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AN ANALYSIS OF BENJAMIN BRITTEN'S
*TEMPORAL VARIATIONS*
FOR OBOE AND PIANO

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Amanda Rae Pochatko

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# AN ANALYSIS OF BENJAMIN BRITTEN'S *TEMPORAL VARIATIONS* FOR OBOE AND PIANO

By

Amanda Rae Pochatko

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## ABSTRACT

AN ANALYSIS OF BENJAMIN BRITTEN'S *TEMPORAL VARIATIONS* FOR OBOE AND PIANO

By

Amanda Rae Pochatko

Composers use a variety of compositional techniques and structural principals to create coherency in their works. In his early work *Temporal Variations* for oboe and piano, Benjamin Britten experimented with the combination of traditional formal ideas and more radical tonal ideas. By giving the audience something familiar, he can also add some less traditional elements without losing his connection with the audience. These elements include the creation of pitch centers without traditional harmonic procedures and a musical surface saturated with dissonance layered on a quasi-tonal background. In the first part of this analysis, I explore what makes this work a theme and variation by looking at a set of expectations presented in the theme and how they are addressed in each variation. In the second part, I take a more holistic view by examining the overall form of the work. The overlying structure of this work is a five-part formal design.

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Composers have the daunting task of creating original and innovative works that are also accessible to the audience. The tension inherent in this process is apparent in the works of such composers as Schubert, Wagner and Mahler who, in very different ways, stretched tonality and tonal design to its limits. As common practice tonality gave way to more expansive tonal principles in the later-19th century, aspects of formal design such as phrase structure and overlying form also began to change. In this study I will be looking at his work *Temporal Variations* for oboe and piano. This piece is particularly appropriate for consideration because it remains accessible to listeners and performers as it explores new harmonic ideas and formal constructions.

*Temporal Variations* was composed in December of 1936.[1] Completed in less than two weeks, Britten originally referred to this piece as *Temporal Suite*, only deciding to change the title shortly before the premiere on December 15, 1936.[2] The work was dedicated to Montague Slater, a co-worker and artistic collaborator at the General Post Office.[3] In his diary the composer appeared pleased with the work and wrote "My oboe suite which they [Natalie Caine and Adolph Hallis] play well if not brilliantly and which goes down well-surprisingly..."[4] Unfortunately the work has received little attention

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[1] Benjamin Britten, *Temporal Variations* for oboe and piano (London: Faber and Faber, 1980) 1.
[2] Benjamin Britten, *Temporal Variations*, introductory notes by Colin Matthews.
[3] Britten dedicated many works from the 1930's to Montague Slater, all of which involve politics (specifically ideas about war) as a central idea. The two men held similar political beliefs and despite their work at the General Post Office Film Unit, many of their outside projects were overtly critical of the British government's actions.
[4] Donald Mitchell, ed., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Diaries of Benjamin Britten,*

until recently, due to the fact that after the first performance, it was never performed again during Britten's lifetime and was only published posthumously.[5]

*Temporal Variations* consists of a theme and eight variations, all played without interruption. Each movement is numbered as well as given a title. Below is the list of movements in sequential order.

I. Theme
II. Oration
III. March
IV. Exercises
V. Commination
VI. Chorale
VII. Waltz
VIII. Polka
IX. Resolution

The significance of nine total sections will be discussed later but the titles give a hint at the overall arch shape of the work.[6] I will first look at the movements as individual sections; their internal forms, pitch material and variation techniques. I will then move on to the overlying form of the entire composition and the significance of the placement of each movement in creating a coherent work.

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*Volume II: 1939-1945* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991) 784.

