Three B's—Three Chaconnes

Byron Cantrell

Ever since Hans von Bülow coined the expression "the three B's" in denoting J. S. Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms to the exclusion of other fine composers whose family names begin with that same initial letter, numerous comparisons have been made regarding the composition techniques of these masters. Although distinct forms are associated with the different time periods within which each lived, all three of these men are regarded as superior composers of variations.

Each has treated the usual melodico-harmonic forms so idiomatically that commentary is too often limited to banal remarks on similarities or non-comparative discussion of individual works. The continuous variation form, the chaconne, has, however, been ingeniously used by these three masters, and, because most of the aspects of the form are demonstrably retained by each of them, comparisons can effectively be made.

Emerging in the late Renaissance, the chaconne gained enormous popularity during the Baroque era; indeed, no opera in the Italian style was considered complete during this age without one or more numbers in chaconne form. But with the Classical period came a strong preference for melodico-harmonic variations and opera buffa finales, and the ostinato variation idea seemed destined for oblivion. It was Johannes Brahms, late in the Romantic period, who handsomely revived the chaconne and thus paved the way for its popularity among later composers.

In his book, *The Technique of Variation*, Dr. Robert U. Nelson devotes considerable space to a discussion of Baroque chaconne practice in the instrumental field. In order to consider the three pieces selected for study here, a list of fourteen points has been extracted from Dr. Nelson's work. The order in which he describes them is the order in which they will be used for the purposes of this analysis:

1. The chaconne is invariably in triple meter.
2. The accented second beat of the old chaconne is carried over from the original dance form.
3. Stock themes, based on or derived from ascending or descending tetrachords, were much used.
4. The harmonic structure of the original presentation is invariably as important as the theme itself as a basis for variation, although there is no fixed practice of either rigid conformity to, or departure from, the original harmonies.
5. Continuous structure is an integral part of the form.
6. Increased rhythmic movement is a prominent feature of the chaconne.
7. Pairing of variations is a common practice.
8. Transposition of the ostinato from the original voice to some other voice is not unusual.

9. Also quite common is the division of the set into sections, usually three, in opposing modes rather than contrasting keys, although the latter is also encountered.
10. In some of the chaconnes based on the descending tetrachord, the ascending tetrachord is substituted as a basis for variation in one or more variations.
11. Other musical forms are often suggested by returning to the original or related settings.
12. Contrapuntal devices, such as imitation and pedal point, are widely used.
13. Sequential treatment of figuration ideas is prominently featured in variations based on the tetrachord.
14. Other ideas are often added to the basic form to make it more interesting.[1]

Bach

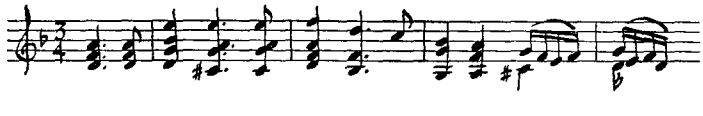
The best known of Bach's chaconnes is the final movement of the *Partita in D Minor* for unaccompanied violin. Phillip Spitta reasons that, because of its length and the fact that it is preceded by a gigue, the *Chaconne* is an appended, rather than integral, part of the *Partita.*[2] This deduction seems plausible enough as the *Chaconne* is in no way enhanced by the presence of the four preceding movements; indeed, the other movements begin to recede when their intrinsic beauty becomes overshadowed by the marvels of the *Chaconne.*

The dating of the work[3] and the determination of Bach's purpose in composing it are points of scholarly dispute. The date of composition can, in any event, be placed around 1720; Bach's intent was most likely founded in his desire to indulge in friendly competition with Johann G. Walther.

The most vigorous controversy, however, appears to concern the number and nature of the variations. Auer,[4] Szigeti,[5] Spitta,[6] Leichtentritt,[7] and Bernstein,[8] all pose individual views. Many writers describing this *Chaconne* identify an eight-bar theme upon which the composition is based; the number of variations claimed by these writers ranges from thirty-three to sixty-five and most often includes some bridges or extensions. The present study has determined sixty-four variations on a four-measure theme, with neither bridges nor extensions.

