

## Butor on Beethoven, or The Limits of Formalism

Michel Butor's *Dialogue avec 33 variations de Ludvig van Beethoven sur une valse de Diabelli* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971, 149 pp.) is an extraordinary attempt to wed musical exegesis and *transposition d'art*. Butor's literary criticism has always been marked by respect for historical circumstance and by a remarkable sensitivity to what may be called the formal virtues of the work under discussion—to those patterns, internal echoes, and parallels which much more than explicit statements, help to delineate the author's vision. Nor has his curiosity been limited to literature; his "repertoire" is catholic in the extreme. Butor's erudition has always been impressive (his novels afford evidence in plenty), and so it is not surprising that when he decides to write about one of the classics of instrumental music, he should show a complete mastery of the rather special techniques of the musician. No amateur impressionism, this (although, as we shall see, a musician might at times suspect that it is); the arcane mysteries of key relationships, stumbling block for many non-musicians, hold no secrets for him, and the musical descriptions are faultlessly precise.

As a result, much of the book is difficult going for the layman, and indeed one wonders if without the technical knowledge which is assumed on every page, a reader would really get anything at all from the book. Yet this is not simply a book for the musician and knowledgeable amateur either. Butor himself has created a work of considerable formal complexity, and in doing so has used techniques borrowed from modern fiction which might well puzzle, or even exasperate, the musician who expects words to convey information and ideas with directness and economy. To anyone willing to follow Butor on both planes, the book is full of fascination; whether that makes it an unqualified success for the happy few, is a question which needs to be debated further.

Structurally, the book comprises four blocks, which both balance each other, and build on each other. The basic pattern is clear from the first block, and this will serve as an introduction to Butor's twin method of musicological commentary and poetic evocation.

On page 5, the dedication: "pour Marcelle Mercenier qui a su jouer l'opus 120 lors d'un concert-conférence le 17 septembre 1970 à Liège origine de ce petit ouvrage." On page 7, the single word PROPOSITION, and on page 9: "On joue la valse de Diabelli: 0) Vivace." We are to imagine, therefore, a concert performance of Diabelli's Theme, followed immediately (page 10) by a spoken "Intervention": "Tel est le thème que l'éditeur Anton Diabelli, installé à Vienne, proposa en 1821 non seulement à Beethoven mais à une cinquantaine de compositeurs de sa connaissance." (Butor, as is usual with him, keeps in mind the historical circumstances of the work's genesis, though he does not seem to know that Beethoven's first sketches for variations on Diabelli's Waltz date in all probability from 1819.) At the end of this Intervention, a paragraph which contains the seeds of much that is to follow: "Il commence par traduire le thème de l'éditeur en celui qu'aurait pu proposer un prince, en une marche solennelle, une mélodie soulignée seulement par des accords qui la suivent en toute fidélité, vraiment royale, à laquelle, en souvenir de la symphonie de Mozart, je vous propose de donner comme surnom Jupiter" (p. 11).

Next comes a "Gloss," rather longer than the text of the Intervention, which explores further some of the hints of the Intervention. The next page (19) implies that the pianist then plays the first four variations. But he does not say "On joue . . ." as he did before; the numbers are there, and the tempo indications, but the rest is poetic, evocative:

## VERSANT TERRESTRE

l'hiver,  
scènes de la vie élégante

tonique:

1) *Alla marcia maestoso*, le sceptre majeur

l'âge d'étain, ou si l'on préfère  
de bronze dans la composition  
duquel ce métal entre:

2) *Poco allegro*, introduction  
au bal de la cour

3) *L'istesso tempo*, soudain le  
regard du docteur Faust se  
mêle au sourire des demoiselles  
dans la galerie

4) *Un poco più vivace*, la  
chandeleur

This is followed by another Intervention and Gloss. In this way we continue as far as Variation 16 (p. 44), each group of four variations being preceded by a numbered Intervention with Gloss. Despite a few puzzling details, to which we shall return, there is nothing particularly difficult in these forty pages. The musical commentary concentrates, as one would expect, on the formal features of the Variations. Anybody who has wrestled with the score, knows that its formal fascination is infinite. Diabelli's theme itself, with its two 16-bar phrases (which Butor calls "wings," a happy phrase) has its own pleasing asymmetrical symmetries. Quite apart from the extraordinary range of experience contained in the Variations, the work is an inexhaustible mine of suggestions for how a theme can be varied, while keeping to the classical rules, which were that the structure of the theme should always be respected. Diabelli's theme has the supreme virtue of a structure which the ear assimilates immediately; this enables Beethoven to vary the internal patterns without really losing sight of the essential frame. It also has a clearly marked harmonic structure, which Beethoven modifies when it suits him, substituting other chords for the dominant chord which is the original resting place at bar 16. There is no real "tune" in Diabelli's theme, but there are several melodic cells which might be developed, and can fruitfully line up the different means of melodic development employed by Beethoven.