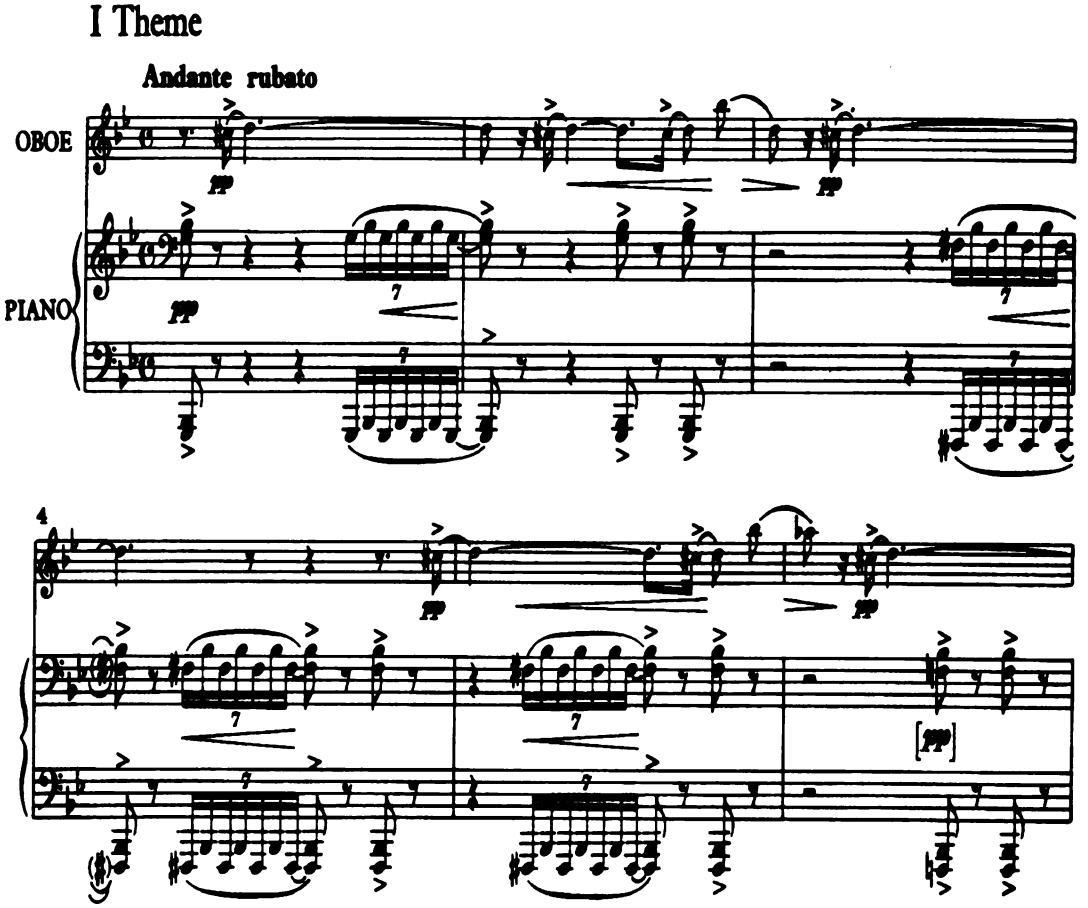
[5] Benjamin Britten, *Temporal Variations*, introductory notes by Colin Matthews. There have been recent studies as to why some of Britten's oboe works were not published during his lifetime, but this is not part of the scope for my study. Mark Biggam addresses this particular concern in his dissertation "Benjamin Britten's four chamber works for oboe".

[6] The words oration, march, exercises, chorale, waltz and polka evoke specific images in the context of war. The first three are obviously related to the militaristic side of war. The last three are less direct. They can be seen as civilian, almost separate from the chaos the war creates. However, Britten presents them within a larger context that forces them to be viewed in combination with the more militaristic elements. On the other hand, theme, commination and resolution are more broad and lean toward the abstract.

Britten's Theme is deceptively simple; the seeds for the entire piece are found in just 21 measures lasting approximately 1' 45". The most striking surface feature involving pitch is found in the oboe line. The incessant D, which is preceded by a sixteenth note C♯ every time except the last,[7] creates a pitch center not only through harmonic implications of the piano part, but also through repetition. The D is vital to both key areas of G and E♭, serving as the 5th tone in G and the leading tone in E♭. See figure 1

[7] There is a discrepancy between the original handwritten and published scores at this point. In the published score, there are three measures of material versus two in the handwritten. Unfortunately I have not been able to view the handwritten to see if this final length of the C♯ is affected.

Figure 1. Measures 1-6.




