

I.B. H.L. Music

MUSICAL INVESTIGATION

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Title:

A discovery linking Jazz and Romantic era music through 'Variations on a Theme'

Hymn to Freedom by Oscar Peterson
Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini by Rachmaninoff

VARIATIONS ON A THEME

A DISCOVERY LINKING JAZZ AND ROMANTIC ERA MUSIC THROUGH 'VARIATIONS ON A THEME'

Discovery has been made of a strong structural link between two vastly different works! The Romantic era work 'Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini' for piano and orchestra by Rachmaninoff and the 60s Jazz work by Oscar Peterson called 'Hymn to Freedom' both employ 'variations on a theme' in similar yet different ways. The theme in both genres is varied using instrumentation, melody, harmony, rhythm, texture, and tone colour. Within the form of 'Variation on a Theme', it is amazing to uncover many links between the two contrasting works.

Under the Microscope

Example	Link
1	Nature of melodic line Strong harmonic basis
Peterson	Rachmaninoff
Theme (16 bars)	Theme (24 bars)

Peterson's 16 bar theme consists of a smooth chordal textured melody with conventional harmony centered in Bb major. Rhythm is explicit, embellished in later variations. The theme has a distinct binary form notated as AB.

Rachmaninoff's 24 bar theme is essentially binary notated as ABB presenting a linear melody on violins. The jagged melodic line has specific articulation and energetic rhythm. This theme is simple in terms of a clear melodic and harmonic basis.

In both themes, a clear harmonic line is evident despite contrasting melodic lines. We have an exciting harmonic link between these two works.

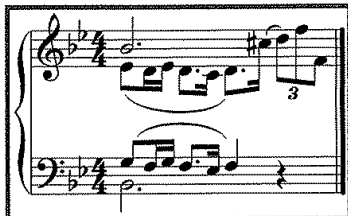
HYMN TO FREEDOM - theme (16 bars)
Oscar Peterson

RHAPSODY ON A THEME OF PAGANINI - Theme (24 bars)
Sergey Rachmaninoff

Wm. Friedrich

Example	Link
2	Placement of variation Retains harmonic basis
Peterson	Rachmaninoff
Variation 1	Variation 1

Peterson's first variation comes as normal in jazz, after the theme or 'head'. The general harmonic basis of the theme is followed closely and texture and tone colour remain unchanged. A group of linear notes (A) are added in the last bar of the variation



heralding the decorative scales used in the next variation.

Rachmaninoff places the first variation before the actual theme. This is a very unusual technique. However the harmony of this variation follows the theme closely as with Peterson. Rhythmic and melodic fragments of the theme are stated using the whole orchestra.

Harmonic outline of the approaching theme is notated from the double bass part (B):



An example of a melody and rhythmic fragment (C):



Although the placement of the first variation differs between

the two works, the harmonic basis remains solid with some additional fragments of the theme in the Rachmaninoff and auxiliary notes in the Peterson.

Structure

PETERSON - Hymn to Freedom				
Theme Binary form AB	Variation 1	Variation 2	Variation 3	Variation 4

What is meant by variations on a theme?

- 'Theme and Variations' originated in the 16th century
- Theme is usually in binary form.
- Varied melodically, harmonically, rhythmically, texturally and in tone colour.
- Strictly speaking, variation form has a "strophic" structure represented as A, A¹, A², A³, etc. The A section presents the theme and following sections are variations on the theme.
- Theme is not always original, like Rachmaninoff's
- Variations are different to development because they are recognizable

Isn't all orchestral music Classical?

- No, three styles of music, Baroque, Classical and Romantic tend to be thought of as 'Classical'.
- Romantic music spans from about 1820 to 1900 following Classical music
- Similar musical forms to Classical era
- Greater range of tone colour, dynamics, emotional intensity and pitch.
- Harmony was broader and unstable chords were more common.
- Emphasis on self-expression

What's Jazz music?

