

TONY SIQI YUN
piano

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833–1897)

Theme and Variations in D minor Op. 18b

Andante, ma moderato

(approx. 12 minutes)

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810–1856)

Theme and Variations in E-flat major WoO 24 “Ghost Variations”

Tema. Leise, innig

Var. 1

Var. 2 Canonisch

Var. 3 Etwas belebter

Var. 4

Var. 5

(approx. 11 minutes)

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)

Sonata No. 23 in F minor Op. 57 “Appassionata”

Allegro assai

Andante con moto

Allegro ma non troppo

(approx. 25 minutes)

- Intermission -

FERRUCCIO BUSONI (1866–1924)

Berceuse from *Elegies* BV 249

Andantino calmo

(approx. 5 minutes)

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810–1856)

Symphonic Etudes Op. 13

Thema Andante

Étude I Un poco più vivo

Étude II Espressivo

Étude III Vivace

Étude IV
Étude V Vivacissimo
Posthumous Variation No. 3
Étude VI Agitato
Étude VII Allegro molto
Posthumous Variation No. 2
Posthumous Variation No. 5
Étude VIII Andante
Étude IX Presto possibile
Étude X Allegro
Étude XI Con espressione
Étude XII Finale: Allegro brillante
(approx. 35 minutes)

Johannes Brahms

Theme and Variations in D minor Op. 18b

Clara Schumann was so impressed with the theme-and-variations second movement of Brahms' Sextet No. 1 in B flat, Op. 18, composed in 1860, that she asked him to make her a piano version of it. Acquiescing to her request, he presented her later that year with his Theme and Variations in D minor, Op. 18b as a birthday present, and the work remained a private affair between the two of them until it was finally published some decades after the composer's death.

Reproducing on the keyboard the tonal range — and above all the tonal *warmth* — of two violins, two violas and two cellos is a formidable task, often requiring the pianist's left hand to perform deft acrobatics in unfurling widely rolled chords and anticipatory bass notes jumping up to complete the score's fulsome harmonies.

This challenge is evident from the first line of the work's Hungarian-flavoured theme in the minor mode.



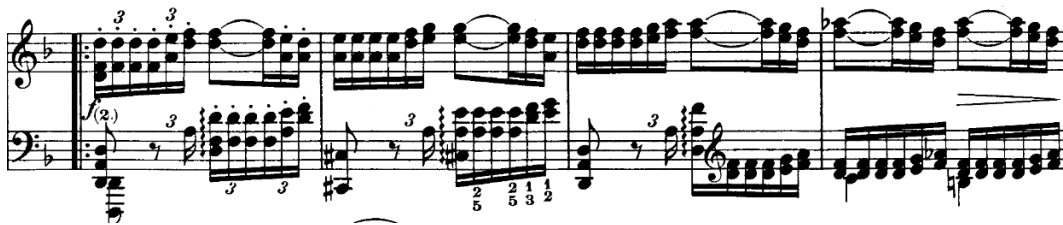
The variations that follow proceed by gradually subdividing the beat into smaller and smaller fractions, just as Bach had done in the opening variations

of his famous *Chaconne* for solo violin — also in D minor and also transcribed for piano by Brahms.

Variation 1 presents the harmonic pattern of the theme in 16ths



which **Variation 2** turns into triplets



and **Variation 3** into great sweeping scales in 32nd notes in the left-hand's "cellos."



A reprieve from all this commotion comes in the textural and melodic simplicity of **Variation 4** in the major mode



and in the innocent rustic flavour of the drone tones in the "musette" of **Variation 5**, a foreshadowing of the similar chiming Variation 11 from Book I of Brahms' *Paganini Variations*, Op. 35.



There remains but for Brahms to reprise the theme in a coda that seems to blanch it of its ominous solemnity in favour of a peaceful ending in the major mode.



Robert Schumann

Theme and Variations in E-flat major WoO 24 "Ghost Variations"

In February of 1854, Robert Schumann was in a state of delirium, but a very musical one. He told his wife Clara that he was surrounded by ghosts, ghosts that fed him wonderful music and had occasionally tried to drag him down to Hell. Despite all this mental clatter, or perhaps because of it, he wrote down a theme offered to him by angelic voices and within a week had begun to compose variations on it. In one particularly bleak moment, he threw himself into the chilly waters of the local river, the Rhine. Fortunately, he was fished out of the drink by a concerned passerby and returned home, where he managed to finish the last variation. Shortly thereafter he was taken to an insane asylum where he died two years later.

