

### 3. THE VARIATIONAL PRINCIPLE, EXPRESSIVENESS, AND VIRTUOSITY IN LUIGI BASSI'S *CONCERT FANTASIA ON THEMES FROM RIGOLETTO*

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**Abstract:** *This scientific paper presents and highlights the musicality and virtuosity that Luigi Bassi perfected with the help of the variational principle, using themes of a unique expressiveness from the opera Rigoletto by Giuseppe Verdi. The work is addressed to clarinetists with a well-developed technique and a qualitative and homogeneous sonority throughout the clarinet's ambitus. In the present scientific and interpretive approach, we propose to decode and present elements of structure, diverse instrumental techniques, and ways of interpreting the themes and variations, that coincide with the composer's desire. We will highlight the instrumental technique problems, proposals to optimize (solve) them, and ways to highlight sound colors, depending on the message the performer conveys. We believe that this study can be of real use both to teaching staff and students in the didactic activity, but also to the valuable instrumentalists involved in the interpretative activity, bearing in mind that the work has a very high degree of difficulty.*

**Key words:** *Variational principle, variations, musicality, virtuosity, instrumental techniques*

#### 1. Variations of character and variational technique in Romanticism

The most beautiful movements built on the variation pattern can be found in the creation of Franz Schubert, who composed them based on themes from his own *Lieds*. Only four such works use themes written by other composers: *d576*, *624*, *823 no. 22*, and *908*. The construction principle he will follow in these architectures is the grouping of a variation in the homonymous tonality with another in a tonality related to the basic one. The first important work on this pattern is the *Andantino* from the *Piano Quintet in A major*, on the theme of the lied *Die Forelle* (The Trout).

The variations reflect the vocal character of the melodic line in the first three variations, in which, in succession, the first violin, piano, second violin, and cello take up the thematic idea. After the homonymous variation, a variation in the key of *F major*, with forays into its own relative and related keys, achieves the fusion with the most complex rhythmic figuration of the whole part, for the finale to resort to a new element, namely the accompaniment figure from the original lied. The same idea of correlating the minor key variation with a new major key can also be found in the *Piano Quintet in A major*, *Piano Sonata in A minor d845*, *Impromptu no. 3, d935*, and *Variations in C major for piano four hands d908*.<sup>5</sup>

Romantic composers who frequently cultivate the variational genre are also Ludovic Spohr (for violin, clarinet, harp, and chamber music for string instruments), Johann Nepomuk Hummel, in whose work variations occupy an important place, and, above all, Carl Maria von Weber, who composes both independent works on his own themes and builds new genres, such as the two *concertinos*, for clarinet and horn, based on the architecture of the theme with variations.

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<sup>5</sup> Hindley, G., *The Larousse Encyclopedia of Music*, Hamlyn Publishing, Bidge House, England, 1986

Also from the romantic era, we can mention the *Variations for piano and orchestra* by Carl Czerny, on the theme of the Austrian National Anthem *Gott erhalte Franz der Kaiser*, op. 73, the four sets of variations for solo piano by Frédéric Chopin, together with the *Variations on the theme "La ci darem la mano"* from the opera *Don Giovanni* by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, op. 2, for piano and orchestra (1827), as well as *Variations sérieuses* by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy.

Robert Schumann was one of the composers who openly expressed his disparaging opinion about themes with variations, especially concerning the variations written by Italian composers on famous themes from operas, considering them superficial and characterized by meaningless virtuosity, appreciating, however, those of Chopin on the theme "*La ci darem la mano*". He will compose variations on themes of personal significance, starting with the "*Abegg*" *Variations op. 1*, on themes by Clara Wieck (*Impromptus op. 5*), *Carnaval* op. 9, in which the miniatures are based on a cipher represented by the letters A-S-C-H, which encodes both the harmonic chains within them, as well as various words related to carnival, or portions of the composer's name. He also includes the theme structure with variations as the architecture of parts of the *String Quartets Op. 41 no. 2 and no. 3* and from the *Sonata for Piano and Violin Op. 121*.<sup>6</sup>

