



## Beethoven's Diabelli Variations

Its Autograph Score, and Moisés Kaufman's '33 Variations'

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In July 1825, more than two years after completing his most monumental contribution to variation form, Beethoven wrote to Anton Diabelli with characteristically biting humor, praising the collective endeavor of many individual Diabelli variations by various composers that reached print under the title 'Vaterländischer Künstlerverein' ('Patriotic Union of Artists'). Beethoven comments here: 'Es Lebe dieser euer Öesterr[eichischer] verein, welcher [einen] SchusterFleck – Meister[ich] zu behandeln weiß –' ('Hats off to this, your Austrian Association, which knows how to handle the Cobbler's Patch excellently').<sup>1</sup> He had begun his own contribution six years earlier, in 1819, but could at that time hardly have anticipated that it would become his largest work for piano by the time of its completion in April 1823. Instead of the single variation Diabelli requested of him, Beethoven conceived a microcosm of his art embodied in a vast collection of transformations, or 'Veränderungen,' 33 in all, lasting nearly an hour in performance.

The reception history of the Diabelli Variations is exceptionally rich, and becomes more fascinating year by year. An early champion of this great composition in performance—Hans von Bülow—declared these Variations to be a 'microcosm of Beethoven's art'<sup>2</sup> and the way Beethoven explored and transformed Diabelli's 'cobbler's patch' of a theme has stimulated and excited generations of critics and commentators. The unique formal design and psychological complexity of this composition have inspired literary responses from writers such as Michel Butor and Irene Dische, whose novel *Sad*

*Strains of a Gay Waltz* imitates the form of a 'theme' and thirty-three changes or transformations in a 'German'—in this case, variations not on a waltz ('Deutscher') but on her main character, Benedikt August Anton Cecil August, Count Waller von Wallerstein.<sup>3</sup>

Most recently a probing exploration of Beethoven's Diabelli Variations on the stage has been undertaken in Moisés Kaufman's play '33 Variations,' which opened in 2007 and reached Broadway in 2009. It is surprising to think of Jane Fonda, who once played the role of Barbarella, as the determined musicologist researcher Katherine Brandt, who investigates the origins of this paradoxical composition by studying Beethoven's sketchbooks held at the Beethoven-Archiv in Bonn, the setting for the second act of Kaufman's play. Consequently, Jane Fonda became so fascinated by the subject that she herself made a lengthy visit to the Beethoven-Haus, hosted by the archivist Michael Ladenburger, who had earlier welcomed Kaufman and who appears in the play in the guise of the character Gertrude ('Gerti') Ladenburger. So far the play has been seen in very many American localities as well as in other cities from Buenos Aires to Berlin, Tokyo to Tel Aviv. It may come to London before long.

Another extraordinary collective project brought the 81-page autograph score of the Diabelli Variations at long last out of the seclusion of private possession into the sphere of public accessibility. This big manuscript was acquired by the Beethoven-Haus in December of 2009. Many music-lovers and