The Bach *Chaconne* actually opens with the first variation. The second beat of each measure enunciates the ostinato in the lowest voice, as shown in Example 1. The ostinato, constructed with a descending tetrachord, shifts to the first beat at Variation 5, and all subsequent alterations of the theme are created by expanding or compressing the ostinato motive within the four-bar period.

EXAMPLE 1



The triple meter remains constant throughout the work. Although the traditional accented second beat of the chaconne form is clearly evident in the first variation and for a while thereafter, it disappears in measure 24 and does not reappear until the close of the first section. In the major section, and in the concluding minor, the accented second beat is used in several successive variations, and then temporarily abandoned. In this way, Bach avoids rhythmic monotony and actually intensifies the effect of the traditional chaconne rhythm by highlighting it.

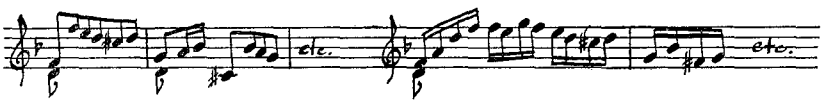
The harmonic structure undergoes little alteration until the fifth variation, after which it is not used except for the occasions when Bach employs the initial setting as a *ritornello* and for a few variations after this return. This can be seen distinctly at the change of mode from minor to major. In general, it can be stated that the harmonic structure is extremely fluid and only incidentally related to the initial presentation. However, Bach usually uses a V to I(i) or vii^0 to I(i) cadence.

Except for the breaks at the changes in mode, the variations are wholly continuous, one variation flowing into the next without any possible pause. In conjunction with this, the rhythmic pace increases steadily in each section and concludes in the minor section with a slightly modified restatement of the original setting.

Pairing of variations, common in this chaconne, begins with the first two variations and continues virtually throughout the work. Undoubtedly, it was this profuse pairing of variations that provoked the adoption of the eight-measure theme idea by Auer, Spitta, and others, who regarded the occasional single variations as bridges or extensions. Generally, the *double* is merely a figuration of the previous variation (Example 2), but a more subtle treatment is sometimes used wherein the *double* inverts the motion of the previous variation (Example 3).

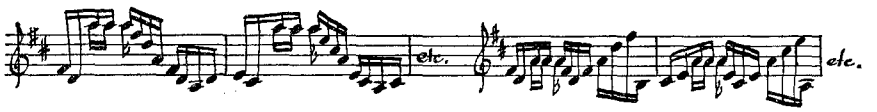
EXAMPLE 2

Var. 7 Var. 8



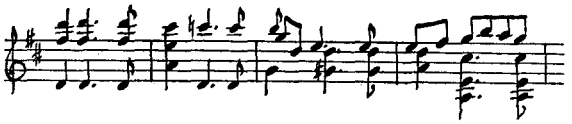
EXAMPLE 3

Var. 41 Var. 42



Single notes of the ostinato are sometimes transposed, most likely occasioned by the limitations of the solo violin medium. There is, however, one instance of complete transposition of the bass theme to the soprano in Variation 50 (Example 4).

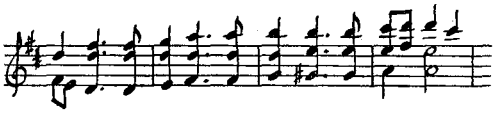
EXAMPLE 4



The *Chaconne* has three sections in opposing modes: the first and third sections in D minor, the second in D major. This middle section has only nineteen variations and serves very effectively to relieve the intensity of the minor so that it can be resumed in the concluding section.

Variation 49 is one which so disturbed Spitta that he considered it a new theme (Example 5). Upon examination, however, this variation proves to be the only one in which Bach has substituted the ascending tetrachord in the bass for the original theme.

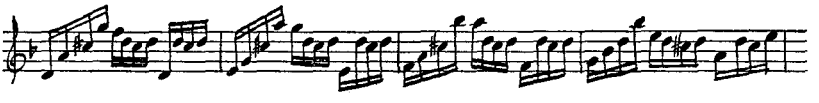
EXAMPLE 5



By dividing the *Chaconne* into three sections and using a variant of the original setting to conclude the minor section, Bach strongly suggests rondo form. This serves to give greater cohesiveness to such an extended work and conveys a sense of musical unity and coherence to the listener.