Butor follows up these hints, and lists the results with admirable elegance (while not avoiding the technical terms). He is particularly perceptive on divergencies, and on groupings. He notices when Beethoven varies the basic 16-bar length, when he omits the repeats (in the theme, and in most of the variations, the two "wings" are repeated). He insists that some variations cannot be separated, but spots two cases where part of a bar is "lost" in the notation between the end of one variation and the beginning of the next (Diabelli's Waltz starts on the third beat of the bar). Sometimes, I have to

admit that I find him oversubtle, especially when he derives conclusions from the printed page which the ear would not register. One instance of this will suffice. The theme has 32 bars, but as it starts on the third beat of an uncounted bar, and as the double bar falls as a consequence in the middle of bar 16, there are 34, not 32 divisions. Likewise says Butor, the work as a whole, has 34 units: the Theme (uncounted) and 33 variations. In like vein is his very curious treatment of the "pivot," or variation 16; we shall return to this. But there is generally a fine consistency in his commentary, as everything contributes to reinforcing the mathematical fascination of the work.

As well as giving a rigorous musical commentary, Butor uses suggestive epithets, as our quotations have indicated. To guide us in the tour, he says, he has "baptized" the variations. Hence the name "Jupiter," and the subtitles which give some kind of narrative thread to the groups of variations that are being played. This, as any musician knows, is dangerous ground, because the works used have a habit of taking over and suggesting patterns which are not those of the music itself. Butor is too intelligent to fall squarely into the trap, but in subtle ways he has yielded to the temptation. For Variation 1, for example, Butor proposes the name Jupiter by association with Mozart. That it is regal cannot be denied, and the remark about the chords following the melody faithfully is very nice, bringing out in a witty simile something which is there in the music. But I suspect the name Jupiter is more arbitrary. It is not in any case clear why Butor should find any connection between this variation and Mozart's Jupiter Symphony. And later in the book, the name Jupiter triggers off a host of mythological developments which do not seem to be bolstered by corresponding parallels in the music itself.

Musical commentary and poetic evocation do not however make up all this book, indeed they do not touch on what is its most original feature. Already in the first quarter of the book there have been some enigmas. The Interventions, for example, were numbered I, III, V, VII. The "Program" (as we shall call the pages which correspond to the performance) left a line blank after Variation 1 and also after 5, 9, 13. The reader of this review may have noticed that having baptized the first variation Jupiter, the description given when it is played says simply "le sceptre majeur." There are other instances where the titles given during the commentary are at odds with the titles given on the "Program." A first explanation comes on page 22, where Butor refers in passing to variation 28 as Mercury, and adds, in a parenthesis: "(que j'appelle aussi la marche fantôme ou la marche oscillante; pour mieux baliser notre exploration, j'ai baptisé les variations, mais pour bien respecter la dimension hyperprogrammatisée de l'oeuvre, j'ai donné à chacune plusieurs noms; nous verrons ainsi passer différents arguments étroitement liés les uns aux autres)." But we have to wait until page 33 and the discussion of the "pivotal" variation 16, before we fully realize Butor's plan. Each wing of the Theme is played twice. Butor will mirror that in his own account, by pausing after variation 16, and going back to the beginning. There is no way of telling whether he did this in Liège in 1970; if so, the evening must have had the proportions of a performance of *Die Götterdämmerung*. Butor insists several times that the Diabelli variations can be ideally realized only in the study, and not in the concert hall, and certainly in reading the book he has given us, we are free to turn the pages of our score at Butor's bidding. The (imaginary?) performance reminds us that we should not lose sight of the cumulative effect of the variations, and should listen to them in groups. After Variation 16, then, we are to start again, this time with a different set of four Interventions, coming *after* variations 1, 5, 9, 13. On the "Program"

a space was left where these new interventions come. They are numbered, obviously, II, IV, VI, VIII. Before the second set of interventions, on pp. 47-49, Butor writes "Au concert on a disposé les interventions de la façon suivante," and details the first sixteen variations, indicating by roman numerals where the interventions were introduced. There are thus three separate descriptions of the character of each variation. If we try to imagine a performance which stopped before and after every fourth variation, however, we shall find that it just does not work: we are not ready for Intervention II until we reach it, on page 54.

All this certainly makes for an ingenious pattern, conforming to the intricate variations on 4-bar phrases, which Butor elucidates for us in Beethoven's Variations. The miracle is that for so much of the time Beethoven's score does seem to allow these interventions to come at regular intervals. Butor has no difficulty in showing that some couples cannot be separated. The flaw in the system, however, is that (as Butor admits) Variations 16 and 17 are quite indissoluble, and yet that is the point where Butor wishes to introduce not merely a spoken intervention, but a reprise of all the music heard to date, analogous with the repeat of 16 bars which comes at the midpoint of the Theme itself. Butor's justification is, not surprisingly, ingenious, but specious for all that. He detects a "harmonic anomaly" in that the end of Variation 16 and the beginning of 17 are pulled towards the dominant (like the corresponding part of the Theme), but this seems to me just not true. He also holds that the beginning of the Theme fits perfectly onto the end of 16, but this also seems to me untrue; Variation 16 is the only Variation in which the last note (D in the left hand) is unresolved. It is resolved by the C at the beginning of Variation 17, and there is nothing comparable in the Theme itself—the left hand is silent until the beginning of the first full bar. Butor's label for these Variations is the Hammer and the Anvil. The contended reprise comes therefore "entre le marteau et l'enclume," which is an idiom akin to our "between the Devil and the deep blue sea."