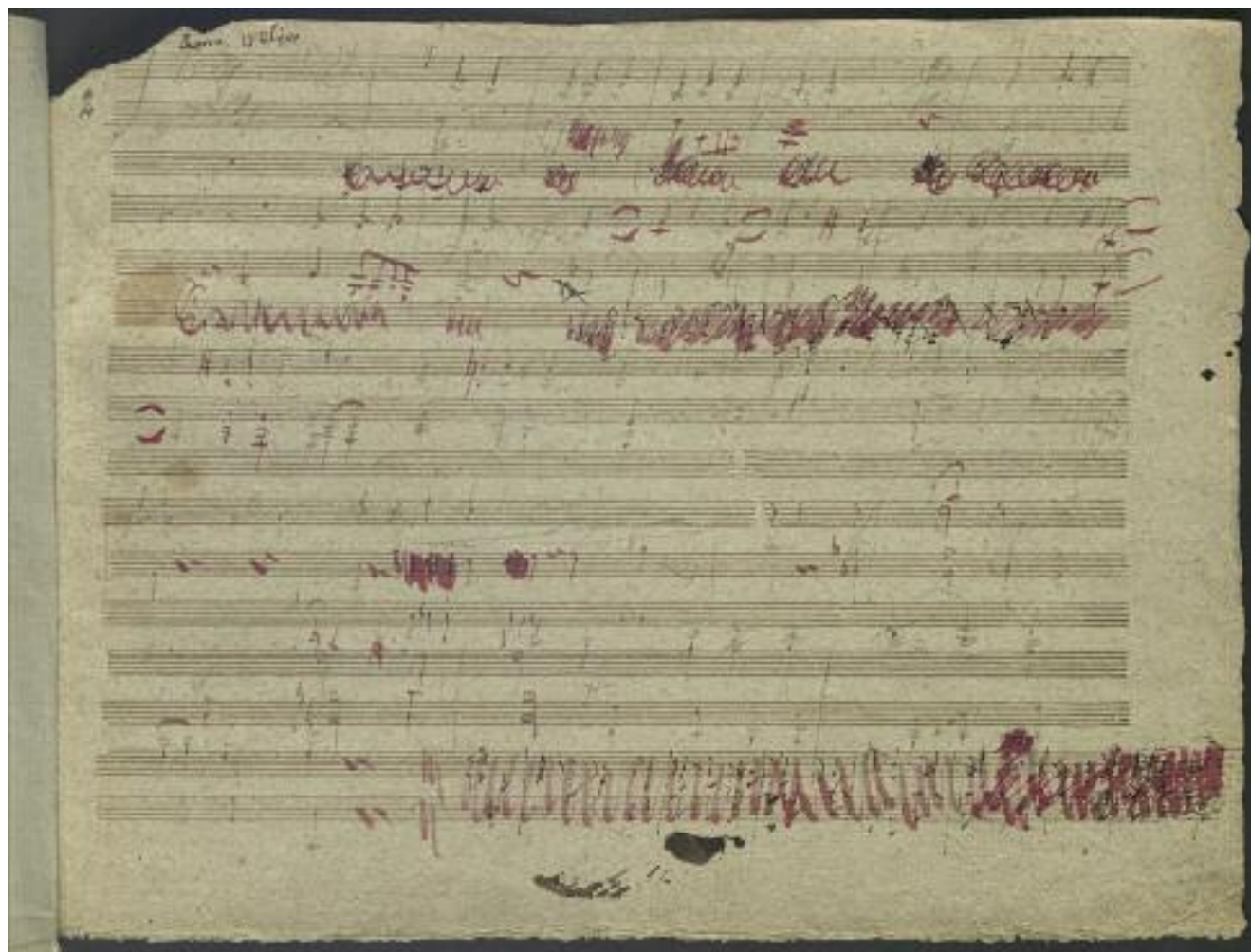
distinguished musicians contributed to the fund-raising drive that made this acquisition possible, including Mitsuko Uchida, András Schiff, and Alfred Brendel among many others. Immediately upon acquiring the manuscript, the staff at the Beethoven-Haus, including Ladenburger and the head of the Archive Division Bernhard Appel, prioritized the preparation of a two-volume facsimile edition, which appeared at the end of 2010.<sup>4</sup> The publication was supported in part by a benefit piano recital by Daniel Barenboim given at Cologne in July 2010.

In the research for my book *Beethoven's Diabelli Variations* first published by Oxford University Press more than 20 years ago, the autograph score was the

only source I was then unable to access directly.<sup>5</sup> Instead, I needed to rely on faded and partly illegible photographs. It has been a revelation to gain access to this manuscript at first hand and in good color reproduction. My essay in the new facsimile edition on 'The Evolution of Beethoven's Diabelli Variations' represents a complementary study to my earlier monograph on the work, and seeks to fill a gap in its inquiry into the way that Beethoven shaped and completed this masterwork.<sup>6</sup>

Part of the 'Author's Note' with which Moisés Kaufman prefaces his remarkable play '33 Variations' relates to not just the sounding music, but to Beethoven's musical manuscripts. The second paragraph of Kaufman's note is as follows:

