

**Discerning the Theme in a Galant Variation by Mozart:
A Detective Story for the First Day of Theory Class**
Designed for the first half hour of a 50-minute class period

Abstract:

In the first meeting of my first-semester theory class, I often examine the opening eight measures of the Adagio variation of Mozart's so-called "Twinkle Variations," K. 265.¹ Presenting the excerpt as a detective story, in which the class seeks to discern the theme that structures the ornate variation (even in its absence), has proven a compelling way to discuss a handful of important topics that are treated more completely later in the theory curriculum. The foreshadowed topics include theme and variations form; triadic arpeggiation; melodic shape and gesture; cadence; ornament; melodic fluency; gap/fill; musical topic; and genre. The lesson has two further benefits: first, it is a productive way of breaking the ice on the first day of class: the ludic approach (and the beauty of the variation) make it easy to get a discussion going about a piece of eighteenth-century instrumental music.² And second, it tacitly functions as a diagnostic, in that it allows me to measure the abilities and backgrounds of entering students quickly in a low-pressure situation. Below, I sketch the order and manner in which I present the material to my first-day theory class.

I. The Mystery: A Theme "Hiding" in a Late Variation?

I begin class with a short discussion of the history and structuring mechanics of theme and variations as a musical form. Though "*variation procedures*," broadly construed, are quite old, the form we know as "sectional variations" seems to have come into its own only in the eighteenth century, the period from which so much of the music to be studied over the next two semesters

¹ Inspiration for this lesson plan came from Gretchen Horlacher, who presented something like it in her T-151 class at Indiana University while I was a masters student there. I wish to acknowledge the influence of that lesson here.

² For further examples of the benefits of game playing in the music theory classroom, see Deborah Rifkin and Diane Urista, "Developing Aural Skills: It's Not Just A Game," *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* 20 (2006): 57-78 and Angela Ripley, "Surviving Set Theory: A Pedagogical Game and Cooperative Learning Approach to Undergraduate Post-Tonal Music Theory," *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy E-Journal Articles* 6 (2016).

comes.³ During that time, it served as the foundation for a huge number of pieces of music, some of them standalone and some of them movements from multi-movement pieces. Many of these variation sets drew on popular or “folksy” themes, for instance from popular songs, opera arias, military marches, and so on.

For current purposes, what is important about sectional variations is the way later variations often progressively leave their structuring theme behind through ever more ornate decoration of the musical surface.⁴ For it is this property of theme and variations form that motivates the two guiding questions for the day: first, if later variations move ever farther away from their theme, but are nevertheless *based on* their theme in an important way, does this mean that the theme of a variations set might be lurking somewhere in the background of a stately, galant variation by Mozart, even though it is not immediately perceptible? And second, is it possible that the tools of music analysis can, as it were, pull back the curtain in order to reveal the theme in all of its resplendent simplicity?

II. The Sleuthing: Music Analysis as Detective Work

³ “Sectional variations” is what we typically mean when we say “theme and variations.” It is distinct from “continuous variations,” those forms with what Laitz calls “repeating bass patterns,” that are characteristic of the Baroque. “Variation *procedures*” can be traced back at least as far as the thirteenth century, where upper voices often embellish a repeated cantus firmus. See, e.g., the “racy” anonymous thirteenth-century motet “On parole—A Paris—Frese nouvele,” which appears in Peter Spencer and Peter M. Temko’s *A Practical Approach to the Study of Form in Music* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1988), 121-123 and which Taruskin memorably glosses in the first volume of *The Oxford History of Western Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 236. And see Steven G. Laitz, *The Complete Musician: An Integrated Approach to Theory, Analysis, and Listening*, 4 ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 493-501.

⁴ As William Caplin mentions, this can involve a trajectory in which “earlier variations [,] relatively simple in style and texture, [become] increasingly more complex with each variation.” Caplin mentions another possibility, which is also relevant to the Adagio at the center of this lesson plan—that individual variations can function as “character pieces,” e.g., in the opening movement of Mozart’s Piano Sonata in A Major, K. 331, in which “variation 4 has the pastoral quality often associated with the ‘trio’ of a minuet movement, variation 5 sounds like a slow-movement in ‘opera seria’ style, and the quick-paced variation 6 has the character of many finale movements in Mozart’s instrumental oeuvre.” See Caplin, *Analyzing Classical Form: An Approach for the Classroom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 570.

The schtick: “In 1781, the 25-year-old Mozart composed a set of twelve variations on a theme that every student in this theory classroom knows. Given what has just been said about variations form, though (and especially the progressive distancing of successive variations from their “generative” theme), it may be that the theme of the set will not be immediately obvious or apparent—especially if, say, your pesky professor were to play for you instead the beginning of a later variation (say, Variation 11 of 12).”⁵ To confirm this, I play through the first eight bars of Variation 11 at the piano at a true Adagio, and observing the repeat so that the students have two opportunities to hear it. The music is given in Example 1, below.



