Analysis and Interpretation of the Spiritual Content in Mendelssohn’s “Serious Variations” Op.54

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Abstract

The Serious Variations is a large solo piano piece from Mendelssohn's late period. Through the analysis of this piece, we understand Mendelssohn's religious complex and classical tendencies in his late works to help us better understand the composer's stylistic characteristics. Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809-1847) was born in 1809 in Hamburg, Germany, into a wealthy Jewish family. His grandfather was a famous philosopher, his father was a successful banker, and his mother was a pianist. The privileged family provided him with an excellent upbringing, and his parents were very close to the literary scholars, philosophers, and thinkers of the time, such as Goethe, Heine, and Hegel, which enabled him to receive a good and abundant cultural education and various refined arts from an early age. Like the Austrian composer Mozart, he was not as closely associated with the Viennese classical school as Schubert was with the classical sonatas he wrote. Mendelssohn was a musical prodigy from an early age, showing his amazing musical talent in his childhood.

Keywords

Serious Variations, Religious Complex, Classical Tendency

Like his contemporary Schubert, Mendelssohn composed mainly piano miniatures, such as his masterpiece "Song without Words", which has a typical Romantic temperament, but unlike Schubert, who wrote a large number of classical sonatas, he was not as well known as the other composers (Wang Lu, 2011). Mendelssohn's creation of the "song without words", a novel genre, greatly contributed to the vocalization of Romantic instrumental music, and the very fluid, song-like melodies in his song without words represent a lifelong piano music style that is also evident in his This style is also evident in his other piano works. His piano music is full of emotion and love for the beautiful life and nature, but unlike Chopin's romantic fantasy and Liszt's passionate exuberance, Mendelssohn's piano music has some classical rationality and restraint, and his emotions are never exaggerated, but also full of religious thoughts and devotional prayers. In his piano works, there are many polyphonic fragments, but Mendelssohn did not simply imitate or emulate them, he gave full play to some classical techniques and gave full play to his genius and creativity, which are well reflected in his Serious Variations Op. 54 (Wobus Mendelssohn, 2007).

Serious Variations Op. 54 (VARIATIONS SERIEUSES), composed in 1841, is one of the masterpieces of Mendelssohn's late piano works and one of the rare large solo piano works in his collection. The first reason for the title of the piece is that the German music industry held a music composition campaign to collect works from Mendelssohn, Schumann, Liszt, Chopin and other musicians, and compiled them together in an album called "Beethoven's Memorial Book". "The album is a tribute to the late German composer Beethoven, the "Sage of Music. Mendelssohn's "Serious Variations" Op. 54 was thus born. Since Beethoven's works include the "Serious Quartet" Op. 95,
the "Serious Mass" Op. 123 and the "serious, not too fast tempo" of the sixth variation of the "Diabelli Variations" Op. 120 (shown in the example below this paragraph), Mendelssohn named his solo piano piece "Serious" after the "Serious Mendelssohn named his solo piano work "Serious" in tribute to the great man and his predecessor, and the music magazine New Music Weekly of the time rated Mendelssohn's "Serious Variations" Op. 54 as one of the most outstanding works in the "Beethoven Memorial Book". The second reason was that Mendelssohn was disgusted by the trend of composing and performing in a way that was mainly showy and technical, a kind of "decorative variation" was popular in the music world at that time, but it was all about form and no content, only showy and lacking artistic expression and thought. Mendelssohn was disgusted by this trend and decided to learn from his predecessors, Bach and Beethoven, and to write the variations with a serious attitude. Mendelssohn's use of a variety of characteristic piano weaves, patterns and techniques makes the Serious Variations Op. 54 a very pianistic work.

After 1832, the death of Mendelssohn's close friend Goethe, his teacher Zelter, and his father, as well as his failure to be elected to the leadership of the Berlin Choral Society, caused a heavy blow to Mendelssohn. These accidents prompted Mendelssohn to express strong emotions, tragic contradictions and religious prayers in the Serious Variations Op. 54, which formed a different musical style from the lightness and warmth of his earlier works "Song without Words".

