An Analytical Study of the Three 1841 Variation Sets for Piano Solo by Felix Mendelssohn

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ABSTRACT

The subject of this thesis is an analytical study of the three sets of variations for piano solo by Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847); Variations sérieuses Op. 54 in D minor; Theme and Variations Op.82 in E flat major; and Theme and Variations Op.83 in B flat major in the context of the development of the ‘Theme and Variations’ genre during the Classical and the early Romantic periods.

The thesis firstly presents (in Chapter 1) a brief overview of the development of the keyboard variation genre and discusses an extensive range of variation techniques from the Classical to the early Romantic period. Works in variation form for piano by Mendelssohn’s predecessors and contemporaries are also reviewed in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 provides an overview of Mendelssohn’s works in variation form including a brief examination of his early keyboard variation works, which are predominantly based on the Classical ‘melodic-outline’ type.

In Chapter 3, the style and texture of the themes and types of variations employed in his three sets of variations dating from 1841 (Op.54, Op.82 and Op.83), are critically examined. Unlike the predominant use of the ‘melodic-outline’ variation type in his early works, Mendelssohn employs a mixture of Classical variation types, together with ‘formal-outline’, ‘character’, and ‘free’ variations in his mature sets.

Chapter 4 presents conclusions from this study. With reference to his strong bond with the formal practices of earlier music, it is clear that Mendelssohn adopts a distinctly conservative profile in his variation compositions, at least when compared to those of his contemporaries - Beethoven, Weber, Chopin, Schumann and Liszt. Notwithstanding this, Mendelssohn’s compositional and pianistic styles appear uniquely personal and distinctive, because he maintains the Classical clarity of formal articulation while adopting nineteenth-century pianistic textures in his compositions.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The subject of this thesis is an analytical study of the three sets of variations for piano solo by Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) – namely, Op.54 in D minor (*Variations Sérieuses*), Op.82 in E flat major and Op.83 in B flat major - in the context of the development of the ‘Theme and Variations’ genre during the Classical and the early Romantic periods. Hence, a special focus of this study is the connection between Classical and Romantic techniques of variation composition and their relationship to the development of the genre prior to and during the early nineteenth century. It may be useful at the outset, therefore, to present a brief overview of the development of the keyboard variation genre in order to place Mendelssohn’s contribution in its historical context.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE KEYBOARD VARIATION FORM

According to *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, a variation is defined as, ‘A form founded on repetition, and as such an outgrowth of a fundamental musical and rhetorical principle, in which a discrete theme is repeated several or many times with various modifications’.¹ The variation form is used either as an independent set, or as a movement of a large-scale multi-movement work. A variation theme generally consists of at least eight to thirty-two bars with a combination of elements such as melody, a bass line, a harmonic scheme and rhythm.

Variation sets have been written for numerous instrumental media and genres such as symphonies, string quartets, trios and many others, but this study will only examine and focus on keyboard variation sets, referring to the types defined below.

Variations are one of the oldest forms of keyboard music and have existed for more than four centuries. Throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries a number of variation types were employed by many composers who developed different musical ideas in variation form that created diverse moods and effects. From the second quarter of the sixteenth century, variations of songs and dances were the first type to appear. Many works of this time used no title for the variations, merely numbers. Themes consisted of one or two phrases and were frequently borrowed from dances and songs. Song variations were built on secular songs, dances and arias. Some of these song variations were of the type which was later referred to as 'melodic-outline' variation. This is a type of variation that simply varies the melody, and was to become increasingly accepted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A special kind of 'melodic-outline' variation, termed 'strophic variation' is linked to the 'strophic' form of the song that was used for early arias. It was largely used in opera and vocal chamber music in the early seventeenth century.

Dances were often used as a framework for variations, and dance patterns, like the Romanesca or Folia, became the basis for variations especially in bass line patterns (Ex.1.1), which were then used as ‘frameworks’. They were frequently ‘bass-frameworks’, which led to the idea of passacaglia and chaconne, which are examples of ‘continuous’ variation that consists of a short pattern of notes, usually in the bass register that remains constant and is continuously repeated throughout the variations. All the other voices may be changed while the form and harmony are unchanged. Such an example is Purcell’s Chaconne in which its bass-line was used as a ground bass to make a set of ‘continuous’ variations (Ex. 1.2).

Example 1.1: La folia

Example 1.2: Chaconne in G minor by Henry Purcell (1659-1695)

The bass-framework-type or ‘ostinato’ variations were the most popular Baroque variation type, which include ‘baroque chaconne’, ‘thorough bass’ and ‘basso ostinato’ variations where the variations are built upon a recurring melodic phrase found in the bass. These ‘bass patterns’ were treated continuously and continued to exist throughout the Baroque period even into the Classical period as can be seen, for example, in Haydn’s work. An example that represents the highest artistic development of the ‘bass-framework’ variation type is J. S. Bach’s Goldberg Variations (1741). These variations
were organized in a contrapuntal and canonic way and are frequently considered as ‘chaconne’ variations, although Bach did not explicitly label the work as such.

Certain terminologies for variation types are used in different periods, but when they are closely examined, the terms reflect essentially similar basic techniques. Although the terms ‘framework’ or ‘ostinato’ and ‘thorough bass’ are used in different contexts, they referred to a particular kind of ‘continuous’ variation type, normally associated with the bass line being the actual theme that is used as a central form for the variations.

Another variation type is the ‘cantus firmus’ (‘constant-melody’) variation, which is in some ways similar to the ‘basso ostinato’ (‘constant bass’) variation, because it contains the same melodic shape repeated continuously, while the other elements, such as harmony, rhythm and other musical fundamentals may be changed. However, the difference is that the ‘cantus firmus’ is not present in the bass, but rather appears either in a middle voice or most often in the top voice- as a theme rather than a bass line. The basic melodic content remains invariant and what changes may be either the harmony, texture, rhythm or the other variables, unlike the ‘constant-harmony’ variation (to be discussed later), where the harmonic scheme is the basis of the variation. Examples of the ‘cantus firmus’ variation type are William Byrd’s *John come kiss me now* (Ex. 1.3) which is based on a 4-bar theme and 15 variations, and (a later example in the eighteenth century) the second movement of Haydn’s String Quartet in C Major (‘Emperor’) Op. 76, no. 3, on ‘Gott erhalte’. Additionally ‘cantus firmus’ variation types were employed in a number of situations including numerous sets of ‘chorale’ variations.
In the early Classical period, composers tried numerous ways to explore variation techniques, including decorating the melody of a well-known piece or creating contrapuntal complexities over an ‘ostinato bass’. Types include ‘constant-harmony’ variations in which a harmonic progression is the basic element. In this respect, they may be related to ‘ostinato’ variations; however instead of having a repetitive bass line, it is the harmonic pattern that is repeated, sometimes with internal variation. Hence, ‘constant-harmony’ variations can be seen to be related to the ‘chaconne’ type, which seems to overlap with ‘bass-framework’ variation by keeping the bass and carrying the harmonies, the only difference being that the bass lines were not consistent. Examples of where this type of variation has been employed, may be found in some compositions of the Classical period such as the Thirty-Two Variations in C minor by Beethoven. The very fact that Beethoven’s C minor variations have been referred to as both ‘constant-harmony’ variations and ‘chaconne’ variations illustrates the connection between them.

‘Melodic-outline’ variations, the main type of Classical variation, also keep the same harmony throughout the variations while the melody and other variables such as rhythm,
tempo and dynamics are subject to change. This type of variation is based on the clear idea of ‘theme and variations’ that takes both a pre-existing melody and its harmony as the basis for variations by means of melodic embellishment while keeping the same harmony as in the case of ‘constant-harmony’ variations. It is the central role of the melodic theme, which distinguishes this variation type from the ‘constant-harmony’ type.

‘Melodic-outline’ variations became popular and were widely employed by a number of composers by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Around this time, the ‘theme and variations’ genre became popular and the popularity of the form arose from the practice of improvising variations based on favourite tunes of the day. It originated from entertaining audiences by repeating and varying tunes with which they were already familiar. These sets were based on either an ‘original’ or ‘borrowed’ theme, (the latter normally a popular or well-known melody) and its harmonization. The sources of the themes were fairly simple, easy-to-remember tunes such as popular or folk-tunes, a melody of the composer’s own invention, or even a melody borrowed from another composer. Composers mostly wrote variations on pre-composed (borrowed or popular tune) themes, for separate sets, but on original themes for sets of variations as movements of a sonata or symphony.

During the Classical period, such ‘melodic-outline’ variation types were used extensively in the music of Haydn and Mozart, and in the early works of Beethoven. It began to predominate over other types such as the various kinds of ‘ostinato’ variations. Haydn employed various variation types including ‘thorough-bass’, ‘constant-harmony’ and ‘cantus firmus’ types but he tended to move towards the ‘melodic-outline’ variations in his later works, whereas Mozart seemed to concentrate more on the ‘melodic-outline’ type throughout his career.

In the late eighteenth century, Haydn began to compose ‘hybrid’ variations (‘double’ variations), which are alternating variations on themes given respectively in a major and a minor key or vice versa. Such an example is the Andante con variazioni in F minor, Hob. XVII: 6 (1793) where the two themes – in F minor and F major – are subjected to
alternating variations. The pattern is as follows: first theme, second theme, variation 1 on the first, variation 1 on the second, variation 2 on the first, variation 2 on the second, variation 3 on the first, and coda. He may have influenced Beethoven who also employed this variation form in his piano variations (e.g. WoO 68, WoO 71).

From the earlier discussion, it can be noted that Haydn's use of the variation form was more diverse whereas Mozart largely confined himself to the 'melodic-outline' variation type. Furthermore, he composed independent sets mostly on popular themes with 'melodic-outline' figurations and cadenzas as opposed to Haydn's variations on original themes. Mozart made the form, 'theme and variations' a more prominent aspect of composition than composers from previous eras. Such an example is Twelve Variations on 'Ah, vous dirai-je, maman' ('Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star'), K. 300e (265), based on the song, which was very popular in Paris. It was composed in 1778 during his Paris concert tours. This is a well-known tune in ternary form and is presented in a straightforward way above a simple bass line. The theme itself exhibits such features as clear phrases, repetitions, and contrast in melody, rhythm and texture. His variation seeks for simpler textures and it is rare to see complex harmony or extremes of dynamics; yet some devices are similar to those seen in works from the Romantic period, for example, the hands more or less exchanging roles from one variation to another. The technique, which Mies called the 'mirroring' texture, was employed frequently. Such example can be seen in variation 1 and 2 of K. 265 (Ex. 1. 4.1).
Like Haydn, Mozart also employs ‘opposite mode’ variations; however, rather than using Haydn’s alternating ‘double variation’ technique Mozart uses the opposite (usually minor) mode in his variations on a (single) theme for occasional dramatic contrast of mood, often involving expressive chromaticism. An example can be seen in the above-mentioned work, ‘Ah, vous dirai-je, maman’. The key changes to C minor suddenly in the 8th variation resulting in a change of mood and basic character of the composition (Ex. 1.4.2).
Other techniques of changing moods can be seen by varying the tempo in ‘Adagio’ and ‘Allegro’ variations. They are usually placed next to each other as the final two variations and the variation stands in sharp contrast to the theme by changing its tempo.