Example 1. Score Excerpt: Mozart, Variation XI from Twelve Variations on The French Song “Ah vous dirai-je maman,” K. 265.

The passage is gorgeous, expressive, almost romantic. (Indeed, many students may be surprised that this is Mozart at all.) After playing it, I lead discussion from the keyboard, posing a series of questions that appeal to students’ as-yet-unformalized musical intuitions about the shape,

⁵ From time to time, a student will know this piece, or will intuit the theme from a knowledge that Mozart composed a set of variations on it. In order not to blow the punchline, after revealing the score to Variation 11, I ask students if anyone knows the piece. If hands go up, I will ask them to remain silent about the theme. (Of course, their being able to guess the theme does not make them unable to participate in the important music-analytic topics of the day.)

directionality, and expressive effect of the melody.⁶ As the discussion proceeds, I “document” students’ perceptions at the chalkboard, guiding their hands in such a way that what emerges from the discussion looks something like the top line of Example 2. (Typically, I fill in some bass pitches, as relevant, that give support to the melody.) In the following, I italicize terms that students will be exposed to over the course of the following two semesters but likely have not been exposed to before their first day of college music theory.

Example 2. Analytic reduction of the passage, with commentary.

We discover that the piece begins with a *rocket*, an upwards *arpeggiation* of the *tonic triad*. The left hand in measure two presents an *imitative entry*, a very old compositional technique in western art music. But the upwards arpeggio in the melody has a complex shape: before each upward leap, the line skips down, as if to gather the requisite energy for the leaps. Ultimately, this

⁶ In appealing to my students’ intuitions, this lesson foreshadows much of what is to come, for two of the core features of my music theory pedagogy are its assumptions that my students are situated (even “expert”) listeners and that one important goal of the core music theory curriculum is to give them a vocabulary for describing musical phenomena that they are already familiar with. A similar assumption is made by Susan McClary in *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), especially ix-34. In my opinion, instructors should take seriously T. W. Adorno’s caution that “The naiveté of the student, to whom the difficult and formidable seems good enough, is wiser than the adult pedantry that admonishes thought with a threatening finger to understand the simple before risking that complexity which alone entices it. Such a postponement of knowledge only prevents knowledge.” See Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” trans. Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, *New German Critique* 32 (1984): 162.

gesture opens a space between *do* on the low end and *sol* on the high, creating a frame in which the melodic shape comes into being. *Do* and *sol* are *solfège syllables*; basically they're handy labels for identifying the individual steps of a scale. Students know these from *The Sound of Music*, but many of them will not have intuited that they are separable from Rodgers and Hammerstein's famous show tune.⁷

It is intuitive to address this opening-up of space as requiring a filling-in, whether presented in terms of a *gap/fill* gestalt or a *departure-and-return* script.⁸ However one presents this “incomplete” melodic archetype, though, what is important is that the motion back towards the origin does not begin immediately. Before starting the descent to *do*, Mozart gives prominent attention to the note A6 (*la*), a note which eclipses the triadic frame by one *diatonic step*, but which nevertheless returns to the framing pitch *sol* at m. 4.⁹ Since it returns to the G from whence it came, this A, which does not belong to the tonic triad, can be understood as a kind of *neighboring tone* to the G—a decoration of the top note of the frame.

The descent, which happens more slowly than the initial ascent, begins immediately after this neighboring embellishment of the *climax* pitch, G. The G, once re-achieved at m. 4, cedes to F in m. 5. The technical vocabulary surrounding suspensions is too complex a can of worms to open on a first-day class, but the mechanics of this suspension are not as important as the percept—

⁷ These syllables date back to the eleventh century (c. 1026), but “do” was called “ut” until the seventeenth century (1672). For more, see Gregory Barnett’s “Tonal Organization in Seventeenth-Century Music Theory,” in *Cambridge History of Western Music Theory*, ed. Thomas Christensen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 407-455.

⁸ Leonard B. Meyer: “The mind . . . expects structural gaps to be filled.” *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 44. T.S. Eliot: “We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time.” See “Little Gidding,” from his *Four Quartets*.

⁹ This notion of “eclipse” plays a role in my pedagogy, where it may be generalized to describe the breakings of other sorts of boundaries. My students particularly enjoy the sense of hope projected by the climactic scale degree 1 (over a VI chord) in the “Force” theme from *Star Wars*, which may be heard as the eclipsing (by one triadic “step”) of the plagal (5-5) frame set up in the beginning of the theme.

in my experience immediately obvious to even to first-day students—that Mozart’s harmony in m. 5 makes G seem to desire F.¹⁰ I often ask students to sing (and of course solmize) the pitch *sol* and hold it while I play, first, the C-major harmony of m. 4, and then, the first-inversion F chord of m. 5. Intuitively, they feel that the bass has precipitated an important change in the stability of their pitch, which has moved from consonant to dissonant before their very ears. When I ask them to sing what they think their pitch “should do,” they tend to descend by step to *fa*.

