
COMPOSING PERFORMANCES: ERNST LEVY, BRAHMS, AND THE HANDEL VARIATIONS

INTERPRETACIONES QUE COMPONEN: ERNST LEVY, BRAHMS Y LAS VARIACIONES SOBRE UN TEMA DE HAENDEL

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ABSTRACT

All too often, critics, historians, and music analysts draw upon the aesthetic and analytic language of composition to describe and account for performed interpretations. This article explores the inequities and challenges that derive from this borrowing of language. Yet a study of Ernst Levy and his recorded performance of Brahms, however, reveals how compositional aesthetics can also be appropriated and repurposed to new creative ends.

Key words: Ernst Levy; Glenn Gould; performance and analysis; analytical methods; Brahms; Haendel Variations.

RESUMEN

Demasiado a menudo, tanto los críticos como los historiadores o los analistas musicales recurren a la estética y el lenguaje analítico propios del mundo de la composición para describir y dar cuenta de las interpretaciones musicales. Este artículo explora las desigualdades y los retos que derivan de este préstamo lingüístico. Aun así, el estudio de Ernst Levy y de su interpretación grabada de las Variaciones sobre un tema de Haendel de Brahms revela, sin embargo, cómo la estética compositiva también puede tomarse prestada y empleada para nuevos fines artísticos.

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Palabras clave: Ernst Levy; Glenn Gould; interpretación y análisis; métodos analíticos; Brahms; Variaciones de Haendel.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is fair to say that almost every kind of analysis is inherently comparative. As we study new compositions, we juxtapose them with those that we already know or compare them to more generalised styles or schema that we've been taught to expect, which themselves emerged from the study of existing and selected repertoire. The highly influential theory on elements of sonata form by James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy, for instance, was developed, in part, by comparing the formal procedures of Joseph Haydn, Ludwig van Beethoven, and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart¹. A century earlier, but in a similar manner, Heinrich Schenker derived his techniques and methods by comparing the compositional processes of those composers whose works he deemed “masters works” and extracted theories he believed to be more “universal”². The methods of these theorists are hardly the exception.

Yet as recent heated conversations in North America have demonstrated, these analytical comparisons are anything but innocent³. Indeed, the teaching or the application of theory is hardly a neutral endeavour but implicitly (and often explicitly) projects value-laden assumptions about how music is *supposed* to operate or, rather, plays a dominant role in governing or policing unquestioned musical norms⁴. Historically, these assumptions emphasise the music of largely white, male, European composers writing within a relatively narrow musical style. This trend is only beginning to change as music theory and history texts do the work to include popular genres, compositions by women, composers-of-colour, or the work of musicians from underrepresented communities⁵.

But where and how might we analyse the work of performers who have, for so long, played second fiddle to composers in most music history texts? Most histories feature almost exclusively composers and their “musical works” as their narrative foundations, whereas performers (and

¹ See James A. Hepokoski and Warren Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types, and Deformations in the Late-Eighteenth Century Sonata* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

² Philip A. Ewell, “Music theory and the white racial frame”, *Music Theory Online* 26, no. 2 (2020). Accessed July 19, 2021, <https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.20.26.2/mto.20.26.2.ewell.html>.

³ See Beth Harpaz, “Racism and antiracism in music theory and higher education: Professor Philip Ewell speaks out”. Accessed July 27, 2021, <https://www.gc.cuny.edu/News/Faculty-News/Detail?id=55599>.

⁴ See Elisabeth LeGuin, *Boccherini's Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology* (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 2006). LeGuin argues that formal theories that prioritise the teleological elements of sonata form have done an injustice to composers like Boccherini, who was more interested in other musical processes.

⁵ Unfortunately, these changes are slow going and there is a concern not only about tokenism but also about that the theories remain the same even as the examples and faces change.

audiences) are relegated to the margins if they are mentioned at all⁶. Similarly, the disciplines of music theory are so traditionally dependent on the score for their methods and modes of analysis, that performances are generally represented as little more than a footnote, cited to “prove” a given analysis or scapegoated for being “wrong”⁷. Underlying this separation is the long-standing notion that the art of composition is a *true* act of creation but that the art of performance or interpretation is merely imitative, self-serving, self-indulgent, or an imposition. And while we hail many composers, uncritically as geniuses, the excitement with performers is often dismissed as a mere “fetish”⁸.

In fact, most aesthetic categories and methods of analysis derive from models that centre composers and compositions. Problematically but popularly used terms like “originality” create a hierarchy that immediately pushes performers aside since, arguably, they are playing the music written earlier by someone else. In other words, the origins of the “work”, so the argument goes, stem from the composer and any interpretation is, thus, inherently supplemental to “the music itself”. Even when composers perform and record their own compositions, their renditions are almost always compared to the “original” score⁹.

