

A STYLISTIC EVALUATION OF AARON COPLAND'S
PIANO VARIATIONS

PROBLEM IN LIEU OF THESIS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Aaron Copland was born of Russian-Jewish parents on November 14, 1900. His father ran a department store in Brooklyn, and the family, on the whole, was not particularly musical. At age thirteen Copland began taking piano lessons from Leopold Wolfson, and, in 1917, he commenced private studies in harmony, counterpoint and composition with Rubin Goldmark. Goldmark provided young Copland with a solid grasp of musical fundamentals, but he had little sympathy for contemporary musical trends. It was mutually understood that if Copland wanted to write something in a more modern style he would have to do so on his own.

Copland's first important independent work was the Scherzo Humoresque: The Cat and the Mouse (1920), a short piano composition, followed by Old Poem (1920) for voice and piano. Copland's next work, Pastorale (1921), also for voice and piano, was composed in France under the tutelage of Nadia Boulanger. During the three years that Copland studied with Boulanger he wrote the Four Motets (1921) for a cappella chorus of mixed voices, the Passacaglia for piano (1922), Grohg, a ballet (1922-25), and As It Fell Upon A Day (1923) for voice, flute and clarinet. In 1924 Copland composed the

Symphony for Organ and Orchestra to serve as a vehicle for Mme. Boulanger's American performance debut. The work was premiered in 1925, and its artistic success brought a great deal of attention to the young composer.

Copland's next two most important compositions, Music for the Theater (1925) and the Concerto for Piano and Orchestra (1926), stand apart from his earlier efforts due to their conscious incorporation of jazz elements, in much the same manner as Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue and Concerto in F, for piano and orchestra. By 1927, however, Copland felt that he had carried the jazz style as far as he could, and he decided to branch out in other directions.

The compositions produced from 1927 to 1929 were largely experimental in nature. Copland employed Jewish melodies in the trio Vitebsk (1928), for violin, cello and piano; used veiled jazz materials in the Symphonic Ode (1928); and in Song (1927), for soprano and piano, he actually experimented with serial technique. In these works "Copland began to avoid scales, arpeggios, and fill-in sonorities, and made his first conscious efforts toward a more transparent texture through a greater economy of means."¹

¹May Kay Higgenbotham, "A Comparison of the Variation Technique Employed by Beethoven and Copland," unpublished master's thesis, School of Music, North Texas State University, Denton, Texas, 1964, p. 7.

The direct outgrowth of all this this was Copland's first masterpiece, the Piano Variations (1930). Based on a four-note motive which predominates throughout twenty variations and a coda, the Variations marks the beginning of Copland's abstract, or second style, period. This phase of his development lasted from 1930 to 1934 and produced only two other important works, the Short Symphony (1932-33) and Statements for orchestra (1933-34). Of the three compositions, the Variations has enjoyed the most attention and the greatest exposure.

The Piano Variations were premiered at a meeting of the League of Composers in New York City in January, 1931. This first performance met with some indifference, due in part to the initial difficulty that the work presents to the listener and also, perhaps, to Copland's performance of it. While not a professional pianist, Copland had enough facility at the keyboard to play his own compositions. He had already premiered The Cat and the Mouse and the Concerto for Piano and Orchestra. Nevertheless, his style of playing was marked by a hardness of touch that seemed to alienate many critics. The second performance of the Variations, at the Yaddo Festival of Contemporary American Music (held on April 30 and May 1, 1931, in Saratoga Springs, New York) was infinitely more successful, although Copland's interpretation was still criticized. Virgil Thomson said, "I find the music of them

[the Variations] very beautiful, only I wish he wouldn't play it so loudly. One hears it better unforced. I miss in his playing of it the singing of a certain small voice that seems to me to be clearly implied on the written page."²

It was the presence of that "certain small voice" that somehow elevated the Piano Variations above anything Copland had written previous to it. It marked a culmination of as well as departure from his earlier works, and did not contain the excesses for which he was frequently criticized.

In an interview in 1968, Copland evaluated his early growth and development and explained his motivations for writing the type of music he did prior to and including the Piano Variations.