The C♯-D pairing occurs 14 times in the first 12 measures of the Theme. Ironically, these two pitches are conspicuously absent from the piano during the entire movement. This fact is unsettling considering their continuous presence in the oboe.[8] There is some evidence that this omission is a

[8] The repetition of these two pitches in the oboe line signal that they are a central idea to this movement and in fact the entire work. By omitting this focal point, the piano line becomes a completely separate voice. The two appear as opposing forces rather than two voices melding to relay a single idea. I discuss this more on page 8.

planned reference but further investigation would be needed to strengthen this claim.[9]

Harmonically the Theme moves from G minor to E♭ minor with an attempted return to G.[10] The opening minor 3rd of G-B♭ in the piano supports the oboe's pitch center of D to create a complete G minor triad. However, by measure 3, the opening stability is starting to be undermined by the piano's chromatic descent. With each new gesture, the piano expands the original minor 3rd. The expansion is done by descending chromatically from G and eventually landing on E♭ in measure 12 to form the second complete triad and tonal area of the movement (E♭ minor).[11] See figure 2.

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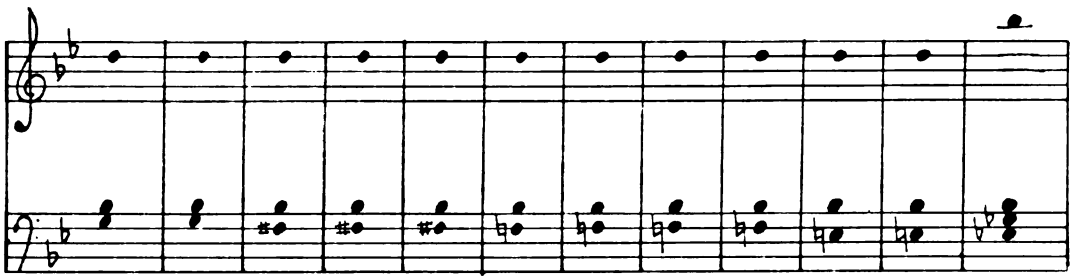
[9] The omission is resolved in later movements; the C♯ appears in the Commination and the D in the Resolution. This feature of omitting important pitches is also found in later variations such as the Chorale. I feel that by such blatant omission of key pitches, there is actually a hidden reference to the omitted pitches. In order to better support this claim, I will need to review a wider sample of Britten's compositions to ascertain if this is an isolated case or part of a recurring technique.

[10] Technically the movement doesn't make it back to G, but I feel the direction is clearly back to G. The implications will be discussed in more detail in the discussion of other movements.

[11] The static B♭ of the piano line is important also, but is less striking because the listener is generally more drawn to the changing pitch than the constant one. Just as the D of the oboe line fulfills a role in the two key centers of the Theme, the B♭ is the 3rd tone in G and the 5th in E♭. The use of common tone modulation creates a smooth transition from one key area to another.

Figure 2. Measures 1-12, chromatic descent of piano

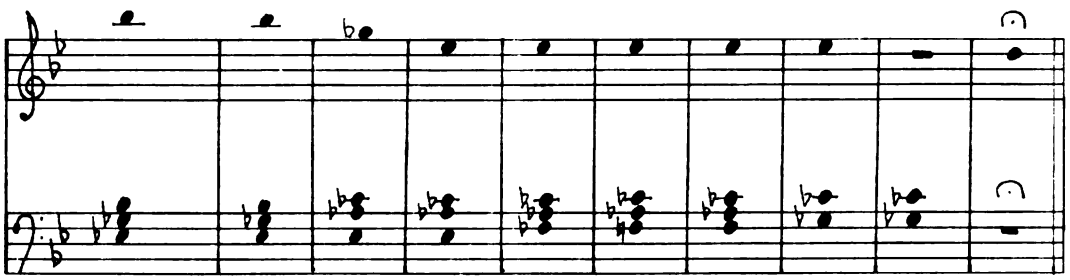


Measure 12 is significant for two reasons. The first is the complete e♭ minor triad; it is only the second complete and functional triad of the Theme. The second is that it signals the halfway mark of the theme.[12] The piano and oboe appear to begin the opening gesture again but at a different pitch level. However, by measure 14 the pattern is disrupted by the original static B♭ of the piano moving to C♭.[13] Following this shift, the C♭ now becomes the static pitch and the old pattern of the lower voice (in this case E♭) moving chromatically is reestablished. The difference between the first half's pattern and the second half's pattern is in the direction of the chromatic line; the motion is now ascending (instead of descending), collapsing the expansion of the previous half of the movement. See figure 3.