Consequently, analyses of compositions seek predominantly to “understand” elements of the score which, themselves, are often seen as a reflection of the compositional intention, compositional structure, or developments in musical style. I have previously argued that performers, even those whose interpretations appeared radical compared to stylistic norms or, for some critics, “blasphemous”, nevertheless provide insight into elements of compositional process or structure. Their variation of tempo, articulation, pedaling, or dynamics might open up new ways of hearing and seeing form, patterns of voice leading, metre, or even harmonic progressions¹⁰. And, yet, however much I sought to foreground performers, their creative contributions, and their analytical insight, I found myself still centring the score and, implicitly, its composer, as a foundational source.

⁶ Daniel Barolsky, “Performers and performances as music history: Moving away from the margins”, in *Norton Guide to Teaching Music History*, ed. Matthew Balensuela (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), 159-171. See also Daniel Barolsky, “Rethinking the undergraduate music curriculum: Where are the performers and their performances”. Accessed July 19, 2021, <https://smtpaig.wordpress.com/2014/10/21/rethinking-the-undergraduate-music-curriculum-where-are-the-performers-and-their-performances/>.

⁷ This has begun to change in the last few decades, but recent music theoretical scholarship is still slow to relinquish the authoritative role of the music theorist. On this, see Mine Doğantan-Dack, “Once again: Page and stage”, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 142, no. 2 (2017): 445-460.

⁸ See Martha Feldman, “Magic mirrors and the *seria* stage: Thoughts toward a ritual view”, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no. 3 (1995): 423-484; and Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

⁹ See Daniel Barolsky, “Stravinsky and recorded sound: Stravinsky’s human imperfection”, in *Stravinsky in Context*, ed. Graham Griffiths (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 187-194, in which the author seeks to separate the composer and performer’s identities.

¹⁰ See Daniel Barolsky, “Embracing imperfection in Benno Moiseiwitsch’s Prelude to Chopin”, *Music Performance Research* 2 (2008): 48-60.

And I'm hardly alone. The description of Patricia Kopatchinskaja on Daniel Leech-Wilkinson's website, [ChallengingPerformance.com](https://challengingperformance.com), argues how the violinist's extreme interpretations allow "her to reveal expressive potential in scores that we may be dimly aware of, but that no one else, until now, has been able to turn so vividly into sound"¹¹. In short, no matter how creative and challenging Kopatchinskaja's performance, its meaning and experience is understood as a derivation of the score and, thus, ultimately as a manifestation of the composition's potential—a musical gem awaiting discovery—rather than of the performer's artistry or even co-creative act.

The purpose of this article is to acknowledge that, in spite of our best intentions, when we seek to analyse performers, we frequently struggle to shift existing hierarchies that so often position them below composers. This happens for a variety of reasons, to which we often give no thought. First, our very use of the score as the map we use to trace performances reinforces a foundational component of the score and renders interesting or "challenging performances" as either deviant and abnormal or, more kindly, as a supplemental lens¹². Second, the very elements that traditionally warrant conversation by music theorists are elements most often connected to compositional processes, namely the realisation of structure, form, harmony, etc. In other words, when we start to explore the relationships between performance and analysis, the language we use is still compositionally-oriented even if we attempt to foreground the performer.

One might imagine that performers would resent their second-class status. Yet, surprisingly, most performers of so-called Classical Music, even those who are celebrated for their distinctive and unique interpretive style, perpetuate this hierarchical imbalance. Indeed, it's not merely the case that historians and theorists have sided, as it were, with composers *against* performers (although in some ways they have). Performers are anything but powerless. Institutionally, many schools of music, conservatories, and even universities as a whole employ more performers than composers. Furthermore, the most celebrated performers earn incomes that likely outstrip those of even the most famous composers. And yet we find that these hierarchies are *reinforced* by many performers who seek to justify their interpretations by invoking some historical, textual, or spiritual connection between their performance and the intentions of the composer. In other words, performers appear to subjugate themselves to the status of the composer even when it undermines their own creative identity¹³.

There are endless examples of this devotional practice. Pianist Alfred Brendel, for instance, humbled himself when he wrote: "If I belong to a tradition it is a tradition that makes the masterpiece

¹¹ See <https://challengingperformance.com/interviews-recordings/patricia-kopatchinskaja/>. Accessed July 7, 2021.

¹² See <https://challengingperformance.com/interviews-recordings/daniel-leech-wilkinson/>; and Joseph N. Straus, *Extraordinary Measures: Disability in Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹³ Daniel Leech-Wilkinson describes this process as "self-policing". See <https://challengingperformance.com/the-book-12-3/>. Accessed July 7, 2021.

tell the performer what he should do and not the performer telling the piece what it should be like, or the composer what he ought to have composed”¹⁴. Brendel is hardly alone in this sentiment. Pianist Pierre-Laurent Aimard criticised the performances of Glenn Gould by invoking his fidelity to the composer: “He [Gould] was a strong personality, obviously, something of a genius, but his eccentricity was so big that it disturbed the listening too much. To play Bach, you don’t need a star whose ego will decide too many things [...] and pervert the musical message”. By contrast, Aimard wrote of himself: “I’m interested in trying to be true. I’m not arrogant. I just try. We always fail somewhere. Only Bach could be true with his own music”¹⁵. Even performers from the late 19th and early 20th-centuries, whose interpretations are so radically different from those we hear today, invoked spiritual, personal, or national connections to the composer to justify what we might perceive as liberties with the text¹⁶.