The period of the Twenties [he said] had been definitely colored by the notion that Americans needed a kind of music they could recognize as their own. The jazz [referring to works like the Concerto for Piano and Orchestra] came by way of wanting to write this more immediately recognizable American music. I also had a--shall we say Hebraic--idea of the grandiose, or the dramatic and the tragic, which was expressed . . . in the Organ Symphony and . . . the Symphonic Ode. The Variations was another version of the grandiose except that it had changed to a very dry and bare grandiosity, instead of the fat grandiosity of a big orchestral work that lasted twenty minutes.³

In the Variations, the Hebraic melodies of Vitebsk, the jazz of the Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, the drama of the

²Virgil Thomson, "Aaron Copland," Modern Music, IX (November-December, 1931), p. 70.

³Aaron Copland in Edward T. Cone, "Conversation with Aaron Copland," Perspectives of New Music, (Spring-Summer, 1968), p. 64-65.

Symphony for Organ and Orchestra and the humor of The Cat and The Mouse were all stripped down to the barest essentials and recombined into a new style marked by objectivity and restraint. The result is a work so rich in its musical imagery and original in its musical language that it takes several hearings to absorb all that is there. A more detailed discussion of the nature of the Piano Variations in terms of imagery, form, melody, thematic development, rhythm, harmony and sound will better enable us to appreciate the nature of Copland's achievement.

CHAPTER II

CHARACTER OF THE WORK

The initial effect of the Piano Variations on the listener is strong, but not particularly easy to define. Although it is abstract and absolute to the extreme, the music is infectious with meaning. Many writers have attempted to sum up the musical imagery of the work with such terms as flinty, metallic, stoic, grim, noble and courageous. The critic Paul Rosenfeld was much more specific:

From the initial bars of the music something unbrokenly touches us. . . . We find ourselves in a badly shattered world, fragmentary, without cohesion. There is no fusion, no relation in it; nothing save cells damned to isolation. . . . Yet some painful mobilization of energies is under way, gathering intensity, finally through much wrestling and travail bringing themselves into harmony and union with things as they are. Out of the shards and cinders a new world is born, floating white, scarcely negotiable, but complete as the great octaves that gather and resolve the sonorous volumes sped toward them.¹

Wilfred Mellers, however, has given us a much more meaningful interpretation of the Variations, drawing from his knowledge of the work and of Copland's personal background. He perceives the Variations as the vision of a Jewish-American

¹Paul Rosenfeld, "Aaron Copland's Growth," The New Republic, LXVII (May 27, 1931), p. 47.

composer attempting to come to terms with a modern, technological, urban environment. The entire piece "is imbued with a feeling, peculiar to big industrial cities, both of man's ant-like energy and of his ineluctable loneliness."² The references to Jewish synagogue music and Negro "Blues" in the Variations are especially significant because both Negro and Jew are an uprooted people, alienated from the mainstream of American society and crowded together into large urban centers. The fragmentary nature of the theme of the work symbolizes the broken bones of these two disrupted cultures, and the fervent manner in which Copland relates these fragments by serial principles seems to imply that this is what can be done "with the minimal material our world offers us."³

The Piano Variations differ dramatically from sets of variations written by eighteenth and nineteenth century composers. In those earlier works, unity was usually achieved by the use of a recurring bass line or consistent harmonic schemes and measure groupings. In the Copland set, an initial theme is stated, and then is repeated and distorted almost beyond recognition by melodic interpolations, octave displacements, rhythmic reorganization and tempo changes. Serial

²Wilfred Mellers, Music and Society, New York, Roy Publishers, 1950, p. 207.

³Wilfred Mellers, Music in a New Found Land, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1965, p. 86.

principles are involved in the Variations, but they are not strict in the Schönbergian sense. The notes of the piece are not always written in serial order, and some are repeated prior to a complete statement of the ten-tone row.

The Variations display an overall form of A B A, the divisions being delineated by tempo groupings rather than key relationships or other factors. The first eleven variations are slow, the next nine are fast, and a slow tempo returns again in the coda. Within this context the individual variations are strung together so that their effect is cumulative. The early sections of the piece progress in a regular quarter-note motion, and, as notes of shorter value predominate, momentum begins to pick up. Line, harmony and rhythm, still related by serial principles, combine into a nervous energy which continues to build "until in the disintegrative climax it is liberated into stillness."⁴

The theme of the Variations is declamatory in nature, despite the octave displacement, and revolves around a fixed point, much like the chanting of the Jewish cantor in a synagogue (Figure 1). The four-note motive itself suggests a polytonal blues figure, due to the alternation of major and minor thirds.