The later parts of the book naturally complicate matters still more, as Beethoven's music stretches out into newer areas of expression. Butor writes a suggestive passage (p. 82-85) on the musical idioms hinted at in the work: idioms of Beethoven's contemporaries in the first half, but styles of the past and the future combined in the second half. Pursuing his quest for significant groupings of the variations, Butor uncovers some plausible mirror effects between the two parts: for example, in the first half the groups of four variations tend to start with a March and end with a Waltz; in the second half the groups begin with a Waltz, and end with canons or fugues. Inventive to the end, the descriptions of the different variations become more and more explicit and (frankly) distracting. Thus in the wake of Jupiter we find Venus, the Earth, Mars, the Moon, Uranus, Saturn, with a page on the music of the spheres, and even a link between sol=Sun and sol=the note G (a meaning quite impossible to anyone whose mother tongue is German). The "renversement de Jupiter par Saturne" which expresses the new atmosphere that characterizes the second half of Beethoven's work, also acts as a reminder that paronage has passed from being the prerogative of princes (as with Bach's Goldberg variations) to being the affair of music publishers like Diabelli, and this in turn brings Napoleon into the lists. On a more modest level, the description of variations 14-20 as a storm sequence (p. 73), which serves as the pretext for introducing the gods, is much more evocative. There is also an increasing use of literary parallels (Rousseau, Nerval, etc). These can at times be diverting (the apposite quotations from *Midsummer Night's Dream* for the sequence Vars. 21-23 [pp. 113, 123-28] being particularly intriguing)

and Butor is right to remind us that the Diabelli Variations are Beethoven's most humorous work (p. 97). On page 93, Butor tries, admittedly rather half-heartedly, to make a case for the number 36 as the golden number, with its associations with the signs of the zodiac. There is even, finally, an unexpected twist in the disposition of the interventions. So far, they have been placed regularly either before or after the first of each set of four variations, and the final eight interventions come where we expect. However, on the table which tells us where all eight interventions came in the concert (p. 111: "Au concert on disposerait les interventions de la façon suivante"; the corresponding table on p. 47 read "on a disposé"—once again the real concert melts into an imaginary one) we find the three parts of Intervention IX placed after variations 17, 18, and 19 respectively, and (for balance is all) three interventions (XIV, XV, XVI) placed between Vars. 28 and 29.

Butor's point in asking us to divide the whole work into two, as the theme divides into two, and to divide it further into groups of four, corresponding to the prevalent four-bar phrases, is more than a clever, but pointless, formal experiment. I think he is basically grappling with the dilemma faced by all musical commentators, that their commentaries, springing originally from a love of the work, and from a conviction of its coherence, ends by driving a wedge between the imaginative experience of the work and the mind which wants to reflect on that experience. He assumes that we already have some familiarity with the music (from early on, he refers to parallel incidents in later variations), and that we are not repelled by technical descriptions. But he seeks to place his commentary into a formal framework which will itself mirror the complexity of Beethoven's Variations, and cause us to reexperience, on the level of words, something of the fascination we have from repeated hearings of the music. His triple series of images, his repetitions, the laying out of the two performances in a different way, so that the interventions do not always interrupt the flow of the music at the same point, his deliberate blurring of the different series, all this, it must be recognized, creates effects for which we can find analogues in our experience of the Beethoven Variations. There is possibly no comparable *tour de force* in the history of *transposition d'art*. But ultimately, the book must be classed on the level of criticism rather than that of original creation. Without Beethoven, the book could not exist, and without a reader able to talk as an equal about Beethoven, it could communicate nothing. But it offers such a reader an experience of an intensity rarely found in criticism, and gives him, as well as insights into Beethoven's masterpiece, a satisfying formal experience which taxes and exhilarates. This is certainly one important aspect of the Beethoven Variations, which one can see as the obverse of the Mass in D, which Beethoven was working on at the same time: they reveal Beethoven relaxing. David Cairns (in his sleeve note to Stephen Bishop's recording) puts this view of the work well: "The whole work is in a sense a huge joke, a piece of Olympian sport at the expense of poor Diabelli." But nobody relaxed at the same pitch of creative intensity as Beethoven did in this work. Where Butor's book falls short of Beethoven, it seems to me, is in the range of the experience. In order to find some equivalent for the staggering variety of expression covered by Beethoven, Butor has to have recourse to overlapping patterns of images. But they remain shadows, images of something, attempts to capture a "given," here Beethoven's Variations. Beethoven's variations, on the other hand, do not correspond to anything at all; what they have to offer us, they create as they go along. Like Butor's novels.

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