- American beginning in New Orleans around 1900.
- Strong beat, improvisation, syncopation
- Improvisation distinguishes Jazz and is when a player creates new melodies based on set melody or chordal framework instantaneously.
- Jazz thrives on a player's individuality.

Where is Hymn to Freedom placed in the Jazz timeline?

- Oscar Peterson spans various Jazz styles
- Swinging big bands, gospel, European classical, and the Blues
- Blues developed from the early African-American experience around 1900
- Hymn to Freedom was written in 1964
- Gospel Blues style
- First performed with drums and bass
- This article only concerns the piano score

RACHMANINOFF - Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini		
3 distinct sections like the 3 movements of a concerto		
Movement 1	Movement 2	Movement 3
Variations 1-11 The theme comes after variation 1 and is in binary form notated as ABB	Variations 12-18	Variations 19-24

Good and useful notes

Very good well researched source, but lots of detail

Example	Link
3	Cadenza like flourishes Use of scales eg. Chromaticism
Peterson	Rachmaninoff
Variation 2	Variation 6

This variation has a flamboyant piano part but is also lyrical containing many melodic and rhythmic elements of the theme amidst much use of chromaticism (H).



Peterson's second variation has the same harmonic basis however some additional colour chords such as E diminished chords are included. Melody is embellished with complicated flourishes and crushed notes. The Bb Blues scale is used for improvisation including the following notes: Bb, Db, Eb, E, F, Ab. Rhythmically the theme varies with triplets, demisemiquavers, pentuplets, and sextuplets. A change in tone colour and texture is seen in the non-chordal texture with improvisatory spirit. Finally the variation closes with the straight 2 bar ending given in the original theme for unity (D).



2 bar ending given in the original theme for unity (D).

The orchestra also has some occasional thematic fragments (I).



Much chromatic writing and cadenza like passages are shared by both works

Uniqueness is a must in Jazz music and this is why Oscar Peterson is so highly esteemed.



The E diminished chord, a triplet, demisemiquavers and the blues notes Db and E (E).



In Rachmaninoff's 6th variation the piano leads into a cadenza like section. A plagal cadence (F) is reached in the piano part resolving the chromatic passage preceding it.



Fact File: OSCAR PETERSON (1925 -)

- Born in Canada in 1925
- Incredible dexterity and prowess over the keyboard due to his classical training
- Master of Jazz piano
- Formed a highly regarded Trio
- Hymn to Freedom was created in a recording session of the Trio.
- Incorporates the blues and uses the entire keyboard

The orchestra has some explicit chromatic sections (G).



The Essence of 'Hymn to Freedom'

- Composed in 1964
- Inspired by the work of Martin Luther King
- A hymn has the same harmonic structure throughout and is a song of praise of God, a folksong, or black/white spiritual.
- Melodic and harmonic simplicity reflects the Negro spirituals often sung in black churches of America

Example	Link
4	Blues and chromatic scales Mixing triplets and semiquavers Change in tone colour and texture
Peterson	Rachmaninoff
Variation 3	Variation 10 Variation 18

Peterson's third variation is similar to its preceding one following the theme's harmonic basis with colour chords, use of the Blues scale, complicated rhythms and an improvisatory style. The rhythm is at times syncopated with accents on the off beats



(J).

The second half or B section of the variation has a much simpler line with many crushed notes emphasizing the blues notes such as D \flat or C \sharp and E (K).



Rachmaninoff's variation 10 and 18 share the rhythm of the theme. In variation 10 the melody is varied using chromaticism (L), whereas in the



renowned variation 18, Paganini's theme is turned upside down. The 'Dies Irae' theme (M) appears as a counter melody.



This variation mixes a chordal section (N) and another section of flowing semiquavers taking thematic material rhythmically and melodically from the original theme (O).



Variation 18 has a complex texture at the emotional peak of the work found in the lyrical



inversion of the theme (P). Inversion of the theme displays *contrapuntal* techniques. This variation also mixes triplets with semiquavers. The tone colour stands out as being the gentlest yet emotionally most powerful of all the variations. *Rubato* is employed widely and hence rhythm is much looser.