In ‘Allegro’ variations that are often in changed metre, the tempo increase continues to a climactic conclusion. They are usually enlarged by adding extensions, using a brief repetition of the theme as codetta, or adding short codas as free, ‘fantasy-like’, manipulations of fragments of the theme. This ‘Allegro’ variation foreshadows the ‘finale’ variation of the nineteenth century, which is independent of the last variation. In design, it corresponds, and is similar in character, to a coda. The ‘finale’ is normally an Allegro molto or Presto, and often in rondo form or a rondo that has taken over some developmental features of sonata-allegro form. The concept came into use in the early nineteenth century and is written as a separate movement. An example can be found within the mixed sonata/variation form of the finale of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. This technique became commonly used at the end of variations to recall the thematic elements that were used in the variations. Percy Goetschius further stated that this technique was to further emphasize the original form in a much more climactic delivery with the original theme expanded at the end.

These ‘Adagio’ and ‘Allegro’ variations, in contrast to the ‘Minore’ variation, are based on a change in tempo, rather than upon a change in mode; but the similarity of employing either of these techniques could be defined as changing the ‘character’ of the variations. Such examples of these techniques can be seen in K. 265, employing different tempo variation in variation 11, and lastly taking a new metre 3/4 as compared to the 2/4 of the rest of the set in the final ‘Allegro’ variation (Ex1.5). These techniques were commonly employed in Mozart’s piano variations and were used, more notably, by other composers such as Beethoven.

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4 Nelson, p.81
Finally, composers often change the mood of their independent variation sets in the Classical period by the deliberate writing of variations in a particular form like minuet, march, waltz, gavotte, aria, invention, fughetta, canon and so on. They are thus actually creating a small composition of a certain type and character. Such variations may be referred to as ‘genre’ variations.

Variation types discussed so far such as ‘ostinato’, ‘cantus-firmus’, ‘constant-harmony’, and ‘melodic-outline’ variations, existing up to the end of the Classical period, can be classified as ‘formal’ variations, where the theme’s form and phrase structure remain more or less constant throughout the variations. They were retained during the nineteenth century but appeared together with the ‘formal-outline’ variations (see definition below), as well as newly emerging ‘character’ and ‘free’ variation types, which were influenced by ‘the new ideals and imagery of Romanticism’. Although, notably, there appears to be no clear distinction between Classical and Romantic tendencies, it is suggested that expansion of Classical variation form was seen in various devices of variations during the Romantic period in piano variations.

Variations involving changes of tempo, mode, metre or form as discussed above, result in variations of increasingly contrasted ‘character’. ‘Character’ variations involved the

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6 Sisman, ‘Variations’ (New Grove), p.289
transformation of individual variations of the theme into contrasting ‘character pieces’ that expressed specific moods, by varying melody, harmony, key, rhythm and tempo, thus changing the theme’s basic ‘character’. However, the changes in variation writing in the Classical period are not yet usually classified as ‘character’ variations. Nevertheless, when what is known as the ‘character’ variation emerged in the nineteenth century, it was not a totally new phenomenon but rather an outgrowth of tendencies already existing in the Classical period.

By the late eighteenth century, almost every composer was writing variations, which often used highly expressive and ornate themes, insertion of opposite mode keys, intense and sometimes capricious figurations. Composers in the Romantic period borrowed, adapted and expanded the principal Classical variation forms. They still kept the theme’s form and phrase structure; but other thematic features, such as melodies, harmonies, rhythmic patterns, tempo, mode and so on, change from variation to variation instead of remaining constant – a type which may be classified as ‘formal-outline’ variations. This type can be best known as the most ‘progressive’ type of ‘formal’ variations, which frequently applied in compositions in the nineteenth century. It was Beethoven, who set out to achieve a balance between the more structured, clear and strict Classical form and the newer, innovative, Romantic style of music making. Hence, he is credited by many commentators as the first notable composer to explore beyond Classical variations such as ‘melodic-outline’ and ‘constant-harmony’ variations towards ‘character’ and/or ‘free’ variations while still also employing ‘formal-outline’ variations in most of his piano works.

During this time, Mendelssohn’s contemporaries and immediate predecessors developed and extended the variation form in a number of ways. In the work of composers such as Beethoven (1770-1827), Hummel (1778-1837), Weber (1786-1826), Schubert (1797-1828), Chopin (1810-1849) and Schumann (1810-1856), one can see the difference between Classical and nineteenth-century variation types. As previously stated, some frequently employed styles of the Classical period would remain in the nineteenth century in a much more developed form, together with the emergence of the ‘free’ variation and
‘character’ variation type. To place these developments in perspective, it is necessary to examine some examples of piano variations by the above composers in terms of their overall compositional process, and to comment on their significance in piano literature in the development of the ‘theme and variations’ genre. The remainder of this chapter, therefore, presents analysis and discussion of some important early nineteenth-century compositions in a way that enables readers to interpret and understand different styles of variation techniques employed and how they interrelate and develop.

In relation to the analysis of variation types during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, Beethoven’s works are significant as these contain many different variation techniques. Beethoven’s earlier (1782-1802) piano variations generally employed simple and normative techniques of the ‘melodic-outline’ type. This indicates the influence of Mozart’s Viennese keyboard sets in the Classical period. It influenced him to adopt many of the newer features of Mozart’s style such as the use of ‘Minore’, ‘Adagio’ and ‘Finale’ variations.7

Beethoven’s extensive exploration of different variation techniques was motivated by the over-use of ‘melodic-outline’ variations by salon composers. Elaine Sisman claims that this led him to consider writing variations in a completely new manner8. John Gillespie describes Beethoven’s compositional styles of his middle period as treating the Classical forms’ basic outlines with complete liberty, making them subservient to the demands of his imagination.9 Thus, in the variations of his middle period (1803-1815), Beethoven was likely to treat motives rather more dynamically and to write in a more ‘progressive’ style, including the use of developmental codas. Examples of transitional works that demonstrate this emerging middle period freedom are the two sets of piano variations: six Variations in F major Op.34 (1802) and the Fifteen Variations and Fugue in E-flat major, Op.35, (‘Eroica’ Variations) (1802). Other important work of this period include the C minor Variations WoO 80 (1806).

The two piano variation sets employed ‘melodic-outline’ and ‘constant-harmony’ techniques respectively. Beethoven transformed these traditional techniques into new variations that changed the ‘character’ of his music in ways, which Mozart and Haydn had not employed. For example, Op.34 demonstrates changes of ‘character’ by bold modulations (F – D – Bb – G – Eb – C - F); in which the first five variations are all in different keys and the last in the tonic is written in slow tempo, ‘Adagio’, and they are accompanied by frequent changes of time signature and tempo. Op.35, fifteen variations and fugue, employs a typical setting of the nineteenth-century variations: introduction, theme and variations followed by a ‘finale’ variation. This 16-bar theme retains the same bar lengths for the first five variations and employs expansion in length in variations 6 (24 bars), variation 14 (‘Minore’ variation, 32 bars), followed by variation 15 (‘Maggiore’ variation, 40 bars). As well, it adopts a particular style of composition, namely canonic writing (var.7) and a fugue in the ‘finale’ variation. The ‘finale’ to this set of variations contains an enormous extension (205 bars compared with theme’s 16 bars), which incorporates material from the introduction as well as the theme (bars 133-156), putting both to powerful use with fugal technique. However, the main thematic elements, especially its harmony, are kept throughout. What is important here is that Beethoven wrote variations employing a mixture of old and new techniques.

The borrowing of older types and transforming them into new music can also be seen in his Thirty-Two Variations for Piano in C minor, WoO 80 (1806-1807). It was written on an 8-bar harmonic theme with a descending chromatic succession in the bass. The theme is a single phrase and it constitutes a ‘chaconne’ variation, which stood apart from other variations as it was the only set to re-apply the Baroque variation form.\textsuperscript{10}

In his last period (1815-1827), Beethoven began to write variations in which the theme’s melody and structure were hardly recognizable, creating expressive types and extreme textures that epitomized ‘free’ variation. ‘Free’ variation is a type of variation in which composers skillfully vary thematic elements by concentrating on the development of a

\footnote{This set of variations is an important work on which Mendelssohn modeled some of the variation techniques that Beethoven employed.}
single idea/element. It can also be termed ‘fantasy’ variation, and embraces a much freer structure than those types of ‘formal’ variations (such as ‘cantus-firmus’, ‘constant-harmony’, ‘melodic-outline’ and ‘formal-outline’ variations) or ‘character’ variations. By definition, ‘free’ variations cannot be generalized whereas ‘formal’ variations can be explained as types of variation in which the theme’s form and length at least remain constant. However, the resemblance to the theme may in many cases be subtle, pointing towards characteristics of the ‘free’ variation type. The designation ‘free’ is, in a sense, an attempt to fit into some sort of category those variations that cannot otherwise be grouped.

Unlike ‘character’ variations, the change of thematic character would not be the main identifier of this variation type, but rather its shape, which sometimes can be altered almost out of recognition. However, the ‘free’ variation shares similar features to the ‘character’ variation to the extent that both types of variation may project clearly contrasted characters or moods. This trait can also be seen in ‘formal-outline’ variations in which themes vary and develop from the original melodic motifs throughout the variations, as well as other features such as harmony, rhythm, and thus style or ‘character’. Hence, it is appropriate to state that the ‘formal-outline’ (theme’s form and phrase structure retained), ‘character’ (recognizable theme) and ‘free’ variations (fragmented theme’s elements), share common characteristics in the development of variation form.

Moving further into the nineteenth century, such variation types were interrelated, particularly the ‘character’ variation and ‘free’ or ‘fantasia’ variation. One of the most important features of the ‘character’ variation is that the theme remains recognizable, while other elements, such as mode, rhythm, dynamic, tempo and texture change completely. Here one can find the link between the ‘character’ variation and techniques of nineteenth-century ‘program music’. For programmatic purposes, it was important for people to recognize the theme. But the significance here is that the ‘character’ is modified completely. When thus examined, the ‘character’ variation is conceptually similar to ‘thematic metamorphosis’ or ‘thematic transformation’. The latter term is
defined in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* as, ‘the process of modifying a theme so that when placed in a new context it is different but yet manifestly made of the same elements; a variant term is “thematic metamorphosis”’. Hence the similarity between the ‘character variation’ concept and ‘program music’ is that they both share the ability to maintain thematic ideas in the music through the use of mood and setting changes. However, ‘thematic metamorphosis’ most often occurs when a theme’s character is changed for programmatic reasons, while the ‘character’ variation is normally non-programmatic.

The present study demonstrates that many of the piano variation works of Beethoven’s late period presage both the ‘formal-outline’ and ‘free’ variation rather than the typical ‘character’ variation type, as the theme is often unrecognizable. Although they share similar traits with the ‘character variation’, such as the Romantic use of mood changes, unexpected modulations and harmonies, they also exhibit more radical experiments in the theme and variation form itself. Such examples can be seen in the final movement of Beethoven’s piano sonata Op.109, which consists of a theme and six variations. The theme comprises a hymn-like tune, whose character is transformed by pervasive elements such as tempo, dynamic, metre, mode, and rhythmic pattern. Following the expressive first variation, in which a new melody is introduced over the original harmonic-structural framework, the second variation employs a ‘double variation’ form, which is built on two contrasting ideas. There is a speed change in the third variation, in 2/4, which is in a much quicker tempo than the previous one, and composed as a two-part invention. Metre change occurs in the fourth variation, to 9/8. Here, the theme is not easily recognizable but the theme’s harmony is retained throughout which represents ‘constant-harmony’ variation type. Following the fugal writing of the fifth variation, the final variation treats the theme to an enormous extension (35 bars compared with the theme’s 16 bars) before returning to a final restatement of the original theme. It is interesting to note that Beethoven, for the first time in his piano sonatas, employed the variation form as a finale.