[12] The structure of the Theme is two part, the halfway mark signals the shift to the second part. Visually the Theme can be viewed as an arch shape. The first half creates the motion from a starting point to the middle of the arch. The second half picks up at the high point and mirrors (in retrograde) the return to the resting point.

[13] This unexpected shift might not seem that important at first. However, once it is added to the list of unresolved expectations, its role becomes not only clear but essential to the structure of the work. This list is compiled on page 7.

Figure 3. Measures 12-21, chromatic ascent of piano



The oboe line returns to the opening idea but differs from that of the piano because it actually completes the return to its opening pitches, C♯-D. The piano comes close (C♭ and G♭) but is still a half-step below and above the opening pitches of G and B♭. The lack of harmonic resolution leaves the Theme tonally open, an aspect not usually found in this portion of a theme and variation set.[14]

The Theme's forward motion hinges on these chromatic lines outlined in figures 1 and 2 because there is a lack of metric stability in the gestures of this movement. The oboe and piano act more as opposing forces, creating an unmeasured and almost stagnant atmosphere. The gestures found in this movement also defy the construction of traditional phrases.[15] The separation

[14] In footnote 10, I stated that the return to G is implied and that the implications of not making it back to "home" will be discussed later. The most important result of this failure to return is this lack of resolution, which plays a key role in the formal ideas I discuss in the second part of this study.

[15] The gestures in the Theme can be broken into segments, but I would not call them phrases for two reasons. The first is that a phrase has an underlying harmonic motion. The segments in this movement do not move anywhere; each one is stationary and only by adding segments together does any harmonic motion occur. The second reason is that phrases have an internal structure that these segments lack. Phrases are generally based on an

of lines creates ambiguity and uncertainty that further the feeling of unresolved expectations. This open-ended construction of the theme contrasts sharply with more traditional themes, which are generally complete ideas that can stand alone both formally and harmonically. By creating a need to progress and allowing room for growth in addition to variation, this movement turns the traditional idea of a theme on its head. By now a set of expectations has formed that will surface in each subsequent variation:

- the creation of a pitch center, either with or without traditional harmonic devices
- the juxtaposition of static and moving pitch elements
- the surface saturation of minor 2$^{nds}$
- metric stability or lack of this
- internal formal designs: how individual gestures and metric stability aid or hinder their clarity, and
- the feeling of resolution or the need to progress.[16]

The Oration begins with a completely different mood than that of the Theme. Forward momentum is immediately present in the piano's opening flourish. This gesture combines the presence of static pitches (in this case E♭ and A) with chromatic expansions similar to those found in the Theme. See figure 4.

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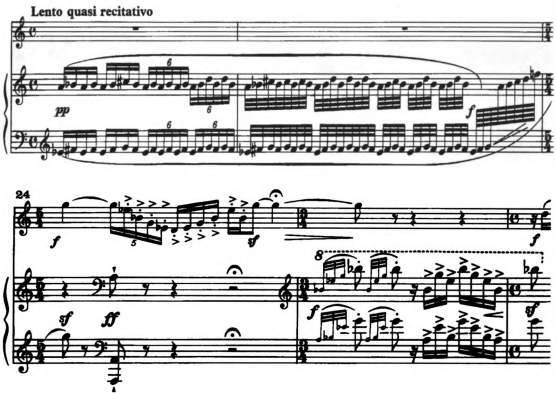
antecedent/consequent idea, which is not the case in these segments. By looking at the larger picture, one can see that this structure does appear (this is addressed in more depth in the discussion of the internal form of the Theme), but only on a much larger scale.