My introduction of Glenn Gould to the narrative might, for readers familiar with him, appear to signal a turn in this article, from “traditionalists” like Aimard and Brendel to radical exceptions like Gould. Yet, surprisingly, this is not the case! Gould famously flaunted traditional rules of etiquette as a performer and interpreter and disregarded the intentions of many a famous composer. Nevertheless, he still drew upon a history of compositional aesthetics, values, elements, and qualities to justify his own unorthodox interpretations rather than to try to present a new realm of performance aesthetics. In his (in)famous recorded performance of the theme and variations from [Mozart’s A-major Sonata, K. 331](#), a performance that the pianist openly admitted was “somewhat idiosyncratic”, Gould chose articulations and tempi that directly contradicted many of the composer’s own markings¹⁷. But his justification for this realisation is striking:

I wanted [...] to subject it to a Webern-like scrutiny in which its basic elements would be isolated from each other and the continuity of the theme deliberately undermined. The idea was that each successive variation would contribute to the restoration of that continuity and, in the absorption of that task, would be less visible as an ornamental, decorative element [...]. I can’t say that I’m entirely convinced about the tempo choice for the *Alla turca* (the third movement). At the time it seemed important to establish a solid, maybe even stolid, tempo, partly to balance the tempo curve of the first movement—and, I admit frankly, partly because, to my knowledge, anyway, nobody had played it like that before, at least not on records.¹⁸

¹⁴ “Alfred Brendel”. Accessed July 19, 2021, <http://alfredbrendel.com/lifeandcareer.php#:~:text=Alfred%20Brendel%20%3A%20Life%20%26%20Career&text=%22If%20I%20belong%20to%20a,he%20ought%20to%20have%20composed.%22>

¹⁵ Accessed July 7, 2021, https://www.inquirer.com/philly/entertainment/20141111_Pierre-Laurent_Aimard_down_the_rabbit_hole_with_Bach.html

¹⁶ See Daniel Barolsky, “Romantic piano performance as creation” (doctoral thesis, University of Chicago, 2005).

¹⁷ Glenn Gould, *The Glenn Gould Reader*, ed. Tim Page (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 40.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

This is a fascinating and wonderfully imaginative aesthetic claim! First and foremost, Gould's partial justification for his interpretation—"nobody had played it like this before"—emerged from the Romantic or modernist aesthetic related to the "imperative of originality"¹⁹. Just as composers after Beethoven felt the pressure, so many have argued, to "advance" musical style beyond existing practices, so too did Gould suggest that it was imperative for performers to present new interpretive ideas rather than perform Mozart as it has always been done. Performers have, for so long, been presented as subservient to composers, to "serve" the work, that Gould was dependent on the aesthetic realm of composition to justify the distinctive qualities of his performance²⁰.

Moreover, Gould inserts himself, almost as a composer, into a long history of theoretical and formal debates concerning variation form, conversations that traditionally addressed the realm of composition, especially 19th-century perceptions of form. Theme and variation form, some argued, was too performance-oriented, too focused on the moment, on "empty figuration", on the virtuosic invention rather than on the whole, the form, the overarching shape and *telos*, i.e., the realm of composition. Consider, for instance, Robert Schumann's crusade against the salon variation in which he argued that "variations should create a whole, whose center is the theme [...]. The time is past when one can create astonishment with a sugary figure, a yearning suspension, an Eb-major run over the keyboard. Now one strives for *thoughts*, for inner *connections*, for poetic *totality*, with the whole bathed in fresh fantasy"²¹.

Gould's implicit criticism of Mozart's work resonates with Schumann's view and channels the 19th-century aesthetics of composition while also denigrating performers²². As written, Mozart's movement merely followed the expected variation formula of the time and lacked an explicit sense of direction in which, from the very beginning (i.e., the dissolution of the theme), every moment held together and every part related directly the whole. As a "musical corrective", saving Mozart from the impoverished or more performance-oriented aesthetic expectations of his time, Gould applied the strategy of a compositional aesthetic, namely that of Anton Webern, to give his performance of Mozart something that the movement appeared to lack. Once he disturbed the equilibrium, however, Gould felt the obligation to modify the third movement's tempo in order to "balance the tempo curve

¹⁹ See Mark Evan Bonds, *After Beethoven: imperatives of originality in the symphony* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

²⁰ Gould, Bazzana claims, saw himself as a composer and regularly modified tempi, changed notes, and emphasized, nay, created motives in the music of Bach, Mozart, and Brahms in order to demonstrate the principles of developing variation or articulate cohesion and continuity among disparate parts. See Kevin Bazzana, *Glenn Gould: The Performer in the Work: A Study in Performance Practice* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

²¹ Elaine R. Sisman, *Haydn and the Classical Variation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1993), 15.

²² Gould's tempo adjustments to Beethoven's Op. 10, no. 2 invokes this same dismissal of formal formulas. See Gould, *The Glenn Gould Reader...*, 37-38.

of the first movement”, that is, to imagine the three movements, structurally, as a unified and well-balanced whole.