Johannes Brahms is the first composer since Beethoven in whose work, the variation occupies a central place, in seven independent works and nine movements within larger works. He is also the first to achieve a fusion between the theme with variations and the sonata form, in the first part of the *Piano Quartet op. 60 in C minor*, where the secondary thematic group is represented by an eight-measure melodic idea followed by three variations. In the re-exhibition, this particular structure is recapitulated with new variations, the last being a recapitulation of the first variation in the exhibition. Furthermore, the *Developments* section of the *Piano Quartet in A major op. 26* is opened by three variations of the initial theme in *B minor*.

Most of its variations retain the original formal structure, even as they transform and replace many of the theme's other constructional details. He chooses themes with personal significance, the character, and provenance of the basic melodic idea giving rise to the particularities of the variations – a theme from a lied generates variations focused on the melodic line, a Handel theme leads to a stricter conception that includes baroque elements, such as the canon, fugue, *siciliana* and *musette* dance), while a Paganini theme will generate virtuoso variations.

The stand-alone variations composed up to 1864 are characterized by a tendency to combine strict concepts with looser ones, especially in *Variations on a Theme by Schumann, op. 9*. This work is entirely an expression of a dual personality, most of the variations being labeled, in the manuscript, with either *Brahms* or *Kreisler*, the composer's alter ego, inspired by Robert Schumann, after the character in the novels of the writer E.T.A. Hoffmann.

The variations notated with *Brahms* are all in slow tempo, having a lyrical melodic line, sometimes treated polyphonically in the canon, while the others are in

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<sup>6</sup> Asch (germ.) – ash, referring to the fact that the celebration of Carnival takes place before Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Easter Lent in the Roman Catholic rite / Asch – the name of the town (today in the Czech Republic) where the composer's fiancée at the time, Ernestine von Fricken, was born, Fasching (germ.) – carnival / Robert Alexander Schumann / SchumAnn.

fast tempos, with melodic fragments processed with figurations, including *codas* and move further away from the structure, harmonic organization and the character of the theme. The theme is one of the poetic miniatures from the cycle *File de album op. 124*, a melodic material on which Clara Wieck also bases her *Variations op. 20*. The following *Themes with Variations, Op. 21 no. 1* and *no. 2* are characterized by grouping the variations in minor tonality, of fast ones depending on the processed melodic material or figuration speed, and by the presence of a final variation that mostly processes elements from the first variation.

*Variations on a Theme by Handel, Op. 24* are a reflection of the *strict-free* concept in the way they bear similarities and differences with *Robert Schumann's Variations on a Theme for Piano Four Hands op. 23*. Thus, the *Variations on a Theme by Handel* end with a fugue, while the *Variations on a Theme by Schumann* end with a funeral march, the character variations in the minor key are composed for two voices, in imitative style, but the sixth variation from those on a theme by Handel is entirely canonical and remains closely related to the theme, while the fourth variation from those on a theme by Schumann has a free imitation, being mysterious and evocative.<sup>7</sup>

Variations from the mature period are included between *Variations on a theme by Haydn op. 56*, which will give rise to the genre of variations for orchestra and the *Clarinet Sonata in E Major op. 120 no. 2*, in which the pre-classical inspiration and concern for the use of the cyclic principle is noted, when the theme with variations appears at the end of a large work, using the theme from the first part, as happens in the *String Quartet op. 67*, or in the *Quintet with Clarinet op. 115*. In the *Fourth Symphony*, the last movement draws its inspiration from the architectural structure of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Passacaglia* and the *Ciaccona of Partita II for solo violin*, while the theme generates 30 variations, the same number as in the *Goldberg Variations*, except for the final recapitulation of the theme (*aria da capo*). Here, variations no. 12 to no. 15, all in slow tempo, form a proper middle section, after which the theme is recapitulated almost in its original form, in a similar manner to the *Overture* at the beginning of the second section of the *Goldberg Variations*. Variation no. 22 has the character of a *scherzo* and is followed, in variations no. 23, 24, and 25, by a return to the melodic material of the theme and to the processing procedures of the first variations. Also, some variations deliberately recapitulate the melodic material from the main theme in the first part – variation no. 10 and the final variations, no. 28-30

The slow movements of Anton Bruckner's symphonies are built on the theme form with variations, being based on two themes that are worked alternately through orchestration and localization in different keys, introducing different countermelodies and accompanying figures.