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movement rather than the first (Op.26 A♭ major (1800-1801)) or the slow movement (Op.14/2 C major (1798-1799), Op.57 D♭ major (1804-1806)).

During this late period, he composed only one independent set of variations, the 'Diabelli' Variations Op.120 (1823). In this variation set, Beethoven changed the harmony and structure freely, which was very far removed from its original material without losing connection between the variations. He did not, for the most part, change the theme's character radically; however, most variations thoroughly transform the surface of Diabelli's theme, so that it is hardly recognizable. Furthermore, particular variations adopt various styles or types of composition – i.e. what has already been referred to as 'genre' variations: Variation 1 is a March; variations 19 and 20 are canonic; variation 22 is patterned after Leoporello's first aria in Mozart's Don Giovanni; variation 24 is a fughetta; variation 30 is an invention; variation 31 is an aria; variation 32 is a fugue; and variation 33 is a minuet. (Ex. 1.6) These characteristics conform more to the Romantic 'character' variation; however, Beethoven's techniques here may also be viewed as an extreme development of the 'formal' variation, where melody, harmony, tempo, rhythm, mode and many other features are changed, rendering the theme partially or completely unrecognizable. These are regarded as a 'formal-outline' variation type, in which only aspects of the theme's form and phrase structure are the main features to remain constant; and it can also be further regarded as a kind of 'free' variation type wherein the theme's characteristics are not easily discernible.

12 Hyung-sook Yoon, 'Selected Piano Sonatas of the Early Romantic Period (1820 to 1850)', (DMA dissertation, University of Maryland, 2002), p.8
13 'The Variations Op. 120 consists of Thirty-Three Variations on a waltz composed by the Viennese music publisher Anton Diabelli. The publisher had written to fifty-one composers requesting one waltz variation from each of them for publication as a single collection. Instead of one variation Beethoven turned in thirty-three. The waltz theme itself is inconsequential (Beethoven called it a Schusterfleck—a cobbler's patch), yet the master succeeded in creating from it a magnificent set of paraphrases', Quoted from Gillespie, pp. 190-191
14 Goetschius, p.73
Example 1.6: ‘Diabelli’ Variations op. 120 by Beethoven
Other composers of variations in the early Romantic period include Hummel, Weber, Schubert, Schumann and Chopin. Hummel is regarded by Joel Sachs as the last representative of the ‘Classical’ tradition. Sachs maintains that his compositions clearly display styles of Viennese Classicism, namely homophonic textures and elaborate
melodies. Like Viennese composers, his piano music also features clarity, neatness, evenness and delicacy.\textsuperscript{15}

He has written several variation sets for piano solo, largely employing the ‘melodic-outline’ variation type, and, like Mozart, employing a popular tune of his time for the theme. On the other hand, his variation sets also demonstrate very complex and chromatic features that can more or less be seen as ‘progressive’. Such an example (Ex. 1.7) is the ‘Pretty Polly’ Variations Op.75 (1817), which includes an ‘introduction’ and a ‘rondo’ variation at the end. This 16-bar theme in two-part form is based on an English song and the set employs ‘formal-outline’ variation type. It displays the most elaborate improvisatory work among his variations (Var.9).

\textsuperscript{15} Joel Sachs, \textit{Kapellmeister Hummel in England and France}, (Detroit Monographs in Musicology Number Six, 1977), p. 48
Example 1.7: ‘Adagio’ Variation 9, from Adagio, Variations, and Rondo on the English Song, ‘Pretty Polly’ Op.75 (1817)

Weber was a virtuoso pianist whose individual styles of playing presented technical difficulties, including double thirds, rapid broken chords (fast, staccato chordal), and legato octave techniques: this is reflected in his compositions for piano writing to suit a brilliant performer rather than an average-skilled musician because his music was largely written for public performances. His compositional styles are hence a little more complex than the rather elaborate passage work of Hummel’s, which was described by Kathleen Dale as ‘for the most part decoratively melodic and extremely sectional in treatment but the piano writing, when it is not merely superficial in style, is attractive and rewarding to the pianist.’

Weber's approaches to variation are rather individual. In terms of choice of the theme, in particular, he either uses an original theme or sometimes borrows from folk or exotic sources such as Chinese melodies, a Norwegian theme, and Russian and gypsy melodies; and only one set is written on the popular operatic melody – the Variations Op.28 on the romance 'A Peine au sortir de l'enfance' from Mehul's Joseph.

With respect to Weber's works in variation form, he is considered as 'progressive' as he desires to treat 'formal' variation traits with more elaborate strategies. Similar to Beethoven's middle-period works, Weber employs Romantic variation techniques such as the use of 'introduction' and 'finale' variations, and tempo and character contrasts between variations. However, rather than adopting and following Beethoven's compositional styles, Weber expands and develops aspects of the thematic material more freely, demonstrating brilliant virtuoso writing.

For instance, the Variations on an Original Theme Op.9 (Ex. 1.8), displays particular compositional styles such as a 'character piece' that sets up a Spanish atmosphere (var.4), and a 'fantasia' variation (var.6), which is composed in alternating chordal phrases and passages of dramatic recitative. The Variations Op.28 were written after his appointment to improvise for the Queen of Bavaria, hence it exemplifies improvisatory features such as virtuosic passages and technical difficulties featuring 'progressive' writing such as rapid broken chords, legato left-hand octaves, fast, staccato chordal and octave techniques. However, it also includes a funeral march as the penultimate variation, which is an example of a 'genre' as well as 'character' variation. The Variations on the Russian song known in Germany as 'Schöne Minka' (1815) Op.40 (Ex. 1.9), on the other hand, begins with an 'introduction' that presages not only the theme but also the variation techniques that will be used in the course of the piece. Like the Joseph Variations, he introduces technical difficulties especially with double-note writing in variations 3 and 9. Here, Weber principally employs 'formal-outline' variation type; but 'cantus firmus' variation types were also employed in variations 2, 4, 6, and 7. It is in the 'finale' variation where the tempo and mood changes with a long 'Espanole' of graceful movement in triple time, that we find a 'character piece'.
From the above examples of Weber’s works, it becomes clear that he is a ‘progressive’ composer, as Warrack describes him, whose compositional techniques leaned towards freer styles that contain contrasting musical ideas.17

Example 1.8: Variations on an Original theme Op.9 (1808)

Schubert, who was more influenced by Haydn and Mozart than by Beethoven, nevertheless incorporated Romantic traits in his compositions. Most of his variations were based on original themes, and most display lyrical and Romantic melodies. His early variations include 10 Variations on an Original Theme in F (D.156) (1815), Variations on a Theme from Anselm Huttenbrenner’s String Quartet, Op.3 (D. 576) (1817), and Variations on a French Song in E minor, Op.10 (D. 624) (1818). These sets illustrate rather conservative compositional styles, whereas, in his late compositions in variation form he employed more progressive techniques. Such developments can be seen in the fourth movement of the Piano Quintet in A Major, ‘The Trout’ Op.114/ D.667 (1819), where the theme (the basis of a set of five variations and coda), is taken from Schubert’s song ‘The Trout’, Op.32. The variations present the theme without any
substantial change of the melody but with varying accompaniment – for example, largely the ‘cantus-firmus’ type. In the first three variations, Schubert presents the theme in the piano, viola and double bass part. He keeps the theme but when he modulates to the relative minor (Var 4), the theme is no longer recognizable. This cannot be described as any other type of variation but a ‘Fantasia’ variation. In other words, he employs both ‘cantus-firmus’ and ‘free’ variation types.

Another work that is regarded as ‘free’ or ‘fantasia’ variations by many writers is, the ‘Wanderer’ Fantasy in C Major D.760, Op.15 (1822), which illustrates an early use of ‘thematic metamorphosis’ (Ex.1.10). It is a large work of four closely connected movements, based on a rhythmic motive: an opening Allegro con fuoco in C Major, an Adagio in C# minor (theme and variations), a Presto which is a scherzo with two trios in A-flat Major, and a concluding Allegro with a fugue in C Major. It is the second movement in which Schubert employs the thematic tune and rhythmic pattern in the ‘theme and variations’ form from the well-known song, *Der Wanderer* (‘The Wanderer’) (1816).

He transformed his theme into modified rhythmic and characteristic form throughout the whole sections while maintaining the theme’s rhythmic patterns. Therefore, the rhythmic motive is the main device which establishes a connection between the ‘metamorphosed’ cyclic theme in the first, third and fourth movement and the ‘theme and variations’ of the second movement. The work is in cyclic form and played as one continuous movement without breaks. This approach to the work, therefore, uniquely links cyclic ‘thematic transformation’ with the theme and variations form of the central movement.
Example 1.10: ‘Wanderer’ Fantasy in C Major D.760, Op.15 (1822)

1st Movement

2nd Movement

3rd Movement

4th Movement

Turning to Schumann’s works, it is essential to note that he had a fascination for a musical style that is programmatic, as well as ‘fantastic’ and ‘capricious’. This view can clearly be seen in his variation compositions. Like Beethoven and Weber, Schumann approached variation composition in a ‘progressive’ manner including characteristics such as lengthy, brilliant ‘finale’ variations and freer structures. As well, he shows a clear preference for ‘character’ variations. Concurrently, however, some variations in which the theme itself is so transformed that the variation does not retain the shape of the theme
but rather transforms it almost out of recognition, can be viewed as ‘free’ or ‘fantasia’ variations which nevertheless stylistically resemble ‘character pieces’. The Études symphoniques Op.13, now titled Études en forme de variations, is such an example demonstrating his contribution to the variation genre. It was written in 1834 when ‘salon’ music was popular in the nineteenth century. Instead of writing the popular type of ‘showy’ variations, he composed a work that contains musical complexities and ‘fantasy-like’ structures. The unique approach to this set of variations lies in the use of ‘free’ variation techniques that are in the style of an ‘étude’ – a genre which emerged and flourished in the early nineteenth century as a ‘study’ piece or a ‘character piece’ to develop pianistic technique by means of the continuous working out of thematic motives and technical figures – a technique which relates to the ‘free’ variation type. Sisman cited this piece as ‘being the one of the fewer ‘free’ variations because of its melodic attributes and freer structural format’.18 Gillespie also observes and expresses a similar view to Sisman by describing Schumann’s work as ‘a unified work’ although presenting ‘études’ whose characteristics are sometimes too remote from the theme,19 the work nevertheless demonstrates, in its variations, the idea of the nineteenth-century ‘character piece’.