Because the violin is hardly the instrument with which to indulge expansively in contrapuntal devices, little use of such practice is made in the *Chaconne.* There is an occasional suggestion of imitation but nothing that could be firmly labelled as such. Instead, Bach makes use of some remarkable examples of pedal point. Variations 41, 42, and 43 feature a dominant pedal (Example 3 provides a partial quotation of Variations 41 and 42), which resolves on a tonic pedal in Variation 44. Variation 55 uses a mordent as a tonic pedal (Example 6). Bach makes his final use of a dominant pedal point in Variations 58, 59, and 60.

EXAMPLE 6



Sequential treatment is abundant in this work; often it is partial or modified, but many examples of full sequential treatment are present. Variations 9, 15, 17, 18, 20, 21, 31, 61, and 62 all demonstrate use of sequences. Variation 31 is especially interesting (Example 7).

Of the three works considered in this study, only this one is actually called "chaconne" by the composer.

EXAMPLE 7

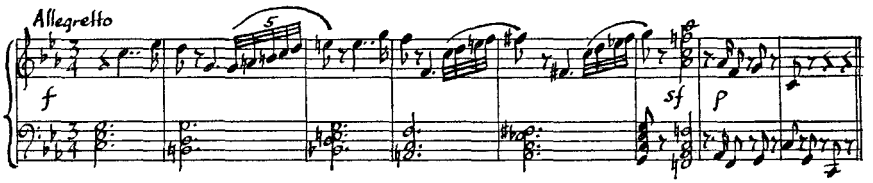
Beethoven

It is not known whether or not Beethoven consciously experimented with the chaconne form, although it is entirely possible that he saw or heard works in this form by Handel and other Baroque composers. In fact, as late as 1772, Tommaso Traetta had used the form as the finale to his masterpiece, *Antigona.* Because the Bach *Chaconne* was not published or performed until more than two decades after Beethoven's death, the *Thirty-Two Variations in C Minor* was, to the musical world of the mid-19th century, the older work. Despite the historical context, and in spite of the double bars that separate each variation, many musicologists consider the *Thirty-Two Variations* a chaconne. The German edition of Thayer[9] explicitly describes it as such, as does Fuller-Maitland.[10]

Theodore Frimmel, in the *Beethoven-Handbuch,*[11] quotes Nottebohm as placing the date of composition between the middle of 1806 and the beginning of 1807. He calls the work distinguished, states that Schumann played it and even unconsciously used some of its ideas in his *Symphonic Etudes,* and reports that Brahms assiduously practiced these variations.

The theme of the *Thirty-Two Variations in C Minor* is an eight-bar idea (Example 8). Triple meter is sustained throughout the work. The accented second beat of the old chaconne style is immediately abandoned after the first variation, but it reappears for Variations 5, and 9 through 15, and makes its final full appearance in Variation 31. Both the bass and soprano voices appear to be derived from tetrachords, the soprano ascending, the bass descending. Either of these voices can be made to function as the ostinato, but, because the soprano is merely an amplification of the harmonies and because the bass is not used all the way through the work, it seems more logical to consider the harmonic scheme itself as the ostinato. With the exception of the last variation, the harmonies remain absolutely faithful, with the solitary substitution of vii^{0}_{7} of F for V_7 of F in some of the variations.

EXAMPLE 8



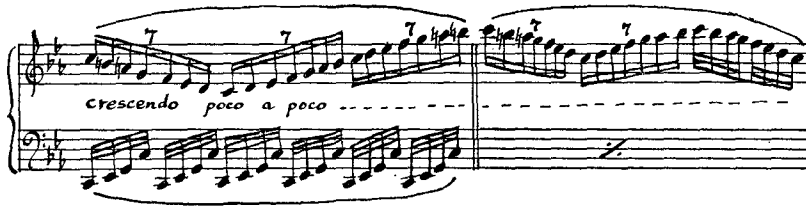
The structure is not continuous in that double bars separate each variation.

However, some of the variations either spill over into the following variation or are anticipated in the last measure of the preceding variation. In nine instances one variation flows into the next; thus, eighteen of the variations are joined in some manner. Example 9 shows a fine use of this procedure.

Increased rhythmic movement is less evident in this chaconne than in Bach's. Beethoven relies more on varying figurations to provide necessary contrast between variations. He also relies on changes in dynamics to express another type of separation, and only toward the close of the two sections in minor does one truly feel an extended increase in rhythmic movement.

