

Listening Guidelines for Mozart's 12 Variations on "Ah, vous dirai-je, Maman," K. 265

Since the 1600s, keyboard players have performed compositions based on the form **theme and variations**. A theme and variations is a series of variations on a given melody. Although some theme and variations are improvised at the keyboard, many composers over the years have written a set of variations on a popular song or dance, a chorale tune, or a theme they or someone else composed.

Variations are created by altering the rhythm, the melody, or the harmony (or all three) of the theme. For example, the rhythm could be altered by changing the meter from 4/4 to 3/4, or the melody could be varied by changing from major to minor or vice versa.

In 1778 at the age of twenty-two, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart composed a set of twelve variations on the theme "Ah, vous dirai-je, Maman" (better known to us as the nursery rhyme "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star") for the piano. (The "K" that appears with the titles of Mozart's works is an abbreviation for Köchel -- Ludwig von Köchel chronologically catalogued Mozart's more than six hundred compositions.)

The notation for the theme is presented below in its entirety and excerpts of each of the twelve variations. Study the notation to *see* the differences in each variation. Some highlights of the unique features of the theme and each variation follow. Then, listen to a recording of the piece to *hear* what you *see* and *see* what you *hear*. As you listen to each variation and follow the notation, see if you can still hear the theme even though it is varied.

Theme: The melody similar to "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" is presented in C major and 2/4 meter.

The image displays musical notation for the theme and two variations of "Ah, vous dirai-je, Maman" in 2/4 time. The notation is presented in two systems, each with a treble and bass clef. The first system shows the beginning of the piece, marked with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The second system shows a continuation of the melody. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1 through 5 above or below the notes. The notation includes slurs and repeat signs.

Variation 1: The right hand performs the melody, but it is embellished with running sixteenth notes.



Musical score for Variation 1, consisting of two systems of piano accompaniment in 2/4 time. The right hand (treble clef) plays a melody with running sixteenth-note embellishments. The left hand (bass clef) provides a simple harmonic accompaniment. The piece concludes with a first ending (marked '1.') and a second ending (marked '2.').

Variation 2: Now the left hand performs the running sixteenth notes, but the melody is heard in the right hand.



Musical score for Variation 2, consisting of two systems of piano accompaniment in 2/4 time. The right hand (treble clef) plays a melody with sustained notes and slurs. The left hand (bass clef) plays a complex accompaniment of running sixteenth notes. The piece concludes with a final cadence.

Variation 3: The right hand performs the melody in a triplet (3's) figure.



Musical score for Variation 3, consisting of two systems of piano accompaniment in 2/4 time. The right hand (treble clef) plays a melody in a triplet figure, indicated by a '3' below the notes. The left hand (bass clef) provides a simple harmonic accompaniment. The piece concludes with a final cadence, also marked with a '3' below the notes.

Variation 4: Now the left hand takes over the triplet figure, but the melody is heard in the right hand.



Musical score for Variation 4 in 2/4 time. The right hand plays a melody of eighth notes with slurs. The left hand plays a triplet eighth-note pattern, indicated by a '3' above the first two notes of the first triplet.

Variation 5: The right hand presents the melody, but in off-beat patterns.



Musical score for Variation 5 in 2/4 time. The right hand plays a melody of eighth notes starting on the off-beat (the 'and' of the previous beat). The left hand plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment. A dynamic marking of *p* (piano) is present in the first measure.

Variation 6: The melody in chord format is featured in the right hand part while the left hand plays running sixteenth notes.



Musical score for Variation 6 in 2/4 time. The right hand plays a melody of chords (dyads) on the off-beat. The left hand plays a continuous running sixteenth-note pattern. Dynamic markings include *p* (piano) and *cresc.* (crescendo).

Variation 7: The melody is heard in running scale patterns in the right hand.



Musical score for Variation 7 in 2/4 time. The right hand plays a continuous running scale pattern, starting with a dynamic marking of *f* (forte). The left hand plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment.

Variation 8: The melody is presented in C minor (parallel minor of C major) and there is imitation between the left and right hands.



Variation 9: The melody is performed *staccato*.



Variation 10: The left hand plays the melody with the right hand embellishing with sixteenth notes.



Variation 11: The tempo slows and the right hand performs the melody in a singing style.

Adagio



Variation 12: The tempo takes off as the “decorated” melody is featured in the right hand with the left hand playing fast running notes.

Allegro

The musical score for Variation 12 is presented in two systems. The first system consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble staff begins with a whole rest, followed by a quarter note with a trill (tr) and a quarter note. The bass staff starts with a forte (f) dynamic and a continuous eighth-note pattern. The second system also has two staves. The treble staff continues with a quarter note, a quarter rest, and another quarter note with a trill. The bass staff maintains the eighth-note pattern. The piece concludes with a double bar line.