

## Variation forms

1. The **concept** of variation and the use of variation **technique** are a part of every period, style, genre, and form. The idea and the practice of theme and variation are over four centuries old.
2. **The basic question to consider in all variation sets:** What is **retained** from variation to variation and what is **varied**? Remember to look **first** at:
  - a. formal outline;
  - b. bass line;
  - c. basic melodic pitches (retention of underlying framework?); and
  - d. harmonies—retention of basic framework (beginnings and ends of phrases) vs. alteration of the internal harmonies (those **within** the phrase).
3. There are two main possibilities of varying: **modification** of the given material itself and **additions to** the given material.
4. A set of variations may comprise a **movement** within a larger work, or it may be an **independent** work in and of itself.
5. Themes may come from a variety of sources. They may be:
  - a. “newly” composed specifically for variations (Bach’s “Goldberg” variations);
  - b. borrowed from a traditional or popular source (Mozart’s variations on “Twinkle”);
  - c. borrowed from another composer (Brahms’s *Variations on a Theme by Handel*, Op. 24);
  - d. less frequently, borrowed from the same composer’s earlier work (Schubert’s song “The Trout” became the basis of the fourth movement of his *Quintet in A Major* for piano and strings); or
  - e. based on two themes that are varied in alternation (Haydn’s “Variations in F minor”); in Richard Strauss’s “Don Quixote” the two themes represent the knight and Sancho Panza, and the variations might be said to show their evolution yet interdependence in the drama.
6. **The overall plan:** the cumulative effect of the variations and the resultant shape are important to the work as a whole. These are brought about primarily by such analyzable elements as:
  - a. gradual increase or subsidence of motion;
  - b. dynamic intensity and shape;
  - c. brilliance of color;
  - d. textural complexity; and
  - e. degree of submergence of the theme’s most recognizable features.
7. Through the 19th century, the theme’s structure (phrase lengths, shape, direction, cadences) was almost always “fixed”—that is, *set* throughout the variations. The harmony or harmony-and-melody were also usually fixed.
8. Variation forms most typically are **continuous**, **sectional**, or some combination thereof.

### Continuous variations (most popular in the Renaissance and Baroque)

While continuous variations were most popular in the Renaissance and Baroque, there are many examples from later stylistic periods, including especially the twentieth century. They are characterized by some **brief repeated pattern**; the pattern most commonly is a bass line or a harmonic progression, though other possibilities exist. Continuous variations normally follow each other without a perceptible break, resulting in a continuous flow of music. Some typical examples:

1. **Repeated bass patterns** of the Renaissance (and sometimes later): *Romanesca*, *Folia*, *Passamezzo moderno*, *Ruggiero*, and so forth. See the Burkhardt, pp. 32–36, for further important details and a few compositions based upon these patterns.

(more on **continuous variations**)

2. The **ground bass** variation: brief, repeated bass line; popularized by Henry Purcell (in what are usually called “ground bass arias” from operas) but used by **numerous** Baroque composers and occasionally later ones. Most commonly the ground is a diatonic or chromatic descent from  $\hat{1}$  to  $\hat{5}$ . “Dido’s Lament” from the conclusion of Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* is probably the most well-known ground bass aria.
3. The **passacaglia**: again, a repeated **melody** which typically begins as a **bass line**. The differences from ground bass: 1) the passacaglia pattern is typically a little bit longer; and 2) the passacaglia tune drifts into the upper parts—it is not confined to the bass line alone. Two examples: Bach’s *Passacaglia in c minor* and Brahms’s *Symphony no. 4, IV*.
4. The **chaconne**: it differs from the ground and the passacaglia in that the chaconne is most typically a **repeated harmonic pattern**—a progression that recurs over and over, sometimes with some modification. Chaconnes are commonly in a triple meter with a subtle accent on the second beat (note the similarity to the *sarabande*). Two examples: Bach’s Chaconne for solo violin, Holst’s *First Suite for Military Band, I*. The latter brings up an **important point**: the terms and types listed here are often used interchangeably—for example, Holst calls his movement a chaconne, though by the above definitions, it is really a passacaglia.

What makes this form continuous is the flow of the upper voices over the ostinato so that each statement can be linked, thereby contributing to the overall shape. Continuity can be achieved by:

- a. the bassline ostinato ending on the dominant, thus linking into the next statement’s tonic;
- b. maintaining dissonance in the upper voices, even if the final harmony involves the tonic;
- c. continuing the rhythmic motion through the cadence;
- d. continuing one idea from one variation to the next (in an upper voice); in fact, the upper voice may ignore the phraseology of the bassline, thereby “combining” two or more bassline statements; and
- e. anticipating the new rhythm of the next variation at the cadence of the previous statement.

### Sectional variations (most popular in the Classical, Romantic periods)

Sectional variations were most popular in the Classical period, especially as sets of **theme and variations**. Their popularity extended into the Romantic period, when numerous composers wrote variation sets as *Hausmusik* for people’s entertainment in their homes.

Sectional variations differ from continuous variations in that sectional variations contain a **complete theme**—a closed entity or entire little piece unto itself which is then subjected to variation techniques of various kinds. The theme here is often a period or in simple or rounded binary form. Another more obvious difference is that sectional variations are “sectional”—there typically are clearly-defined cadences and/or breaks between the variations, while continuous variations are more “continuous.” The difference between the two can be a little hazy at times.

The elements of the theme which are most commonly **retained** in the variations include form and phrase structure, initial and cadential (and often all) harmonies, and the structurally most important melodic notes. Those elements which are most commonly **varied** include the melody itself (addition of notes), sometimes the harmony (more often in the middle of the phrase; less often at cadences), and the rhythm (naturally, the note values become faster as more and more melodic notes are added).

#### About the larger scale:

1. Look for groupings of two or more variations based on rhythm, motives, texture, color, register.
2. Sectional variations (and most especially theme and variations) are often organized by a process of **gradual rhythmic acceleration**—the note values in each variation get progressively faster. Composers frequently insert a **contrasting** variation (the contrast is created by a slowing-down of the tempo and note values; in a major-mode set, this variation is sometimes in the parallel minor), and variation sets of this type often conclude with a fast, technically demanding finale.

## Variations in the nineteenth century

1. Some composers continued to write “theme and variations,” including the rhythmic acceleration stereotype discussed above.
2. **Character variations:** a new type of variations in which a composer tries to convey a particular mood or even imitates pieces of varying characters—a march, a waltz, and so forth. Essentially, composers in the 19th century began to explore the possibilities for varying the more deep-seated aspects of the theme’s character—its tempo, metric organization, even its structural outline and form—thus producing *fundamental revisions* of the theme’s basic aesthetic characteristics.
3. **Free variations:** variations of this type move farther afield from the theme—the variations often abandon the formal and sometimes harmonic models established by the theme. Beethoven is often acknowledged as being one of the first to experiment with both character and free variations. Much of Schumann’s piano writing includes the idea of variation in some fashion.

## Variations in the twentieth century

The twentieth century is yet more eclectic—composers often do whatever they desire according to their own stylistic preferences. Britten often modeled his variations after earlier practice (especially after Purcell). Members of the second Viennese school (Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern, as well as later followers) eventually viewed serial (twelve-tone) variations as a possibility. Stravinsky was very concerned with the **melody** when he composed variations.