EXAMPLE 9

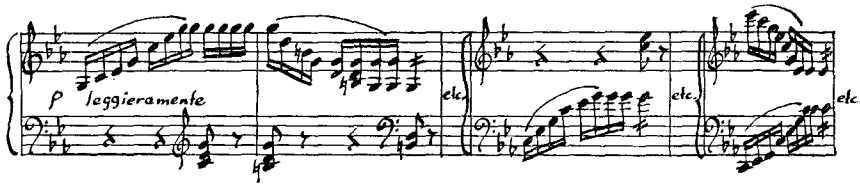
Var. 32



The pairing of variations is rather common in this work but not nearly so frequent as in the Bach *Chaconne*. Notably, the first three variations spring from a single figuration idea. Example 10 also shows that both the soprano and the bass ostinati are transposed almost immediately. In addition, Variations 10 and 11, 13 and 14, and 20 and 21 invert the ostinato between the hands.

EXAMPLE 10

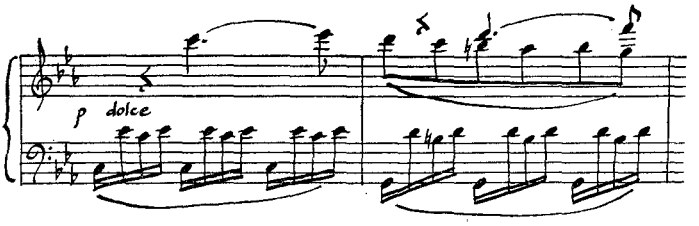
Var. 1 Var. 2 Var. 3



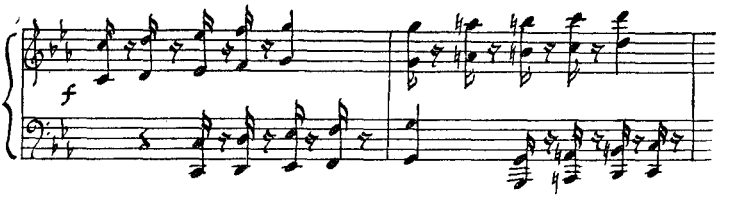
Like Bach's *Chaconne*, this work is divided into three sections in opposing modes, with the major lasting for five variations. Beethoven draws attention to this brief middle section by marking it *Maggiore*. There is no substitution of tetrachord, but the work as a whole does suggest a rondo. The reappearance of the soprano and the original harmonic progression—now in the major mode—at the beginning of the *Maggiore*, followed by the return of the theme in minor (with the bass harmonies arpeggiated) in Variation 31, strongly suggest rondo form.

Beethoven makes masterful use of many contrapuntal devices. Two instances of mirror imitation are shown in Example 10. This technique is also found in Variations 26 and 29, and, slightly modified, in Variation 6. Variation 17 is the return to minor, and the modified canon at the second between the alto and soprano over an Alberti bass produces a wonderful effect (Example 11). Variation 22 is a canon at the octave between the hands playing in double octaves (Example 12). Pedal point is used only once, on the tonic in Variation 31. Beethoven uses a few modified sequences in the course of these variations, but he does not really indulge extensively in this technique.

EXAMPLE 11



EXAMPLE 12



The most significant addition to the Baroque form is the extended coda of the last variation. It might be argued that the fugue which Bach added to the *Passacaglia in C Minor* was, like this coda, a free variation on the theme, but here the usage closely parallels that usually associated with sonata form. Other original inclusions are polyrhythmics in Variations 9, 16, the last bar of 31 and the beginning of 32, and the ostinato within an ostinato in Variations 10 and 11.

It is unusual that this work was published without opus number, but perhaps Beethoven regarded this composition as an experiment. At any rate, pianists are grateful for it, and it is the most played of all the sets that Beethoven wrote for the instrument.

Brahms

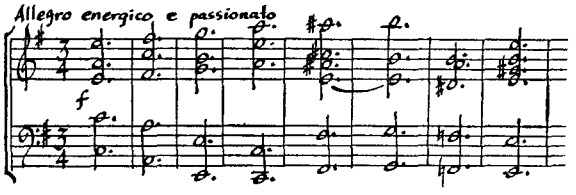
The finale to Brahms's *Fourth Symphony* refocused attention on the chaconne form. The symphony was unsuccessful for many years after its first performance but has steadily grown in the estimation of musicians and is now regarded as one of his finest compositions.

