

Beethoven, the Erard, and the *32 Variations* (WoO 80)

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In late 1803, Beethoven acquired a new piano from the French firm of Sébastien Erard. This piano differed from the one built by Anton Walter that he owned in the late 1790s, most notably in its heavier construction, English-style action rather than the lighter Viennese action, triple stringing, four pedal stops (lute, dampers, buff, *una corda*), and five-and-a-half octave range from FF to c4. Beethoven twice asked a builder to lighten up the instrument's stiff action; by 1810, he was complaining to Johann Andreas Streicher that it was beyond repair and "useless." Nonetheless, the evidence suggests—contrary to earlier claims—that he used his French piano extensively from 1803 to 1810 and that it was an important compositional resource during this period (Skowronek 2002/2010, Rose-van Epenhuysen 2005, Botticelli 2014).

Nowhere is the piano's influence more apparent than in his *32 Variations on an Original Theme*, WoO 80 (composed 1806), a quasi-systematic exploration of piano techniques, textures, and sonorities. This paper examines how Beethoven transforms a Handelian chaconne structure (Staehelin 2001) into a throughcomposed set of variations that alternates between didacticism and freedom while presenting a series of mounting technical challenges to the performer. These include various types of rapid passagework (throughout), parallel octaves (Variations 5, 7, 15, 16, 22), parallel thirds (Variations 14, 26, 27), persistent cross-rhythms (Variations 9, 16, 32), and repeated notes (Variations 1–3, 23, Coda), among others. Several variations overtly recall the English-style etudes of J. B. Cramer (1804) and Daniel Steibelt (1805).

WoO 80 also highlights distinctive elements of register and touch. As in Opp. 57 and 58, here Beethoven not only makes use of the Erard's extended range but also exploits the expressive potential of registral extremes in strategic moments. While he uses the low FF frequently, he strategically avoids the high c4, reserving it instead for a single moment of dramatic import. He also showcases a wide variety of articulations. As indicated in the first edition (Vienna: Bureau des Arts et d'Industrie, 1807), the Variations call for no fewer than five gradations of detached playing (one of which is routinely bowdlerized in modern editions) as well as long legato lines and various "wash-like" slurred accompaniments. Viewing both registration and articulation in light of the Erard's capacities and limitations suggests new ways of shaping interpretation.

Requirements: Piano, PowerPoint setup