It is amazing to discover that both Rachmaninoff and Peterson use embellishment of melody and rhythm to vary the theme. Tone colour and texture are also altered in both works.

Rachmaninoff is said to have 'lived and breathed melody'



Fact File: SERGEY RACHMANINOFF (1873 - 1943)

- Born in Russia
- Left with his family in 1917 due to the Russian Revolution
- Long beautifully phrased melodies
- *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* - peak of works for piano and orchestra
- Eighteenth variation considered a masterpiece
- The Western Church's plainchant 'Dies Irae' is found in more than 20 compositions most of all in this work.
- His music is laced with a sadness reflecting Russian heritage.

General Trends through Variations

Peterson

Hymn to Freedom is written as a jazz chorus with variations following on this 16 bar theme. The piece is continuous but the sections are easily recognizable. The Blues scale is used in flourishes. Use of crushed notes amidst the simple melodic line appears and creates a linear rather than chordal line. Colour is altered by changing the texture. The range of piano used is small. Rhythm is embellished whilst the same key is retained throughout like in a hymn. In general the harmonic basis remains very much the same across variations.

Rachmaninoff

Many key changes occur altering the harmonic basis. The work is continuous without breaks between variations; however, there are some cadential points. Colour is often altered with *staccato* articulation and chromaticism is used to broaden the tonal centre. There is much diminution and augmentation of note values. Radical deviation from the theme occurs but there is always a concrete harmonic basis and rhythmic fragments. Rachmaninoff tends to use long beautifully crafted phrase lengths. The inversion of the theme for the

18th variation displays contrapuntal techniques. A large piano range is also used throughout the work. Overall the rhythm and harmonic basis tend to be a common factor across variations.

A summary of the discovery

After examination of assorted variations compared between the two works it can be seen that Theme and Variations as a form acts in a similar yet different way in Jazz versus Romantic music. Both tend to retain their harmonic basis but the Romantic work seemed to deviate more from the theme. The Jazz work allowed much use of the Blues scale and colour chords. This was similar to the chromaticism used in the Romantic work. Tone colour was altered in both genres using devices such as register and instrumentation. The combination of chordal and linear textures appeared in both works. The rhythm in some variations of the Jazz work became extremely free compared to the consistent rhythmic pattern from the theme in the Romantic work. Overall the harmonic structure appeared to be most important in maintaining unity throughout the two works with rhythm, melody, texture, and tone colour playing a slightly less significant role.

"I try to make music speak simply and directly that which is in my heart at the time I am composing." –
Rachmaninoff

GLOSSARY

Binary – two-part
Diminished chord – minor chord + 7th *more dark*
Crushed notes – A musical ornament where another note is played a split second before the main note.
Pentuplet – A group of 5 notes of equal value played in the time of 4.
Sextuplet – same as above except 6 notes
Cadenza – a virtuosic passage
Plagal cadence – a harmonic progression ending a section (chords IV to I)
Chromatic – notes that don't belong to major or minor scales
Contrapuntal – a type of device stemming from counterpoint (where 2 or more lines occur simultaneously)
Rubato – flexible time
Staccato – short and detached

The Essence of 'Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini'

- Romantic work for orchestra and solo piano
- Written in 1934, Rachmaninoff's Opus 43
- Key of A minor
- "Rhapsody" refers to a long concerted work in one movement, often based on popular, national, or folk melodies.
- First used in 19th century
- Piano was the most common instrument for a "Rhapsody" and a well known example is *Rhapsody in Blue* by Gershwin.
- 'Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini' is a set of 24 variations on the twenty-fourth of Niccolò Paganini's *Caprices* for solo violin.
- Undoubtedly one of the best-loved piano and orchestra compositions of the 20th century.

An excellent M.I. Presentation is very good and very expressive all of the analytical parts. Good debut and very good control of technical language.

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