## Plate 1



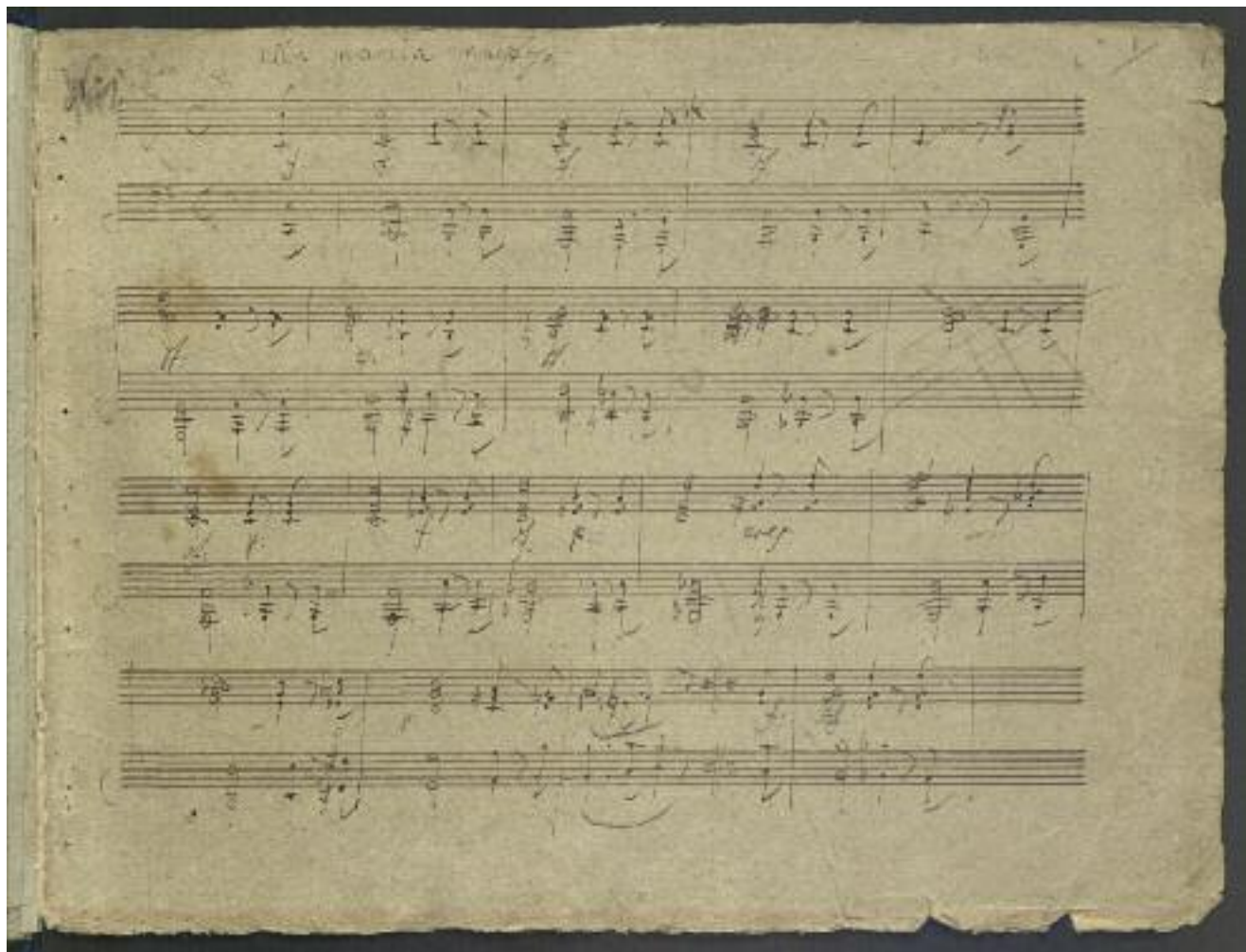
One other thought. In addition to the characters listed in the script, there are two more characters in the play: one, the music of Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* which plays over the course of the story – whenever possible, it should be played live; and two, the images of the original Beethoven sketches projected throughout the piece – they tell their own story.

