
Variations, op. 40

Title	Variations on a Recitative for Organ, op. 40
Date	1941
First performance	10 April 1944, New York
Duration	ca. 16 min.

Dika Newlin reminisced that Arnold Schönberg ordered his pupils never to blindly follow modern idioms, but always reach their artistic decisions independently of passing compositional fashions; "There is still much good music to be written in C major." As if to prove that orally handed down dictum, after his 1936 String Quartet No. 4, op. 37 Schönberg wrote nothing using the "method of composing with twelve tones related only to one another."

Kol Nidre, op. 39 was premiered in October 1938; it is a sacred work hardly suited to atonal composition, due to its integration of traditional melodic formulae. In 1939, he completed his Chamber Symphony No. 2 in E-flat minor, op. 38 (which he had begun in 1906) for a concert by the New Friends of Music in New York. At the request for a contribution to the Contemporary Organ Series published by H. W. Gray, he began a 12-tone sonata for organ in 1941. However, when the publisher and organist William Strickland specifically asked for "variations for organ, neither too long nor too demanding in expression," Schönberg opted for a tonal composition.

The variations are based on a theme called a recitative in view of its rhythmic-melodic structure; it extends over 11 bars and contains all 12 tones of the chromatic scale. By the fourth bar, free pitch repetitions make it clear that it is not a 12-tone row, but a melody based on the tonal center D. Short motifs are abstracted from the melodic progression and interwoven in the following variations, each 11 bars in length. Like the Variations for Orchestra, op. 31, the theme is the work's structural basis, although it is only occasionally detectible as a musical element. Schönberg said to René Leibowitz that he had wanted the organ variations to "fill a gap between my chamber symphony and my 'dissonant music'," in order to put to use "many unexploited opportunities" of composition related to a central note.

Sketches document comprehensive preliminary organisational work; at times, they are scarcely distinguishable from comparable notes of 12-tone works. With the organ variations, Schönberg was consistently thinking further of the principles he had already set down in his Harmonielehre of 1911; the basis of harmonic connections consists primarily of the ways of linking tonal groupings themselves. The close or distant chordal relations are not the result of abstract functions, but rather of commonalities on the pitch level. Thus, for example, in the 7th variation, Schönberg dissolves the theme in cascades of notes based on series of chords which constantly change between layers of thirds and fourths.

With the organ variations, Schönberg achieved a newly reasoned shaping of chromatic space without abandoning the principles of relation to a fundamental keynote.

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