The plaintive theme given him by his ghost has both the intimacy and the tenderness we associate with Schumann's short piano pieces, and the quiet solemnity of a hymn sung by a church choir. Its downward-seeking phrases evoke a mood of quiet resignation and wistful remembrance.



In the first four of his five variations, Schumann leaves the melody remarkably unvaried, preferring instead to merely upholster it with a decorative covering of ornamentation that leaves it still singing clearly in the ear, as in the first variation, which features a ripple of triplets in the middle voice,

VAR. I



while the second unfolds as a canon between the outer voices.

VAR. II



The third variation adds an insistent rhythmic counterpoint between melody notes,

VAR. III



and the truly “ghostly” and ethereal fourth variation is set in the minor mode.

VAR. IV



The fifth and final variation is assuredly the most affecting. Composed immediately after Schumann’s suicide attempt, it is decorated, like the previous variations, in a rich layer of ornamentation, but seems somehow to have lost its way.

VAR. V



It brings home the fragility of the composer's psychological state in its wandering melody and harmonically wavering accompaniment.

Here, painted in sound, are the last vestiges of a great composer's mind gradually clouding over with madness as his window on the world slowly and gently closes down.

Ludwig van Beethoven

Sonata No. 23 in F minor Op. 57 "Appassionata"

Beethoven's 23rd piano sonata of 1804-1805 is one of the works that, along with his Fifth Symphony, stand in the public imagination as emblematic of the composer's explosive temperament and resolute pose of heroic resistance against all forces that would seek to tame his indomitable will. Its outer movements in particular explored new terrain in terms of dynamic contrast, expressive range and sheer technical difficulty. Their emotional rhetoric is brutally direct, their gestures often willfully abrupt.

And it was not by chance that he chose the key of F minor for this work, as this key allowed him to write comfortably for the full keyboard range of his day. The capabilities of the piano, you see, were progressing rapidly, and the newest pianos had a range that stretched from low F more than two-and-a-half octaves below middle C to the high C three octaves above it. And you can see how Beethoven glories in this new wider range of pitches available to him. Both that low F and high C appear in the score, meaning that this sonata was "ultra-modern" in concept: you simply couldn't play it on an older piano.

And as he did in the Fifth Symphony, Beethoven chose to make his point with a bare minimum of motivic material, the elements of the entire first movement all being presented on the first page of the score. First there is the eerie pattern of dotted rhythms that furtively rise in a conspiratorial whisper through the F-minor arpeggio to culminate in a mysterious trill.



Then comes the repeat of this gesture a semitone higher, in G flat, introducing the idea of Neapolitan harmony (on the flattened second degree of the scale). This semitone *rise* in the treble is then answered by an ominous semitone *drop* in the bass, setting up an explosion of arpeggio figures that rip down from the high treble to the very bottom of the keyboard.

The motivic intensity of this movement is so dense that even the second theme, in A flat, is merely a major-mode variant of the first theme.



It's as if Beethoven were playing good-cop-bad-cop with the same thematic material.

The development section explores the principal motives of the movement with an almost constant menacing flutter of tremolo figures that occasionally overwhelm the entire texture until the recapitulation once again restores the murmuring mood of mystery with which the movement began.

The opening fireworks are balanced, formally, by an extended coda (just as in the Fifth Symphony), the apocalyptic fury of which reaches its climax in the hammering spasmodic convulsions and choppy cross-handed rhythms of this passage:



Until, all passion spent, Beethoven relents and ends the movement in a quivering tremolo, still seething with menace, that seems to want to recede beyond the limit of human hearing. But you get the impression that nothing has been resolved in this movement, merely that the raging fury has passed, that the fever has subsided — for now.

* * *

The ***Andante con moto*** slow movement is a theme and variations as calm, stable and emotionally grounded as the two movements on either side of it are anxious, turbulent and volatile. This hurricane of a sonata, then, pivots

around an “eye-of-the-storm” middle movement that throws the violence concentrated in the outer movements into high relief.