⁴Wilfred Mellers; Music in a New Found Land, p. 86.



Fig. 1--Jewish chant, cited by A. Idelsohn in Jewish Music in its Historical Development, p. 32.

[The initial exposition of the theme is ten measures long and is divided into two equal five measure sections. The first section begins with a statement of the four-note motive (E, C, D[#], C[#]) followed by a repetition of that motive with one added note, the repeated E. (From this point on, references to the individual notes of the four-note motive will be made by using arabic numerals.) [The second section introduces four measures of new material, and the cadence (measure ten) employs three notes of the motive (1 3 4). Although the key center established in these opening measures appears to be C[#] minor, Copland consistently chooses to spell the leading tone as a C^b instead of B[#].] The ambiguity created by this type of notation is enhanced by the insertion of polytonal chords between each phrase of the theme. The use of sympathetic vibrations in the first five measures is not particularly significant since this is their only occurrence in the piece (Figure 2).

THEME

Handwritten musical score for "Piano Variations, mm. 1-11". The score is written on three systems of grand staves. The first system is labeled "THEME" and shows a melody in the right hand with dynamics *f* and *sff*, and fingerings 1-4. The second system continues the melody with dynamics *p* and *ff*, and fingerings 3-4, 1, 7, 6, 8, 9, 1. The third system shows further development with dynamics *p* and *ff*, and fingerings 3, 2, 10, 1, 3, 4. The score includes various musical notations such as accents, slurs, and dynamic markings.

Fig. 2--Piano Variations, mm. 1-11

Variation one consists of a canon at the octave based on the theme. The canon is strict for only four measures, after which the upper voice continues to state the theme and the lower voice moves freely (Figure 3). The second

Fig. 3--Piano Variations, mm. 12-15 (Variation 1)

variation presents a vertical organization of the notes of the motive.] The resultant dissonant ninths are a prominent feature throughout the piece, and their presence reminds us of similar sounds exploited by Stravinsky. [In this variation, the middle line establishes the motive and its repetition. The second section continues the statement of the theme, within a context of polytonal chords (six of which representing vertical arrangements of the motive) moving in contrary motion (Figure 4).

Fig. 4--Piano Variations, mm. 21-31 (Variation 2)

In variation three, Copland disguises the theme by writing E^b for D^\sharp and D^b for C^\sharp . The left hand contains permutations of the original motive, and the dissonant sound of the minor second prevails throughout the entire variation (Figure 5).



Fig. 5--Piano Variations, mm. 31-33 (Variation 3)

Whereas the exposition of the theme was ten measures in length, it is restated in the fourth and fifth variations in seven and nine measures respectively. Thus, the length of each variation is unimportant as long as the general structure of the theme is maintained. In the polytonal chords of variation four the motive occurs in both its original form and in the order 3 4 1 2. This figure appears four times and then is used as an ostinato in the left hand in the second half of the variation (Figure 6).

Fig. 6--Piano Variations, mm. 42-48 (Variation 4)

The fifth variation represents an extension of the materials of the fourth, and is the only variation in the set that does not begin with some form of the four-note motive. The static quality of the harmonic rhythm in this variation is characteristic of most of the piece and of Copland's style in general (Figure 7).



Fig. 7--Piano Variations, mm 49-52 (Variation 5)

In variation six, the theme is transposed to E. The motive simultaneously appears divided between the hands, in vertical combinations, and in a rearranged order in each hand. This material is punctuated on five occasions by sixteenth-note figures which also include various orders of the motive (Figure 8).

Fig. 8--Piano Variations, mm. 57-60 (Variation 6)

In the next variation the theme is extended through more than three octaves. The end of each phrase is marked by a major triad, and much of the musical material is identical to that found in the previous variation (Figure 9).