The 'story' conveyed through the sketches for the Variations is deepened through study of this remarkable autograph score. **Plate 1** shows the very first page of the autograph, with Beethoven's copy of Diabelli's waltz and sketches for Variation 2, whereas **Plate 2** shows page 3 of the autograph, which contains the beginning of Variation 1.<sup>7</sup>

The autograph's first page is written on a differ-

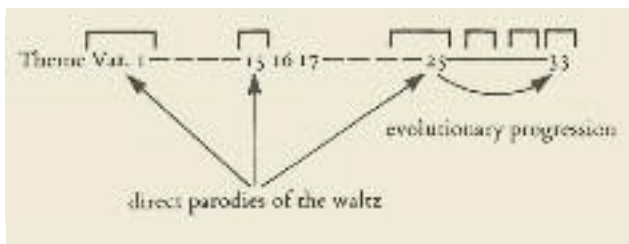
ent kind of paper than the rest of the manuscript, and it clearly belongs with a preliminary draft of the work from 1819, a source containing twenty-three variations, ten fewer than the final number. In the process of polishing his work, Beethoven not only strengthened his conclusion but he inserted into his preliminary draft several strategically placed variations that make pointed and humorous reference to the original theme in its original register. As the two diagrams show, Variations 1, 15, and 25 are each late insertions into the pre-established order of variations, reminding us of the origins of this gigantic composition in Diabelli's 'cobbler's patch' theme while thereby drawing the waltz more tightly into the narrative design of the whole work (see **Figures 1 and 2**).

**Plate 2**



| Ursprünglicher Plan (1819)<br>Draft (1819)     | Vollendetes Werk (1823)<br>Finished Work (1823) |
|--|---|
|  | 1   |
|  | 2   |
| 1  | 3   |
| 2  | 4   |
| 3  | 5   |
| 4  | 6   |
| 5  | 7   |
| 6  | 8   |
| 7  | 9   |
| 8  | 10  |
| 9  | 11  |
| 10   | 12  |
| 11   | 13  |
| 12   | 14  |
|  | 15  |
| 13   | 16  |
| 14   | 17  |
| 15   | 18  |
| 16   | 19  |
| 17   | 20  |
| 18   | 21  |
| 19   | 22  |
| nicht verwendete Variation<br>unused variation | –<br>23<br>24<br>25<br>26                       |
| 20   | 27<br>28<br>29                                  |
| 21 („minore“)<br>22 (Fuge) 22 (Fugue)          | 30<br>31  |
|  | 32<br>33  |

**Fig 1: A Comparison of the early plan for the Diabelli Variations with the finished work**



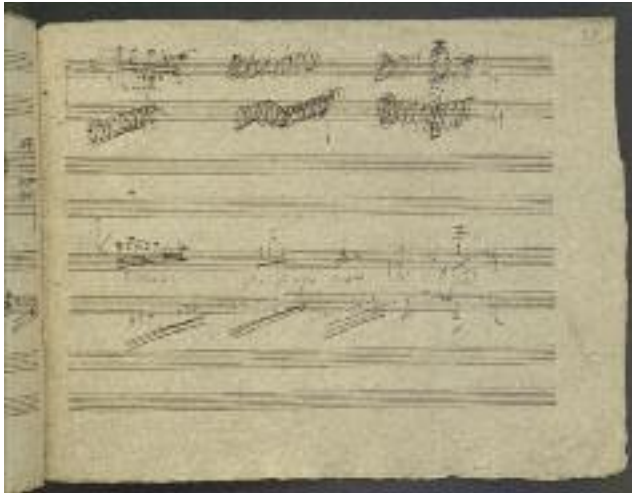
**Fig 2: Overall formal progression of the Diabelli Variations**



**Example 1: (a) “Engelmann” Sketchbook, p. 6, staves 7-8; (b) Autograph, p. 81, cancelled version of the ending; (c) Autograph, p. 81, final version of the ending**