It opens in a sound world that seems to have collapsed into a small space just below middle C.



As the variations proceed, there is simply a gradual increase in the amount of rhythmic activity, first with rhythmic offsets,



then with constant 16th-note motion



and finally in an accompaniment pattern of constant 32nd-note chatter.



And the theme returns to close out the movement in a dignified reprise.

But wait! Beethoven gives us the sonata equivalent of a “Breaking News!” alert:



Suddenly the dying embers of fading anger that ended the first movement return to life, announced by a clarion call to arms on a harmonically unstable diminished 7th chord. And just as in his Fifth Symphony, Beethoven launches straight into his finale without a pause.

This finale is a *moto perpetuo* of restless 16th notes ranging feverishly around in circles in a combination of arpeggios and scale patterns.



This theme is linked to the opening of the first movement by its sequence of F minor and then G-flat major phrases in quick succession. The “rising semitone” motif is now part of the finale, as well.

And motivic economy is much in evidence throughout. Witness how the second theme is merely a reproduction of the first, but placed in C minor, the dominant minor, punctuated every now and then with the odd weak-beat *sforzando*, a Beethoven “elbow-in-the-ribs” trademark.

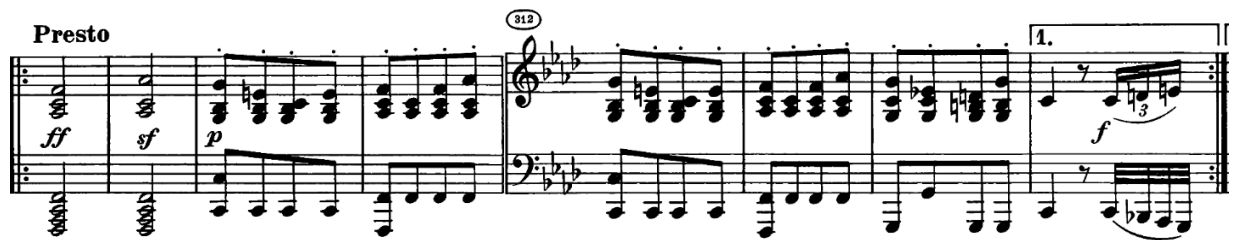


This is a rhythmic tic that follows into the development section as well, a development section that is repeated while the exposition, curiously, is not.

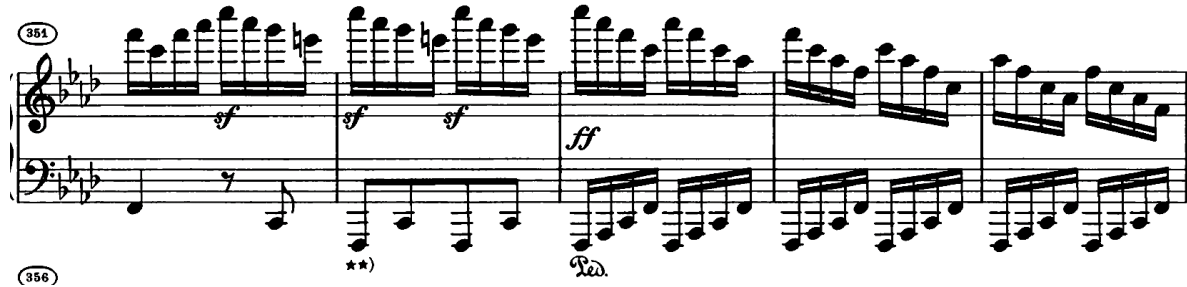


These rough accents stand out against a constant chatter of 16ths, either in the theme itself or in the accompaniment of its many diversions, that are only interrupted when a hushed passage of suspenseful harmonic uncertainty intervenes to prepare for the start of the recapitulation.

Things come to a head in an accelerating *Presto* section that arrives at the end of the second go-round of the development section, beginning with what Sir András Schiff has described as a kind of “demonic czardas,” that stomps and skips



until a final whirlwind of *moto perpetuo* figuration returns



that seems to want to eat up the whole piano as it sweeps the work to its conclusion in a cascade of broken chords — over a *single* pedal marking, mind you — rattling down from the highest C at the top of the keyboard to the lowest F at the bottom.