With regard to stylistic and technical aspects of variation composition, Chopin’s variations employ, like Schumann, the full resources of the Romantic keyboard and display ‘free’, ‘fantasy-like’ constructions. Many of Chopin’s sets of variations display elaborate ‘melodic-outline’ as well as ‘character’ variation types. As well, he tends to borrow particular forms (or ‘genres’), such as minuet, waltz, and nocturne as well as ‘finale’ variations in order to change the theme’s character. Examples of ‘borrowed’ themes using elaborate ‘melodic-outline’ variation types are: Variations for Piano and Orchestra on Mozart’s ‘La ci darem la mano’, Op.2 (1827), Variations in E major ‘Sur un air national allemande’, and Variations brillantes in B-flat major ‘Je vends des scapularies’ from Herold’s Rudovic, Op. 12 (1833). A few years later, he composed a variation that is a ‘nocturne-like’ piece, as part of Hexameron (See below).

18 Sisman, ‘Variations’ (New Grove), p.311
In the early nineteenth century, many composers wrote sets of variations of the ‘showy’ type because of the popularity of ‘salon’ music, and based on popular tunes of the time, mostly employing ‘melodic-outline’ variation types. In taking the progress of variation techniques a step further, a number of ‘virtuosic’ variation sets for piano compositions included insertions of ‘fantasy-like’ introductions, ‘interludes’ and ‘finales’ in much freer styles. Such an example is Hexameron, (1837) based on a melody from Bellini’s opera I puritani.

The Hexameron is a set of variations that is the contribution of six different composers: a number of the variations and other materials were written by Liszt, and the other composers are Chopin, Thalberg, Pixis, Herz, and Czerny. This piece consists of an introduction, a theme, 6 variations, (the last with added coda) and the ‘finale’. The setting of the piece is as follows: introduction (Liszt); setting of Bellini’s theme (transcribed by Liszt); variation 1 (Thalberg), variation 2 (Liszt); variation 3 (Pixis and Ritornello by Liszt); variation 4 (Herz); variation 5 (Czerny) and added ‘Lento quasi recitative’ (Liszt); variation 6 (Chopin); and coda and the ‘finale’ (Liszt).

The theme is 32 bars in length, constructed in an A-A’-B-A format: Part A, bb1-8; Part A’, bb9-16, Part B, bb17-24, Part A, bb 25-32. The first three variations employ ‘melodic-outline’ variation type where theme’s elements are more or less maintained. The fourth variation presents changes in tempo, metre (4/4 to 12/8), dynamics, melody and harmony; but the theme’s formal structure is still recognizable, hence it illustrates the ‘formal-outline’ variation type. The ‘free’ variation type can be seen in variation 5, as thematic elements are not easily discernible. The texture has changed dramatically and the piano writing has become dense with arpeggiations, repeated notes, large leaps, chromaticism, change of mode (E minor), and further rhythmic complications. Progressive styles can be seen in the last two variations, where Chopin introduces a ‘nocturne-like’ piece in the sixth variation. Here, only the theme’s melodic fragments are heard with an elaborate melodic line supported by undulating broken chords in the bass. It appears as a sort of ‘character piece’ while employing ‘free’ variation technique on the surface. The theme is deconstructed in the ‘finale’ variation where thematic elements are
not easily recognizable; melodic cells are distorted in different voices and brilliant passages such as fast octaves are used. Like much of Liszt’s early piano compositions, his piano variations\textsuperscript{20} - that are also written fairly early stage - also illustrate technical brilliance, such as octave passages, double trills, and all kinds of ornamentation that are dominated by ‘free’ and ‘character’ variations. This technically challenging writing can clearly be seen in the Hexameron set.

It can be seen from the foregoing review that Mendelssohn’s contemporaries employed and explored ‘character’ variations and a few employed ‘free’ variations in their variation works, as well as continuing more Classical techniques. Needless to say, a full account of the variation techniques employed in the music of such composers in the early Romantic period is far beyond the scope of this study. Therefore a very limited number of examples that embody an assortment of procedures has been cited.

**SCOPE OF THIS STUDY**

The main aim of this study is to analyze and evaluate the stylistic and technical features of Mendelssohn’s mature independent sets of variations for solo piano, namely the *Variations sérieuses* and the two other sets of variations (Op.82 and Op.83) written in 1841. It will therefore investigate to what extent and in what ways, Mendelssohn maintained Classical texture while displaying Romantic ideals, as his contribution to the early nineteenth-century development of the variation form.

In the foregoing discussion, works in variation form for piano by Mendelssohn’s predecessors and contemporaries have been reviewed in order to discover the extent to which they may have influenced Mendelssohn’s variation writing. The next 2 chapters therefore comprise a critical analysis of Mendelssohn’s piano variation sets. Chapter 2

\textsuperscript{20} His solo keyboard variations are: Variation sur une valse de Diabelli:var.24 (1822); Five Variations on a theme from Méhul's Joseph [attributed to Liszt but actually by Franz Xaver Mozart]; Huit variations [on an original theme] (1824); Seven Brilliant Variations on a theme by Rossini (1824); the Hexameron set; and the later Variations on ‘Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen’ (1862)
will first review his musical background and influences within the historical context - how his early approaches to the technique of variation were similar to composers who preceded him, and how they differed. In chapter 3 the style and texture of the themes and types of variations employed in Op.54, 82 and 83 will be examined, and the three sets compared both with each other and with examples of variation composition by his contemporaries and predecessors as reviewed in the present chapter.
Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847), a Romantic composer, yet conservative and strongly rooted in Classical tradition, lived and worked during the early Romantic period in the wake of the Viennese Classical composers whose music he studied and knew well.

Mendelssohn’s early professional musical training influenced his compositional works and led him to demonstrate his interest in earlier music. His composition teacher was the musical theorist, Carl Friedrich Zelter (1758-1832), whose musical preferences were steeped in the contrapuntal techniques of Bach and the Classical style of Mozart, and under whose influence Mendelssohn became well acquainted with the music of the Baroque and the Classical eras. This is evident for example, in his use of contrapuntal types in his variations, which indicates a musical influence from the Baroque period. Zelter also introduced Mendelssohn to the poet Goethe, who proved to be an enduring influence on the musician.\(^{21}\) Mendelssohn's frequent visits to Goethe helped him increase his understanding of Classical music, and particularly that of Beethoven.\(^{22}\)

Another musical theorist who enabled Beethoven’s influence over Mendelssohn to blossom was Adolf Bernhard Marx (1795-1866), whose relationship with Mendelssohn is commonly considered to date from 1824. Werner observed that Marx influenced Mendelssohn’s work by giving it more expressive intensity, as Mendelssohn’s music characteristically displays classicism and elegance. Finson also noted that Marx was an influential figure who guided Mendelssohn’s viewpoint regarding what music could and

should represent. A good example of his more ‘progressive’ influence on Mendelssohn’s early compositions can be seen in his stimulation of Mendelssohn’s interest in the new genre of the ‘concert overture’, as clearly displayed in the Overture to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1826).\(^{23}\) His help also extended to assisting Mendelssohn with the important performance of Bach’s *St Matthew Passion*, which was given for the first time after the composer’s death in Berlin in 1829.\(^{24}\)

**MENDELSSOHN AND HIS PIANOFORTE VARIATIONS**

In the 1830s, the piano was an important medium, and piano music flourished because of the mechanical and structural development of the instrument. The growing popularity of public piano recitals resulted in the piano becoming an essential item of household furniture, as a domestic instrument and the centre of domestic music-making.

Mendelssohn’s keyboard music has been classified by Eric Werner into three defined areas in terms of pianistic styles, forms and genres: the contrapuntal style; the ‘personal’ or ‘domestic’ expressions; and the brilliant virtuoso style to suit the concert hall.\(^{25}\) The first type includes the very first set of variations, in D major (1820), and the Six Preludes and Fugues Op.35 (1837); the second type includes the six sets of *Songs Without Words* (forty-eight in all) of which sets of compositions are published between 1832 and 1845\(^{26}\); finally, the third category of Mendelssohn’s piano works include Fantasy in F-sharp minor Op.28 (1833), originally entitled *Sonate ecossaise*, two later sets of *Songs Without Words* Op.85 and Op.102, Andante cantabile and Presto agitato in B major (1838), and the *Variations sérieuses* Op.54 (1841). His two other sets of variations for piano solo display contrapuntal texture but their compositional style illustrates ‘domestic’ styles of piano writing, hence they can be categorized under both the first and second types.

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\(^{23}\) Werner, pp. 71-85

\(^{24}\) Werner, p.84

\(^{25}\) Werner, p.63

\(^{26}\) The first set was published as Opus 19, titled *Original Melodies for the Pianoforte*, (1832) and the second, *Six Romances* Opus 30, published in 1835. Four other collections later appeared posthumously from the publisher, Simrock, namely Opus 38 (1837), Opus 53 (1841), Opus 62 (1844), and Opus 67 (1845).
Among Mendelssohn’s piano compositions in the above categories, it may be observed that his sets of variations comprise a small proportion of his mature solo compositions for the instrument. They include 4 sets of variations for piano solo, 1 set for two pianos, and 1 set for piano duet; which, together with a further 3 sets for chamber music combinations comprise his entire output in this genre.

The earliest set of variations, in D major, was composed in 1820 (Ex. 2.1.1), and as most pre-adult compositions are ‘conservative’, this piece demonstrates an earlier type of variation technique, namely the ‘melodic-outline’ type. The melody is very Haydnesque. Todd finds that the first half, for example, is very similar to the well-known Rondo finale from Haydn’s Quartet, Op.74, No.2 (Ex. 2.1.2). Both have the 2/4 same time signatures, begin with an anacrusis. Both themes appear in a top voice, with chordal accompaniment played in a middle range making use of a quick harmonic progression, I-IV-I (Haydn, bb. 1-2; Mendelssohn, bb.3-4). Interestingly Mendelssohn employs Haydn’s alternating major-minor mode theme; however, this ‘hybrid’ (double) variation technique was not popularly employed for variation sets during the early nineteenth century. His early compositional training may have been influenced him to adopt earlier techniques in his compositions.

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27 This was a variation set for two pianos, which was jointly composed by Mendelssohn and Moscheles. See also p.42 for comments on the background of this piece.

28 Op 83a is a work for piano duet, which is arranged from a theme of Op.83. Radcliffe claimed in his book, *Mendelssohn* (p.69) that it is just a rewritten version of Op.83 with some additional variations. However, the information was misleading as the three of the five variations of the piano solo are replaced by six completely new variations in the duet work. Hence, the length of the music is not only much longer but also a considerable extent of a new work.

Example 2.1.1: Theme and Variations in D major

Example 2.1.2: Rondo finale from the Quartet, Op.74, No.2
Another early set of variations that also demonstrates Classical variation technique of the 'melodic-outline' type is the C major variations for piano and violin (1820) (Ex. 2.2.1).

Like the theme for the D major variations, the theme of the C major set comprises a symmetrical structure of sixteen bars in 2/4 time with an anacrusis of two quavers. Todd observes that the comparable stylistic features of Haydn can also be seen in the Rondo finale to Haydn’s Symphony No.79 (Ex. 2.2.2). 30

Example 2.2.1: Theme and Variations in C major for Piano and Violin (1820)

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Example 2.2.2: Rondo finale of Haydn's Symphony No.79

Other earlier variation works, not for solo keyboard, include Variations concertantes in D major, Op.17 for cello and piano (1829) and Variations brillantes on the Gipsy March from C. M. von Weber's *Preciosa* for two pianos in C minor (1833).