In the program notes published as an introduction to the Philharmonia edition of the Symphony, Karl Geiringer dates the composition of the last movement as the summer of 1885, and the first performance as October 25th of that year.[12] Fuller-Maitland lists the date of composition as 1886 and says that this last movement gave rise to much discussion because of its innovative qualities.[13] According to Edward Evans, Riemann stated that it was some time before even the professional critics realized the structural basis of the last movement.[14]

Since Brahms transcribed the Bach *Chaconne* for piano left hand and, in addition, knew the Beethoven *C Minor Variations*, it is interesting to see what he retains of each. The theme seems to have been borrowed from Bach but also greatly resembles the soprano theme of the Beethoven *Thirty-Two*.

Like the two works examined above, the theme is in triple meter (Example 13). The accented second beat is not present in the initial statement but is heard in the strings in Variations 1 and 2, dropped for Variation 3, used for the next three variations, dropped again until Variations 15 and 16, and further reintroduced in Variations 20, 21, 24, 25, 28, and 30. The theme also suggests its origin in the ascending tetrachord.

EXAMPLE 13



Sheer fluidity dominates the movement, as the harmonic structure begins shifting immediately after the first variation. Brahms retains the E minor center, yet modulates, however briefly, to almost every imaginable key. It is interesting to note that the dominant-seventh chord with the flatted fifth that enriches the seventh bar of the theme is heard again only in the first variation and in the twenty-fourth variation. So great is the wealth of harmonic change in this work that even a chord of such striking interest as this dominant is used only three times.

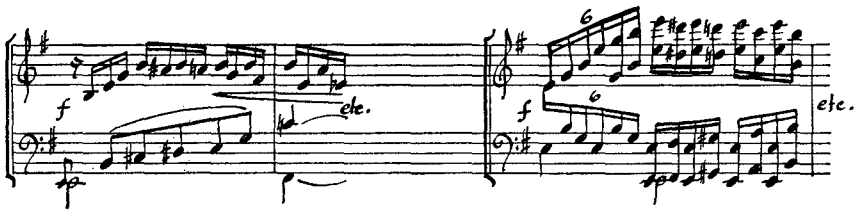
Brahms maintains the continuous structure of the old chaconne, even where he changes tempo. The rhythmic movement increases until Variation 10; then different ideas predominate until Variation 16. Intensity builds until Variation 22, where contrasting material resumes until the gregarious coda. Variation pairs are as common here as they were in Bach's *Chaconne*. The vigorous pairing of Variations 8 and 9 (Example 14) is very effective in a manner reminiscent of Bach.

In these ostinato transpositions, which would make an interesting study in themselves, Brahms not only transposes complete themes from soprano to bass or inner voices but also transposes single notes of the ostinato through

EXAMPLE 14

Var. 8 (strings only)

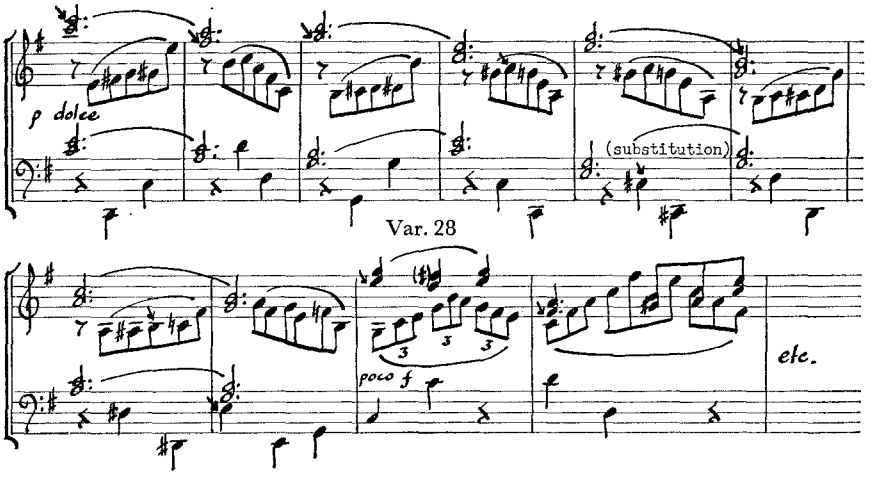
Var. 9 (strings only)



the voices. No doubt this method was greatly influential in the formulation of color melody by Schoenberg and his disciples. So many instances of this idea occur in the work that it sometimes becomes necessary to make an intensive search to find a semblance of the ostinato. Variations 27 and 28, which are paired, illustrate this idea (Example 15).