Ferruccio Busoni

Berceuse from *Elegies* BV 249

In 1907 Busoni published a collection of six piano pieces under the title *Elegies*, to which he later added a seventh piece in 1909 entitled *Berceuse* (Lullaby). As the composer himself later acknowledged, these pieces represented a fundamental transformation in his approach to composition.

Hitherto-for-e Busoni had written in the highly emotive style of late Romanticism. This could arguably even be said of his famous Bach transcriptions that gave the piano repertoire some of its most enduring warhorses. But the *Elegies* collection marks a new departure towards the more “atmospheric” sound world of Impressionism, with its subtly nuanced shades of tone colour and finely sifted sonorities.

Berceuse begins with a rocking motion (this being a lullaby, after all) conveyed by a widely spaced ostinato accompaniment in the left hand, over which tolls a bell-like melody line that seems oddly static.

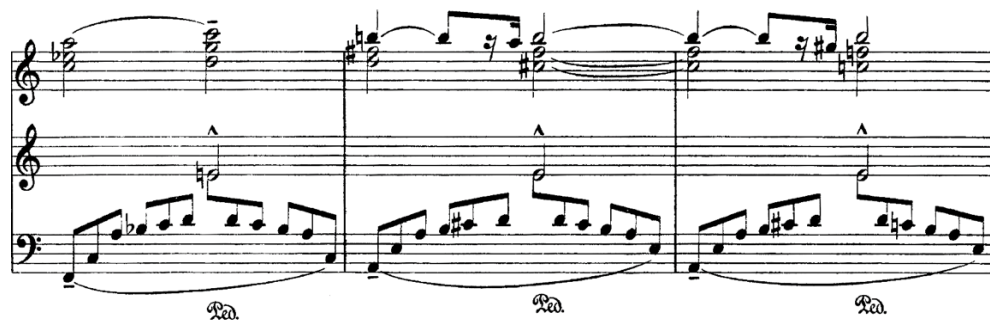


As the piece progresses, you get the impression that tonality, the idea of being in a certain *key*, is not the point here, and the next section even seems bitonal, i.e., in two keys at once.

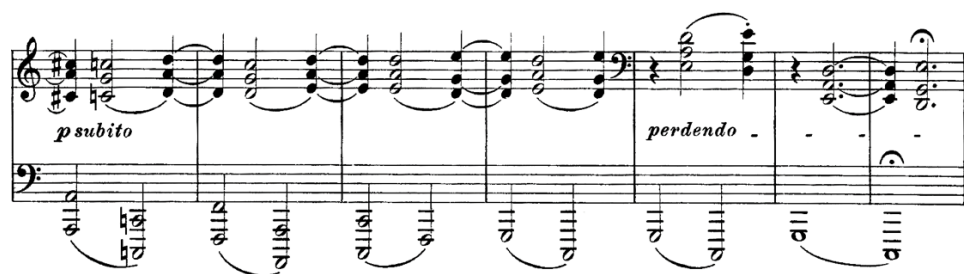


Note the indication “with the two pedals always down,” referring to the damper and soft pedals, responsible for the piece’s veiled and ever-so-blurry tone palette, a sonic image of drowsiness.

When the “melody,” such as it is, returns, many of the harmonies are in 4ths rather than the 3rds of traditional harmony.



And the piece concludes in a misty fog of quartal harmonies drifting gradually into silence.