The eight Variations concertantes, the first in Mendelssohn's series of compositions for cello and piano, were dedicated to his cello playing brother, Paul. The 32-bar theme is followed by eight variations, which show the influence of both Mozart's, and Beethoven's (early) sets of variations. Such types are mixture of Classical 'melodic-outline' and 'formal-outline' variations; but Mendelssohn displays typical nineteenth-century piano writing, including running triplets, wide leaps of octave runs, chromatic scales and arpeggiated chordal texture punctuated by rests (Ex. 2.3). Interestingly Mendelssohn employs a fast tempo with a *minore* variation (var. 7) (Ex. 2.4).
Example 2.3: Theme from Variations concertantes in D major, for Cello and Piano Op.17 (1829)

Example 2.4: Variation 7, Op.17 (1829)
The Variations brillantes on the Gipsy March from Weber’s melodrama Preciosa for two pianos, arranged by Mendelssohn and Moscheles, consists of an introduction (Mendelssohn), theme with 4 variations (the first two variations by Mendelssohn and last two with connecting tutti by Moscheles) and a finale (Mendelssohn and Moscheles). This set illustrates the virtuoso style of Weber, whom Mendelssohn had first met in Berlin in 1821 at the premiere of Der Freischütz and he may be the stylistic source for the use of a characteristic figure by Mendelssohn - namely, broken arpeggiations embellished by chromatic notes. This set illustrates somewhat pretentious pianistic style, especially similar to that of Weber, employing ‘formal-outline’ variations, accompanied by nineteenth-century piano writing involving large leaps, octave passages and rhythmic complexities (Ex. 2.5). It is with the ‘finale’ variation that Mendelssohn displays more progressive features, such as a metric change from 2/4 to 6/8, tempo change ‘Allegro vivace’, chromatic arpeggiations, dramatic use of non-harmonic notes, and employs ‘character’ variation technique.

Example 2.5: Theme from Variations brillantes on the Gipsy March from Weber’s Preciosa
It is evident that much of Mendelssohn's early variations for piano solo were influenced by his predecessors (Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven), and were largely modeled on Haydn's and Mozart's variation techniques. Mendelssohn demonstrates how thoroughly he assimilated and imitated earlier types - Haydn's individual thematic construction and Mozart's decorative structure - which show his strong roots in the Classical tradition. However, his chamber music variation sets demonstrate a more typically early nineteenth-century style similar to that found in the piano music of Weber. The present research will be focusing on the mature solo piano variations, namely the three sets of variations, composed in 1841: *Variations sérieuses* Op.54 in D minor (4 June 1841), Op.82 in E flat major (25 July 1841), and Op.83 in B flat major (July 1841).

**THE 1841 VARIATION SETS**

The impetus that led to the creation of *Variations sérieuses* came from the Viennese publisher, Pietro Mechetti, who invited Mendelssohn to write variations in memory of Beethoven; however, Mendelssohn initially refused this invitation. Finally, the music critic, Karl Kunt had to ask on Mechetti's behalf, and this time Kunt managed to persuade Mendelssohn to write music for an album of piano pieces to create funds for the raising of Bonn's first Beethoven monument. However, in response to Kunt's request, Mendelssohn confessed his complex feelings because he could foresee that his agreement would involve a very demanding artistic contribution and he was concerned about the conditions and the overall conception of the volume. In a letter of 25 May 1841 from Mendelssohn to Kunt, Mendelssohn expressed his view as follows:

I have nought that, in my opinion, might suit an album bearing name; but I shall try to finish something new for it by the end of June, and only hope that I shall succeed as I would like...

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...May I write somewhat at length? How long? Perhaps you could tell me something about the rest of the project – whether it contains just instrumental music or vocal music as well, how much of the former, how much of the latter? &c. &c. If he does not need a long instrumental piece (such as a fantasy), would a short lied be in order? In short, I would like to know more about it, and if I happen to write something decent by that time, something I need not be too ashamed to put in an album of this sort, I will send it to him.32

Soon after, in the same year 1841, Mendelssohn completed the work and described it in a letter to Karl Klingemann, dated 15 July 1841:

Do you know what I have been doing so passionately for the last few weeks? - variations for piano. Eighteen of them at one go, on a theme in D minor; and they gave me such divine pleasure that I immediately wrote a new set on a theme in E flat major [Op.82], and am now working on a third on a theme in B flat [Op.83]. I almost feel as if I have to make amends for not having written variations before. The first ones, in D minor, are very dear to me so far, and will appear in a Viennese album for the benefit of the Beethoven monument in Bonn. Moscheles has also included a piece of his; you will probably be seeing and hearing them in short order.33

The Beethoven album appeared between 1841 and 184234 with Mendelssohn’s variations and works by Chopin, Czerny, Liszt, Moscheles, and many other pianists. One of contemporary critics quoted this work as a great contribution to Beethoven’s album: ‘we must give pride of place to Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy who, with a complete set of

32 From Briefe an deutsche Verleger, p.294, in Jost, ‘In Mutual Reflection’, p.35
34 from Briefe an deutsche Verleger, p.298n, in Jost, p.35
variations of no mean achievement, has contributed an opus worthy both of himself and of the project.\textsuperscript{35}

As will be seen in Chapter 3, the other two sets of variations (Op.82 and Op.83) demonstrate similar compositional approaches to \textit{Variations sérieuses}; Radcliffe claims that they were not of sufficient significance and were less popular than Op.54 because (he contends) they were uninteresting musically and did not display a well-constructed set of variations.\textsuperscript{36} Eric Werner postulates that Mendelssohn did not consider the 'serious' element in these later sets of variations.\textsuperscript{37} Radcliffe expresses similar thoughts to Werner in his book, \textit{Mendelssohn} (1990), maintaining that the two latter works were less distinguished, lacking distinctive techniques and unique styles. He claimed Op.82 in E flat major as having 'a theme that is the considerably superior model of many Victorian hymn-tunes',\textsuperscript{38} and for the most part covered in an atmosphere of 'good-tempered rhythm'. Then he went on to state that the third set, Op.83 in B flat major has more variety, but claimed it to be 'spoilt by a distressingly commonplace finale'.\textsuperscript{39} It is noteworthy, in this regard that Op. 72 was the last publication that Mendelssohn saw into print during his lifetime,\textsuperscript{40} and that all works bearing later opus numbers (including the later variation sets) were never approved by Mendelssohn for publication; this may include indication that he regarded the Op.82 and Op.83 variations as inferior to Op.54, written in the same year.

However, it seems that the composer did not remain satisfied with any of these 3 compositions (including Op.54). He wrote this ironical observation to his sister, Rebecca, to declare his reaction to his own creation in unpublished letter on 30\textsuperscript{th} July, 1841:

\textsuperscript{35} from \textit{Neue Zeitschrift fur Musik} 16/15 (18 Feb 1842), 57, in Jost, pp.38-39
\textsuperscript{36} Radcliffe, p. 69
\textsuperscript{37} Werner, p.361
\textsuperscript{38} Radcliffe, p.69
\textsuperscript{39} Radcliffe, p.69
I vary every theme that occurs to me. First I did eighteen serious ones, then six sentimental ones; now I want to do ten graceful ones, and then some with and for orchestra……The Variations sérieuses start in D minor and are peevish.41

This acknowledgment indicates that his constant self-doubts about his composition may have affected his ability to write variations. This may have been the reason why he never attempted to compose variations for piano again after these three sets42.

It is interesting to be able to capture the musical ideals of a composer who is situated in the Romantic period, yet is strongly imbued with Classical ideas. During an era when variation compositions tended towards being showy and lacking in substance, Mendelssohn chose to take a unique approach by writing variations in a serious mode, as exemplified by the title, Variations sérieuses.

Schumann and Marx held similar thoughts to variation composition and criticized the variation writings of this time as hackneyed and tasteless, using popular themes and lacking meaning.43 Mendelssohn’s Variations sérieuses and their two successors, Op.82 and Op.83 could be seen as a reaction to such lightweight works. These seemingly enthusiastically written sets may be the results of his intellectual capacity to write music with a sudden outburst of creativity.

Mendelssohn’s contemporaries held the Variations sérieuses Op.54 in high regard as a major set of variations. As Moscheles stated, ‘I play Variations sérieuses again and again, enjoying their beauties anew at every turn.’44 Robert Schumann pointed out ‘What a capital work are Mendelssohn’s D minor Variations – yet ask whether they are one quarter as well known as, say, the Songs without Words.’45

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42 With the exception of the additional variations written of Op 83a (1844)
45 from Robert Schumann’s Briefe, neue Folge, ed. T. G. Jansen, 2nd ed. (Leipzig, 1904), p.312, in Jost, p.43
As stated in chapter 1, the remaining 2 chapters will examine the 3 variation sets of 1841 both in comparison with each other and with contemporary works; and will also address the issue as to whether the Op.82 and 83 sets represent a decline in compositional quality as claimed by various critics.
CHAPTER 3

MENDELSSOHN’S 1841 SETS OF VARIATIONS FOR PIANO SOLO

Variations sérieuses Op.54 in D minor (1841)

Introduction

As briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, one of the unique features of this work lies in the descriptive title together with distinctive variation techniques and compositional styles (See Chapter 2 pp 43-45 for comments on the background of this piece). In a letter of 5 February 1842 from Berlin to Ferdinand David in Felix Mendelssohn Bartholody, Briefe aus Leipziger Archiven, Mendelssohn expressed his view on musical styles, including his dislike of improvisatory works that are largely based on imaginative ‘fantasy-like’ sources. His wish to write a ‘serious’ type of work, therefore, applies to this set of variations. R. Larry Todd observes this term is previously used in Beethoven’s music: the contrapuntal intermezzo in the Allegretto ma non troppo of Beethoven’s F minor String Quartet Op.95, marked with the heading ‘Quartetto serioso’ the contradiction in the heading to the scherzo-like third movement, ‘Allegro assai vivace, ma serioso’ ; and another occurrence in the tempo mark ‘Allegro ma non troppo e serioso’ in the sixth of the ‘Diabelli’ Variations op.120.
The Theme

Mendelssohn’s 16-bar theme of Op 54 is in a two-part form. Its series of descending melodic lines (a - g#, d - c#, a - g#, g - f# etc.) is harmonised by frequent modulations; in the first 8 bars G minor is alluded to on the way to F major. Furthermore, the harmony involves chromaticism: bars 1-2 cover i – V7 of V – iv – V7 in D minor which in bars 5-6: the repeated open phrase abruptly shifts to iv – V of G minor. There is also a bass line (d - e, g - a, d - g - a etc.) that exhibits similar stepwise movement, to the theme and underpins the chromaticism of the harmony (Ex.3.1.1.1).

The Variations

The variations are independent of each other, and constitute separate sections, each complete in itself. Nevertheless, most variations are linked to one another, by joining the cadence directly to the next variation; this occurs in variations 1-2, 2-3, 3-4, 6-7, 9-10, 11-12, and 16-17. This, therefore, partially creates the effect of ‘continuous’ variations, even though not of the true ‘ostinato’ type with its short, recurring bass and/or harmonic scheme. However, it is the connecting passagework between the variations that form the image of the ‘continuous’ variation type. Its compositional approach somewhat resembles that of Beethoven’s Thirty-Two Variations that are in ‘chaconne’ pattern. Furthermore, a direct link to this work may be seen if we examine one of several rejected variations (Ex. 3.1.1.2), for Op.54, which clearly state the descending chromatic bass in the accompaniment, similar to that employed in Beethoven’s C minor Variations (See Ex.3.1.1.3).
Example 3.1.1.1: Theme, *Variations sérieuses* in D minor, Op.54 (1841)

Example 3.1.1.2: Rejected Variation⁴⁸ (Krakow, Biblioteca Jagiellonska, *Mendelssohn Nachlass* 35), Mendelssohn’s *Variations sérieuses* in D minor (1841)

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Example 3.1.1.3: Theme, Thirty-Two Variations in C minor by Beethoven (1806-1807)

Variation 1 shows an exact restatement of the theme with ‘scale-like’ running notes in semiquavers in the middle part. Unlike the theme, the bass line descends in bars 5 and 6 instead of rising. Nevertheless, the theme’s melody and harmonic plan stays close to the theme; thus it illustrates the ‘cantus-firmus’ variation type (Ex.3.1.2).