[16] In the first half of the analysis, I will discuss all the expectations in detail except metric stability. This topic will be further discussed in the second half dealing with the overall formal design of the entire piece.

Figure 4. Measures 22-26.




With each return to E♭ and A respectively, there is an enlargement in the total distance covered. The gesture ends in a run of all the preceding pitches which leads to the first oboe statement of the movement in measure 24.

The surface of the Oration is also full of the chromatic dyad idea first stated in the Theme. Many of the piano gestures begin with a chromatic pair in one of the lines. Figure 4 shows one occurrence of this paring, the right hand opens with the A/B♭ chromatic dyad. The majority of these pairings are found in the oboe line. Almost every gesture begins with a chromatic dyad, and with each statement the frequency of these dyads increases. By the final gesture, every note is preceded by its lower chromatic partner. See figure 5.

Figure 5. Measures 40-41.


Although the oboe pitches can be forced into chordal structures (E♭ minor 7th, B major 7th, and diminished F♯ 7th), these chords have no harmonic function. E♭ establishes itself as the tonal center for this movement through repetition and despite the lack of traditional tonal support. The piano outlines an E♭ major triad in measure 25 (see figure 4 on the previous page) but the line really emphasizes the B♭.[17] As the movement progresses, the E♭/B♭ conflict grows. By the end the B♭ appears to win, with both the oboe and piano finishing on B♭. Without ever presenting a complete triad, the B♭ has apparently asserted its dominance.

The structure of this variation is elusive because the gestures act more as elements of speech than traditional musical structures. They are short bursts of very similar ideas which progressively build into new ones, eventually ending in a restatement of the original idea. The only gesture that is out of place occurs in measures 32-36. Although the oboe and piano still play off

[17] This idea of putting greater weight on the dominant tone rather than the tonic is the same idea found in the Theme's opening. In that movement the center is G, but the oboe emphasizes D.

each others' lines as before, the mood is completely different than in previous gestures. While it is not evident on the first listening, this phrase is actually a bit of the upcoming Waltz. The effect is unsettling until familiarity with the piece is established, and for many listeners this interjection supports the growing feeling of a lack of resolution.[18]

The Oration does not fit into a typical formal design. While the tonal design is basically E♭ moving to B♭, the return of the opening oboe gesture gives this movement a twist. If this recapitulation did not occur, the movement could be seen as through-composed. However, the return to this material gives the Oration a rounded feel while challenging traditional expectations about resolution. The final measures provide closure with the return of the opening material and the cadenza gesture, but the motion to B♭ as a tonal center leaves the listener questioning. Is it possible that we have moved to B♭ or are we still in E♭ and just ending on B♭? While this uncertainty lasts for just a brief time, it helps connect the Oration's end with the March's beginning. The B♭ of the Oration moves directly back to the E♭ in the March. [19]

The surface of the March is also saturated with the chromatic dyad gesture. While there are many minor 2nd pairings, a variation is added;

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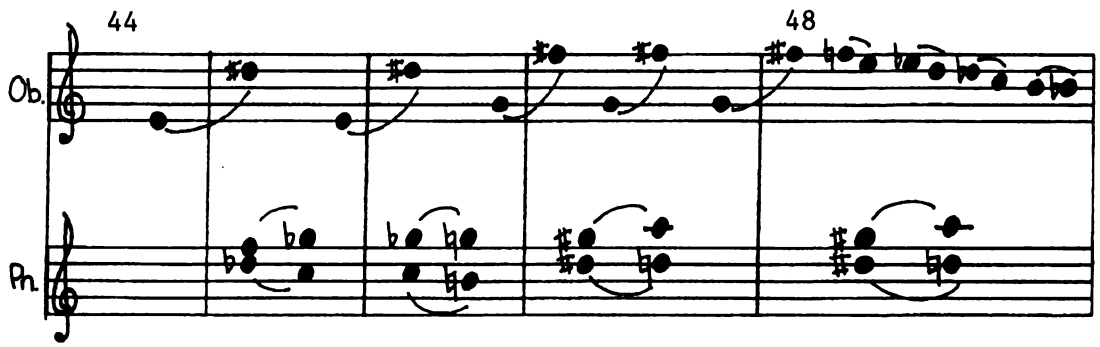
[18] The Oration follows the Theme's cyclic structure, with a return to the opening piano gesture, creating a feeling of closure. This feeling is sidestepped in the Theme due to the lack of G minor but in the Oration the tonal problem is not apparent. This could account for the addition of the Waltz material. This is the only time Britten references another movement before its original presentation.