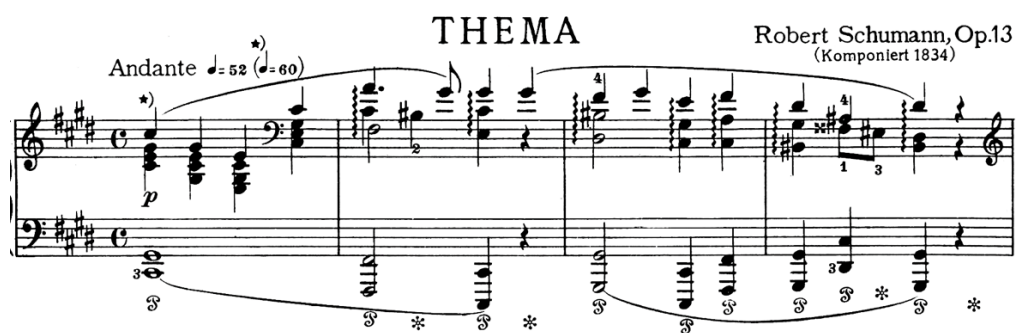
Robert Schumann Symphonic Etudes Op. 13

In 1834, Robert Schumann was engaged to the musically gifted Ernestine von Fricken (1816–1844), the adoptive daughter of Ferdinand Ignaz Baron von Fricken (1787–1850), a flute virtuoso and amateur composer. Potential fathers-in-law being traditionally on alert for character flaws in their prospective sons-in-law, it was likely a shrewd move on Schumann's part to choose in that year a theme drawn from a flute sonata by the Baron for his set of variations entitled *Symphonic Etudes*.

By setting this theme in the resonant lower regions of the keyboard, Schumann invests it with a solemnity and gravitas it would surely have lacked in its flute-sonata setting.

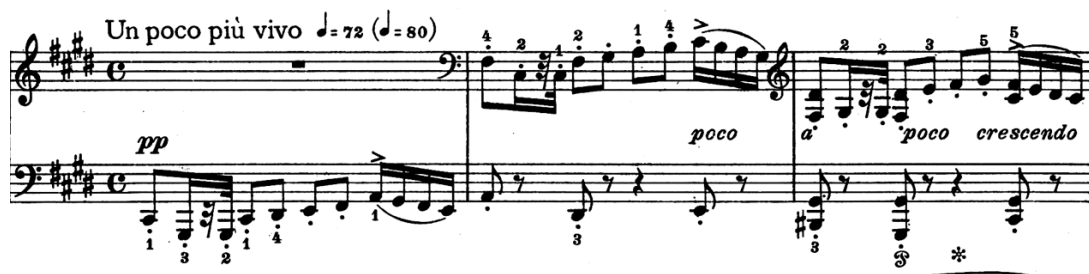
THEMA

Robert Schumann, Op. 13
(Komponiert 1834)



The variations that follow are labelled “etudes” for their pianistic difficulties and their textural and motivic homogeneity, although some might qualify as simply character pieces or even dances. And they are “symphonic” in the orchestral level of sonority they pull from the keyboard.

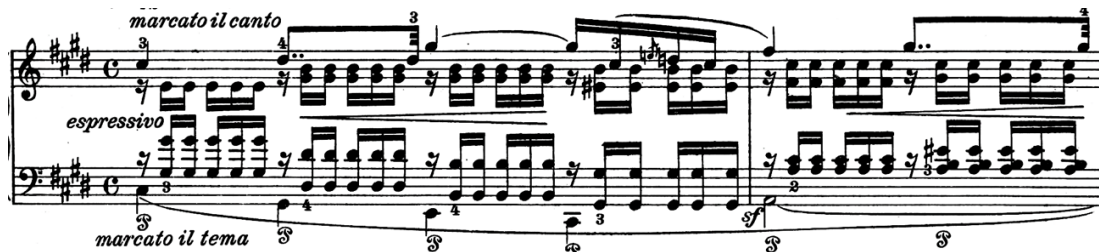
Etude 1 remains rooted in the same low register but fills in the rhythmic spaces in the steady hymn-like pacing of the theme with a sprightly countermelody that skips and trips along, seeming to disregard the sombre tone of the theme that preceded it.