Example 3.1.2: Variation 1

Variation 2 also restates the theme with slight changes of ornamentation in rhythmic pattern to sextuplets in middle and top (soprano) voices. The theme’s phrase structure as well as the bass line, which is octave-displaced, stays roughly the same as the theme. The harmonic plan also stays close to the theme, hence it displays the ‘melodic-outline’ variation type (Ex.3.1.3).
Variation 3 continues to increase the tempo and dynamics, and undergoes rhythmic changes while presenting a slightly altered thematic melody and bass line, yet the theme’s original harmony is retained. Also texturally the piano writing displays nineteenth-century rather than Classical or Baroque texture and figuration, as displayed, for example in variations 1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, and 15. It illustrates the ‘constant-harmony’ variation type (Ex.3.1.4).

Example 3.1.4: Variation 3
Variation 4 features traditional Classical pianistic texture such as canonic writing and retaining more or less the same thematic elements such as the metre, tempo, and nearly the same length. But different numbers of voices are employed, followed by changes of dynamics and melodic shape. Although motivic growth is further developed by chromaticism, the harmonic plan is close to the theme thus, illustrating ‘constant-harmony’ variation type (Ex.3.1.5).

Example 3.1.5: Variation 4

Variation 5 conveys a sense of a reharmonised theme where Mendelssohn employs D major instead of F major at bar 8 (bar 88), followed by more complex chromaticism in the remaining 8 bars of the variation. This is the first time Mendelssohn avoids a modulation to F at bar 8. As well the effect of ‘frozen’ harmonies by the use of a continuous D pedal point produces a feeling of intensity. The opening fragment of the thematic melody returns in recognizable form in the highest voice (a - g# - d - c#) of the repetitive chordal figures. The specific expressive marking ‘Agitato’ and changed texture indicates a species of ‘character’ variation, as well as ‘formal-outline’ type (Ex.3.1.6.1).

Jost finds an indication of Mendelssohn’s preference of evoking older styles, especially from the Baroque, by echoing part of Handel’s twelve-bar ‘Air’ from Suite No. III, in this variation: f – e – d - c# - d – e - a, which appear intact at bars 2-4 (marked as bars 82-84)
with the final note as ‘c#’ instead of ‘a’. This is clearly reminiscent of Handel’s theme (Ex.3.1.6.2).

Example 3.1.6.1: Variation 5

Example 3.1.6.2: Handel, Suite No 3, Air Bars 1-4

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49 Jost, p 58
Variation 6 retains the harmonic plan of the theme, but the melodic content is octave-displaced in a bravura style using chords and octave leaps, in both hands. In this variation, it is difficult to identify the theme because of the melodic displacement - the melody spans two octaves in chords. Like variation 3, the pianistic texture displays nineteenth-century figuration and the stylistic feature; wide range of the dramatic dynamic expansion from \textit{pp} to \textit{ff}, and fast passages of octave and chordal leaps. Despite the use of 'Romantic' texture, formal outline is preserved: bar length, tempo, mode, and metre. A unique feature of this variation is the use of octave displacement, as a device obscuring the theme's melodic outline, which can nevertheless be traced. It, therefore, demonstrates the 'constant-harmony' type (Classical period) (Ex.3.1.7).

Example 3.1.7: Variation 6

![Variation 6 Sheet Music](image)

The surface melodic content of variation 7 varies and fragments the theme through the extensive use of arpeggiation, and chordal figuration. Yet its harmonic plan and thematic structure are kept virtually consistent with the theme. The harmonic foreground is literal enough for this variation to be called a 'constant-harmony' type, but its thematic structure...
also stays consistent with the theme, thus conforming to the both ‘constant-harmony’ and ‘melodic-outline’ variation types (Ex.3.1.8).

Example 3.1.8: Variation 7

Variations 8 and 9 generate dramatic tension through the use of chromaticism and accented chord notes in running triplet figures. Variation 9 exhibits rhythmic changes of accompaniment in the bass part, adding triplet figures, which further creates an internal rhythmic acceleration. The overall harmonies are less complex than the theme. Variation 8 keeps the bar length of the theme, whereas extended variation 9 is extended to 21 bars. Again modulation to F is absent at bar 8 in variation 8 (marked as bar 136 in Ex. 3.1.9) but not in variation 9.
In both these variations, the underlying pulse becomes faster than the theme. The use of a faster tempo illustrates one of the previously discussed Classical precursors of the ‘character’ variations, which have been frequently observed in Mozart’s works. Here, Mendelssohn’s approach to ‘character’ variation demonstrates a technical resemblance to the Classical pattern, while stylistically expressing the nineteenth-century ‘character’ spirit.

The background of variations 8 and 9 retains features of the ‘formal-outline’ technique as some features still remain the same (mode and metre), including the modulation to F major in the case of variation 9 (Ex.3.1.10). However, the theme is fragmented or ‘deconstructed’ in these variations, which both develop the opening motif in a ‘study-like’ fashion, corresponding to the ‘free’ variation type rather than properly illustrating the technique of ‘formal-outline’ variation.
Example 3.1.10: Variation 9

The pioneering techniques of ‘motivic’ variations are seen in earlier examples of Beethoven’s variations such as the ‘Diabelli’ set: he employs the same bar length variation throughout but the theme is ‘deconstructed’ and employs minimal use of the theme’s elements (See Chapter 1).

Variation 10 demonstrates more or less traditional Classical (or perhaps Baroque) texture in terms of pianistic writing. This variation presents a sudden contrast in tempo from the previous variation (‘Allegro vivace’ to ‘Moderato’) and employs a particular style of composition, namely a fugal technique, hence suggesting a ‘character’ variation type as discussed in Chapter 1. However, the ‘character’ variation was seen to relate to Classical devices such as ‘minore’ variations where the key (therefore character) of the theme alters. Also variations in tempo, metre, texture and employing a particular form like minuet or fugue in the Classical variation obviously presages the nineteenth-century ‘character’ variation. In the present case, the theme’s character is transformed by the adoption of a fugal model from the Baroque period, which also provides an example of what has been referred to as a ‘genre’ variation.

Other aspects of this variation include thematic distortion in different parts and a varied harmonic foreground. Elements of such ‘deconstructed’ thematic features as part of the ‘motivic’ development are thus displayed in this variation. However, its foreground outlined similar thematic features including modulations to F at bar 8; hence it can be
seen a ‘formal-outline’ variation type but also foreshadowing a kind of ‘free’ variation technique (Ex. 3.1.11). Like variations 8 and 9, similar musical approaches to variation techniques are shown, displaying deconstructed thematic structure as well as distorted thematic motives – i.e. the Beethovenian ‘motivic’ type.

Example 3.1.11: Variation 10

Variation 11 shows a connection with Schumann’s Abegg variations because it breaks up motives in a manner similar to variation 2 of the Abegg variations (Ex.3.1.12.2). An additional remarkable feature is the resemblance between the Mendelssohn and Schumann ‘cantabile’ themes. Hence, it is often called a ‘Schumannesque’ variation. This variation demonstrates a definite ‘character piece’ in which a new harmonization and an expression mark of ‘cantabile’ help to build a totally different mood or ‘character’; hence, it may be clearly seen as a ‘character’ variation of the Romantic type. As well it features the theme’s form (though not its literal statement) throughout; thus it also may be classified as a ‘formal-outline’ variation (Ex.3.1.12.1).
Example 3.1.12.1: Variation 11

Variation 12 displays the theme’s harmonic scheme, therefore conforming to the ‘constant-harmony’ variation type. This variation also exhibits a high level of chromaticism, especially in bars 13-16 (marked as bar 210-213 in Ex. 3.1.13) where one finds linear chromatic ascents in all voices. Along with these surface alterations, this variation increases the intensity of the music by the use of a wide range of dynamics and faster rhythmic values that build up the climax. As well the underlying pulse becomes
faster than the theme, hence changing its character, which thus illustrates the ('modest') 'character' variation type. Similar compositional styles were employed in variation 1 of Beethoven's 'Diabelli' variations Op.120 - emphasizing the first beat of thematic melody with f'dynamic marking.

Example 3.1.13: Variation 12

Variation 13 is a 'cantus-firmus' variation type, like variation 1, restating the exact thematic melody, but this time in a middle voice (Ex.3.1.14.1). Mendelssohn surrounds
the theme with demi-semiquaver arpeggations in the right hand and a semiquaver accompaniment in the left. This scheme creates the illusion of a ‘three-hand technique’, which was used first in the 3rd etude of Schumann’s *Etudes Symphoniques* Op.13 (Ex.3.1.14.2). Previously, Mendelssohn had often used this technique in his piano works, such as the Concerto in D minor Op.40 (1837), Serenade and Allegro Gioioso Op.43 (1838), and Three Preludes and Studies Op.104 (1836-1838) Vol.2 no.1.

Example 3.1.14.1: Variation 13
Variation 14 is the only variation in the parallel major in this set. Despite changes in mode and foreground harmonic progressions, basic shapes of the theme are still present in the middle voice of the variation with melodic displacement; the semitone motivic ‘cell’ is used in the middle voice with $a - g\#$, $d - c\#$, $a - g\#$, $g$ in the melodic line, accompanied by $d - e$, $g - a$, $d - e$, $c$ in the bass line at bars 1-2, 4-5 (marked as bars 235-236, 238-239 in Ex. 3.1.15).

This piece can be viewed as the Classical ‘Adagio’ variation, which resembles the slow movement of a sonata cycle - not only regarding the mode and tempo relations (fast - slow - fast) but also regarding the work’s structure which casts all of the preceding musical events in a new light. It presents a different mood and character, while the overall structure stays close to the theme; hence it comprises features of both ‘character’ and ‘formal-outline’ variation types.
Variation 15 is a ‘character’ variation based on a short motive of the theme’s motivic ‘cell’. Like variation 5, this variation employs similar compositional techniques such as the expressive marking of ‘poco a poco piu agitato’ and a syncopated rhythmic pattern with chordal figures; however, it presents little thematic relationship in terms of both harmonic and phrase structure (Ex.3.1.16). The theme’s motivic ‘cells’ are seen in inner voices initially divided between middle and bass parts where they are less immediately discernible. Nevertheless this variation stays close to the thematic outline and harmonic background. Therefore, this variation mixes ‘character’ and ‘formal-outline’ variation techniques.