Among Gustav Mahler's symphonies, only the slow parts of the 2nd and 4th symphonies can be considered proper themes with variations: in the *2nd Symphony*, the variations alternately work two themes in A major and G minor, with transitions extensive and transparent processing techniques. The third part of *Symphony IV, Ruhevoll. Poco adagio*, is inspired by the grouping of variations that Ludwig van Beethoven makes in the *VII Symphony*, building a strophic pattern. Thus, the series

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<sup>7</sup> Randel, Don Michael, *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*. Editura Harvard University Press, 2003

of variations on theme A is characterized by the expansion of registers, the densification of the orchestration, and the addition of countermelodies, with faster tempos, different metrical organizations, and a dancing character, while the variations on theme B are episodic, increasingly dissonant, and performs increasingly distant modulations.

Genres that emerged in the Romantic era, such as symphonic variations, soloist variations, and programmatic variations, are also cultivated in the work of late Romantic composers, as follows:

✓ symphonic variations: in the work of Antonin Dvorak (*Symphonic Variations*, op. 78), Hubert Parry (*Symphonic Variations*), and Max Reger (*Variations on a Theme by Hiller*, op. 100, and *Variations on a Theme by Mozart*, op. 132);

✓ variations with soloist: Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (*Rococo Variations for cello and orchestra*), Cesar Franck (*Symphonic Variations with piano*);

✓ programmatic variations: Richard Strauss (*Don Quixote*), Edward Elgar (*Variations "Enigma"*), Vincent d'Indy (*Istar*).

At the beginning of the 20th century, variations appear in multiple forms:

- for solo instrument: Alexandr Glazunov (*Theme with variations op. 72 for piano*), Sergei Rachmaninoff (*Variations on a theme by Chopin op. 22, for piano*), Paul Dukas (*Variations, interlude and finale on a theme by Rameau for piano*), Karol Szymanowski (*Variations on a Polish folk theme op. 10, for piano*), etc.;

- in chamber works: Maurice Ravel (*Piano Trio, Part III, Passecaille*), Donald Francis Tovey (*Elegiac Variations op. 25, for piano and cello*), etc.

## **2. Luigi Bassi – Concert fantasy on themes from *Rigoletto* opera**

The clarinetist and composer Luigi Bassi was born in Cremona in 1833. He studied the clarinet at the Milan Conservatory with Benedetto Carulli between 1846 and 1853. Even during his studies, he joined the orchestra of the famous La Scala in Milan, where he remained until he died in 1871. He composed 27 works for clarinet, 15 of which are fantasias on themes from works famous in his era. Among them are fantasias on themes from *Rigoletto*, *Luisa Miller*, *La forza del destino*, *The Troubadour*, *Don Carlos*, on themes from the works of Giuseppe Verdi, *I Puritani*, *La sonnambula*, on themes from the works of Vincenzo Bellini, *La favorita*, on themes from the work of Gaetano Donizetti.

The opera *Rigoletto* illustrates the characteristic features of Verdi's compositional maturity. In this work, the contouring of the psychological complexity of the characters is also achieved through the refined construction of the orchestral music, which mirrors and suggests the events and inner states of the characters, complementing and enriching the dramatic action. Luigi Bassi uses in the *Fantasia for clarinet and piano* themes from the *Prelude* of the opera, the Rigoletto-Gilda *Tutte le feste all' tempio* duet from the end of Act II, the Ducele di Mantua-Maddalena-Rigoletto-Gilda *Bella figlia dell'amore* quartet from the end of Act III, the orchestral moment from the introduction of Act I, the aria of Gilda *Caro nome* from Act I, the chorus *Scorrendo uniti remota viva* from Act II, and the Duke of Mantua's aria *Parmi veder le lagrime*, from Act II. In most of them, the arias are presented in different tonalities compared to their presentation within the opera.