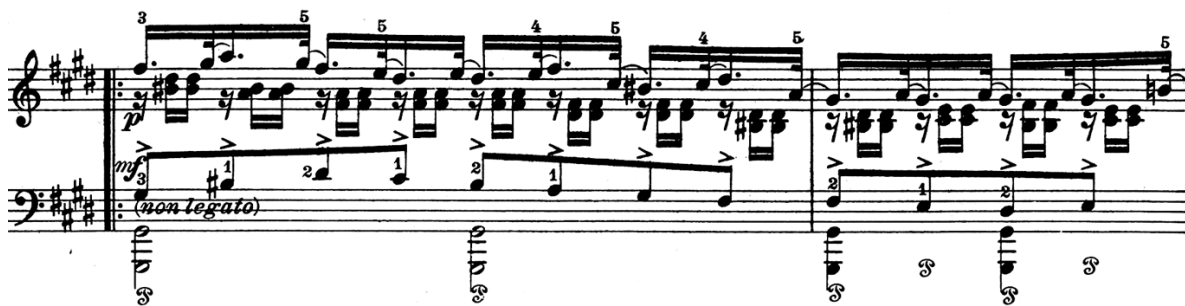
And yet the characteristic descending arpeggio of the theme makes a coy appearance from time to time.

This same reference to the theme appears in *Etude 2* but this time in the bass, the harmonic foundation to the musical edifice, while the soprano heads in the

opposite direction, supported by a thickly upholstered mid-range of pulsing chordal infill.

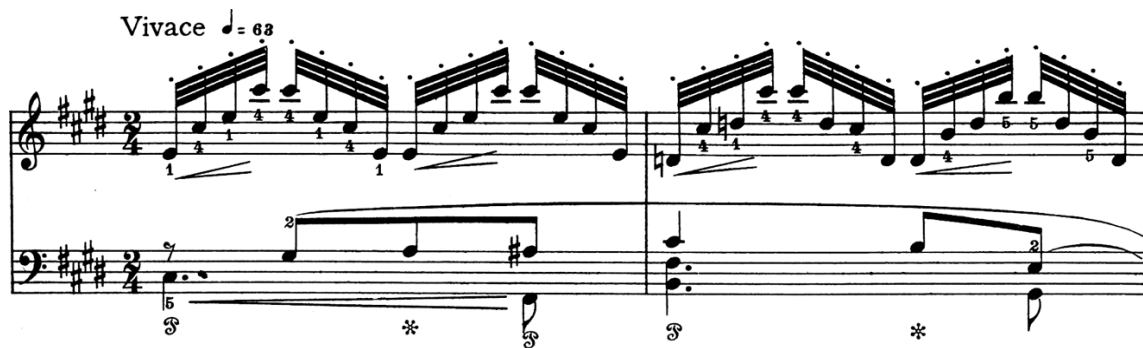


The tenor voice takes over the theme in the second section, where the sonorities written into the score are literally impossible to play at the keyboard



but give an indication of the “symphonic” range of sound imagined by Schumann.

Relief from this dense orchestral level of sonority comes in the airy textures of *Etude 3*



with its wide-ranging figuration of peppery staccatos in the right hand dancing nimbly above a blithe tune, suitable for whistling, in the tenor.

What a shock, then, to hear the punchy chordal mimicry of the theme at the opening of *Etude 4*.



Schumann's growing admiration for Bach is evident in the way that right and left hand are in canon.

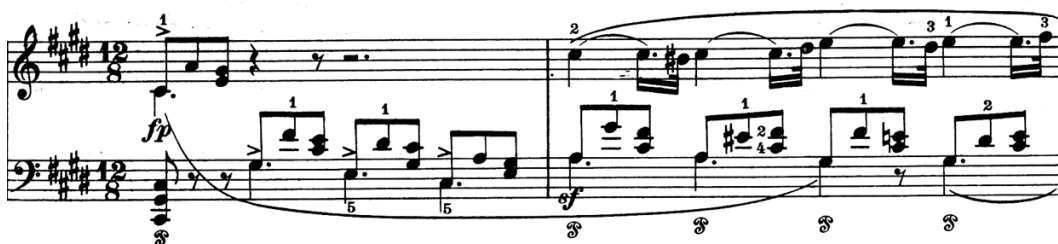
The mood turns dance-like once again in the playful dotted rhythms of *Etude 5* that echo between the hands throughout, in rhythmic canon.



Now, the editorial history of the *Symphonic Etudes* is messy, with many different assortments of pieces variously included and excluded from the set at different publication dates by Schumann himself, who felt so conflicted about the work that he recommended that his wife Clara not even perform it.

But in 1890, Brahms published a complete version that included five "posthumous" variations, so called because they were found in Schumann's *Nachlass* (estate) after his death. While it used to be the practice to exclude these from concert performance, some of them are now often inserted in various places in the sequence of variations.