However unusual Gould’s performance, his invocation of Webern as an aesthetic lens is exceedingly usual. Even if intentionally anachronistic, Gould transforms his conception of Webern’s compositional style into a performative tool. And this transference is remarkably commonplace. Years ago I played Samuel Feinberg’s recording of the [D-minor Prelude](#) from the first book of Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier to a number of colleagues. Feinberg allows the passagework in the right hand to ebb and flow with bursts of cascading energy, from which emerge off-beat melodies that converse with unexpected voices in the walking bassline and provocatively resonant pedal notes. In short, his interpretation is not necessarily in keeping with the interpretative traditions of the early 21st century or, for that matter, the mid 20th century. Although the responses from the audience were not necessarily surprising in their mix of admiration and distaste, their breadth of comparisons was striking. One person jokingly questioned whether we were listening to Chopin. Another told me that it sounded like Rachmaninoff. A third, noting Feinberg’s play with texture and sonority, described the resemblance to a Mendelssohn song without words. In short, to account for the distinctive *performance* by Feinberg, my colleagues drew upon the more familiar identity of compositional aesthetics to explain or describe what they heard just as Gould used the elements of Webern’s compositional approach to explain his performance.

What does it mean that we so often apply categories from one domain to another? Obviously, the divide between the domains is blurry and far be it for me to suggest that performers don’t think about structure or harmony. But it is striking how often critics, analysts, *and* performers invoke the style or aesthetics of a composer (e.g., Chopin or Mendelssohn) to characterise an interpretive choice by a performer²³. Often the mapping of compositional values is more intuitive or metaphorical and, as such, usually (e.g., Gould and Feinberg) seeks to justify seemingly anachronistic renditions, that is, performances that appear to conflict with conventional stylistic expectations for a given composer.

But what would it mean to *perform* a composition by one composer within the aesthetic realm of the same composer? Specifically, what could it mean to perform Brahms, for example, in a Brahmsian way, even if the interpretation bore almost no connection to the interpretive conventions of the time? For the remainder of this article, I will present an extensive analysis of another set of variations, the Handel Variations by Brahms, performed by the pianist Ernst Levy, to demonstrate more concretely how such a mapping might be applied. Specifically, I seek to examine how the composer’s own aesthetics can be used to justify radical changes from the same composer’s score. I demonstrate how Levy’s interpretation, a performance as unorthodox or even “blasphemous” as Gould’s or Feinberg’s, appears to draw upon both compositional aesthetics and even conceptions of historical development,

²³ As mentioned earlier, it doesn’t help that music histories simply don’t tell the stories of performers and how they play, thus, making it difficult to invoke a well-known style to describe what a given performer does.

to undermine the fundamental claims of the score. Yet, however much a compositionally oriented mode of analysis or description might reinforce antiquated notions of originality or intentionality, Levy, like many critics and performers, has found a way to performatively repurpose elements of compositional style into a creative interpretive lens.

II. ERNST LEVY AND JOHANNES BRAHMS

A Swiss pianist who studied with Egon Petri (Busoni's student) and Raoul Pugno, Ernst Levy (1895-1981) founded (and conducted) the Choeur Philharmonique in Paris in 1928 before immigrating to the US in 1941. He is, perhaps, best known (in academic circles) as a co-author, with Siegmund Levarie, of books on harmony, tonality, or musical morphology as well as a prolific composer who wrote, among other works, fifteen symphonies. Although a virtuosic pianist whose artistry is known only by the most hardcore pianophiles, Levy liked to think of himself as a composer first²⁴. His extensive writings reinforce this perception, especially as they make almost no reference to his performances. Even his pre-concert lectures or radio performances highlighted the history and form of the compositions he was playing and made no mention of his own approach as a pianist. Yet his conception of composition, its history and its forms, are key to understanding his approaches to his performances. Indeed, just as Gould taps into a long-standing debate about variation form, so, too, does Levy align with late-19th and early 20th-century views about said form.

But where Gould anachronistically applies later aesthetic ideas to a composition from a much earlier period, Levy's perspectives on the form align perfectly with the aesthetics of Johannes Brahms. In fact, within histories of so-called Classical Music (i.e., of composition), the Handel variations by Brahms have signified, for many, a successful compositional solution to the problems with the form discussed earlier. Critics and musicologists emphasise these formal "virtues" with the following accolades: It is the "completest mastery of Variation form" (Geiringer); it demonstrates "strength of form" (Musgrave) that is "miraculously balanced" (Geiringer); it "dwarfs all his previous variations sets" (MacDonald); "ranks with the half-dozen greatest sets of variations ever written" and "represents a rediscovery of the fundamental principles of the form" (Tovey). In short, and to sum up the general view of the work with this understated claim, it is "one of the most important piano works he ever created" (Gál)²⁵.

²⁴ Levy made a few early 78s in 1929, but evidence of his pianism can be found on a handful of LPs from the 1950s. They received little popular attention at the time but have garnered more attention since their re-release (along with some unpublished concert performances) by [Marston Records](#).