On the other hand, many of Beethoven’s variations transform the theme in far-reaching ways. The expressive range of this work is extraordinary, and Beethoven incorporates stylistic references to other composers including J.S. Bach, Handel, and Mozart, while absorbing into the coda of the Diabelli Variations a self-allusion to his own last piano sonata, the Arietta movement of op. 111.<sup>8</sup>

The very last page of the autograph score catches Beethoven in the act of adjusting the aesthetic balance of his concluding passage, which refers back to the beginning of the work, namely to Diabelli’s original waltz (see Plate 3). **Example 1** transcribes the last three stages of Beethoven’s revision of the two final measures. The first version is found in the Engelmann Sketchbook; the second version is the cancelled ending from the autograph (the top system of p. 81); the last version corresponds to the finished work. In his final artistic solution, Beethoven simultaneously recalls the original theme and distances himself from it. The emphasis on the repeated third E-G in the right hand reminds us distinctly of the repeated chords



**Plate 3**

from the original waltz, and the rising sixth E to G to the syncopated closing chord recalls the middle of the second half of Diabelli's theme. On the other hand, the more rapid rhythmic figuration and the decrescendo at those repeated impulses impose distance, suggesting a correction of questionable features of Diabelli's 'cobbler's patch' theme, such as the crescendo over the stubbornly insistent, ten-fold repeated chords in its initial phrases. In his witty open ending, Beethoven strikes a balance between the exalted and the commonplace, implying perhaps that even more transformations of the waltz would have been possible.

\* \* \*

In Moisés Kaufman's play '33 Variations,' the original manuscripts connect two disparate temporal levels of the action: the years between 1819 and 1823 when Beethoven created the work, on the one hand, and our own aesthetic contemplation of the piece nearly two centuries later, on the other. Beethoven's struggle to bring his cycle to a conclusion is pitted against expanding creative horizons and debilitating illness; Katherine Brandt's parallel quest for understanding centers on her attempt to solve the puzzle that drew her to the Diabelli Variations in the first place and that is bound to fas-

cinatate us too: why Beethoven at the height of his powers should have devoted such enormous efforts to transforming a theme he apparently disdained as a 'cobbler's patch'. Like Beethoven's creative endeavor, Katherine's quest for meaning is undertaken as a race against time: stricken by a degenerative ailment, 'Lou Gehrig's disease' or ALS, she does not survive the action. Significantly, Katherine's final scholarly address is read by her daughter Clara, who has enabled her ailing mother to perceive a dimension of the music to which she had previously remained deaf.

The importance of manuscripts like the autograph of the Diabelli Variations lies in provocative clues they hold about creativity and the enduring relevance of artistic meaning. Katherine starts to grasp their fundamental *musical* meaning during Act 1 of the play, when evolving versions of Variation 3 from the sketches are projected visually for the audience, while the corresponding music is played live by the pianist.<sup>9</sup> As Kaufman specifies, 'the music of Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*... whenever possible... should be played live' in the play, since it stands for a 'character' and in some sense stands at the core of the action. In satisfactory performance of the play, in fact, the music of the Diabelli Variations easily assumes the weight of about three of the human figures. The seven human characters are delicately balanced between two temporal realms. Three historic figures (Beethoven, Schindler, and Diabelli) are counterpoised against the three contemporary trans-Atlantic figures (Katherine and Clara Brandt and the male nurse, Mike), while Gerti Ladenburger as the Beethoven-Haus archivist assumes the responsibility in the present for manuscripts *stemming from* the past.<sup>10</sup> In its form, the two-act play unfolds as a chain of short scenes or variations shaping the larger narrative, thereby mirroring the design of Beethoven's musical work.

Because of my connection to the genesis of the play, I have often been engaged to lecture on and perform Beethoven's Diabelli Variations in associa-

tion with performance runs of Kaufman's play in diverse locations. During the last year, such musical/theatrical collaborations have taken place in various cities including Chicago (TimeLine), Winston-Salem (Festival Stage), Chelsea/Ann Arbor, Michigan (Purple Rose Theatre), and New Orleans (Southern Repertory/MESA Productions). Such experiences have alerted me to some of the pitfalls of undertaking Kaufman's '33 Variations'. In some ways, larger repertory theaters that perform several plays in the same period can be poorly situated to tackle this demanding play. The production of '33 Variations' in German at the Renaissance Theater in Berlin was disappointing, for instance, since too many distinctive features of the play were curtailed. In the Berlin production, the sung passage from the 'Kyrie eleison' of the *Missa solemnis* was deleted altogether, whereas the closing dance of assembled characters to the closing Minuet and coda of the Diabelli Variations was barely suggested, and Beethoven and Schindler unwisely double cast.