Tony Siqi Yun will be playing three of these, beginning with *Posthumous Variation 3* that, like Etude 1, puts the theme in the lower register and fantasizes with melodic rhapsodies in the opposite direction in the treble.



Schumann's fondness for rhythmic patterns that overlay and even contradict the metrical pulse is on full display in *Etude 6*,



in which the left hand constantly beats the right hand to the melody by a mere 32nd note — and a heavily accented 32nd note at that.

Etude 7 churns away in the mid-range in a headlong rush of dotted rhythms that begin as small handfuls



but soon develop into mighty bolts of keyboard thunder.

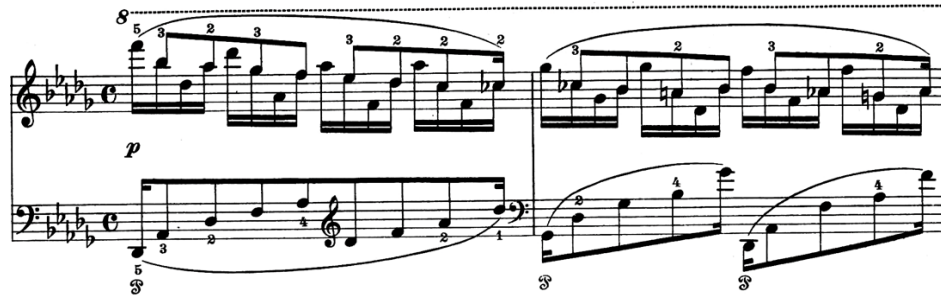
The utterly charming *Posthumous Variation 2* begins with a soprano-bass duet



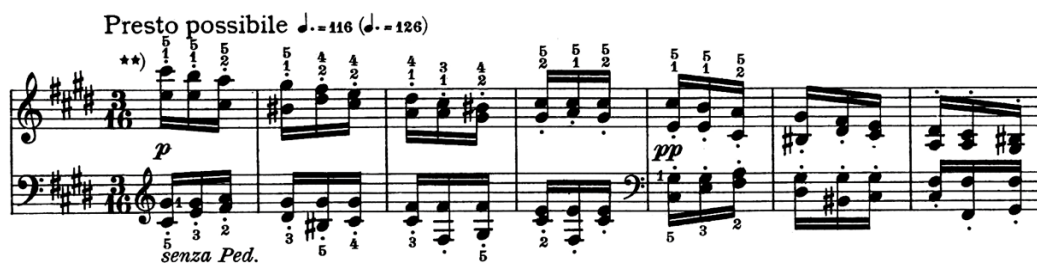
but soon discovers an interest in the opening theme, swaddled in murmuring figurations of piano tone.



Rhythmic irregularity reigns supreme once more in the delicately poetic *Posthumous Variation 5*,



Schumann's reverence for Bach is further exemplified in the "French overture" feel of *Etude 8*, with its linearly determined harmonies and run-up melodic gestures echoing in imitation between the hands, each concluding with a majestic leap.