Example 3.1.16: Variation 15

Variation 16 demonstrates the same tempo marking as variation 8 - namely ‘Allegro vivace’, and they also share similar technical features. This is a ‘character’ variation, in which the change of ‘character’ is brought about by employing faster tempo and varying
the rhythm (running sextuplets) to produce an assertive, character-altering pattern (Ex.3.1.17). It exemplifies the type of Classical ‘Allegro’ variations that are placed after ‘Adagio’ variations. This variation technique was later commonly practiced and exploited by many Romantic composers. In addition, it also features ‘formal-outline’ variation technique in which the theme’s harmonic scheme undergoes much alteration, like Beethoven in his ‘Diabelli’ Variations, but it retains a formal structure quite close to the theme.

Example 3.1.17: Variation 16

Variation 17 and Coda, employ ‘formal-outline’ and ‘character’ variation types. Like variation 16, the use of chordal figures simplifies the harmonic progression compared to the theme, but the difference is its phrase length, which is much longer than the 16-bar theme with increased use of chromatic passing notes and more complex texture (Ex.3.1.18). Here, the theme’s harmonic scheme is used as a point of departure to vary the theme, while employing 40 extended bars in a much freer developmental ‘motivic’ structure. A dramatic reprise of the theme’s opening phrase over a dominant pedal occurs just before the Coda that illustrates a feeling of intensity.
The long coda begins with a $ff$ octave in the bass (D note), followed by a sudden drop in dynamics to $pp$ and a *Presto* tempo. Following on from the dramatic reprise of the theme's opening phrase at the end of variation 17, the coda proceeds to reiterate phrases from the opening and close of the theme as a kind of rhetorical peroration. The dramatic use of dynamics and a repeated syncopated rhythmic pattern employed in this section provide an intensified mood to build a climax, in which the repeated phrases of the theme finally dissolve into arpeggio flourishes (Ex.3.1.19).
As seen in the previous discussion, Mendelssohn’s variation writing in this work features two distinctive stylistic tendencies: on the one hand, he imitates earlier variation types, employing ‘cantus firmus’, ‘melodic-outline’, and ‘constant-harmony’ variation types, as in most Classical composers’ works. However, he creates a more nineteenth-century approach to variation form, namely the ‘formal-outline’ type, accompanied by extreme use of chromatic textures and stylistic features; and also employs certain techniques of what has been dubbed the ‘motivic’ variation type, which points towards the Romantic ‘free’ or ‘fantasia’ variation. This variation technique was first introduced in Beethoven’s ‘Eroica’ Variations Op.35 and subsequently further developed in the ‘Diabelli’ Variations Op.120. By the nineteenth century, ‘free’ variation was added to the existing variation types, as seen in works such as Schumann’s *Etudes Symphoniques*.

In addition, the ‘character’ variation type is frequently employed in order to display different stylistic and technical features that change the theme’s character. Mendelssohn often employs ‘character-contrast’ variation, mainly by changing tempo, mode and compositional style – for example, the use of a faster tempo (vars. 8, 9 and 16), two-part canonic writing (var.4), fugato technique (var.10) and ‘Schumannesque’ writing (var.11);
opposite-mode variation (var.14); as well as introducing different mood variation such as ‘agitated’ (var.5 and 15) and ‘cantabile’ mood (var.11).

Furthermore, Mendelssohn explored a kind of variation type, which we have termed ‘genre’ variation, which can be seen as a species of ‘character’ variation, by adopting a specific form or ‘genre’. The very ‘Baroque-like’ variation 10, for example, is of a fugal type, while displaying ‘free’ variation technique.

Finally, Mendelssohn’s compositional style in *Variations sérieuses* owes much to Beethoven’s C minor Variations in use of ‘continuous’ technique, and chromaticism, especially the association of the chromatic bass with his theme, together with its strong links to the ‘chaconne’ style of Beethoven’s work, as earlier shown.
Theme and Variations in E flat major Op. 82 (1841)

The Theme

The 20-bar theme for Mendelssohn’s Theme and Variations in E flat major, Op.82 is in a three part form: A (a+b), B (a+b) and A (b) form. The piece presents the theme and 5 variations followed by a coda of 73 bars. It is worth noting that the composer did not use an opposite mode (i.e. minor-mode) variation in this set.

The theme is more diatonic and features a more ‘hymn-like’ texture than Op.54, which gives a feeling of a ‘domestic’ or ‘Biedermeier’ character50 – that is a ‘simple’ and ‘graceful’ style - as opposed to, on the one hand, the more complex and excessive style of Romanticism and on the other hand, strict motifs of the Baroque type. The theme’s pianistic texture displays conservative Classical–Romantic stylistic principles not unknown in late Mozart compositions and fairly common in Beethoven’s works, employing chordal passages over octaves. Like Op.54, the theme is in 2/4 time and begins with an anacrusis (Ex.3.2.1).

Example 3.2.1: THEME of Theme and Variations in E flat major Op.82 (1841)

The Variations

The first two variations more or less retain thematic elements such as the harmonic pattern, phrase structure, pianistic texture, tempo, key and dynamic plans of the theme. In variation 1, the theme is varied by means of melodic-displacement, and is buried with chordal passages in the right hand, accompanied by quaver and crotchet notes in left hand. It is the harmonic plan that stays close to the theme; hence it displays a ‘constant-harmony’ variation type (Ex.3.2.2). This type of compositional style in first variations is not uncommon in nineteenth-century variation writing, especially in Beethoven’s works.
Variation 2 resembles the 2nd variation of Op.54, introducing ornamentation in sextuplets in the accompaniment in the bass part. It seems rather freer harmonically, and the theme’s motivic ‘cells’ are heard and varied in the left hand, which otherwise bears little resemblance to the theme. Nevertheless, the theme’s formal elements such as metre, tempo, mode, rhythm, bar length and phrase structure stay close to the theme, hence it displays ‘formal-outline’ variation type (Ex.3.2.3).
Example 3.2.3: Variation 2

The following two variations present contrasting tempi. Variation 3 provides an increase in tempo and dynamics. The use of repeated semi-quaver rhythms in a rapid tempo (*Piu vivace*) with full range of dynamics generates a feeling of great energy, hence it illustrates a ‘character’ variation. Further, the theme is difficult to identify because melodic content is octave-displaced. It therefore also demonstrates the ‘formal-outline’ variation type (Ex.3.2.4). This type of variation writing is also featured in the 6th variation of Op.54.
Variation 4 displays ‘formal-outline’ and ‘character variation’ types with ‘freer’ elements. The thematic melody is manipulated in the top voice in the right hand. Like the 5th variation of Op.54, this variation employs a continuous (B♭) pedal point, which creates the effect of ‘frozen’ harmonies, which nevertheless follows the original harmonic plan closely (Ex.3.2.5).
Example 3.2.5: Variation 4

The last variation demonstrates the ‘cantus-firmus’ variation type, with a nearly literal presentation of the theme’s melody. In terms of restatement of the theme’s melody in the last variation, it recalls Beethoven’s ‘finale’ variation of the third movement from Piano Sonata in E major Op.109. As in Beethoven’s sonata, enormous numbers of extended bars are employed in this last variation, which also resembles Op 54. Technically, like the 13th variation of Op.54, it employs a ‘three-hand technique’ with the theme in the middle part. Here, for the first time Mendelssohn exploits thematic structure and format freely, and the variation can be viewed as a ‘development’ section. In this last variation, a modified version of the theme (‘a’ section) is restated at the beginning of the ‘coda’ (that is stylistically similar to the coda of Op.54) and appears again (now in original form) with canonic writing at the end (like Beethoven, for example, in the last variation of the third movement of Op.109) (Ex. 3.2.6).
Example 3.2.6: Variation 5 and Coda (bb. 48-91)
Unlike earlier sets of variations and Op.54, Mendelssohn did not employ the decorative ‘melodic-outline’ variation type in the first variation; instead he focuses on harmonic structure more than melodic phrase, and often, even then, in an improvisatory way.
Nevertheless, rather traditional classical variation techniques are employed in variations 1 and 5, namely 'constant-harmony' and 'cantus-firmus' types.

This set of variations displays simple pianistic textures and a rather 'conservative' style, both in the theme and also the variations, which retain thematic structures close to the theme; and the stylistic elements and principles are fairly simple. Although some of the middle variations, particularly variations 3 and 4, attempt to demonstrate 'progressive' styles by changing tempo and dynamics, and employing contrasting dynamics and different texture, nevertheless, the variation techniques of Op.82 display less variety in compositional styles - merely imitating and adopting some of the features and styles of Op.54 - hence exhibiting a comparatively limited expressive and technical range.
Theme and Variations in B flat major Op.83 (1841)

The Theme

The theme (again 20 bars in length) of the Theme and Variations in B flat major Op.83, also demonstrates a three-part form: A (a+b), B (a+b) and A (b). Like op.82, it comprises a theme and 5 variations followed by a coda. As in practically all of Mendelssohn’s variation sets, the theme has the same 2/4 time signature, and begins with an anacrusis. As could be seen in previous set (Op.82), the piano writing also displays Classical-Romantic pianistic texture, where counterpoint is mostly employed. As in Op.82, the theme displays a ‘hymn-like’ texture with much less chromaticism compared to Op.54; the diatonic theme, with its simple texture, steady rhythm and limited dynamic markings, once more displays a ‘homespun’ or ‘Biedermeier’ character. The thematic elements, such as rhythmic and textural patterns, are more or less maintained throughout. (Ex.3.3.1)

Example 3.3.1: THEME of theme and variations in B flat major Op83 (1841)
The Variations

The first variation presents the thematic melody almost unaltered in the inner voice though the chords are detached and the bass being shortened in terms of rhythmic articulation. Like the 13th variation of Op.54 and the 5th variation of Op.82, the ‘three-hand technique’ is employed with the expressive marking of ‘cantabile’. Therefore it displays ‘cantus firmus’ type with a ‘character’ variation aspect. The underlying harmonic structure remains the same (Ex.3.3.2).

Example 3.3.2: Variation 1

In variation 2, only the first phrase of the theme is traceable, shown between two different voices (top voice; d - c - f , and inner voice; e♭ - d - e♭). Foreground harmonies vary, yet the formal structure remains virtually constant with the theme, hence conforming to the ‘formal-outline’ variation type. However, the melodic material is largely independent of the theme; hence, it can also further be viewed as ‘free’ variation with ‘motivic’ development (Ex. 3.3.3).
Example 3.3.3: Variation 2

Variation 3 generates a fast tempo (Allegro) with mostly pedal points in the left hand in repetitive triplets, accompanied by a chromatic chordal progression in the right hand, to build and express the feeling of intensity. Similar techniques were seen in the 4th variation of Op.82. The thematic elements are freely varied while maintaining the
harmonic background and structural plan of the theme, hence it demonstrates the 'formal-outline' variation type (Ex.3.3.4).

Example 3.3.4: Variation 3
Variation 4 is in the relative minor mode, G minor. As in Beethoven’s ‘Diabelli’ Variations, the harmony of this penultimate variation has no close connection to the theme. Also, the phrase structure has little resemblance to that of the theme; nevertheless, the theme’s form is the only element that is retained. Hence it illustrates a mixture of ‘formal-outline’ and ‘free’ variation types (Ex.3.3.5).