²⁵ John Rink, "Opposition and integration in the piano music", in *The Cambridge Companion to Brahms*, ed. Michael Musgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 87.

What makes Brahms's set of variations so "important", according to these critical, historical, and analytical assessments, is the composer's ability, as it were, to transcend the inherent paratactic or "classical" nature of the genre and to augment it with a broader sense of form and structure. Brahms makes whole what could be, on the surface, a superficial collection of parts. Consequently, it has been the aim of many scholars (John Rink, Jonathan Dunsby, Hans Meyer, Nicholas Cook, and others) to demonstrate, through varied analytic means (e.g., dynamic flux, models of symmetry, unifying motives, constructions of syntheses, networks of "family resemblances") the compositional totality or cohesion of the work and, therefore, its place alongside Bach's Goldberg Variations and Beethoven's Diabelli Variations as representatives of canonic variation sets. In short, we see these analyses serving the aesthetic desires of the time, namely, to elevate Brahms in order to demonstrate his progressive compositional approaches.

Ernst Levy's aesthetic views line up nicely with these scholars cited above. In his lecture entitled "How a Composer Works" (again, no mention of performers), Levy writes that "[a]ll kinds of psychic form-concepts may be used in the attempt at making a well-rounded whole out of a series of variations on a theme. In second-class works of that kind, shape is often enough absent. Then we are confronted with a haphazard series which could stop at any time or go on endlessly. By studying the variation-works of the masters we see, however, that they never proceeded in that way but always kept in view the shape of the whole work"²⁶.

III. LEVY'S PERFORMANCE

One might think, given the similarities between Levy's views on form and the reception to Brahms's composition, that Levy's performance would resemble the more traditional renditions that we find on record today. Instead, Levy's performance of the variation set is unmistakably idiosyncratic and, like Gould, he takes great liberties with Brahms's notated score. Yet, unlike Gould, he does so in a manner that, ironically, resembles Brahms's compositional ideals.

Brahms's theme, which he borrows from Handel's Harpsichord Suite No. 1 in B-flat major, HWV 434, consists of a simple repeated binary form, a form Brahms maintains throughout the Variations (excluding the finale). As noted in table 1, Brahms largely reinforces this form with printed repeat signs. But there are six variations where Brahms writes out one or both of the repeats in order to incorporate his own internal variations. Of the 25 variations, Levy only plays the repeats about a third of the time and, at times, even ignores a repetition written by the composer.

²⁶ Ernst Levy, "How a composer works" Papers [Box 1, Folder 8], Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

Table 1. Levy's treatment of repeats and transitions

Variation	Key	Levy's Repeats	Brahms Cadences
1	B-flat	Repeats	Rest
2	B-flat	No repeat ↓	
3	B-flat	No repeat ↓	Rest/incomplete *
4	B-flat	No repeat ↓	Rest/ incomplete
5	b-flat	No repeat ↓	incomplete
6	b-flat	Repeats	
7	B-flat	No repeat ↓	Pick-up/Elision
8	B-flat	Repeats (written out by Brahms)	Fermata/ incomplete
9	B-flat	Repeats (written out by Brahms)	Fermata/Rest
10	B-flat	No repeat ↓	Rest
11	B-flat	No repeat ↓	Pick-up/Elision
12	B-flat	No repeat ↓	Rest
13	b-flat	Repeats (written out by Brahms)	
14	B-flat	No repeat ↓	incomplete
15	B-flat	No repeat ↓	Fermata/ incomplete
16	B-flat	No repeat ↓	Half Cadence
17	B-flat	No repeat ↓ (written out but ignored by Levy)	Fermata
18	B-flat	No repeat ↓	Fermata
19	B-flat	Repeats (written out by Brahms)	incomplete
20	B-flat	Repeats (written out by Brahms)	
21	g-minor	No repeat ↓	Fermata
22	B-flat	Repeats	Rest
23	B-flat	No repeat ↓	
24	B-flat	No repeat ↓	
25	B-flat	Repeats	Rest

* By "incomplete" I mean that the last measure of the variation is missing a beat. In every case this missing beat is accounted for by the anacrusis to the next variation

The concluding variations offer us a key to understanding Levy's interpretative choices, especially since he's left no known writings on the Handel Variations. Levy's performance projects an unquestionable sense of direction, realising what John Rink, in his analysis of this moment, describes as "an accelerando of momentum towards the climactic fugue" that Levy unites with a "massive

‘crescendo’²⁷. Moreover, by eliminating the repeats of each section, Levy maintains a single transitional sweep or musical growth from Variation 23-24 into Variation 25 (audio clip 1). Inversely, in order to articulate this moment of arrival at Variation 25, the goal of the “massive crescendo” and a structural pillar that prepares the listener for the finale, Levy retains Brahms’s repetitions.



Audio clip 1*. Variations 23-25, permission for use granted by Marston Records, <https://www.marstonrecords.com/products/levy3>.

* This multimedia file may not be reproducible in Acrobat, as Flash Player is required. If that is your case, you can download it directly from the [journal's website](#), where you can find the list of audio clips immediately below to the PDF download button.