The same sense of desire accompanies the F-to-E (*fa*-to-*mi*) motion at m. 6, where the descent is slightly obscured by a melismatic *motion out of an inner voice*. As so often in Mozart’s piano music, this soaring leap is a virtual operatic soprano; still, she rejoins our operative F5 before falling to E5. As a concept typically associated with Schenkerian theory and tied up with abstract notions of “melodic fluency,” motion out of an inner voice may seem a stretch for the first day of class. And yet, this phenomenon, too, is easily demonstrated at the keyboard: students sing *fa*, while I demonstrate the motion out of an inner voice, followed by the regaining of the structural tone F. Despite this expressively supercharged moment, the two Fs connect up with one another, and the line turns out to be melodically connected, or *fluent*. From this perspective the D# that decorates the resolution from F to E poses no new difficulties. Students can easily see that the D# decorates—and so is subsidiary to—the E to which it resolves. Singing this should make it aurally obvious.

To a veteran music theorist, measures 7 and 8 seem slightly more challenging, because the D that is expected in m. 7 does not appear until it forms a part of the cadential figure in m. 8. In a class of more advanced undergraduates, this little detail might take a bit more explanation. On the

¹⁰ The notion of dissonance may be useful here, especially if some of the class is comfortable spelling triads and can see that the melodic G is not in the first-inversion F chord played by the left hand. From here, the instructor may further wish to point out the similar beauty of the inner-voice G in m. 3, a pitch which enriches immeasurably the effect of the IV chord.

first day of music theory, however, I am happy to assert simply that in m. 8 D5 and C5 (*re* and *do*) provide the last two notes of our structural melody and to add them to our inchoate chalkboard sketch. Here, it is helpful to call attention to the notion of *cadence* (and its etymological root, *cadere*: “to fall”) and to the satisfaction, resolution of tension, or sensation of repose that accompany our having found the way back to the point of origin, the C5 from m. 1.

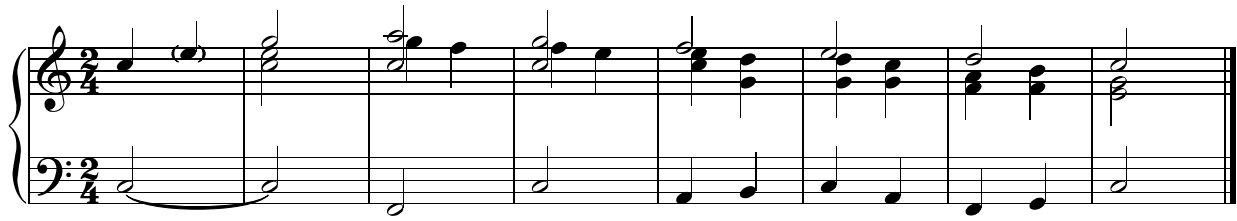
What has emerged on the board is a synoptic view of Mozart’s variation. Whatever the details of its particulars, it is now clear that Mozart has composed a melody that has three main parts: 1) A space-opening departure from the tonic pitch, which ascends through the members of the tonic triad to the climax *sol*; 2) a dallying decoration of the climax *sol* through a neighboring pitch (the *la* “eclipse” mentioned above); and 3) a slow, scale-wise descent back to the point of origin. It is worth pointing out that a great many melodies that the students will be exposed to in the following semesters will have a similar structural shape.¹¹

III. Case Closed: The Solution and Denouement

The last stage of our detective work involves examining the details of the music-analytical artifact on the board, with an eye to whether it houses any helpful clues to the identity of the theme that we surmised might be lurking in the background of our galant variation. The students sing the melody that has emerged on the chalkboard while I accompany, supporting them with the melody

¹¹ Sometimes, I challenge students to come up with a melody that does so. An example of one whose effect is strikingly different from Mozart’s Adagio variation can be found in the *minore* variation (Var. 8) from the same set. (This stands to reason, since all the variations should have similar “background contours,” even if these are differently elaborated.) Var. 8 is in the *minor mode* and begins with an ascending scale instead of an ascending arpeggio, but it preserves the eclipse, the suspensions, and the slow descent of Var. 11. It will strike some students as being the “Hatikvah”—the Israeli national anthem—as it were, *avant la lettre*. It is not directly connected with the Hatikvah, but it may be a deliberate recollection of the tune of Giuseppe Cenci’s well-known madrigal “La Mantovana” from c. 1600, which inspired works by many classical composers and to which melody Samuel Cohen ultimately set the text of the Hatikvah in 1888. Further information is available on Wikipedia, s.v. “Hatikvah” and “La Mantovana.”

and adding the expressive suspensions and the structural bass pitches. A *continuo*-like accompaniment is given in Example 3.



