

ME21 | Deleuzabelli Variations

Beethoven's Thirty-three Variations on a Waltz by Diabelli in C major, op. 120 (1819-1823), are widely known as a work of exhilarating humor, one of those pieces where the utmost elaborated compositional techniques are combined with concrete operations of historical reinterpretation, quotations and musical parody. The work originated with a commission by the Viennese publisher Anton Diabelli (1781-1858), who invited fifty composers from the Austro-Hungarian Empire to write one variation on a waltz theme of his own invention. The list of composers included Schubert, Hummel, Czerny, a very young Liszt, the son of Mozart, and some of the keyboard virtuosi of those days, such as Friedrich Kalkbrenner and Ignaz Moscheles. Beethoven first refused, but later accepted the commission delivering not one but thirty-three variations. Instead of simply contributing to a collective publication, he composed an autonomous set of variations — a work that, together with Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, remains at the apex of this musical form.

The theme, which Beethoven early disdained as a “cobbler's patch”, is of disarming simplicity: a danceable waltz in C major, straightforward in its rhythm and simplistic in its harmonies — a very timely waltz that could have been written by many other Viennese composers of the day. Immediately in the first variation Beethoven rebels against this timely character of the music, composing a laconic march in binary rhythm, radically departing from the original waltz and suggesting a path of infinite freedom. Beethoven's thirty-three transformations of the theme do not merely vary or decorate it; they build independent entities that relate more to each other or to other musical works than to Diabelli's waltz. In Variation 22 — Allegro molto — Beethoven explicitly refers to Mozart's Don Giovanni, quoting and playing with Leporello's entry aria ‘Notte e Giorno faticar’, which alludes to the uneasy relations between servant and master, the virtuous worker and the immoral debauchee. The following variations, from 23 to 28, continue this line of parody, including hidden quotes and references to a piano Etude by J.B. Cramer (23), a Bach chorale (24), a Schubertian German dance (25), and to Beethoven himself (28). The next section - from variation 29 to 33 - retraces a particular path of music history, going from an early Baroque lamento (29) and canon (30) to a powerful fugue in the style of Handel (32), including a reference to Bach's 25th Goldberg Variation (31) and a Minuet (33) that starts in the style of Haydn but concludes with an auto-referential quotation of the last movement of Beethoven's last piano sonata, op. 111 (whose theme manifestly shares intervallic relations with the waltz by Diabelli). Thus, Beethoven quotes himself but also other composers and musical genres — an “evocation of styles and idioms that absorb an almost encyclopedic range of contexts, historical and contemporary” (Kinderman). If the collective work commissioned by Diabelli to fifty composers defines a very timely musical catalogue of those days (bringing together “composers and virtuosi from Vienna and other Austrian states”, as the original edition announces), Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* can be seen as a catalogue of untimely musical structures, of musical events detached from their time of birth and presented in a different kind of temporality — a time outside of time, pure musical time.

The Deleuzabelli Variations^x is a series of assemblages developed by Paulo de Assis and his team in the framework of the artistic research project “Experimentation versus Interpretation: Exploring New Paths in Music Performance in the Twenty-First Century” [MusicExperiment21], hosted at the Orpheus Institute in Ghent. Beyond interpretation, this project argues for an experimental attitude towards historically received musical materials. A musical work is always more than the sum of its parts, more than its scores, sketches, editions, commentaries and renderings. It is all of that, but also the intricate network of relations and associations it generates in the receiver. More than static, well-established entities, musical works appear as complex manifolds in processes of permanent becoming. Crucial to this approach is a new image of work where works are no longer seen as static entities (the score), but rather as highly elaborated manifolds with potentially infinite constitutive parts (sketches, manuscripts, editions, recordings, theoretical reflections, previous

works or styles that exerted an influence, future works that shed new light upon them, etc.). In the place of a reiteration of uncritically inherited performance practices, this perspective offers a methodology for unconventional, critical renderings that expose the variety and complexity of the music materials available today. More than repeating what one already knows about a given work, it claims the unknown as the most productive field for artistic practices. Rather than accepting a reproductive tradition, it argues for an experimental attitude.

More specifically, the Deleuzabelli Variations² is produced by MusicExperiment21 at Orpheus Institute (Ghent), in collaboration with the Royal Antwerp Conservatoire and HERMESensembel. In addition to the original variations by Beethoven (some of which instrumented by Paulo de Assis), five composers were invited to write variations on the variations, including musical comments, reflections or glosses. The composers are all researchers at Orpheus Institute, affiliated to its research centre (ORCiM), or to the docARTES doctoral programme. Tiziano Manca composed a musical reflection on the entirety of the *Diabelli Variations*; Paolo Galli wrote a comment on the variations 21 to 28; Bart Vanhecke composed a comment on variation 20; David Gorton wrote a set of three variations in replacement of variations 12, 13 and 14, while Juan Parra Cancino worked on electronically and computer-based comments on variations 8, 16, 17 and 20. More than simple commissions these compositions are part of a collaborative endeavor that was build on a series of team meetings involving the core team of MusicExperiment21, all the musicians of HERMESensembel, the five composers, and the video directors Thomas Heiber and Gerhard Schabel, who are producing a video installation and a video film about the whole process.

The title is a homage to both Beethoven and Gilles Deleuze. Beethoven's music functions as the backbone structure of the assemblage while Deleuze's idea of differential repetition provides a sort of method related to processes of continuous transformation and permanent becoming.

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ME21 & HERMESensemble
Royal Antwerp Conservatoire, campus deSingel, Witte Zaal
Antwerpen, 17.03.2015

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Performers

MusicExperiment21

Paulo de Assis, piano
Juan Parra Cancino, live-electronics

HERMESensemble

Gaetan Lamela, percussion (vibraphon)
Geert Callaert, piano
Karin De Fleyt, flute
Marc Tooten, viola
Peter Merckx, clarinete
Stijn Saveniers, cello
+ Nico Couck, guitars

Composers

Juan Parra Cancino
David Gorton
Bart Vanhecke
Paolo Galli
Paulo de Assis (arrangements)

Co-production

Orpheus Instituut
Royal Antwerp Conservatoire
HERMESensemble