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

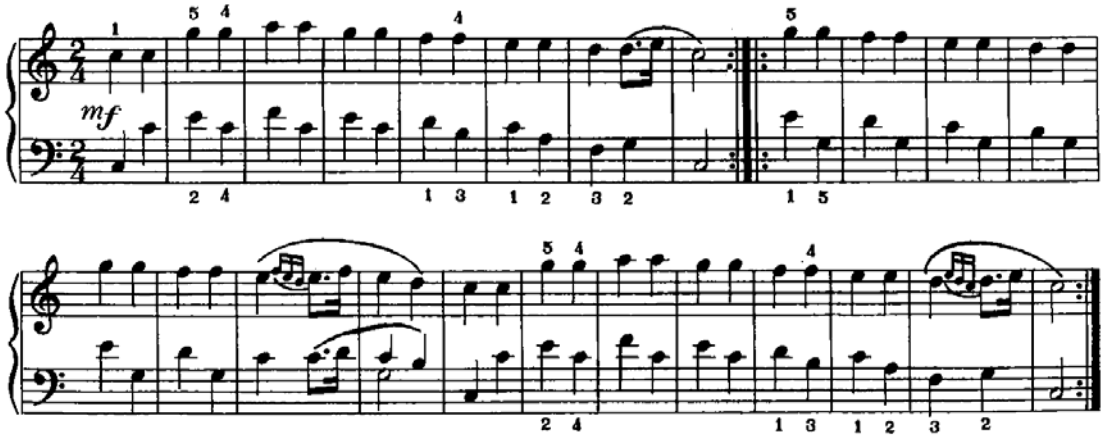
Since the 1600s, keyboard players have performed compositions based on the form **theme and variations.** A theme and variations is a series of variations on a given melody. Although some theme and variations are improvised at the keyboard, many composers over the years have written a set of variations 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.

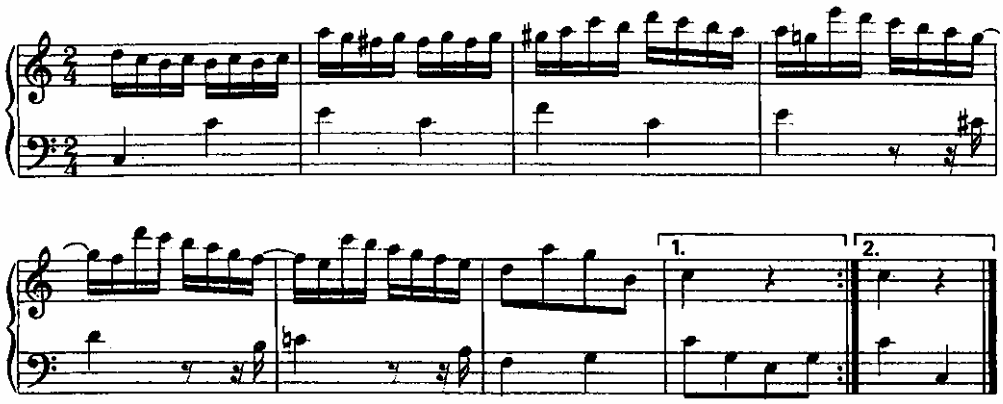
In 1778 at the age of twenty-two, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart composed a set of twelve variations on the theme "Ah, vous dirai-je, Maman" (better known to us as the nursery rhyme "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star") for the piano. (The "K" that appears with the titles of Mozart's works is an abbreviation for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

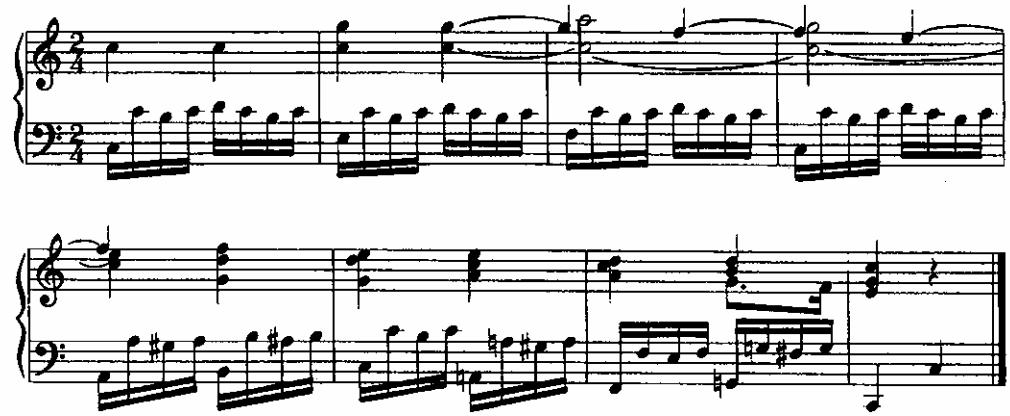
Theme: The melody similar to "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" is presented in C major and 2/4 meter.