EXAMPLE 15

Var. 27



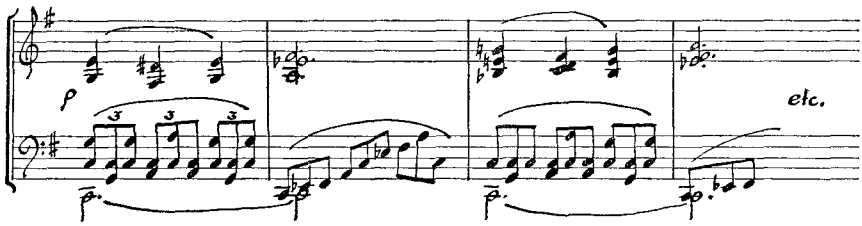
This chaconne is also divided into three sections using opposing modes. Variations 13, 14, and 15 are in E major—a much smaller section than either of the works considered above—but Brahms suggests other keys, as can be seen in the example above. Here, the variation seems to start in C major and, though the beginning of the last measure returns to E minor, it immediately moves away from the tonic.

Brahms does not substitute tetrachords, but he does occasionally substitute individual notes for those in the ostinato. Measure 5 of Variation 27 (Example 15) shows a substitution of C♯ (or A♮) for the A♯ of the ostinato. For the most part, however, the ostinato is retained intact, with some extension and diminution of parts of the theme.

Consistent with the symphonic character demanded by the other three movements of the symphony, this chaconne suggests sonata form; not only does it make use of modal contrast, but variations in the "exposition" are paired with others in the "recapitulation." Thus, the theme and Variation 16, Variations 1 and 24, 2 and 25, 3 and 26, 5 and 27, and 6 and 28 are all pairs that are used to extend the chaconne into sonata form.

It is only natural that a superb contrapuntalist like Brahms has endowed this movement with a vast array of contrapuntal ideas. Imitation is a prominent feature in Variations 3, 5, 7, 13, 18, and 28. There is a canon between the upper and lower strings in Variation 31, and mirror imitation is found in Variations 8, 15, and 18. Variation 26 uses a pedal on C with splendid effect (Example 16), and the tonic pedal is used in Variations 12 and 13. Sequences, very much in evidence throughout, are prominent in no fewer than twelve of the variations. Examples 15 and 16 show how effectively Brahms uses this idea.

EXAMPLE 16



Some of Brahms's additions to the chaconne form are highly original. Certainly, the pairing of variations in separated sections of a work is unique. Cross rhythms and polyrhythmics are abundant. Decidedly unusual is the change of time signature from 3/4 to 3/2 in Variation 12, followed by the change of mode in the succeeding variation. It is a stroke of pure genius not to have them coincide. A few of the variations are bridges between pairs or sections but still retain the ostinato, and there is a four-bar bridge between the last variation and the coda. The latter develops not only the theme itself but also a few of the variations. Octave transposition is very prominent, as can be seen in Example 15.

Returning now to the fourteen points that characterized Baroque chaconne practice, the results of this investigation can be summarized.

1. All three works remain in triple meter throughout.
2. None of the three works makes extensive use of the old accented second beat, although it does appear somewhere during the course of each work. Interestingly, Brahms decides not to use it for his theme.
3. All three works are based on tetrachords, but only Bach develops a four-bar idea. Consequently, he has many more variations than either Beethoven or Brahms.