[19] This will be discussed in more detail later.

inverting the minor 2nd into a major 7th. This can be seen in the first measure of the variation and is continued throughout the movement. See figure 6.[20]

Figure 6. Measures 44-48. Reduction showing chromatic dyad motion.




The most obvious chromatic dyad figures are found in the oboe part; measures 51-58 and 76-83. The incessant pairing of D with E♭ is reminiscent of the Theme's C♯ and D. Within the 16 measures mentioned above, the pair can be found fifty times in the oboe part while the piano presents no D-E♭ pairs.[21]

The March is the first movement where there is a conspicuous internal form. Despite the continuous use of courtesy accidentals, Britten changes the key signature in measure 60 to show the separation of the first theme from the second. The character of the music, as well as the accompanying figurations, also shifts at this point. This variation has a clear rounded binary structure,

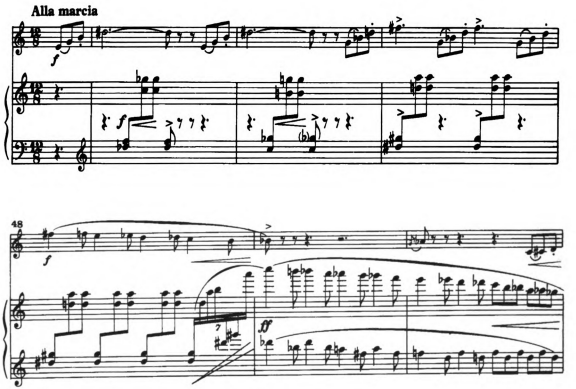
[20] The oboe mixes major 7th and minor 2nd pairs, while the piano only has minor 2nd pairs.

[21] The piano has D and E♭ in its part; however the two are not paired as a single gesture. This differs from the Theme because the piano does not play the C♯ or D at all in that movement.

with a return of the first theme at measure 76. However, the bluntness of the separate sections is disguised through transitions that blend the end of one into the beginning of the next, much in the way the separate variations are connected. The pitch materials for both sections are also related, thus furthering the fluidity of one into the next.

In the first section, the oboe begins by outlining minor triads with added major 7ths while the piano figurations consist of chromatic dyads and longer chromatic strings. See figure 7.

Figure 7. Measures 44-50.