Fig. 9--Piano Variations, mm. 67-71 (Variation 7)

Variation eight transposes the motive up a third higher to G[#]. The first two chords contain all four notes of the motive. In addition, the upper notes in the first four left-hand chords spell out the motive, as do the lower notes in

a different sequence (3 4 1 2) (Figure 10).

Fig. 10--Piano Variations, mm. 78-81 (Variation 8)

The C[#] minor center is reinstated in the ninth variation.

The theme is stated with a few minor alterations, and is answered in canon by the left hand one-half step up from the initial transposition of the motive in variation six (Figure 11).

Fig. 11--Piano Variations, mm. 90-94 (Variation 9)

In variation ten the pitch center moves up a half-step to D. The theme, again spanning three octaves, is interrupted

by B^b major and minor chords in juxtaposition (Figure 12).

Fig. 12--Piano Variations, mm.103-106 (Variation 10)

The end of this variation employs the same material found in variation four. Variation eleven centers around the key of E^b. The right hand plays a slow, expressive line of free two-voice counterpoint against a left hand pedal point (Figure 13).

Fig. 13--Piano Variations, mm.112-115 (Variation 11)

The twelfth and thirteenth variations take on the quality of a light, pointillistic scherzo (Figure 14).

Figure 14--Piano Variations, mm.124-127 (Variation 12)

In variation thirteen the texture is reduced to a single voice. The retrograde form precedes each downbeat statement of the original motive which, itself, is disguised by rhythmic alteration (Figure 15).

Fig. 15--Piano Variations, mm.131-135 (Variation 13)

Variation fourteen marks a return to the theme at the original pitch level of C^\sharp (employing the enharmonic spelling encountered in the third variation). Alternating with quarter-note thematic statements are eighth-note figures built on two interlocking versions of the motive (Figure 16, m.145).

Fig. 16--Piano Variations, mm.142-145 (Variation 14)

One presents the original motivic pitches (E, C, E^b , D^b), and the other is transposed (G, E^b , F^\sharp , E^4). Both versions appear in a rearranged order. The last measure of this variation (m. 163) is repeated three times for emphatic effect.

Variations fifteen through eighteen provide the only examples of ternary form within the set. Prior to this, all the variations employed a binary structure. The first and last eight measures in variation fifteen are identical except for differences in the arpeggio figures which are interjected between each phrase of the theme. In variation sixteen the

motive is presented in a slightly altered version, the third and fourth notes being a minor second rather than a major second apart (Figure 17).

The image shows a handwritten musical score for Variation 16 of Piano Variations, measures 199-206. It consists of two systems of grand staves. The first system contains measures 199, 200, and 201. The second system contains measures 202, 203, 204, 205, and 206. The music is written in 5/8 time. The right hand plays a melodic line, and the left hand plays a bass line. Dynamics include *sf*, *mf*, and *ff*, with *secco* markings. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, accidentals, and articulation marks. The first four notes of the melodic line in measure 199 are circled and numbered 1 through 4. The score is handwritten and appears to be a study or working draft.

Fig. 17--Piano Variations, mm.199-206 (Variation 16)

In variation seventeen the motive appears in the right hand against an eighth-note ostinato pattern in the left. This is followed by a sixteenth-note passage which contains the retrograde form of the motive ascending and the original form descending (Figure 18).

Fig. 18--Piano Variations, mm. 221-225 (Variation 17)

The last four measures of the middle section of this variation (mm. 235-239) are significant, as we shall see later, for their rhythmic structure.

The ternary form of variation eighteen is not as rigid as that which was found in variations fifteen through seventeen. Although arranged and spelled dissimilarly, the motive is enharmonically the same in each hand. The lack of a consistent rhythmic pulse (the number and types of rests vary between each eighth- and sixteenth-note figure) coupled with a rapid tempo, gives this variation a nervous and unsettled quality (Figure 19).



Fig. 19--Piano Variations, mm.244-249 (Variation 18)

Variation nineteen marks the return of a binary structure, variety being achieved here partly by syncopation and a sudden increase in tempo. For the most part, this variation is chordal, and the motive occurs in a number of vertical combinations (Figure 20).