In this way and at this moment, Levy’s approach resembles the approach taken by one of his teachers, Egon Petri. In his [1938 performance](#) of the Brahms, Petri comes up with an ingenious “solution” to these final variations, the effect of which is very similar to that of Levy. Petri integrates or fuses the two variations by using the first half of Variation 24 as the repetition to the first half of Variation 23, a process replicated in the second half as well. And the effect is unmistakable. Of this performance, Jed Distler writes: “The last three variations build with intensity and excitement, culminating in a suave and securely dispatched Fugue”²⁸.

Like Levy, Petri is unobtrusively goal-oriented. His interpretation reflects a desire to think beyond the individual variation and, instead, considers the relationship of each variation to the next, in this case literally combining the two. Petri’s even more dramatic manipulation of the score might reflect the influence of his teacher, Ferruccio Busoni, who famously edited another variation set, [Bach’s Goldberg Variations](#), in a manner that was more in keeping with the formal aesthetics of the time and sought to demonstrate structure and form in ways that might not be as apparent to listeners²⁹.

Like Petri and Busoni, Levy’s writing on those “masterfully composed” sets of variation emphasises the internal grouping and structuring of internal variations: “[O]ften groups of variations of related moods are formed and the groups themselves are arranged to form a logical and convincing whole, by following an inner line of development which in some cases resembles that expressed by the totality of a sonata”³⁰. Although Levy writes about the role of the composer, it appears as though he’s taken these same ideas and applied them to his interpretation, performing, as it were, as a composer of

²⁷ Rink, “Opposition and integration...”, 87.

²⁸ Accessed July 6, 2021, <https://www.classicstoday.com/review/review-5824/>.

²⁹ For more on the Busoni Goldberg, see Erinn E. Knyt, “The Bach-Busoni Goldberg Variations”, *Bach Perspectives, Volume 13: Bach Reworked*, ed. Laura Buch (Urbana, CHI; Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2020), 74-100.

³⁰ Levy, “How a composer...”, 13.

the work. Yet however much Levy radically changed the notated score, he never asserted himself. When discussing his interpretation of Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 111, for instance, Levy replied, "The construction is in the Sonata. It can be demonstrated. It is not an invention of mine. It is evident".

Instead, Levy continues to channel the composer while writing: "Such a struggle to arrive at the final shape of a theme shows that shape is a whole, an entity that has to be 'discovered'. Now this process of discovery, or grasping what is offered by inspiration, is a very delicate one and needs a special mental technique". Levy's performance is, like many of the analyses mentioned above, an attempt to, as it were, "discover" the shape within the whole that is Brahms's work, even if it comes at the expense of Brahms's own notated instructions. Levy even allows for the possibility of multiple constructions or potential shapes in the same composition.

His analysis of Beethoven's "Eroica" Variations Op. 35, for instance, illuminates the analytical shaping of potential forms. He writes how "in order to become form, an otherwise loose set of variations [can] be limited by some governing principle". Tables 2 and 3, from his analyses, provide two such governing principles.

Table 2. Eroica Variations as a three-movement sonata³¹

Introduction	Introduzione col Basso del Tema
First Movement	Tema. Variations 1-14
Middle Movement	Minore—Maggiore. Largo
Finale	Alla Fuga

Table 3. Eroica Variations as a one-movement sonata³²

Exposition	Theme I: Basso del Tema Theme II: Tema. Variations 1-7
Development	Transition: Variation 8 Scherzo: Variations 9-13 Slow Movement: Minore—Maggiore. Largo
Recapitulation	Finale. Alla Fuga Theme I. Allegro con brio Theme II: Andante con moto

³¹ Sigmund Levarie and Ernst Levy, *Musical Morphology: A Discourse and a Dictionary* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1983), 323.

³² *Ibid.*

Like Schumann before him and Gould after, Levy dismisses variation form as an impoverished form. “[T]he ‘variation form’”, he writes, “is not a true ‘form’ [...] but rather a series of pieces the totality of which is being shaped by factors not inherent to the concept of ‘variation’”³³. Levy is not condemning Beethoven *per se* but, rather, using his analysis to suggest that undergirding the appearance of a mere theme and variations, one might “discover” Beethoven’s “governing principle”. The first analysis of the “Eroica” Variations reflects what Levy would label a geometrical form or “three-part Liedform”. According to this logic, the first and third movement group themselves around the minor variation or middle movement with a kind of symmetry. Levy would likely argue (in a manner that resembles Gould’s discussion of the Rondo alla Turca) that the fugue balances out the weight of the first 14 variations. By contrast, the narrative of the sonata form (for Levy a dialectical form) suggests that the fugue is a kind of climax, a moment of releasing energy.

Upon comparing table 1 with Levy’s analysis of the Eroica Variations, one can see an obvious link between Levy’s performance and his analysis of Beethoven. One might assume that Levy sees in Brahms’s variations an internal organization of musical groups. The final three variations, for instance, clearly represent a penultimate climax of sorts, one that both resolves a larger dramatic section as well as anticipates and counterbalances the monumentality of the fugue to follow. And when put together with the other variations, Levy’s likely imagines some more “proper” and developmental form.