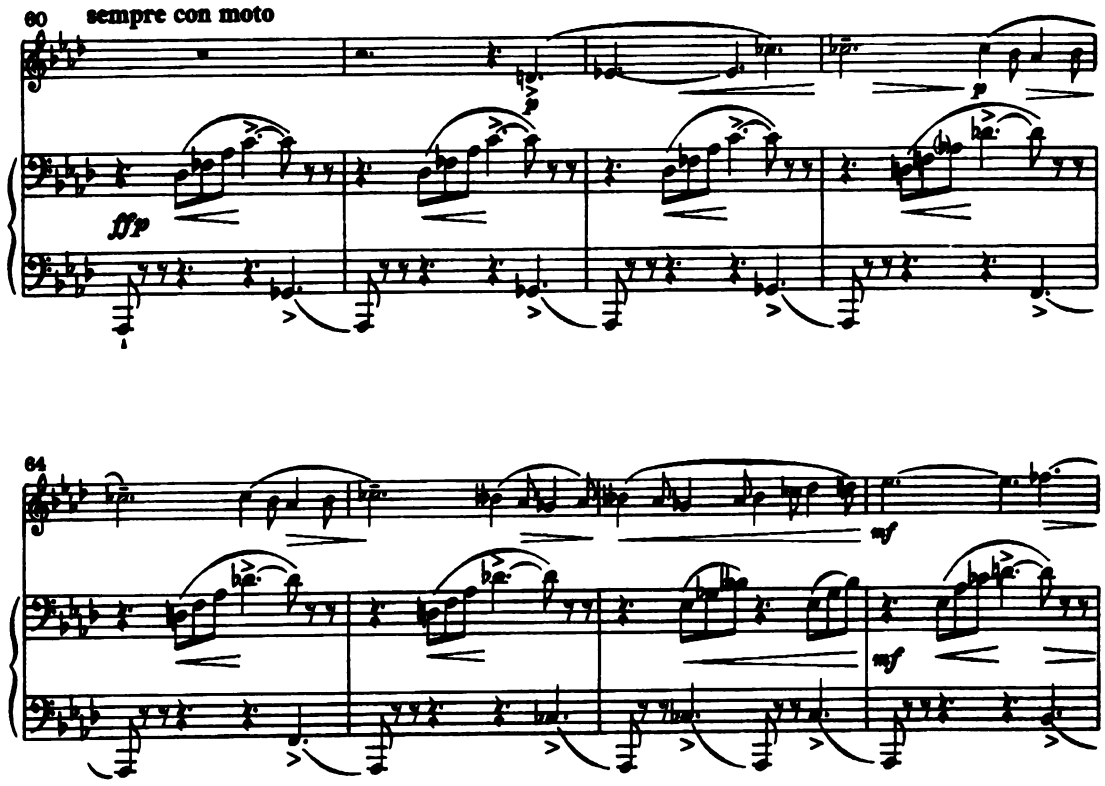
There is no harmonic support for these triads, but a pitch center of D♯ arises out of sheer repetition.[22] The D♯ is important because it is enharmonically equivalent to E♭, the tonal center of the previous movement.[23] This D♯/E♭ is also the common tone held throughout the March, remaining static even though its surroundings change. It not only provides a tonal center but creates cohesiveness within the variation.

In measure 60 the parts switch, giving the piano the chordal outlines while the oboe turns the chromatic wanderings into a melodic line. See figure 8.

[22] This is similar to how E♭ asserts itself in the Oration as the tonal center without any traditionally functional support.

[23] To the listener, the uncertain B♭ ending of the Oration is now finished in the March with a focus on the D♯/E♭.

Figure 8. Measures 60-67.




The pitch center remains E♭ despite the key change, and both the oboe and piano re-emphasize its importance with the return of the first theme.[24] Clearly E♭ is the tonal center of the March and the expectation is to end on it. However the oboe never gets there, ending its established pattern one note short.[25] This is jarring considering that these two pitches are always heard as a pair in this variation, and although most would internally complete the figure (the same way most do when a V7 is left unresolved at the end of movement) Britten does not give the listener a chance. Without a pause, the next

[24] In measure 76, all three voices present end their lines on E♭.

[25] The oboe ends on the lower partner of the chromatic dyad D-E♭; the D.

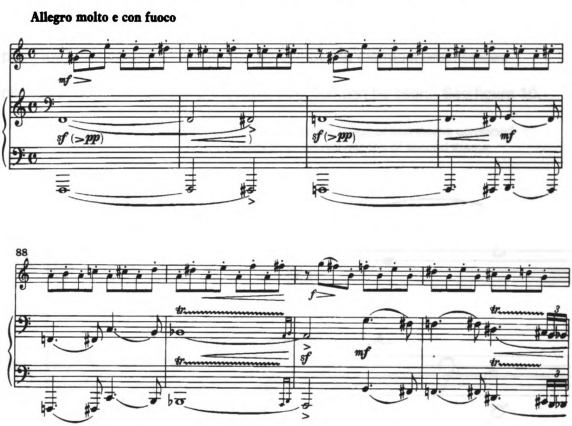
variation begins on F and completely bypasses the E♭ we expect. Once again a clear resolution has been sidestepped, and we are pushed on to the next variation with our expectations of resolution unmet.

The stability of the March not only comes from its internal structure but also the strict metric nature of the two themes. This is the first clearly metric/measured movement with a clear teleological direction. There is no change in meter at the section changes and the constant 12/8 adds to the blending of the two segments. This metric continuity, as well as the D♯-E♭ pitch center implied by the repetition lends the movement direction and coherency despite the lack of functional tonality.