Fig. 20--Piano Variations, mm.268-273 (Variation 19)

The final variation (number twenty) is a multiple variation consisting of several sections. The left hand is usually based on the motive beginning on B, while the right hand

contains many permutations of the motive (Figure 21).

The image shows a musical score for piano variations, specifically Variation 20, spanning measures 283 to 285. The score is written for a grand piano, with a treble clef on the upper staff and a bass clef on the lower staff. The music is in 7/8 time. The score is divided into three measures. Above the treble staff, there are three groups of circled numbers (1, 2, 3, 4) indicating fingerings for the right hand. Below the bass staff, there are also three groups of circled numbers (1, 2, 3, 4) indicating fingerings for the left hand. Dynamic markings 'f' (forte) are present above the first and second measures. The notation includes various rhythmic values, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests.

Fig. 21--Piano Variations, mm. 283-285 (Variation 20)

In spite of frequent rhythmic and textural changes, the patterns remain basically the same throughout the variation, which ends in an accelerated disintegration.

The coda is divided into three progressively slower sections. The first one (mm. 336-349) combines the chords encountered in variations four, five, and sixteen. Section two (mm. 350-359) presents the theme in the same basic form as it was stated in variation three. The last section begins with three measures of polytonal chords, followed by a final sounding of the motive against a low C^\sharp pedal. Three percussive chords in the low bass end the coda and the work (Figure 22).

POLYTONAL CHORDS

(♩=58)

MOTIVE

Sust. Ped.

Fig. 22--Piano Variations, mm. 360-367 (Coda)

It can be deduced from the preceding analysis that Copland does not develop his thematic material through a working out or expansion in the traditional sense. The theme is merely restated in each variation in a disguised form. As a result, the harmonic rhythm of the work remains fairly static, and this, in turn, cancels out any potential for lyrical growth. Thematic lengthening or augmentation,

which might be mistaken for development, is achieved through the interpolation of new material, or permutations of the motive, and the repetition of some notes of the theme.

The basic rhythmic structure of the Variations is also tied to the theme. Throughout the work, rhythm is reduced to a fairly predictable sequence of longs and shorts. Even in the driving toccata-like passages the overall rhythmic pulse rigidly adheres to the longer notes of the thematic statement on which each short phrase comes to rest (Figure 23).

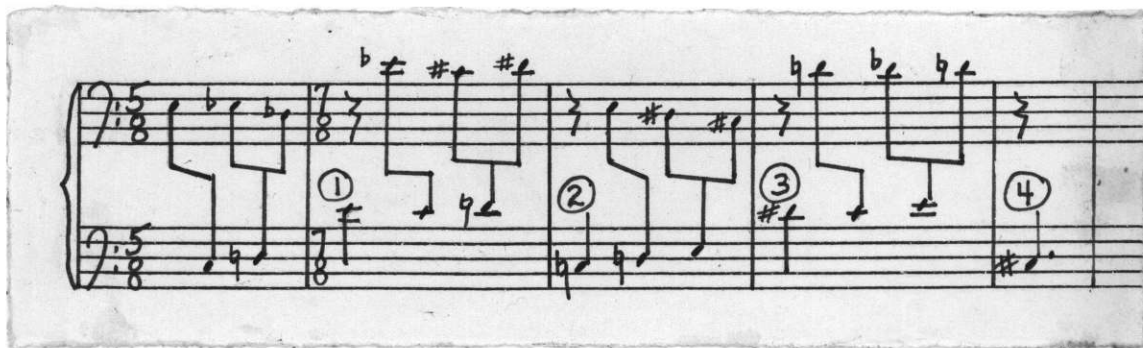


Fig. 23--Tocatta Style in the Piano Variations,
mm.167-171

A certain amount of rhythmic complexity is achieved in the Variations by the use of shifted accents, which result from the lengthening and accumulation of pitch materials. Such an effect can be found in variation sixteen, where an additional secco chord is inserted after each repetition of the phrase (See Figure 17). Jazz elements are also present in the work. Rhythmically speaking, jazz can be reduced to a "division of eighth-notes of a 4/4 measure into groups of

three and five."⁵ Copland extends this principle in the Variations by borrowing 5/8 from fox trot meter and giving it an "aura of jazz syncopation"⁶ (Figure 24).