1. Hymn of the congregation (theme)

In order to study the "Serious Variations", it is necessary to start from the theme of the Variations. The theme of the Variations contains all the elements that can provide development: motive, harmony, tonality, melody, etc. And the theme of the Serious Variations is similar to a religious congregational hymn with distinct Mendelssohn's spiritual connotations, which deserves to be studied in detail and explored in depth.

The theme of the Serious Variations Op. 54 (as shown in the score) is a four-part choral-like section, consisting of two contrasting square phrases of eight bars each. The contrasting phrases reflect the contradictory elements of the theme and set the stage for the emotional variations that follow; the use of the square structure also shows the regularity of Mendelssohn's composition in the form of a congregational hymn. The tempo of the theme is Andante sostenuto, which means "maintained, sustained" in musical terminology, which makes the theme slower than the
line, while the sound is full and diffuse. The four-part melody is sung in a slow and sustained manner as if it were a congregational hymn in a German church, which reflects both the singing nature of Mendelssohn's melody and the influence of Bach on Mendelssohn as evidenced by the congregational hymn style. In the first phase of the theme, Mendelssohn lays down the core tones of the whole variation: A-♯G, D-♯C. These two sets of minor second motives already foreshadow the emanation of spiritual connotations and the collision of conflicting emotions in the piece. The three lower voices are integrated and float beneath the melodic voices, beginning with the intensity of P as in remembrance and prayer, to a contradictory change in intensity in the second phrase Sf. In the full tone of the church congregation hymn-like, Mendelssohn expresses both devotion to God Jesus and religion, and it is full of memorial nostalgia for his late master predecessors.

In general, although the theme of the Serious Variations is very simple, with only sixteen short bars, and is performed in a calm and gentle atmosphere, it contains a rich variety of variations and changing conditions, from which we can also understand Mendelssohn's attachment to religion and his classical tendencies in composing techniques. It is clear from the beginning of the piece that Mendelssohn was full of sublimity when he wrote it, thus establishing the "Seriousness" of the composition.

2. Polyphony (1st and 2nd Variations)

The first and second variations (as shown in the example of the score below) are the development of the theme of the piece.

![First Variations](image1)

![Second Variations](image2)

The first and second variations are both written in polyphonic mode, with the high part of the first variation remaining a singing melodic voice and the middle part adding a sixteenth-note phrase, which makes this variation slightly faster and more melodic than the theme, and it is worth noting that the low part uses staccato octaves, which mimics the pizzicato of the bass in classical string repertoire. If the theme is a four-part hymn, then the first variation is like a string repertoire, with the high, middle and low voices each taking a different melodic form,
The 14th variation is in the key of D major, the only variation in the whole piece that uses a major key, with bright, warm and moving colors. The tempo of this variation is Adagio (soft plate), which is moderate, and the tempo of the soft plate matches the tonal color of the major key, while the intensity of this variation is mf, in which there is a crescendo and a decrescendo, and the tempo of the last two bars is a crescendo, giving a calm and warm effect overall. The melody, which is propelled by polyphonic harmonies, has a very moving musical feel. We can imagine a serious scene in this variation: the composer is in a serious cathedral, in front of his revered God, Jesus, praying to the warm and moving choral singing, praying to the seriousness of his heart, confessing the pains of his life, and remembering his admired master musician. The Fourteenth Variation gives a religious serenity and contemplation that is impressive and evocative. Although Mendelssohn did not make any obvious religious mark on the writing or the score of this variation, in my mind, this variation is the most religious and classical of the composer, and it is also the most touching one. Mendelssohn's 16 bars of this variation are the most thoughtful, once again reflecting his profound and rich talent as a master of Romantic music.

3. Canon (Fourth Variation)

The fourth variation (as shown in the example below) changes the musical image of the theme and the first and second variations, the melody no longer has a flowing singing character, but becomes a light and joyful skipping movement, and the musical character becomes brighter. Mendelssohn composed this variation while still maintaining the core tones and basic melody of the theme. It is worth noting that the fourth variation is written in the style of the Canon.