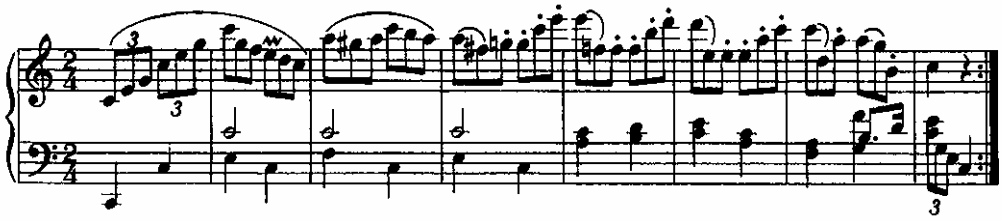
Variation 1: The right hand performs the melody, but it is embellished with running sixteenth notes.



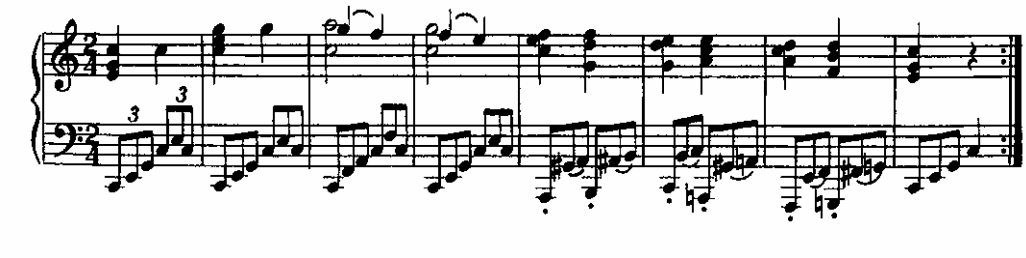
Variation 2: Now the left hand performs the running sixteenth notes, but the melody is heard in the right hand.



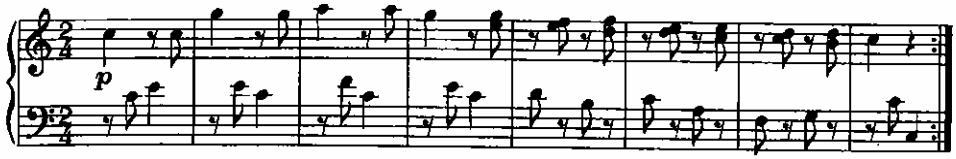
Variation 3: The right hand performs the melody in a triplet (3's) figure.



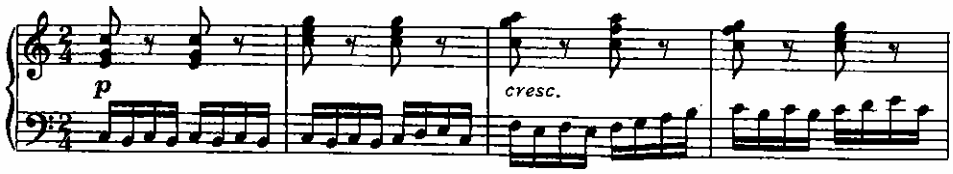
Variation 4: Now the left hand takes over the triplet figure, but the melody is heard in the right hand.



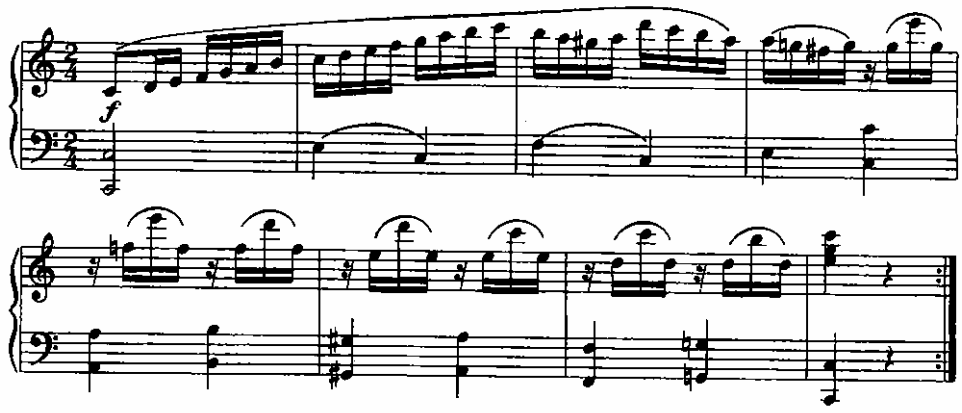
Variation 5: The right hand presents the melody, but in off-beat patterns.



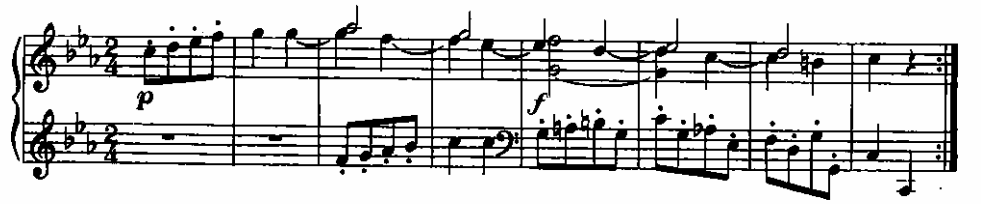
Variation 6: The melody in chord format is featured in the right hand part while the left hand plays running sixteenth notes.