In the construction of the opera, the overture, called *Preludio*, has only 35

measures and a structure based on the processing of the *curse* motif (*la maledizione*), which will be present as a *leitmotif* in several moments of the action. It is represented by an anacrusic formula, a sixteenth followed by a dotted fourth, on the sound of *C*, originally performed only by trumpets and trombones, at the octave, in *crescendo*, leading to a diminished, dissonant chord, in which join the bassoon, the horn, contrabass trombone, and timpani. Resolved on the tonic of *C minor*, the dissonant chord thus indicates from the very beginning the character of the dramatic action that will unfold, and the assignment of the entire motive, located in the low register, and the entire phrase to the brass instruments completes the tragic character, through their specific metallic timbre.

In the fantasy, it is the piano that will interpret this cell motif with a heavy rhythm, here transposed a semitone lower. The sequence of events on the harmonic plane is then similar to the overture of the opera, the diminished chords, in *tremolo* in both hands preceding the cadence on the *B flat minor* chord. This element then generates the next cell, which comprises an eighth and a sixteenth, with the character of a sigh, at the interval of a second and the downward orientation of the melodic line. The clarinet enters after a general pause of some time. His first intervention has a free improvisational character, with chordal punctuations of the piano accompaniment. The similarity with the operatic recitative is evident by the alternation between the agglomerations of rhythmic values of the thirty-sevenths and, respectively, their rarefaction, with scales of sixteenths, second, and stopped. From a harmonic point of view, the clarinet discourse is based on dominant seventh chords: Ex. 1

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The first system features a Clarinet part in B-flat major (one flat) and a piano accompaniment in B-flat minor (three flats). The clarinet part is marked 'CLARINETTO in SI b' and 'a piacere'. The piano accompaniment includes a dynamic marking of *f* (forte). The second system continues the clarinet's melodic line with various ornaments and the piano accompaniment's harmonic support.

The next section (m. 17-32) elaborates the theme from the recitative that precedes the duet *Tutte le feste all'tempio*, between Gilda and Rigoletto, a culminating moment in the opera's dramaturgy. Gilda is returned to her father, who is still unable to fully understand all that has happened. In the following aria, Gilda tells him how she was seduced by the Duke of Mantua, while attending religious service at the church. From the melodic line of the recitative, however, Luigi Bassi only preserves the discourse of the orchestral accompaniment, represented by an anacrusic cell of two eighths, with a leap of an ascending third. This and its

accompanying accompaniment, represented by two chords on the second and third beats of the 6/8 measure, and the fourth and fifth, respectively, will be presented in piano and clarinet dialogue.

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The musical score for Example 2 consists of two systems. The first system shows a vocal line in the upper staff and piano accompaniment in the lower two staves. The vocal line is marked 'Agitato' and 'p'. The piano accompaniment is marked 'pp'. The second system continues the vocal line and piano accompaniment, with a 'cresc.' marking in the vocal line.

In measures 33-37, an original melodic element is introduced, with a chordal character, which allows the soloist to interpret a new passage of virtuosity, with ascending arpeggios on a two-octave ambitus. The next section continues the elaboration of ideas from the same moment, this time bringing to the piano the first four measures of the melodic line performed by Rigoletto in the duet *Tutte le feste*, which he will present twice. The clarinet plays arpeggio lines in thirtieths, in a *pianissimo* tone. Ex. 3

The musical score for Example 3 consists of two systems. The first system shows a vocal line in the upper staff and piano accompaniment in the lower two staves. The vocal line is marked 'pianissimo'. The piano accompaniment is marked 'pianissimo'. The second system continues the vocal line and piano accompaniment, with a '3' marking in the piano accompaniment.