Fig. 24--Jazz elements in the Piano Variations,
mm. 234-238

The thematic and rhythmic structure of the Piano Variations merely serves as a framework for the further compilation of coloristic devices, both harmonic and instrumental. One of the most important characteristics of the work is its overall sound. For the most part, the Variations is a type of monody, and the polytonal harmonies and sharp dissonances that pervade the music are the result of the ambiguous nature of the tone row itself (Figure 25).

⁵Arthur Berger, "The Music of Aaron Copland," Musical Quarterly, XXXI (October, 1945), p. 430.

⁶Ibid.

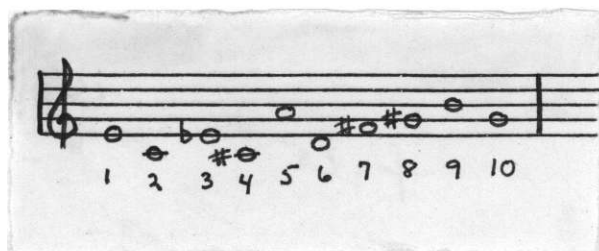


Fig. 25--Statement of Tone Row in the Piano Variations

Special coloristic effects are produced, however, by the juxtaposition of major and minor thirds (Figure 4, mm.28-31), the use of quintal-quartal harmony (Figure 26) and the use of chords of addition, usually a triad or perfect fifth with an added major second or sixth (Figure 27).

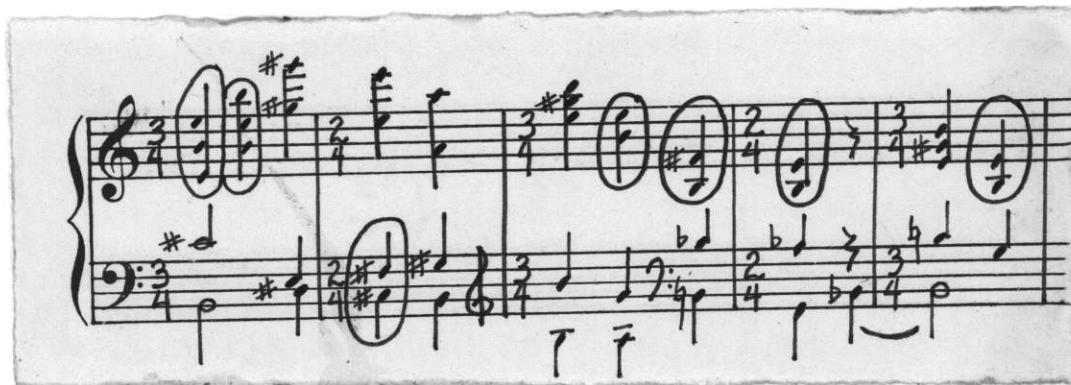


Fig. 26--Quintal-Quartal Harmony in the Piano Variations, mm. 85-89



Fig. 27--Chords of addition in the Piano Variations, mm. 338-339

Copland exploits the full range of the keyboard to achieve his effects. Sympathetic vibrations are called for in the beginning of the piece, and the sound of the coda is enriched by the use of the sostenuto pedal, Copland judiciously writing an alternate version for instruments without that device. Copland also gives specific instructions as to how each variation should be performed. For example, the directions at the beginning of the piece read, "strike each note sharply." Other instructions are; "clangorous, mark the melody"; "simply, naively"; "boldly"; "blurred"; "threatening"; and "not too fast, well articulated." These directions stand apart from the more traditional Italian terminology which is also present in the score. In addition, Copland gives specific metronomic markings for each variation. He states, however, at the beginning of the work that these "are to be taken only as approximate indications of correct tempi."⁷

⁷Aaron Copland, Piano Variations, New York, Cos Cob Press, 1932, p. 2.

