

Beethoven is teaching a student Anton Webern's Variations op. 27

Beethoven says:

Well, harmonically the music of Webern is a little strange and futuristic to me. Nevertheless, declamation and expression seem more familiar to me. The polyphony is, indeed, new and original, but not unappealing. Let take a look at the scores.

Oh, there is not much in it! In my times, I was a little bit more suspicious and tried to write as much as possible of fine dynamics, accents and articulation. But, the more I look at the scores I think there is much more in it than it seems first.

Let's start from the very beginning: What kind of three-semiquaver-bar do you play first?

I myself very rarely wrote bars over bar lines. Sometimes it happens though. Groups of notes have to be stronger than the meter! Look at my last movement of the sonata op. 10 nr. 3.

Music example Video 1'22"

Bars over a bar line actually mean a separate meter: the bar line is canceled, the group connected by bars creates its own meter.

And something else: believe me, I wouldn't have bothered to make a difference, whether to mark notes that are separated by breaks with flags or with a solid bar. Look at the movement with variations of my „Kreutzer-sonata“! Come up with something how to show the distinction between bars and separation. Look:

Music example Video 2'05"

Yes, you have to put the groups in meaningful manner! You may ask, what is meant by “meaningful” here? Just but a text underneath! Two words for two sounds? Of course not, because then there would only be one bar. Look at the score of “Fidelio”. There you can find such a speech with a lot of breaks.

Music example Video 3'39"

Or, look at the Liederzyklus “An die ferne Geliebte”

Music example Video 4'08"

Let's check: „Flo-wers”

Yes, now it starts to make sense! Let's try the words: “come - yet”; “to – you”

Music example Video 4'46"

Yes, a completely different content but musically the same sense! Friedrich Silcher did something very funny: he added lyrics to piano music from me and published this as songs. Take a look at it. I think he was often wrong about the details but basically he did the right thing. A text underlined correctly and you already have the right phrasing.

Etwas anderes: haben Sie nicht ordentlich den Generalbass studiert? Ich muss gestehen, dass ich die Harmonik Weberns zwar nicht ganz klar nachvollziehen kann. Gleichwohl scheint es auch hier schwere und leichte Akkorde zu geben, ja auch Vorhalte und ihre Auflösung – wenn auch beides im Falle dieses Stückes nicht ganz klar voneinander zu unterscheiden sein mag. Lassen Sie mich mal ans Klavier.

Something else: haven't you studied the thorough bass properly? I have to admit, that I can't quite clearly understand Weberns harmony. Nonetheless, there seem to be heavy and light chords there, as

well as suspension and their resolution – even if the two cannot be clearly distinguished from one another in the case of this piece. Let me go to the piano.

Music example Video 6'10"

There, can you hear it? There is also heavy and light! I was right! Just like in greek prosody! Now it's becoming increasingly clear: there is a comma, here a point, there a semicolon. Play it as if it would be a continuo!

Well, look, this is structured quite differently!

Lets take a look at the second page. What do I see there? You played completely different! Think of the second Bagatelle of my op. 126! Two hands act there – not one! In the beginning I made it even clearer by making the end note of the small figure on the right a little longer and overlapping the figure on the left. Afterwards, the figures seemingly - but only seemingly - connect to one another.

But you still have to hear, that two hands are playing here, otherwise the whole declamation is broken!

So: make the switch from hand to hand and don't make it too perfect! Otherwise you won't hear, that two hands are working together!

Music example Video 8'12"

See, it already sounds much better, especially it's clearer, more understandable, more moving. A few wrong notes are less disturbing than a completely wrong declamation. Please forgive my fierceness! But to sacrifice the sense of safety and cleanliness, I find that outrageous. As musicians we are not machines, but humans!

So, what does it mean when a sound comes on a three-plus and not three? Exactly! Hesitate. Even if you hesitate in the air, before you touch the keys, you will hear it. Your expression doesn't just start on the keys. Lets try this with a text: What would you say on a three-and?

„Well“, „Oh“; so something questionable, something you are not exactly sure about. Yes, it should sound exactly like this! Think of my sonata op. 110:

Music example Video 10'08"

If you cannot feel the expression before you touch the keys it sounds like as if some g-major chords would just happen like flop, flop, flop. Dreadful! And if that doesn't happen exactly on time, then it will be a little too late. Too late is just right!

Actually, now you should be able to declamate the first movement quite properly. But stop! Please take another look at the thorough bass!

Music example Video 11'18"

There you are.

Music example Video 11'57"

Well, you obviously understood playing with two hands. What you have not yet understood, however, is that all declamations - I repeat: all declamations are based on greek feet. You play the first group of eights notes quite correctly as a trochee. But it seems you haven't recognized the spondaeus of the repeated a. Take your time for these two a's, then you can see the meter.

Music example Video 13'10"

Very well. Now, the meter will help you see whether you have an iambus or a trochee. Especially the spondaeus, twice long, has such a unique effect and is often not recognized. I've used it a lot. If you see a forte under each half note, then you can be sure that the notes have the same weight here – as with spondaeus.