It’s not only at the end, however, where Levy creates larger groupings. After he plays the theme and first variation, the pianist eliminates the repeats in the next four variations, while maintaining the repeats for Variation 1 and 6, as though they are structural bookends (audio clip 2). These encompass the four more transitional and, if you will, process-oriented variations, none of which are held back by internal repeats. Additionally, Levy constructs, or should I say, “discovers” an internal geometrical pattern based on the way he links the variations, a pattern akin to the first grouping of Beethoven’s variations. In Variation 2, for instance, Levy slows down the triplets in such a way that they morph into the three-note groupings of Variation 3. Similarly, Variation 4 resolves in a crashing cascade of octaves. But before the resonance recedes, there emerges the prominent pick-up to variation 5, a single remnant or shard of the previous variation but one that serves as an elision between the two. The resulting shape presents us with a beautiful symmetry: two bookends in variations 1 and 6, two groups of coupled Variations 2 and 3 separated by 4 and 5, and a fulcrum, if you will, designated by the dynamic and abrupt juxtaposition between Variations 3 and 4.

³³ Ernst Levy, “Liszt’s B minor Sonata”, Notes for a lecture in Chicago on 7 May 1950 (Unpublished).



Audio clip 2*. Variations 1-5, permission for use granted by Marston Records, <https://www.marstonrecords.com/products/levy3>.

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There are a few reasons why we can imagine Variation 6 as the end of the first group. For the first time in his performance Levy pauses and breathes before jumping into the percussive Variation 7. Additionally, Variations 5 and 6 are the first time Brahms turns to the minor and, as such, the return to the major in Variation 7 presents a new modal direction. Finally, variation 6 is a canon. For Levy, canons or similarly contrapuntal or stylistically notable variations, by themselves, represent moments of importance. In his analysis of Bach's Goldberg Variations, Levy groups the variations in ten groups of three, each one (excluding the quodlibet in variation 30). Similarly, if we return to Levy's analysis of Beethoven's Eroica Variations, Levy notes that Variation 7 ends the Exposition given that it's a "canonic climax"³⁴.

Levy creates another musical section between Variations 14-19 (audio clip 3). This "movement" is initiated by the change from minor to major as well as the overall shift in dramatic mood. Moreover, Levy eliminates all the repeats throughout this entire section until it culminates in the more pastoral Sicilienne. But it is not only the repeats that Levy eliminates in order to construct or "discover" internal forms. In order to elide variations, Brahms often ignores the fermatas that Brahms uses at the ends of variations (placed as they are on the top of double bars or final notes) while also significantly adjusting the tempo and drawing out unexpected melodic lines (see table 1). Levy ends Variation 16, for instance, by drastically slowing down the tempo in order to smooth the transition into subsequent variation³⁵. Levy does briefly pause to acknowledge the fermata over the bar line at the end of Variation 17. But his emphasis of the left-handed motive, at the expense of the decorative sixteenth notes, serves to pair it with, what Michael Musgrave describes as the "variation of a variation" in No. 18³⁶. Finally, in response to the arpeggiated left hand at the end of Variation 18, Levy plays right through the fermata and allows the melody of the Sicilienne to emerge organically from the bass-line.

³⁴ Levarie and Levy, "Musical morphology...", 323.

³⁵ Levy also reverses the tempo and dynamic instructions in the score. Brahms writes "*più mosso*" in Variation 17 even as Levy slows down. Moreover, Levy's dynamics in Variation 16 are far more forceful and dramatic than the *piano* in the score.

³⁶ Michael Musgrave, *The Music of Brahms* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 55.



Audio clip 3*. Variations 14-19, permission for use granted by Marston Records, <https://www.marstonrecords.com/products/levy3>.

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The existence, however, of these fermatas, the variations that end in half cadences, the variations of variations, and multiple dynamic and motivic links between variations suggest to most that Brahms appears to have sought to construct a work that deliberately gave form and shape to his variations. Yet a comparison of all of these authors and their analyses reveals that the actual unifying link or continuous line is anything but agreed upon. Levy was hardly the first or last person to construct an argument about how Brahms's work holds together. If we take Levy at his word and open our minds generously to his performance, his intention was not to change Brahms or to impose his own invention but to reveal the inner workings of the score, to demonstrate in performance what *should*, but perhaps isn't, already evident in its construction.

IV. CONCLUSION

Except that Levy *did* significantly change elements in Brahms's score, all the while professing fidelity to the composer's compositional forms. And Levy is no exception among both performers and critics who exist within this paradoxical aesthetic realm. Jed Distler, for instance, in his review of Petri's recorded performance of Brahms reflects this inherent contradiction. He celebrates the pianist's brilliance, writing: "The pianist's innate virtuosity and insightful musicianship pack a large-scale punch in the variation sets"³⁷. This musicianship includes the innovative combination of variations described above. And yet Distler concludes with an almost instinctive genuflect toward the dominant aura of the composer when he allows that Petri "still let[s] the works speak for themselves"³⁸. This is no different from Aimard's claim to Bach's musical truth.