The melodic ideas presented in this duet are located in the original tonal sphere, *D flat major*. The conclusion of the section is similar to that of measures 33-37, with a strong cadential character, on piano *tremolo* and ascending clarinet arpeggios.

The third section processes in eight measures the quartet from Act III, *Bella figlia dell'amore*, performed by the Duke of Mantua, Maddalena, Gilda, and Rigoletto. In the opera this moment of great dramatic intensity is right before the tragic denouement, the melodic line of each of the characters revealing their inner state, the strong contrast between them representing the climax of the opera.

In its original version, Gilda's melodic line is accompanied and supported by the first violins, alongside the flute, the accompaniment being maintained only as a harmonic support, to highlight the complexity of the vocal lines. The storm that follows is suggested by the chromatic lines of the stringed instruments, in *tremolo*, as well as the timbral effects achieved by the introduction of the mute choir, with a chromatic speech in minims, which gives a gloomy character. The denouement and finale are accompanied by the orchestra *in tutti*, with *piccolo* flute and percussion, expressing the jester's despair and the tragedy of the dramatic events. Rigoletto's last line, *La maledizione!* it is accompanied by a *tremolo* of the violins and the intervention *in tutti* and *forte* shade on the dissonant chord.

Luigi Bassi takes only the theme of the aria, performed by the Duke of Mantua, which is played by the clarinet, with a chordal piano accompaniment. The double appoggiatura on the third beat of the measure is characteristic, with an ascending scalar sound contour. The piano accompaniment is sparse and punctuates the main metrical pillars, with a brief interjection of three octaves between repeated expositions of the motif. From a sound point of view, its organization is based on the sounds of the tonic *B flat major* chord. Ex. 4

The image displays a musical score for Example 4. It consists of three systems of music. The first system shows a vocal line in the upper staff and a piano accompaniment in the lower staff. The tempo is marked 'Andante' and the dynamics are 'pp'. The second system continues the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The third system shows a variation of the piano accompaniment, with the vocal line omitted. The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and chords, with some measures marked 'pp' and others 'p'. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major).

After its introduction, two eight-measure variations are introduced based on the main melodic line of the orchestral accompaniment in the duet *Tutte le feste*. The thematic idea is played by the piano, while the clarinet unfolds virtuosic passages in thirty-eighths, with numerous ascending leaps. An original six-measure material reinforces the tonic *B-flat Major* and introduces a virtuosic, free clarinet cadence.

The next section, *Allegro con brio*, resumes the melodic idea from the moment immediately following the opera's prelude. The first scene is the party at the duke's court, it is accompanied by frivolous, bouncy music, with accents and

appoggiatura, performed by a distinct instrumental ensemble, called in the orchestral score *Banda interna*. The sonorities are designed by the composer to represent courtly music, and the orchestral, dancing melodic line renders a cheerful overall frame, with a melodic line ornamented with appoggiatura. According to the customs of the opera genre, the *Banda interna* consists of wind instruments, predominantly brass, which may be joined by clarinets, to create a sonority with vulgar connotations.<sup>8</sup> By using this ensemble, the composer thus characterizes both the atmosphere at the Duke of Mantua's court and the character itself, even before the first line of the vocal soloist. The main ideas, with numerous ascending leaps of sixths, are played by the piano.

The original key of this moment is *A flat major*, but here the composer presents it in *F major*. The clarinet entry brings an original idea, with an isorhythmic melodic line in octaves and an arpeggial outline, followed by a short cadenza. The immediately following moment, in the *Allegro moderato*, presents the melodic idea from Gilda's aria, *Caro nome*, of particular delicacy, in the key of *F Major*, a semitone higher than its exposition within the opera. It alternates eighths separated by rests, with a descending scalar contour and dotted minims values. Ex. 5

The main motif is anacrusis, and the characteristic sound element is represented by the ascending leap located between the long sound, with a value of three beats, and the anacrusis, made up of a formula of dotted eighths followed by sixteenths. The jump is originally a sixth, and the second exposition of the motif turns it into a third jump over the octave.