In the recent production at the Purple Rose Theater in Chelsea, Michigan, the interpersonal relations between the characters were well conveyed, yet the production as a whole foundered on

calamitous disregard of the musical dimension. Instead of live performance of the excerpts from Beethoven's music, recorded music was employed. This solution might nevertheless have proven acceptable, assuming a good choice of recording and a fine sound system. Most unfortunately in this production, the director sadly chose to substitute pop music for Beethoven in some of the most crucial and moving passages. Superficial sentimentality and feel-good mood music destroyed the end of Act 2, stripping away gravity and genuineness from the conclusion of the play.

One of the most successful recent realizations of '33 Variations' was the production by the MESA Company in New Orleans, directed by Michael Cooper. In this production, the intersection of temporal levels – as Katherine and Beethoven converge – was effectively portrayed. Near the close of Act 1, to the playing of the sublime Variation 20, Beethoven's appearance on stage lent spiritual support to the increasingly frail musicologist. This moment in the New Orleans production is shown below: [Maggie Eldred is Katherine Brandt, and Phillip Karnell plays Beethoven.](#)

The second image from this production, shown above, on the other hand, depicts the weakened





Katherine in a wheel-chair in Act 2, positioned between the manuscript pages to her right and the playing of Beethoven's music by Chia-Hsing Lin from across the stage.<sup>11</sup> The interaction of individual actors with Beethoven's live music assumes an indispensable role at key junctures of '33 Variations'. One of these—the enactment of Beethoven's creation of the fugue (Variation 32) in Act 2 – requires painstaking coordination between the actor for Beethoven and the pianist, but holds the potential to bring down the house with the audience. The basic strategy of absorbing musical performance into a narrative resembles that employed by a novelist like Thomas Mann in passages of *Buddenbrooks* or *Doktor Faustus*, but in Kaufman's play the actual performance of the music delivers the message to the viewer/listener with palpable force.

A key scene near the play's conclusion is Katherine's hallucination of Beethoven and their ensuing dialogue. Although she finds such hallucination 'unbecoming in a scholar,' she recognizes that without the power of imagination, thought remains sterile. Beethoven's supportive presence

from the end of Act 1 is expanded here into an encounter that overcomes the play's dualistic temporal structure and generates the healing agency of humor. In limbo together with Mozart, Schubert, and others, Beethoven confesses how his distaste for angelic music has made him wish that he were deaf again; he quips that God is unhappy with them in heaven. Art is unruly, unwilling to submit to convention and capable of transcending its time and place of origin. For Beethoven, a closed 'work-concept' is not a guiding principle in any strict sense. Instead, his working methods display a pattern that embodies a sustained way of life, a process richly infused in fantasy, avoiding excessive restraint of the intellect upon the imagination.

What does Dr. Katherine Brandt learn in her quest for meaning? How is her vision expanded? Her blindness/deafness stems from her intellectual arrogance, or her assumption that Beethoven's attitude to the waltz—and by implication to the commonplace elements of the everyday world – was fully defined by its critical edge. Beethoven does indeed indulge in caricature of Diabelli's ditty, and subjects its repetitious banality to decisive critique.

Nevertheless that is not at all the whole story, but at most a half-truth. The term ‘Schusterfleck’ or ‘cobbler’s patch’ is itself a technical term, referring to the mechanical sequences in Diabelli’s theme, an element that Beethoven subjects to persiflage in Variation 27. Yet it is through the self-possessed contemplation of such details that other kinds of creative possibilities are unlocked. Daughter Clara’s affection for Diabelli’s theme as a ‘beer-hall’ waltz embraces a truthful recognition of character that wisely withholds judgment, retrieving thereby something about a moment of life. And as Gerti reminds Katherine, she herself has been guilty of insensitive treatment of her own daughter as a ‘second-rate waltz.’ Hence creativity derives not merely from critique but also from compassion, from a generous recognition of potential and openness to a wide range of contexts.

