

Comments on the piece and on each variation

Kahn Variations is a set of 8 rhythmic variations based on a traditional theme from Qawwali music as sung by the Pakistani singer Ali Kahn. In each of the 8 variations –which are played continuously– I develop different rhythmic and melodic aspects of the original theme. From the harmonic point of view the piece is rather static, to some extent respecting the lack of harmony –in the western sense– of the original theme. The player may recognise a range of influences from Conlon Nancarrow and Latin-American music to my own previous pieces for marimba. All these influences have one thing in common: the articulation of pulse or multiple simultaneous pulses to create a dramatic musical discourse.

Variation I

The 1st variation introduces a triplet figure and the idea of bouncing echoes which will be developed later.

Variation II

Here a secondary pulse is introduced in the bass line. This pulse must be played very evenly, each note having the same dynamic and duration so that the listener may no longer be certain of where the main pulse is.

Variation III

This variation explores the idea of one hand or layer accelerating while the other one remains at a constant speed. It is therefore very important that the overall tempo should be kept as steady as possible.

Variation IV

Here there is a further development of the main idea in the previous variation. At times both hands seem to have changed speed in the opposite direction. In bar 76, for example, the theme begins to slow down while the right hand carries on playing a pulse which had accelerated on bar 71. Note that the tempo changes from $\downarrow=138$ to $\downarrow=108$ are in a ratio of 5 to 4. This is because the repeated crotchet pulse on the left hand at $\downarrow=108$ is equivalent to a duration of 5 semiquavers at $\downarrow=138$. Had I not changed the tempo to 108 it would have been necessary to notate each crotchet in the bass line (bars 84 to 87 and 91 & 92) as a crotchet tied to a semiquaver (a stream of syncopations that would hardly be perceived as a clear pulse, which is just what they are). On the right hand the phrasing would have looked a lot more complicated too. So, by changing tempo I simplified the notation and made the passage look simpler. Yet, the tempo changes must be played as accurately as possible since they do not represent a mere 'meno mosso' but a metric modulation relevant to the structure of the variation.

Variation V

In spite of the apparent complexity of this variation the rhythms in any given bar are simple. In each bar there is only a single rhythmic unit and it is only subdivided in the basic ratio of 2 to 1. So a passage in quintuplets will only have quintuplet figures of quavers or semiquavers in both hands (the same for triplets, etc.). I wrote the original version of this variation on 3 staves (see appendix). In the final score I reduced the 3 layers to simpler composite rhythms. From the player's point of view, it is essential to establish with precision the relationships between the different rhythmic units, and in particular between triplets and quintuplets. The perceptual result should be one of music which seems to accelerate and decelerate. It is more a variation of changing speeds than one of complex rhythms.

Variation VI

Here I developed a variation process not unlike the manipulation of *color* and *talea* found in isorhythmic motets. The sequence of pitches that make the theme of the piece is repeated time after time while the stress (accent and octaves) changes its position in the sequence with every repetition. For example, in bar 165 the stress is on the G#. In the following bar it falls on the A# (the next note in the pitch sequence), and so on. However, other small changes are introduced too, like the lengthening or shortening of the duration of some notes in the sequence. The procedure is neither as predictable nor as systematic as *color* and *talea* are in medieval motets. The overall effect is one of hearing the same musical phrase repeated from a different perspective. I sought that the listener might perceive these changes as a repetitive pattern, while being unable to predict its evolution. I intended to create a feeling of non periodic repetition as we find in nature.

The appendix contains some bars with the original notation of this variation in 3 staves, which show more clearly how the theme in the higher register is inserted in the overall process.

Variation VII

This variation develops the idea of a simple echo such as the type produced by 'time delays' or 'echo' machines used in rock and pop music. Such an echo is, in effect, a very close canon in unison. While the writing simulates this kind of echo effect it also controls and changes the canonic distances between the voices as well as their intervallic and harmonic relationship in a way that delay machines usually do not.

Variation VIII

In this variation I used most of the ideas from the previous 7 variations combined together to create a feeling of 'coda' and 'Finale' to the piece. A.V.

Khan Variations

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♩ = 138-144 always strictly *a tempo*

Theme _____ Variation I

Marimba *mf*

bouncing (like an echo) _____

7

Variation II

13

(the bass always a steady pulse of equal duration) _____

20

sfz *f*

Variation III

25

mp f mp mf

p

30

mf p mf mf mp

35

f mf f mf p f

39

ff mf p mf mp

Sample