

Theme and Variations

Theme and variation forms have, appropriately enough, many variations. We sort them into categories as follows:

Strict vs. free

Strict: preserves number of measures of theme, location and type of cadences

Free: doesn't preserve those things (free variations mostly 19th century and later; examples include Elgar *Enigma Variations*, Rachmaninov *Variations on a Theme of Paganini*).

Sectional vs. continuous

Sectional: Clear formal endings at end of each variation; each is a formal unit (most classical era variations are sectional).

Continuous: Theme is shorter (4-8mm.), ending of each variation is not strong, formal units are larger than individual variations.

Examples include ground bass, passacaglia – mainly baroque forms; note that baroque composers also wrote sectional variations, e.g. Bach's Goldberg variations.

In general in a variation form, variations contain some deviations from the theme (making them variations and not just the theme all over again) but also share features with the theme (making them variations on the *theme*, not just some random new music).

A big question when looking at variations, then, is what is new in the variation and what is kept from the theme? Sometimes the melody is basically preserved, though often with some degree of decoration or elaboration. At other times a new melody is composed for the same chord progression, in the manner of a jazz improvisation. And sometimes it can be rather challenging to find just what it is that connects the variation to the theme.

Note that strict variations may contain features that deviate from strictness literally construed but that don't actually prevent us from classifying the variations as strict. These can include an introduction before the theme, transitions between the variations, and a coda (usually essentially a free variation).