4. Only Beethoven retains the harmonic structure virtually intact. Both Bach and Brahms depart at will from the initially stated harmonies, so that the return to the original harmonization is greatly enhanced and can be made to suggest other forms.
5. Only Beethoven does not maintain the continuous structure, but even he makes use of continuity where he feels it is required.
6. While all three make some use of increased rhythmic movement, it is most evident in Bach's piece. Beethoven and Brahms prefer contrasting settings along the lines of character variation.
7. All three make use of paired variations. Brahms pairs them not only side by side but also in different sections of the work.
8. All three composers transpose the ostinato at will. In addition, Brahms transposes individual tones of the ostinato, thus gaining greater flexibility in its treatment.
9. All three works are divided into three parts in opposing modes. Bach has the most, Brahms the fewest variations in the contrasting middle section.
10. Only Bach employs substitution of the ascending for the descending tetrachord.
11. Bach and Beethoven incorporate a suggestion of rondo form in their chaconnes. Brahms hints at sonata form.
12. Contrapuntal devices are very much in evidence in all three works, although Bach has fewer such ideas than is usual for him because of the limitations of the solo violin in performing multivoiced lines.
13. Both Bach and Brahms are lavish in sequential treatment. Beethoven relies but little on this device.
14. Bach adheres most strictly to the old Baroque form without adding to it except for the use of expansion and compression of the ostinato and harmonic departure from the original setting. Beethoven adds polyrhythmics, dynamic changes, an ostinato within an ostinato, and, most significantly, a coda. Brahms uses practically all of these additions, plus cross rhythms, extensions, bridges, tempo changes, polytonal effects, and alteration of the melodic structure.

Each of these works is a masterpiece in its own right. While adhering to the basic chaconne form, each composer amends it as his ingenuity dictates and infuses it with his own personal stamp. Perhaps this is why von Bülow's coinage of the expression "the three B's" has been almost universally accepted and still persists nearly a century later.

TEXTS EMPLOYED

The music used in analyzing the Bach *Chaconne* was a photostat of the 1720 Dresden Manuscript, which the noted violinist Marshall Moss was kind enough to lend this writer. This manuscript was compared with modern practical editions (Auer, Flesch, etc.) and with that which Bärenreiter published in 1958 as part of the Bach *Neue Ausgabe, Sämtliche Werke.*

The Edwards reprint of the Breitkopf und Härtel *Ludwig van Beethoven, Werke* was the prime source for the *Thirty-Two Variations in C Minor.* The edition of the complete variations for pianoforte, edited by Anton Door for Universal-Edition in Vienna, was also consulted.

The Edwards reprint of Johannes Brahms's *Sämtliche Werke* was the prime source for the *Finale* from the *Fourth Symphony*, and the Wien Philharmonischer Verlag edition listed below (Note 12) was also used.

NOTES

[1] Robert U. Nelson, *The Technique of Variation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1948), pp. 67–78.

[2] Phillip Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, trans. Clara Bell and J. A. Fuller-Maitland (London, 1899), Vol. II, p. 94.

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 71–72; Charles Sanford Terry, "Johann Sebastian Bach," in *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 5th ed. (London, 1954), Vol. I, p. 316.

[4] Leopold Auer, *Violin Master Works and Their Interpretation* (New York, c. 1925), p. 20.

[5] As quoted by Sidney Finkelstein in the liner notes for the Bach Guild recording 627/9, *J. S. Bach, Six Sonatas and Partitas for Violin Alone*, performed by Joseph Szigeti and released in 1962.

[6] *Op. cit.*, II, 95–96.

[7] Hugo Leichtentritt, *Musical Form* (Cambridge, Mass., 1951), pp. 312–14.

[8] Martin Bernstein, *An Introduction to Music* (New York, 1937), pp. 86–87.

[9] Alexander Wheelock Thayer, *Ludwig van Beethoven . . .*, trans. and ed. Hermann Deiters and Hugo Riemann (Leipzig, 1908–17), Vol. II, pp. 526–27.

[10] J. A. Fuller-Maitland, *Brahms* (2nd ed.; London, 1911), p. 153.

[11] *Beethoven-Handbuch* (Leipzig, 1926), Vol. II, p. 360.

[12] Johannes Brahms, *Symphonie IV* (Vienna: Wien Philharmonischer Verlag [n.d.]).

[13] *Op. cit.*, p. 152.

[14] Edward Evans, *Handbook to the Chamber and Orchestral Music of Johannes Brahms* (London [n.d.]), Vol. II, p. 164 (footnote).