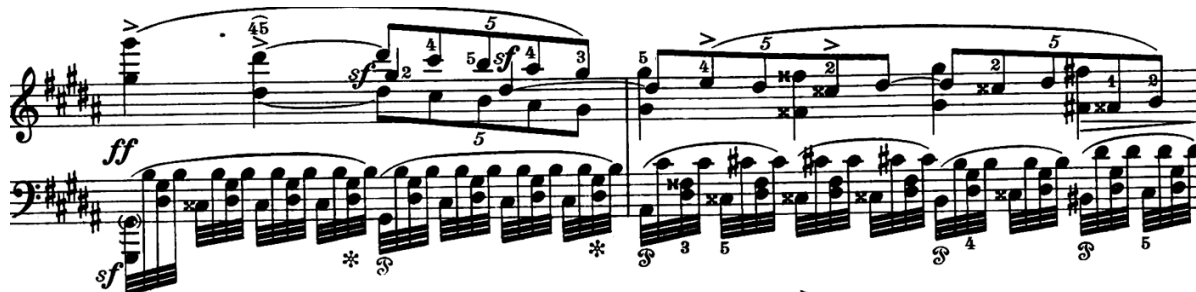




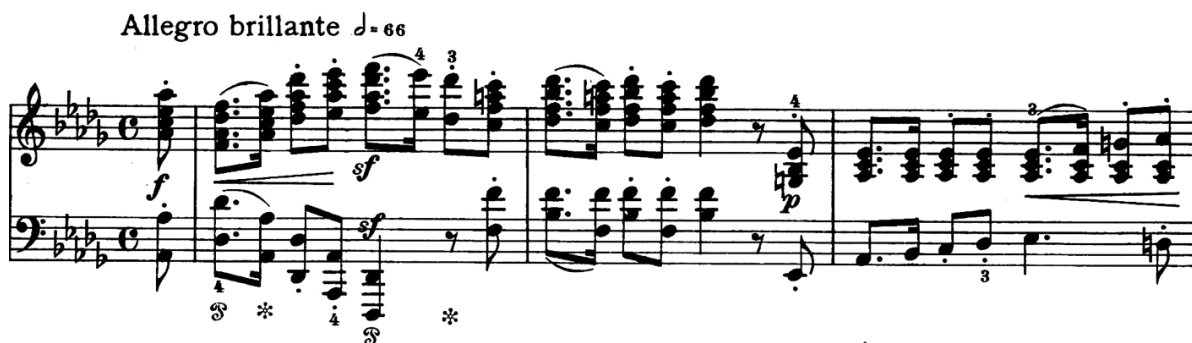
In keeping with tradition, Schumann prepares us for the finale with a deeply lyrical variation in *Etude 11* that features a darkly wavering accompaniment pattern of chromatic alternations in the left hand.



But even here, in the haziest of textures and most lyrical of moods, the spectre of Father Bach hovers benevolently over the proceedings in the pianistically tricky pattern of imitation between iterations of a melody structured in *quintuplet* 8ths.



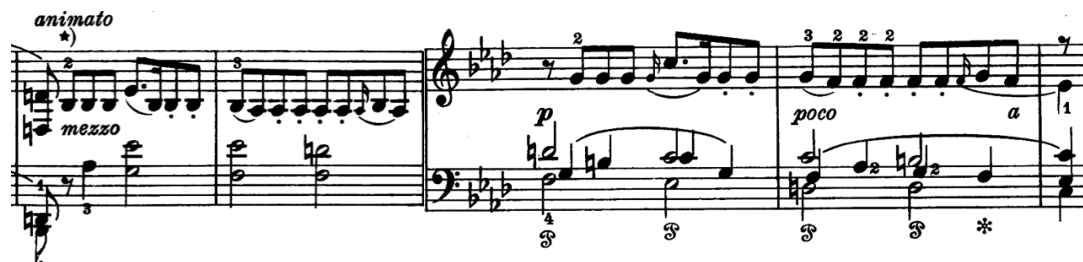
The finale, when it does come, is in D flat, the enharmonic major of the original theme's C# minor, and this brightening of the harmonic landscape brings a considerable note of triumphalism to the conclusion of this work.



This opening might well be considered an inversion of the work's opening, with the theme's sorrowful *descending* arpeggio transformed into an ecstatic *ascending* one. But in fact, the finale's opening burst of energy is actually the tune of the joyous chorus *Du stolzes England freue dich* (Proud England, rejoice) from Act II of the Ivanhoe-flavoured opera *Der Templer und die Jüdin* by composer Heinrich Marschner (1795–1861), an opera which Schumann must have heard when it premiered in his home city of Leipzig in 1829.

The spirit of rejoicing in this finale is kept alive by dotted rhythms, the metronomic predictability of which might have made this piece into just an extended march but for the distracting series of beautiful and even elegant melodies that float buoyantly atop this rhythmically vibrating texture.

These include a triumphalist version of the original C# minor theme, but in the major mode. And *this* glorious tune,



which a certain musicologist, who bears a striking resemblance to the present writer, has been known to sing in the shower.

In rondo-like alternations of the movement's exuberant opening with moments of a more lyrical, song-like character, Schumann drives this movement to levels of ecstatic jubilation that rival anything in the piano literature.

Donald G. Gíslason 2025