The piano accompaniment follows the previous rarefied configuration, with the marking of the main metrical pillars, along with an interjection in sixteenths, with an ascending octave jump between the first two, which in the original version of the aria belongs to the flute. The structure of the moment is rigorously symmetrical, two articulations of eight measures each, with internal divisions also symmetrical, building a bipartite architecture with a small re-entry. The melodic material of the aria is then processed variably, through ornamentation, the thematic idea being the generator of an abundance of ornaments and passages in triplets in sixteenths, with very large jumps, over two octaves, and with numerous double appoggiatura and trills. The architectural structure is precisely respected.

After a break of six-tenths with a stop, the piano presents for 8 measures the main melodic idea of *Scorrendo uniti remota via*, an ensemble moment from the beginning of Act II of the opera, performed by the secondary male characters from the king's suite – Borsa, Marullo, and Ceprano, together with the chorus of courtesans. In the dramatic action, this chorus marks the moment of the plot that

<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Banda\\_\(opera\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Banda_(opera))



will lead to Gilda's abduction and the whole sequence of tragic events that follow. In *Allegro moderato* tempo, this segment is in *B flat major*, also a semitone higher than the original key of *A major*. Ex. 6

The image shows two systems of musical notation. The first system is for piano accompaniment, marked 'Allegro moderato', in B-flat major. It consists of a treble and bass staff with a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes. The second system is for a vocal line and piano accompaniment, marked 'Adagio'. The vocal line is labeled 'a piacere a guisa di recitativo' and features a melodic line with a fermata. The piano accompaniment is marked 'p' and consists of a treble and bass staff with a simple harmonic accompaniment.

An improvisational recitative, with a free cadence character, makes the transition, during 7 measures, to the last processed aria and the virtuoso finale.

In *Andante* tempo and the key of *F Major*, the clarinet introduces the melodic idea from *Parmi veder le lagrime*, the Duke of Mantua's aria from Act II, in which he expresses his sincere love for Gilda, before learning that his entourage kidnapped her and brought her to the palace already. From a melodic point of view, the aria is distinguished by the thematic idea and the ternary pulsation accompaniment, which joins triolet rhythmic formulas with dotted rhythms, on a sound contour with numerous jumps. The thematic material is exposed for 12 measures and then worked through ornamentation, being interspersed with appoggiatura and arpeggio elements in sextuplets on sixteenths.

The finale, in *Allegro* tempo, is represented by 19 measures of virtuoso passages, in which the clarinet line is made up exclusively of sixteenths, on a harmonic support that reinforces the main chords in the key of *F Major*. It spans the entire scope of the instrument and builds tension steadily, with ever faster tempo and increasing dynamics until the final cadence on the tonic chord in *fortissimo*.

### 3. Conclusions

It is worth noting that Luigi Bassi, in a similar manner to Donato Lovreglio, does not respect the order of appearance of the thematic ideas in the opera, joining them based on a sequence that does not aim to build a dramaturgy. Rather, he pursues only the intrinsic beauty of the Verdi's melodic lines, the only motive respecting the location in the economy of the work being the original one, of the curse.

The *Rigoletto Fantasia* is one of the most well-known and performed clarinet fantasias of the Romantic virtuosity period, and it has been arranged for various accompanying ensembles. In this work, clarinetists can demonstrate both their sensitivity and their virtuoso qualities. In this sense, we recommend the study of the passages of velocity, rarely, in rhythmic formulas, so that at the end, the passages of virtuosity are interpreted with rhythmic and sonorous equality over the entire scope

of the clarinet, without avoiding the expressiveness required by the context and the subject of the work.

The playing suggestions are the result of personal study and playing choice and are only a starting point for clarinetists who feel challenged by this very challenging work (Albu, 2014). We must also emphasize that these variations are part of the most valuable work that has survived from the creation of the composer Luigi Bassi. He, being a clarinetist of great value, knew perfectly the qualities of the instrument, which he valued and perfected in terms of technical and interpretative dynamics.

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