This continued deference to the composer and the score (often framed as "the work itself") is deeply ingrained in our methods of analysis and criticism³⁹. It is ironic that no matter how much a performer changes a score, our analyses often seek to demonstrate how these changes reinforce some other element in the score! And I'm more than guilty of having done this myself. When I wrote "The Performer as Analyst" I defended or explained performers' interpretative decisions by comparing

³⁷ Accessed July 6, 2021, <https://www.classicstoday.com/review/review-5824/>.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ On more recent discussions around "the musical work", see Gavin Steingo, "The musical work reconsidered, in hindsight", *Current Musicology* 97 (2014), 81-112.

them to the work of music theorists⁴⁰. At the time I felt that the only way to give voice to what performers did or, rather, how their actions had meaning within the community of musical scholars, was to frame their contributions within those topics that were already valued in the academy, namely the discourse of music analysis. Thus, to give “legitimacy” to the interpretations of Chopin (and for a music theory journal to accept my work), it was imperative that I demonstrated analogs between performance and analysis or, rather, to compare the idiosyncratic interpretations of pianists to the normative language of musical analysis, a language that derived from the study of composition. In other words, to analyse performers meant that I still needed to perform a certain kind of analysis that was grounded in the score.

The use of existing structures and language has the danger of reinforcing the status quo, of marginalising performers and their creativity, and of limiting how we analyse performances if we let it do so. Even the use of new analytical methods (e.g., spectrograms⁴¹ or microanalyses⁴²) or the focus on performed embodiment, can be limiting if the ultimate goal is to demonstrate how the performer either channels certain intentions of the composer or merely relates to pre-existing analytical debates.⁴³

As we move forward in our analyses of performance or performers, I urge scholars to embrace the effects and aesthetics of Ernst Levy, his brilliantly creative repurposing of Brahmsian aesthetics, that is his compositional and formal ideas. This approach doesn't reveal anything previously hidden in Brahms's score, as Levy and many others would have us believe but, rather, creates an entirely new musical experience for listeners. In this way Levy invents, as Gould does with Webern, a new interpretive aesthetic that applies in fresh and innovative ways to Brahms and, as I've argued elsewhere, to Beethoven and Liszt as well.⁴⁴ In this way Levy anticipates the groundbreaking claims that scholars, like Adam Behan and John Rink, among others, have recently pushed us to consider, namely, how

⁴⁰ Daniel Barolsky, “The performer as analyst”, *Music Theory Online* 13, no. 1 (2007).

⁴¹ See, for instance, Adam Behan, “Large-scale structure, performance and Brahms's Op. 119 no. 2”, *Music Analysis* 40, no. 1 (2021), 104-130.

⁴² See, for instance, Ana Llorens, “Recorded asynchronies, structural dialogues: Brahms's *Adagio affettuoso*, Op. 99ii, in the hands of Casals and Horszowski”, *Music Performance Research* 8 (2017), 1-31.

⁴³ Elizabeth LeGuin's groundbreaking and influential work on “carnal musicology”, for instance, features the body, not merely the score, in remarkable ways. This approach serves to challenge dominant methods of analysis that have for so long dismissed the contributions of Luigi Boccherini. Yet at the end of the day, while using her own body as the medium through which she discusses the event of performing, her ultimate goal appears to bring us back to the composer's own performing body as a way through which we might re-analyze or re-interpret a given composition. Similarly, Nicholas Cook's earlier study of Furtwängler's control of tempo deviation when performing Beethoven becomes only of interest to most because of the ways it interacts or relates to the analytical claims of Schenker and his analyses of the score. See Nicholas Cook, “The Conductor and the Theorist: Furtwängler, Schenker and the first movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony”, in *The Practice of Performance: Studies in Musical Interpretation*, ed. John Rink (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 105-125.

⁴⁴ See the liner notes to <https://www.marstonrecords.com/products/levy3>.

concepts like “musical structure” are not necessarily driven by fixed compositional features but, rather, shaped or even created by the myriad choices made by performers.⁴⁵

We should resist the urge to discuss how performances, like those of Levy, Gould, or Kopatchinskaja are “challenging”, however much I understand the realities of our musical politics, those described fully by Daniel Leech-Wilkson.⁴⁶ This notion suggests that there is a fixed work, structure, or tradition that must be upheld and, moreover, that our modes of analysis need to maintain a perpetual engagement with these traditions. As we respond to Levy’s Brahms, we can acknowledge the influence of Brahmsian aesthetics as source of influence, a “misreading” if you will, without feeling the need to compare Levy’s performance, judgmentally and discriminatively, with pre-existing analyses or conceptions of the score. Only when we let go of this false notion of origins can our analyses do full justice to the creativity of performers.

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⁴⁵ See John Rink, “The (f)utility of performance analysis”, in *Artistic Practice as Research in Music: Theory, Criticism, Practice*, ed. Mine Doğan-Şak (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2015), 127-147; and Adam Behan, “Large-scale structure...”.

⁴⁶ See <https://challengingperformance.com/>.

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