Let us return in this vein to the conclusion of the Diabelli Variations, to the passage whose genesis we surveyed above. There is something wonderfully paradoxical in Beethoven’s open ending to the Diabelli Variations. Even the final chord is a surprise – the long-range backward glance and conclusion on a weak beat conveys a sense of unfinished business, of a witty smiling gaze, suggesting perhaps that the creative process is not exhausted after all, and that even more variations *could* have followed.

Beethoven’s Diabelli Variations are an enduring monument to the principle that creative potential lies in the transformation of the commonplace. In these ‘extensive transformations of a familiar German dance’ (‘Große Veränderungen über einen bekannten Deutschen’), as he once described them,<sup>12</sup> Beethoven extracts a nebula of associations from the waltz, finding surprising riches even in its clumsy sequences and repetitious chords. The special personal meaning of this work for Beethoven is signaled as well by his dedication of the Variations to his intimate friend Antonia Brentano, who was possibly his ‘Immortal Beloved’ (‘unsterbliche Geliebte’). How astonished Diabelli must have been

at the unexpected outcome of his modest request for a single variation! In providing the real-life springboard, his ‘cobbler’s patch’ remained indispensable, yet the brainstorm that ensued conformed to Beethoven’s favorite saying: ‘Ars longa, vita brevis’ (‘Art is long, life is short’).

## Notes

- 1 *Ludwig van Beethoven: Briefwechsel. Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Sieghard Brandenburg, 7 vols. (Munich: Henle, 1996, 1998), L. 2017.
- 2 ‘Mikrokosmos des Beethovenschen Genius’ (Hans von Bülow, ed., *Sonaten und andere Werke für das Pianoforte von L. van Beethoven*, vol. 5, *Sonaten und andere Werke (Op.101–129)* (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1892), 159.
- 3 Butor, *Dialogue avec 33 variations de Ludwig van Beethoven sur une valse de Diabelli* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971); Irene Dische, *Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz* (London: Bloomsburg, 1994).
- 4 *Ludwig van Beethoven 33 Variations in C major on a waltz by Anton Diabelli for piano op. 120*, ed. Bernhard R. Appel and Michael Ladenburger (2 vols.) (Bonn: Verlag Beethoven-Haus [Carus], 2010).
- 5 My book first appeared as *Beethoven’s Diabelli Variations* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), and subsequently in various reprintings, including a 1999 version that included my performance of the work on CD with Hyperion Records. That studio recording as been joined with a lecture recital in a two CD set currently available through Arietta Records.
- 6 This essay appears in English and in German in vol. 1 of the facsimile edition, pp. 46-71, and is supported by facsimiles and transcriptions from Beethoven’s ‘Wittgenstein’ and ‘Engelmann’ Sketchbooks, as well as from the autograph score.
- 7 Thanks to the Beethoven-Haus at Bonn for granting permission to print these images, as well as the image below of the very last page of the autograph score.
- 8 For detailed discussion of these aspects of the work, see the final chapter of my book *Beethoven’s Diabelli Variations*, pp. 111-130.
- 9 These evolving versions of what became Variation 3 in the finished work are transcribed in my book *Beethoven’s Diabelli Variations* in pp. 19-20.
- 10 Moisés Kaufman has absorbed allusions to real personages into his play, whereby Katherine Brandt is named in honor of my wife Dr. Katherine Syer, who offered much input during the genesis of the play. Gerti Ladenburger, on the other hand, is named with reference to Dr. Michael Ladenburger at the Beethoven-Haus at Bonn.
- 11 I am grateful to Stacey Arton, Executive Producer of the MESA Production Company, for supplying these images and the permission to reproduce them in the present article.
- 12 Letter to Peter Joseph Simrock, 10 February 1820, *Beethoven Briefe Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 4, L. 1365.