Canon is a kind of polyphonic music and a technique of writing polyphonic music, which originally means "regular". For example, in the fourth variation shown above, the lower voice enters one beat later than the higher voice at the beginning (Zhang Xun, 2011), creating a staggered, sequential effect. In the fourth variation of the Canon, it is clear that the melody of the lower left hand chases the melody of the upper right hand until the last note of the last bar when it blends together.

In the works of German masters Bach and Beethoven before Mendelssohn, they also had many compositions written by applying this polyphonic technique of Canon, for example, in Bach's Gothenburg Variations, variations 3, 6, 9, 12, 15, 18, 21, 24 and 27 are all Canon, while Bach wrote five Canon Variations specifically; Beethoven's most prestigious Symphony of Destiny No. 5 also Beethoven's most famous Symphony of Destiny also uses the
Kanon technique. Thus, Mendelssohn pays tribute to his admired masters by using the Kanon technique used by his predecessors, demonstrating his serious compositional attitude on the one hand and echoing the "Seriousness" of the title of the piece; on the other hand, while following his predecessors, Mendelssohn demonstrates his classical compositional tendencies and On the other hand, while following the sage, Mendelssohn showed his classical tendency and seriousness in the Romantic era, so that the classical composing technique of Canon could also make waves and shine in the Romantic music.

![Figure 6. Variation IV.](image)

4. Fugue (Tenth Variation)

The tenth variation (shown in the example below) is a four-part fugue, which is also a polyphonic compositional technique, but it is more complex than the Canon technique used in the fourth variation. "The fugue is also known as the "Transport". The tenth variation begins with the theme of the fugue played by the left hand, and the right hand plays the counterpoint after four beats, starting with the core tones "A-♯G", which retains the core tones of the theme, but deforms the melody of the theme, making the melody of the theme into the polyphony of the fugue.

![Figure 7. Variation X.](image)

The fugue is the most complex and rigorous form of polyphonic music. This polyphonic compositional technique was already in use in the religious music of the church in the 16th century, and it reached its peak with the composer Bach. The fugue is both a frequent form of religious music and a representative of polyphonic music; J.S. Bach's collection of twelve mean-measure piano pieces contains one fugue for each piece, for a total of 48 fugue pieces. In Bach's late work "The Art of Fugue", there are fourteen fugues (as shown in the score).

This shows that Mendelssohn was heavily influenced by Bach and Beethoven, two of his most admired masters, when he composed the Serious Variations Op. 54. In his Romantic period, his contemporaries such as Schumann,
Chopin and Liszt rarely or even did not use fugue composition, but he perfectly integrated his personal and emotional theme melody into this classical polyphonic composition technique, combining romantic emotions with classical interests (Sun Gang, 2017), which not only remembers and pays tribute to the masters, but also reveals his own spirituality in music composition, which reflects the "Seriousness" of this late work, i.e., the tendency to compose with classical connotations and a religious complex in the music.

5. Conclusion

The Serious Variations Op. 54 is said to have been written on the model of Beethoven's 32 Variations in c minor WoO.80 (as shown in the score).

Mendelssohn's homage to Beethoven continues the "character variation" technique of the 32 Variations in c minor, but Mendelssohn also inherits it and creates new ones at the same time. In the "Serious Variations" Op. 54, Mendelssohn uses not only character variations but also ornamental variations, and this mixture of variations makes the variations in the "Serious Variations" richer and fuller with contrasting descriptions and different musical images. Based on the analysis of the above types of variations, we can see that Mendelssohn respected the classical composing tradition of Bach and Beethoven more than his contemporaries and the Serious Variations Op. 54 is itself a work to commemorate and pay tribute to Beethoven. This makes the "Serious Variations Op. 54" a classic work of classical interest and romantic sentiment, full of brilliant and difficult techniques, but at the same time not
lacking in profound ideological connotations, which is different from the trend of the contemporaries to show off their skills, and becomes a work of "Seriousness". It is also possible to interpret the spiritual connotation of the composer in the "Serious Variations Op. 54" - Mendelssohn's religious complex and classical tendencies (Han X, 2018).

Figure 10. 32 Variations in C Minor WoO.80.

References


