-fourth figure from m. 1. The horn-call opening of the Theme was very limited harmonically, so for the ending Czerny replaces its return with a full-bodied phrase that closes the form with a complete harmonic progression in Bb Major. This replacement in the variations offers an opportunity for change of material so that each variation begins with a repetitive figure, goes on a tonal digression, then ends with an elaborate new figuration. Besides the falling-fourth figure, the new 2+2+4 melody is constructed from the repeated eighth notes in m. 1 and the rising steps in m.
3, and is supported by a dance-style accompaniment of steady eighths. The new melody climbs to a forte peak in m. 22, then suddenly drops to piano and falls through three octaves of Bb's to the end. The falling octaves in the last measure are given new figuration with each variation.

3. Variation 1

Variation 1 is marked Brillante. Generally, the variations retain the same binary form, including keys and cadences. The ‘brilliance’ of this variation is conveyed by strong full chords and nearly-constant sixteenth-note triplets, creating a bravura character. Whereas the dynamics of the Theme were p and pp, with only one rise to forte, this variation, in keeping with its display character, begins at forte, drops to pp for the tonal digression, then ends at f and ff, with sf punctuations. The new consequent melody rises with arpeggiated figuration to the high peak c⁴ with a sf (m. 7), then falls to f⁴ with the perfect authentic cadence in F Major.

With the tonal departure in the digressing phrase, Czerny introduces sweeping chromatic scales, marked pp. The repeated Fs in mm. 15-16 of the Theme are expanded into octaves and a rising arpeggio, keeping up the momentum. As in the Theme, the final phrase introduces a new melody, this time a series of sixteenth-note triplets that mixes chromatic scales from the digressing phrase with other scale and arpeggio figures. After rising to the peak on f⁴ at ff (m. 23), the line descends with the arpeggiated figuration, and the phrase finishes with a ff variation of the dropping octaves from the end of the Theme.

4. Variation 2

Variation 2 again retains the tempo and form of the Theme, and it also brings back much of the main melodies. The horn-call melody is recalled in the treble with a new, sweeping chromatic accompaniment resembling the lines in Variation 1. In m. 5, the treble begins a climb in leaps to a forte peak on c⁴, which enlarges the range in mm. 6-7 of the Theme.

The digressing b phrase is again a sequence that falls in thirds, with a new arpeggiated figure for each chord. After the rising chromatic notes in the treble (m. 14), the motion again pauses on repeated Fs. In the last phrase, the melody that closed the Theme returns, now with running sixteenth triplets in the bass. The melody and the bass move outward, reaching their widest separation as the melody peaks in mm. 13-14. The two lines both fall in the last measure for yet another variation of the B⁰ octaves.

5. Variation 3

Variation 3 returns to the simple eighth-note accompaniment figure of the Theme, now supporting elaborate sixteenth-note lines doubled in octaves, sixths, and thirds. The opening recalls the repeated Fs from the Introduction and the Theme, adding a line also in sixteenths against them. After the treble and the dynamics reach a peak at m. 5, the consequent phrase accelerates the rate of chord change with new chord functions while the sixteenths descend, dropping octaves, as before, at the cadence in m. 8.

The horn-call rhythm continues into the b phrase, as it did in the Theme. The running sixteenths move into the bass here and are doubled in octaves. In mm. 13-14, a rising line in the treble and a descending line in the bass move chromatically outward to F, restoring the dominant harmony in preparation for the final phrase, as in the Theme. The new figuration in the closing is a variation of the opening, namely an eighth-note accompaniment supporting delicate, staccato sixteenths doubled in thirds. The final phrase introduces yet another figuration, this one a fuller version of mm. 13-14, and it rises from p to ff. This crescendo culminates, as expected, in falling B⁰ octaves.

6. Variation 4

Marked Non tanto Presto, ma con vivacita, the rhythmic pace of Variation 4 now is primarily at the eighth note, with various rhythms against the eighth-note pulse. In the opening phrase, Czerny recalls the leap figure of the Theme, and adds trills and big leaps to convey a quick, energetic sense of humor. In mm. 5-6, a rising melodic line full of trills climbs to a forte peak c⁴, then suddenly drops to piano in only an eighth note’s time, creating a playful change of dynamic. The falling Fs at the cadence in m. 8 are also playfully exaggerated, quickly dropping five octaves.

In the b phrase, a hymn-like character is introduced, marked legato and pp. The sequence of the b phrase steps up twice (mm. 9-14) instead of falling in thirds. Steady eighth-note chords move through a progression in Bb minor and at m. 16, in place of repeated Fs, there is a pause on the dominant chord. This pause sets up a return to the playable character of the opening of the variation, which is amplified with quick dotted-sixteenth/thirty-second-note figures. The humor continues through to the leggierö ending. The distinct change of character in this variation creates a break from the virtuosic display of the previous variations.

7. Variation 5

Marked Più Allegro, Variation 5 returns quickly to a bravura character with a new sixteenth-note figure that lends an excited and agitated affect.

As in the Theme and all of the variations thus far, the first part is a 4+4 period. Also as before, each phrase rises to a peak, then quickly falls. The new figure of this variation consists of alternating sixteenths with an offbeat neighboring figure, which is widened and inverted in the second phrase.