Example 3. Reduced Melody and Continuo-Style Accompaniment Reveal the Theme that Undergirds the Variation

After singing the structural melody, the solution to our detective story is usually clear, even if students hesitate to propose “Twinkle Twinkle” as a theme on which Mozart would have written a set of variations. If it is not immediately clear (or if the entire class does not seem to have gleaned the source of the variation), the instructor may use this to her or his advantage, asking if the incipient melody on the board might stand to be further simplified: The E in m. 1, for instance, turns out to be something of a red herring; the most important pitches here turn out to be the ones that constitute the framing fifth! By omitting the E and starting by singing the fifth-leap from C to G, typically, the familiarity of the tune will begin to show on some students faces; if we have not yet guessed the theme by this point, the reason for this is probably an incredulity that Mozart would have written a set of variations on this nursery-rhyme theme. Nevertheless, if it needs to be made more explicit, the substitution of repeated quarter notes for all the half notes of the theme (except the last) should be more than enough to get a definitive verdict: the theme is “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star”—the case is closed.

IV. Postscript and Some Extra Materials

After the detective exercise, I typically try to expose students to the other important component of the curriculum: “skills.” Most often, I piggyback on the refresher of solfège syllables provided by the Mozart exercise to identify the notes and syllables of a simple canon and/or a

simple chorale, and then to sing these in as many parts as we can in the time that's left. The hope is that this will whet students' appetites for group music making and inculcate a readiness to participate.

Before closing the door on the Mozart exercise, however, I wish to make explicit two further benefits. First, in my experience, it seems that students enjoy the process of discovery afforded by the game-like nature of the lesson. That the analysis is fun, however, should not obscure the fact that in the half hour or so that it takes to get to the bottom of the mystery, I have gotten them to read notes, refresh their memories of solfège syllables, sing out loud in front of their peers, and examine a piece of eighteenth-century music, activities that will be absolutely central to the next several semesters and which will be enhanced from willingness of students to participate. And second, I have been able to measure the abilities and comfort levels of each of the students. By the end of the exercise, I know which students have been exposed to basic music-theoretical concepts and vocabulary, which are comfortable reading treble and bass clefs, which have heard (or never heard!) a piece by an eighteenth-century composer, which are comfortable singing a simple tune with solfège syllables, which enjoy speaking up, and more.

In case the instructor (or some students) are interested and if class time permits, I close with some further information about the history of the theme for Mozart's set of variations. It seems to have been first sung as early as the 1740s; it was published in 1761, without text, and appeared in 1774 with a text in a volume of romances.¹² In the 250 years since the tune was written, many texts have been sung to it. One of them is "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star," of course, but the

¹² Mozart may have been exposed to the tune on a trip to Paris that lasted from April to September of 1778. There are a few amusing anecdotes regarding the 22-year-old Mozart's stay in Paris, including a famous letter to his father, from 12 June, in which he describes the upcoming premiere of a symphony thus: "I can vouch for the *few* intelligent French people who may be there; as for the stupid ones—I see no great harm if they don't like it. But I hope that even these idiots will find something in it to like..." This translation appears in Hermann Abert's *W. A. Mozart*, trans. Stewart Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007): 507.

class should be able to come up with others, such as “Baa Baa Black Sheep,” “The Alphabet Song,” and the German Christmas song entitled “Morgen kommt der Weihnachtsmann.” (In my experience, even this can be an epiphany to some students in the room.)¹³

Also potentially of interest: the current nursery-rhyme version of the French text sets a story about a child’s desire for a *bonbon*:

Oh! Shall I tell you, Mommy
What is tormenting me?
Daddy wants me to reason
Like an adult,
Me, I say that sweets
Are worth more than reasoning.

But the original lyrics are a far cry from the nursery. The first stanza only of this multi-stanza poem, which describes the awakening of desire in a young girl, is given in Example 4.

Ah! Shall I tell you , Mama,
What causes my torment?
Ever since I saw Silvandre
Look at me tenderly;
My heart says at every moment:
“Can one live without a lover?”¹⁴

¹³ Mozart is not the only composer to have written a set of variations on this tune. For music theorists, it might be particularly interesting to know that the Abbé Georg Joseph Vogler wrote one. Other notable (and potentially teachable) sets include those of Johann Christoph Friedrich Bach and Ernst von Dohnanyi.

¹⁴ The entire text and translation may be found on Wikipedia, s.v. “Ah! vous dirai-je maman.” I have very slightly modified both translations above.