Example 3.3.5: Variation 4

Returning to the original theme in B♭ major, the final variation (5) presents a reprise of the theme in the first 6 bars in the top voice, except that it begins with chord vi rather than I, thereby securing a smooth progression from the G minor of variation 4 back to B♭ major. It retains the harmonic plan of the theme, while employing melodic content in an octave-displaced structure in the top voice. It resembles the 6th variation of Op.54, which displays a bravura style of piano writing. This melodic displacement variation
nevertheless keeps the thematic elements in a discernible manner (Ex. 3.3.6.1). It is then followed by a long coda in a fast tempo ‘Allegro assai vivace’- featuring Schumannesque ‘three-hand’ technique. The theme is restated, in slightly modified form, with ‘motivic’ melodic cells (d – c – f – e \^\[ instead of e \_\] – d – c) in bars 48-55 of the coda (Ex.3.3.6.2).

Example 3.3.6.1: Variation 5
SUMMARY

It is clear that there are strong similarities between the three 1841 variation sets (Op. 54, Op. 82 and Op. 83) in terms of both stylistic and technical features. This is perhaps not surprising, given their circumstances of composition as earlier described.

First, all three themes employ steady and simple rhythmic patterns in which the largely homophonic themes are also clearly defined melodically and harmonically. Second, as in all Mendelssohn’s sets of variations, both for piano and chamber combinations, the themes are written with the same 2/4 time signatures, and begin with an anacrusis. This unique compositional pattern displays Mendelssohn’s special affinity for Classical texture, particularly Haydnesque, as earlier discussed. Third, all three variation sets display similar stylistic features such as nineteenth-century pianistic writing, chromatic harmony accompanied by expressive leaps of sevenths and sixths, and the use of similar tempo markings in their themes – *Andante sostenuto* for Op.54, *Andante assai espressivo* for Op.82 and *Andante tranquillo* for Op.83. Fourth, all three sets include variations which emphasize ‘motivic’ writing, with more chromatic harmony and faster tempi. These all occur in the middle variations (var. 8 and 9 of Op.54, var. 3 and 4 of Op.82, var.3 of Op.83). The changes in the lengths of the phrases in these more ‘motivic’ variations, are accompanied by changes in tempi: ‘Agitato’ (var.15), ‘Allegro vivace’ (var. 8 and var.16) and ‘Moderato’ (var.10) of Op.54; ‘Piu Vivace’ (var. 3), ‘Piu moderato’ (var. 4) of Op.82; and ‘Allegro’ (var. 3) of Op.83. Fifth, none of these three sets employ ‘fantasy-like’ introductions, or brilliant ‘finale’ variations, such as found in the works of Mendelssohn’s immediate predecessors and contemporaries. Finally, all three sets employs similar concluding strategies such as extended variations and long codas, which also include restatement (partial or complete) of the theme in close to their original forms. Here, the device of restating the theme recalls Baroque practices, as well as Beethoven’s example, as discussed; however, Mendelssohn expanded and developed the thematic material and formal structure, while employing nineteenth-century pianistic texture as well as Romantic musical elements in the last variation and coda, which gives a dramatic climax.
There are likewise different features in the three sets. First, Op.54 displays a more ‘intense’ and ‘serious’ texture with more chromatic emphasis in its harmony, employing diminished and dominant sevenths, and appoggiaturas that contribute to a feeling of intensity. In contrast, the other two sets demonstrate somewhat bland and diatonic textures, together with rather ‘graceful’ and ‘domestic’ themes. As well, the thematic elements are less chromatic and use a more limited range of dynamics. Second, unlike the greater number of variations and variety of compositional styles employed in Op.54, both Op.82 and Op.83 not only comprise a smaller number of variations - consisting of a theme and 5 variations with coda – but also employ fewer technical features of a ‘virtuosic’ type. They also contain fewer variation types and musical devices. Third, different stylistic features are shown in the codas. Op.82 employs the opening of the original theme at the end of the last variation. It is a kind of memento of the original basis out of the variation series. This similar technique was employed at the end of the ‘finale’ variation of the last movement (‘theme and variations’ form) of Piano Sonata Op.109 by Beethoven. However, Op.83, like Op.54, employs a ‘Mendelssohn-like’ coda, by restating the thematic melody at the very beginning of the last variation (though not exact restatement of the theme) and expanding its form by varying the harmonic plan of the theme. Finally, only Op.82 contains no changes in mode and metre, which maintains the major mode and 2/4 time throughout.

As noted by most writers, it is evident that Op.54 uniquely contributes to the piano repertory, by merging the fundamental compositional strategies of Mendelssohn’s predecessors’ practice and virtuosic features of Romantic articulation and expression. The main techniques used in Op.54 include Mozartian ‘melodic-outline’, Beethoven’s ‘motivic’ style, and Schumann’s compositional approach to ‘character’ variation type. However, the other two sets (Op.82 and Op.83), are less interesting, since a more limited range of variation types is employed, including ‘cantus-firmus’, ‘formal-outline’ and ‘motivic’ variations, in which they resemble the first set (Op.54) in terms of the musical approach to variation techniques.
The thematic writing of Op.82 and Op.83 in fact shows merely a limited development of thematic material than is found in Op.54. Their themes are rather commonplace, as is certainly also the case with the frivolous ‘Diabelli’ waltz employed in Beethoven’s Variations Op.120. Nevertheless, Beethoven’s variations are far more interesting, as he develops and varies the theme in many different ways, especially by employing ‘motivic’ and ‘genre’ variations; whereas Mendelssohn’s two sets provide little in the way of adventurous variational strategies; and they are neither technically virtuosic nor musically interesting, but show a less inspired repetition of what he had employed in Op.54.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

In the foregoing chapters, it has been observed that, during the early nineteenth century, there was a wide range of stylistic and technical features found in variation forms. In Chapter 1 an extensive review of the development of variation forms, especially from the Classical period to the early Romantic period, was presented. This was undertaken in order to view the relations and/or differences between variation techniques that were used during Mendelssohn’s time. ‘Melodic-outline’ variation types, often based on popular tunes of the day, were most commonly employed in the Classical period. The transition to the Romantic period saw a majority of composers developing more ‘progressive’ types of variations, such as ‘formal-outline’, ‘character’, and ‘free’ variations, which were then commonly employed during the nineteenth century. Beethoven was one of the most influential composers who explored newer types of variation techniques, employing existing techniques (Classical period) as well as ‘formal-outline’ together with ‘character’ and ‘free’/ ‘motivic’ variation types (Op.34, Op.35 and Op.120). Similar types were employed in Weber’s works, together with more technical brilliance, while other contemporaries like Hummel and Schubert, mostly kept closer to Classical models in their variation works, a notable exception being found in Schubert’s ‘Wanderer’ fantasy, which illustrates an early use of ‘thematic metamorphosis’. Chopin and Schumann, however, generally employ the more ‘progressive’ type of variations especially ‘free’ and ‘character’ variations.

Proceeding from the overview that was presented in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 pointed to the probable influence on Mendelssohn of certain stylistic features of earlier composers. Most significant was the Classical standard of clear formal articulation and contrapuntal features from the Baroque. Mendelssohn’s treatment of variation techniques, particularly in his early keyboard variation works, is predominantly based on the Classical ‘melodic-outline’ variation type. Works include Theme and Variations in D major (1820) and
Theme and Variations in C major (1820). However, the more decorative and dramatic features of the more ‘progressive’ types are found in his early chamber music variation sets: Variations concertantes Op.17 (1829) and Variations brillantes Op. 87b (1833). His pre-adult keyboard variations display simpler musical patterns, largely employing the ‘melodic-outline’ variation type. However, interestingly, Mendelssohn also adopts compositional styles such as the Haydenesque ‘double’ variation type, instead of employing the more popular variation types that were commonly used at the time of composition. That is probably a legacy of his childhood learning from Zelter, Klein and Berger, who were deeply rooted in studies of early Baroque and Classical music. It is not surprising that this traditional background has led many to regard Mendelssohn as unique among the composers of his generation.

In Chapter 3, Mendelssohn’s three sets of variations dating from 1841 for piano solo were critically examined, in terms of the styles and texture of the themes, as well as the types of variations, where Mendelssohn combined the musical styles and compositional techniques of the Classical tradition with Romantic ideals. In addition to the ‘melodic-outline’ variation type found in most of his early works, Mendelssohn also often employs a mixture of ‘formal-outline’ and ‘character’ variations in his later works, as well as exploring ‘progressive’ techniques in his variations, such as the use of ‘motivic’ variations (as used by Beethoven in his more ‘progressive’ variation sets).

Classical variation types are employed in variations 1-7 of Op.54, variation 1 of Op.82 and Op.83, such as ‘cantus-firmus’, ‘constant-harmony’, and/or ‘melodic-outline’. Other types include a mixture type of ‘formal-outline’, ‘character’ and/or ‘motivic’ variations: a ‘character piece’ in variation 11; and ‘motivic’ variations in variations 8 and 9 of Op.54, variation 4 of Op.82 and variations 2, 4 and 5 of Op.83.

Mendelssohn seems to have indicated his personal search for a balance between stylistic imitation and innovation in his variation compositions. With reference to his strong bond with the formal practices of earlier music, compared to that of other composers of the early Romantic period - Weber, Chopin, Schumann and Liszt - it is clear that
Mendelssohn is by far the most ‘conservative’. However, his position within a period of changing styles and rapid pianistic developments, has led Mendelssohn to develop these styles and techniques, just as many other great composers did. In so doing he transformed the inherited traditions in the context of emerging traits of the Romantic period. However, despite his contemporaries’ tendency to explore more elaborate techniques, Mendelssohn still maintains the Classical clarity of formal articulation (balanced phrases and closing cadences), while adopting nineteenth-century pianistic textures in his compositions.

Nevertheless, music critics such as Fischer and Griffiths\textsuperscript{51} position Mendelssohn, along with Weber, as ‘progressive’ composers whose works largely consist of ‘character’ variations. It is clear that Mendelssohn employs the ‘character’ variation type in his mature sets. However, as has been indicated in the previous analysis, Mendelssohn’s use of the ‘character’ variation type does not often dramatically change thematic structure or formal outline. Nevertheless, it is supported by the pianistic texture and sonorities of the early Romantic style. It is Mendelssohn’s formal approach to variation techniques that is not as adventurous as even his predecessors, namely Weber and Beethoven, whose variations mostly display styles of Romantic ‘character’, ‘progressive’ and ‘fantasy-like’ constructions rather than keeping the Classical models. Therefore, it seems inappropriate to classify Mendelssohn in the same category as Weber.

Even more radically, it has been asserted that Mendelssohn’s variations fall into the same category as Schumann.\textsuperscript{52} However, Schumann’s \textit{Études symphoniques}, for example, presents much more Romantic styles and certainly demonstrates something more than just the ‘character’ variation type alone. In a very lyrical piece (var.9), for example, the C# minor theme is paraphrased and the theme’s melody is distorted in the variation. It can be seen as a ‘free’ variation, as well as a ‘character piece’ because it distinctly turns into another ‘nocturnal’ piece - poetic and lyrical. Certainly, Schumann’s musical approach to variation technique seems to be much more ‘progressive’ as well as ‘extra-musical’ than Mendelssohn.

\textsuperscript{51} Kurt von Fischer and Paul Griffiths, ‘Variations’, p. 550

Finally, Mendelssohn’s compositional and pianistic styles, in his mature variation sets, appear uniquely personal and distinctive, at least when compared to those of his contemporaries. In particular, they are indebted to Classical techniques of formal structure, but they also display stylistic features of Romantic dynamics and complexities.