Also in the following poem. You probably know the poem Wanderers Nachtlied from Goethe.

Über allen Gipfeln

Ist Ruh

What power lies in this spondaeus! Not even the great Schubert recognized this. He set to music:

Music example Video 14'18"

Such mistakes may happen to everyone once. Let's leave that. Back to Webern: why else is the same `a` written twice here? Where else there are no direct repetitions of notes at all? So, a spondaeus has to come from here!

Look, look: without imagination you can't even read notes. Perhaps the composer should have written down a little bit more? But I have to admit that well into your century people will read and investigate what Schindler and Ries, what Czerny and Moscheles wrote about my playing and my collaborations with performers, and what I should have said about this or that sonata.

As if I hadn't written enough into my scores myself! But before you will play the movement: What about the basso continuo here? No answer? Let my play the piano!

Music example Video 15'36"

Ah, all notes are reflected in the `a`, the spondaeus-a. One more reason to play here twice. But I have never done something like that. Here the notes are only high and low and more or less distant from each other. There is no longer a thorough bass ...

Oh, something occurs to me: do you know my grand fugue for string quartet? Again and again there is a group of four notes that you cannot assign to any tonality. They seem to float freely in space:

Music example Video 16'46"

Do you notice that you couldn't put figured bass cords under it either?

Here is another example: play the Adagio bars from my Fantasie op. 77. The external voices slide apart and the chords result from this movement. (Schubert made it even better and more impressive in his „Wegweiser“ from his „Winterreise“. I heard this for the first time shortly after my death. Very impressive!) Well, maybe that will help you, this little movement from Webern really helps to hear and that also means: to really hear the tones and to grasp their cohesion.

Music example Video 17'44"

Aber jetzt verraten Sie mir noch, warum das Ganze eigentlich „Variationen“ heißt! Ah, ich verstehe schon. Der Komponist hatte Sorge, dass man vermuten könne, nichts hinge zusammen. Alles sei irgendwie beliebig. Und wenn er nun das Wörtchen „Variationen“ drüberschreibt, dann hört man schon mal ganz anders, weil man annimmt, dass hier etwas variiert wird, dass also der Zusammenhang schon durch das Variierte gegeben sein muss. (In der Musik wird ja ohnehin immer etwas variiert.) Naja, hören wir uns mal den letzten Satz an.

But now can you tell me, why the whole thing is called „Variations“! Ah, I understand. The composer worried that one might assume that nothing was related. Everything is somehow arbitrary. And when it says „Variations“ you hear very differently, because you assume that something is being varied here, that the connection must already be given by the varied. (Something is always varied in music anyway.) Well, let's listen to the last movement.

Music example Video 18'43"

Here the score looks quite empty. The many breaks. Do not be fooled! It all belongs together. Everything belongs together. Already in the first movement I showed you how to pronounce one single word over one intermission. Here, at the beginning, the composer seems to have taken this effect to extremes!

Music example Video 22'22"

All words cross each other! Show clearly what belongs together. There we have two note heads with a line above them. I probably would have added the word „tenuto“. The first note should be played syncopated, so you have to hesitate a little bit in the air! The second note comes on the good measure part, the word is over. I think the legato bow is perfectly clear. But don't play the note too short at the end of the bow!

Mozart almost never wrote a dot at the end of the bow, because the staccato point only means „separate“ and that means the end of the bow too. But I already told you, that you can no longer rely on the musicians and that you have to describe every single detail. I believe, to be honest, that no later than eighty years after my death, it was more or less forgotten that the dot only indicated a separation. These young composers, who are barely a hundred and thirty years old today, usually write a dot when the note is supposed to be really short.

Just for fun: ask any student at a music university what `staccato` means. You will certainly get the answer very promptly: `short`. In these times, you could look up something like that on such small devices, those little noxes with buttons that you can type around on – and apparently also talk to people who are not there! Well, I think you know what I am talking about. So in a nutshell: if there is no dot, please don't play short!

Music example Video 24'33"

But now, please pay attention to the different degrees of strength! They also help to create a connection!

By the way, I am pleased to see that Webern, at least in this piece, does not use a mezzo forte either. I've hardly ever done that. And when I've written it down, it is to indicate an expression, not a degree of strength. My scale is like the one in this piece:

pp – p – f – ff – and just at the very end he writes one single ppp. So, don't make too much difference between piano and forte, because there is actually no degree of strength in between. But pay special attention to the difference between piano and pianissimo. How many misunderstandings there haven't been in my compositions to this day! No one would suddenly play a crescendo from piano to forte and play the forte quieter than the end of the crescendo. But how often is this done in my music with a crescendo from pianissimo to piano! First a huge crescendo, then suddenly a very soft piano again. But let's leave that now, it's not about my music.

Let's talk about the pedal for a moment: Unlike me, Mister Webern has not entered any pedal regulations. But that doesn't mean, that you can't use one. I think yes, there is a similar misunderstanding here: when it comes to my works, some still say: in my opus some people still say: 'This is classical! Use as few pedal as possible! Play everything evenly.' I tell you: that is completely

wrong! And I have heard that many people say when it comes to Webern's music: 'This is modern and precisely constructed! Use as few pedal as possible! Play everything very precisely to the rhythm!' What a strange idea of accuracy! And that is accuracy! I think, Webern always spoke of comprehensibility.

