
Variations for Orchestra, op. 31



Title	Variations for Orchestra, op. 31
Time of origin	1926–1928
Premiere	2 December 1928, Berlin
Duration	ca. 20 min.

In October 1925, Arnold Schönberg was appointed to the Prussian Academy of Arts in Berlin as head of a master class for composition, succeeding Ferruccio Busoni, who had died the year before. The appointment, initiated by Leo Kestenberg, the music advisor of the Prussian Ministry of Culture at the time, was provocative: Schönberg was regarded an uncongenial agitator, seen by the conservatives as a defier of tradition and by the younger generation around Hindemith as an unfashionable dogmatist. In addition to teaching composition, his duties at the academy included serving on the Senate, which was responsible for advising the ministry on musical matters. The founder of the Viennese School and pioneer of the twelve-tone method moved to Berlin at the end of 1925 (for the third time in his pedagogical career) but did not assume his position at the Academy until January 1926 for health reasons.

At the end of February, Schönberg began work on a composition which would, for the first time, apply the “method of composing with twelve tones related only to one another” to a large orchestral apparatus. This Passacaglia, which would remain a fragment, was followed – interrupted by the completion of the Suite op. 29 – by the draft of a stylistically similar series of variations for orchestra; he began with the composition on 2 May 1926. At first, work on op. 31 proceeded quickly, up to the fifth variation, when Schönberg stopped working on the so-called “first draft” in June to turn to an entirely different project: the Zionist drama without music “Der biblische Weg” (The biblical way), a conceptual precursor of “Moses und Aron.”

Due to extended journeys to Vienna and Pörtlach am Wörthersee, Schönberg repeatedly lost the thread to the orchestral work he had recently worked on; in particular, he was unable to reconstruct the thought-process of the fifth variation, as he explained in 1928 in his text “Interview mit mir selbst” (Interview with myself): “An irregular number of voices began at irregular intervals, interrupting the principal line with interjections of unequal length. I had composed about half of it and now could not find out the principle according to which the hastily sketched remainder was meant to be completed.”

Schönberg was forced to create a new concept for this variation; after doing so, by chance a misplaced sketch sheet reappeared that contained the basic construction plan of the fifth variation and showed an almost identical train of thought to the newly conceived one.

The completion of the Variations op. 31 finally came about following an inquiry by the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler. On May 30, 1928, Schönberg replied that the "Variations on an Own Theme" begun two years earlier were "three-quarters finished" and that he would "certainly need no more than 14 days for completion." However, he stipulated: "I would not release a new work for a performance in Vienna. I happen to be the only composer with any kind of reputation that the [Vienna] Philharmonic have not played. And let us keep it that way!"

Schönberg finished the Variations on 21 August 1928, in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin on the French Riviera; the fair copy of the full score is dated 20 September 1928. Preceding the premiere, he repeated his prohibition of a performance by the Vienna Philharmonic in a letter to Furtwängler dated 21 September: "They will have to make up for their neglectfulness before we can talk about anything else."

Despite Schönberg's advice that while op. 31 was "not excessively difficult in terms of ensemble playing, [...] the individual parts are by and large very difficult – so the quality of the performance will depend especially upon how well the parts are mastered," Furtwängler scheduled only three rehearsals, which led to a debacle for the Berlin Philharmonic at the premiere during the Fourth Berlin Philharmonic Concert on 2 December 1928: "Unbelievable! Fully irresponsible!" (Anton Webern to Schönberg, 9 December 1928).

In February 1931, preceding the successful Frankfurt performance of the orchestral variations under the direction of Hans Rosbaud, Schönberg produced an introduction for radio that was broadcast on 31 March 1931. The radio lecture, which still exists today as a recording and includes about seventy musical examples, some played on the piano, complements the interpretation of the work with far-reaching overall historical references concerning criteria of comprehensibility, musical logic and references to tradition: "Variations for orchestra undoubtedly approach a symphonic manner of design. [...] The variations are like an album with views of a place or a landscape that show you individual aspects. The symphony, however, is like a panorama, where one could also examine each picture separately, but in reality these pictures are firmly interlinked and merge into each other."

The design of the theme itself is founded on the principle of comprehensibility which Schönberg himself proclaimed, i.e. recognition through conciseness and clear, distinct organization: "In a word, the theme must be relatively simple, for several reasons; one is that the variations gradually become more and more complex" (Frankfurt radio broadcast, 1931). In particular, the variations are vividly differentiated from one another by individual sound spectrums, at times reminiscent of chamber music and at others reaching the extreme complexity of rich scoring for the full orchestra.

The twelve-tone method used in op. 31 is based on a hierarchic equivalence of the pitch material in a basic row related to the conventional idea of a theme, also employing inversion and transpositions derived from that row. The breaking up of the genuinely rigid schemes is ensured by the procedure of distributing the row tones to different instruments, so that motives can arise in the individual voices whose pitch course does not have to correspond to that established by the row structure.

The dependence on the basic row and its permutations – methodologically established in dodecaphony – also permits motivic deviations and pitch “cryptograms”, as Schönberg demonstrates in op. 31 with his repeated use of the famous B–A–C–H [B flat, A, C, B natural] motif. This cipher is deliberately made audible by the composer in isolated variations and especially in the finale in the sense of an “homage à Bach,” as evidenced by Schönberg’s letter to the American music critic Olin Downes of 9 November 1938: “I think I have woven my quotation in quite carefully.”

Therese Muxeneder | © Arnold Schönberg Center, Wien
www.schoenberg.at