The digressing b phrase again is a sequence that falls in thirds, with rapidly arpeggiated chords. As before, the dominant chord arrives in m. 15, here at ff with a sudden drop to p, during which thirds rise chromatically against repeated Fs to smoothly connect to the return of the opening figuration, varied, in m. 17. In the final phrase, the alternating sixteenths are reduced to the offbeat neighboring figures, supported by a dance-style accompaniment of steady eighths. A more-complex harmonic progression is introduced in this variation with the rise in register through the phrase, thus
creating a flashier finish. The peak is delayed to the penultimate measure and is followed quickly by the falling B’s in the last measure.

8. Variation 6

Variation 6 loosely follows the form of the Theme, with a written-out repeat of Part 1, which creates the opportunity for additional variation within the variation, and no repeat of Part 2. It is in the subdominant key, E-flat Major. The tonic key will be restored with the Allegro vivace that follows. Overall, the tempo, key, and character of Variation 6 make it a slow movement that will be followed by a lively finale. For the first time in this work, Czerny transforms the horn call into a dotted rhythm that evokes a slow march.

Despite the short motive that is reiterated throughout the melody, the first eight measures are a single, continuous phrase that modulates to the dominant key, Bb Major, reinforced by a PAC in Bb in m. 8. Measures 9-16 are a written-out repeat, with variation, of mm. 1-8. The first four measures of the repeat are similar to the opening, but with added trills recalling Variation 4 and steady eighths in the accompaniment. The rest of the phrase is replaced with a new but derived melody. The repeat of Part 1 ends with a Bb: PAC in m. 16. The digressing b phrase begins in m. 17, again with a move to the sVI chord (in relation to the cadence), Gb Major, and it is a measure longer than before (9 vs. 8). The double-dotted quarters recall the b phrase of the Introduction (m. 17). This phrase ends on a Bb: PAC in m. 25. The remainder of the measure turns Bb: I into Bb: V7, which is different from the Theme. The return of the Eb tonic in m. 26 is the start of the final portion, which is again a 4+4 period with change of material in the consequent. Because there is no repeat of Part 2, the Eb: PAC at m. 33 is the end of Variation 6. The music that follows is a transition denoted by a new tempo (Piu lento). It modulates back to Bb Major and ends on V7 with a fermata to set up the Allegro vivace.

Czerny, for the first time, expands the original form into a sonata form with much-larger dimensions than the previous variations (153 measures vs. 24 measures). The energetic character of this movement resembles that of the Theme in a contredanse style and is launched by the fugue-like opening. He creates a fugue subject from the horn-call motive, and the movement begins with a four-voice fugal exposition of this subject, ending on the downbeat of m. 19. There is a short transition using the head motive that ends on F: V in m. 24. In a Haydn mannerism, Czerny begins the F-Major portion in m. 25 with a transposition of the horn-call motive to that key. Once past m. 29, Czerny returns to bravura style with a new figuration that recalls the beginning of Variation 5. After the F: PAC in m. 33, ff, the dynamic suddenly drops to p, leggierement, and a reiterated cadence formula using the rhythm of the horn call closes the exposition.

The development, mm. 41-88, begins with the horn-call motive in the sVI key, Db Major, as did the Theme. The development has the expected sequences and circle-of-fifths successions, until in m. 65 the horn-call is exposed in inversion. This change signals the arrival of the retransition, which is marked by a faster tempo, Vivo, and constant sixteenth-note motion. Through the sixteen measures of the Vivo, the energy increases and there is a crescendo that builds up aggressively to the moment of recapitulation, m. 89. The fugue does not return, but rather a harmonization of the fugue subject with big chords, which sounds like a fresh start in the home key.

The remainder of the recapitulation replaces what was in the exposition with a new, bravura passage. This change is an expansion of the theme and variations, in which the endings consistently introduced new material. The bass, doubled in octaves, recalls the horn-call motive. The sonata form ends with a big F7 arpeggio that recalls the falling octaves at the cadences in the Theme. With no pause, the tempo increases to Presto and the meter changes to 6/8 for a 21-measure coda. Resembling an opera buffa conclusion, the Presto brings back the character of the Theme, which is easily recognizable despite the change of meter. For closure of a very large work, Czerny sounds the tonic for the final eight measures in orchestral fashion.

Carl Czerny’s enormous pedagogical contribution for the piano has unfortunately eclipsed his more creative output. His music skirts the aesthetic borders of some of the most popular composers in his field. It also provides ideal repertoire for pianists wishing to present seldom-heard, Classic/Romantic music that is off the beaten path. In a time of widespread world concert activity, such exploration of lesser-known repertoire may be gaining some traction. According to one enthusiast, “The rediscovery of Carl Czerny as a significant and long-neglected composer of serious music understandably generates great enthusiasm among his advocates.”[4] Is it possible that a revival of Carl Czerny’s music is at hand?

The author has hoped to make a case, for revisiting the man who has enriched our techniques, to discover his untapped repertoire of some of the most popular composers in his field. It also provides ideal repertoire for pianists wishing to present seldom-heard, Classic/Romantic music that is off the beaten path. In a time of widespread world concert activity, such exploration of lesser-known repertoire may be gaining some traction. According to one enthusiast, “The rediscovery of Carl Czerny as a significant and long-neglected composer of serious music understandably generates great enthusiasm among his advocates.”[4] Is it possible that a revival of Carl Czerny’s music is at hand?

References