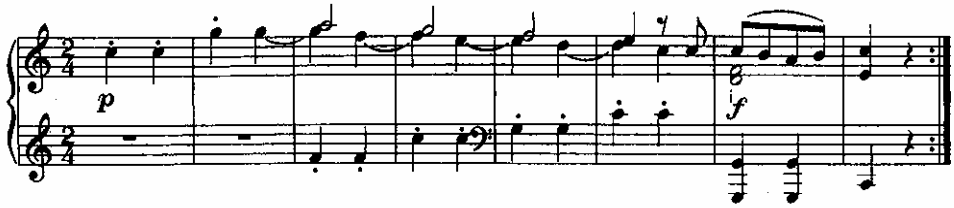
Variation 7: The melody is heard in running scale patterns in the right hand.



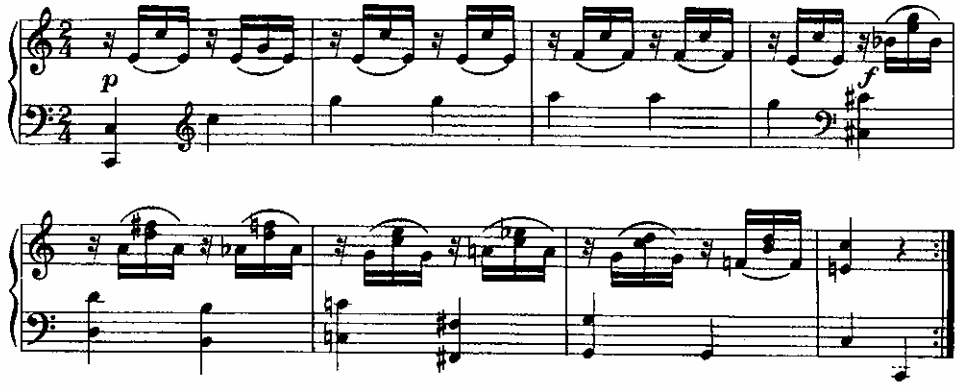
Variation 8: The melody is presented in C minor (parallel minor of C major) and there is imitation between the left and right hands.



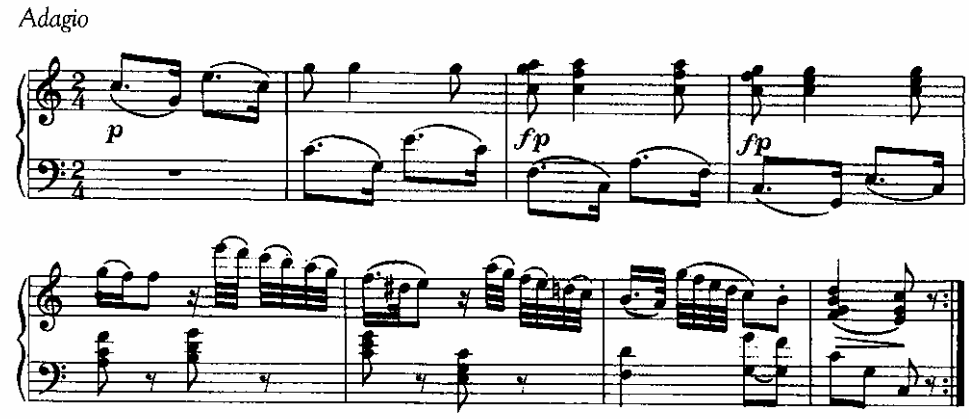
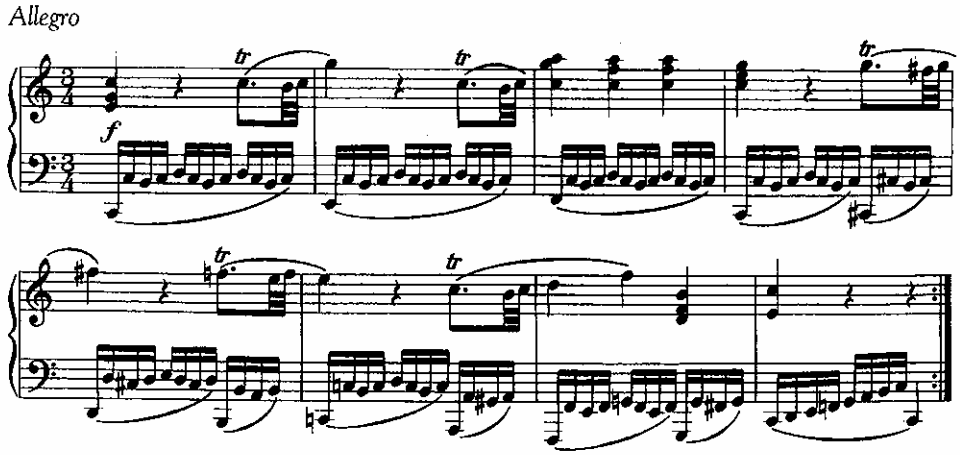
Variation 9: The melody is performed *staccato*.



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.



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