In addition, the piano writing is very similar to that found in Bartok's Piano Sonata (1926), and the use of serial

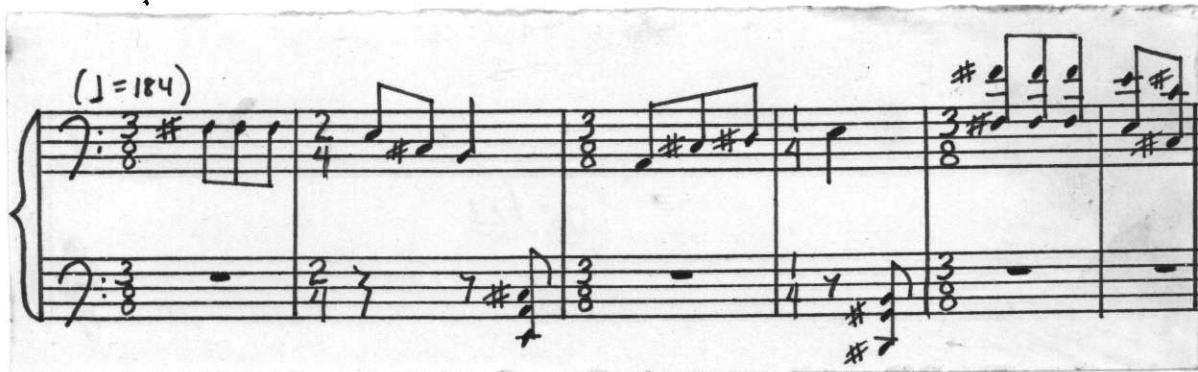


Fig. 30--Excerpt from Third Movement of Bartok's Piano Sonata

technique, with its resultant pointillistic textures implies a certain debt to Schönberg and his school. Indeed, Copland had first-hand exposure to these composers during his stay in Europe, and it is not unlikely that their techniques were assimilated into his unconscious thought. According to Arthur Berger, Copland's "capacity to absorb contemporary methods without elevating any one of them into an all-pervading value" gives "new implication and vividness to these devices."¹ "Those elements [in the Variations] that hark back to Schönberg, Stravinsky or Bartok in no sense render it eclectic; but on the contrary, enrich it since they are all part of a normal

¹Arthur Berger, "The Music of Aaron Copland," The Musical Quarterly, p. 429.

evolution and are thoroughly absorbed into an eminently personal idiom."²

It must be emphasized that Copland's approach to serial writing differed vastly from Schönberg's. The usual twelve tones are reduced in the Variations to ten, and these in turn are all related to the four-note motive. Apparently, Copland's purpose in writing the Variations was to see how much variety, complexity and sonority could be obtained from a minimum number of tones. Even though serial principles are loosely applied in the piece, a strict economical attitude pervades throughout. By working under self-imposed limitations Copland has given himself complete mastery and control over all of the musical material.

The "most obvious difference [of the Piano Variations] from European music--or from most of the music of Ives, Ruggles or Harris--is its lack of lyrical growth."³ Ironically, this is the work's most striking characteristic as well as its greatest flaw. Copland does a masterful job of covering up this weakness by diverting our attention to other

²Arthur Berger, Aaron Copland, New York, Oxford University Press, 1953, p. 48.

³Wilfred Mellers, Music in a New Found Land, p. 84.

elements. It in no way detracts from the powerful effect of the work, yet one cannot help but suspect that the last few phrases of the piece are, in a sense, redundant.

The Piano Variations is particularly significant in relation to Copland's total output. It was his first truly mature composition and was free from the stylistic superfluities of his earlier works. In a sense, it represented a coalescence of the best from the past and pointed the way to the future. The clarity of texture and transparency of sound that distinguishes the work became characteristic of his style from that time on.

The Variations is a masterpiece of musical construction and communication. Perhaps it is the most accurate musical testimony we have of the reaction of a sensitive individual to an impersonal industrial environment. That the Piano Variations probably states a deep, personal conviction of the composer can be seen from the following quotation in Copland's book, Music and Imagination.

One of the primary problems for the composer in an industrial society like that of America is to achieve integration; to find justification for the life of art in the life about him. I must believe in the ultimate good of the world and of life as I live it in order to create a work of art. Negative emotions cannot produce art; positive emotions bespeak an emotion about something. I cannot imagine an art work without implied convictions; and that is true also for music, the most abstract of the arts.⁴

⁴ Aaron Copland, Music and Imagination, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1952, p. 111.

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