Let's get back to the pedal: everything which is written underneath the bow belongs together. Try taking the pedal there. Then you can hear the togetherness better. Especially from bar 12 on it seems that this is a big help for comprehensibility.

Music example Video 27'19''

Here from bar 23 we have direct repetitions again, as in the second movement. And it also says 'tender'. Imagine wanting to touch a little bird very gently. Yes, the finger in the air already knows how to touch the little bird, the keys! Also, play the repeated notes as spondaeus. You will understand polyphony better, when the different shapes are completely different.

Remember the remarks I made to Anton Schindler in relation to Cramer's studies. An excellent composer, by the way. Everything I said to Schindler is meant to make things easier to understand. And the most important thing is the comprehensibility of the polyphony! It is wonderful, if that succeeds. And here everything seems to be somehow simultaneously, even if it is not really simultaneously. So, let's try it: Spondaeus with the tone repetitions, and prepare all the strokes in the air as a gentle touch! Here we go.

Music example Video 28'47''

Play forward

Music example Video 29'06''

Wait a minute, it doesn't work that way! You should know these little slur of twos from my music. Just think of the first movement of my Sonata op. 31, 2! Let me go to the piano

Music example Video 29'23''

These small groups of two are gestures, are a single syllable, are a tone of voice! Janacek did something like that too, he composed everything from the tone of voice. You can learn something about me from him, too, but obviously also about Webern. So back to the piece: play these groups of two once as if they were just one sound; like a single syllable

Stop! Don't you see that there are always single notes remaining? You will find this effect quite often in my compositions, for example in my piano sonata op. 54, right at the beginning. This remaining is also an expression! A tone remains alone, lonely, then it goes out. All of this is expression!

Music example Video 30'56''

Remember this! What do I see on the next page? An accelerando over the pause? That is funny. But actually it's clear. How many mistakes are made if, while playing, you don't consider that the audience is continuing a movement!

Look at my sonata for piano and cello op. 102, 1. There is a rallentando, then there is a pause. And in this break the rallentando has to take an effect, otherwise the next pause comes too early. Well, here it is the other way round. So completely logic. Webern didn't think so much of the cleverness of his coevals. I hope you are more clever in 21. century.

The composer writes "moved". Janacek would have written "Con moto", so with inner emotion. For me it might have been called "con brio". So let's go! And then there's a "molto fortissimo"! Some of

my contemporaries were bothered by the fact that I wasn't playing properly. But just playing clean is like mumbling to me. You pay attention to the cleanliness and forget what you actually have to say. I don't just want to hear the music with my eardrum - you know that I also have problems with my hearing. I want to feel the music on my body too! So let's go! Make the limits of the piano tangible! Consonants are the edges of our language. You bump into them; but without it you just babble. So: brave, brave!

Music example Video 33'00"

Yes, the conclusion, you can work out yourself. Actually, there is no rhythm here, but an expression of touching the keys. Nothing is on beat, the hand hesitates in the air. I did this very excessively twice, namely in the first movement of my piano sonata op. 101 and, even more extreme, in the transition to the last fugue in the Sonata op. 110. We already had that in the first movement of this piece: Precision leads not here to fulfill what is written in the notes!

Recently you have these devices - what's their name again? The name reminds me of a character from Mozart's Don Giovanni - wait - I'll have it in a moment: Oh yes: Komtur - Komtuter? Oh, computer - thank you!

So, if you gave this rhythm to a computer, it would not only reproduce it too straight, it would reproduce it wrongly! Basically wrong! This rhythm consists of moving in the air and touching the key. Both together. Otherwise it's just wrong.

Now I will tell you another anecdote that will show you how important it is to me to touch. Stravinsky once told this anecdote. I have to admit that I don't know where he got it from, because as far as I can remember we never met personally and I don't know who wrote it down either. Listen:

Stravinsky says that when I became completely deaf, I was still sitting at the piano while composing and putting a pencil in my mouth, which I then used to touch the music stand. So, when I couldn't hear the tones anymore, I could feel their vibrations with my lips. I tell you in secret: Stravinsky couldn't have read that anywhere in my opinion. Maybe he made it up. But it is true!

But before you play that, I would like to advise you, before we meet again, to look for the figured bass in this third movement as well. So summarize everything that can belong to a harmonious unit and then taste how these units relate to each other. Now, while playing, you can at least try to feel these connections.

Music example Video 36'16"

Yes, I think you understood something and you could use my instructions. But take a look at Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. He is very friendly. I didn't get to know him personally until after our deaths, but he was my role model while I was still alive. Also, don't forget to knock on Johannes Brahms's door. Webern's music will probably be even more foreign to him than to me, but he will have a lot to say to you about it ... So, until next time! I am curious, what you will bring then ...

Till Alexander Körber

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