The forward momentum of the March continues into the Exercises. This variation, however, is more elusive than its predecessor in terms of pitch and formal structure. The chromatic dyads are once again ubiquitous in this movement.[26] The dyads begin each syncopated entrance in the first theme of this variation, alternating upward and downward in direction. For example, in measure 84 the dyad is G♯-A, then it changes in measure 90 to G-F♯. There are also longer lines composed of chromatic pairs mixed throughout this first idea. See figure 9.

[26] Exercises is the most saturated (of all 9 movements) with the chromatic dyads. Both instruments are constantly presenting the pairs because both musical ideas presented in this variation are based on the dyads.

Figure 9. Measures 84-91. Oboe has first theme, piano has second.



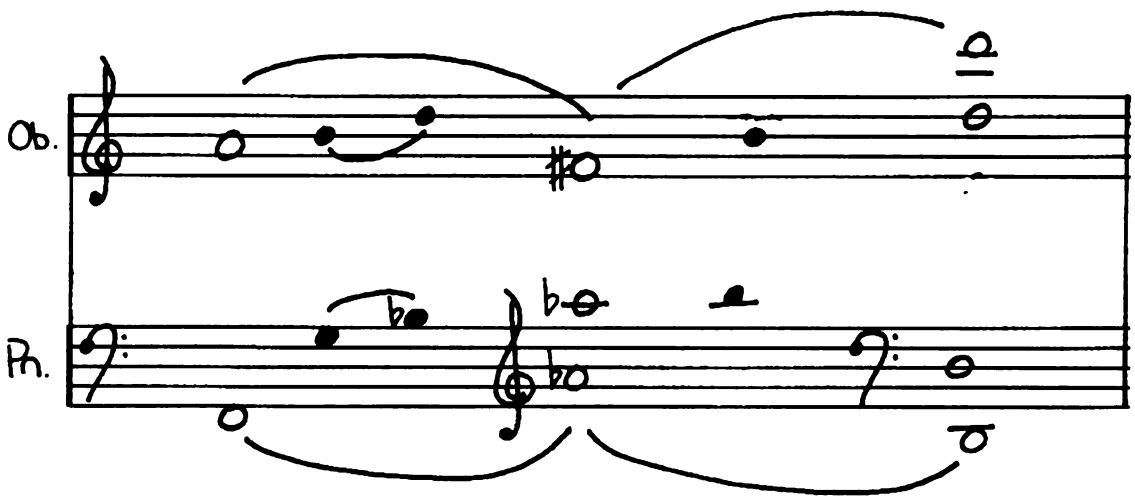

The second theme is also saturated with chromatic dyads. Each main note in this line is paired with either its chromatic upper or lower neighbor. The character of this line is less urgent than the first but the common thread of chromatic dyads links the two musical ideas.

The combination of static elements with moving ones appears in the Exercises' first theme. The oboe has this line from measures 84-99, the piano takes over in measure 103 and eventually both instruments join in measure 118.[27] In each phrase, there is a constant pitch alternated with a moving line.

[27] The discussion presented below about this variation's internal form gives more detail about the interplay between the two musical ideas that are present in the Exercises.

This technique is generally used to create the illusion of more musical lines being played simultaneously. I feel that in this variation these static pitches point toward a hidden tonal center. By combining the most emphasized pitches of both musical lines, the tonal direction can be seen. See figure 10.

Figure 10. Reduction showing static pitches of first theme combined with emphasized pitches of second theme.




In the first section, the oboe's static A is paired with the piano's F. In the second section, the piano's static A♭ is paired with the oboe's F♯. By the final section, both instruments have D as the static pitch in their lines. I feel that the first two pairs of F/A and F♯/A♭ are hinting at the original tonal center of the set, G, because they begin a pattern of contraction toward this pitch. In this context, the D would act as the dominant and be a logical choice for a second tonal goal.[28]

[28] Despite the lack of appearance as a static pitch, there are other factors that lead me to this conclusion about the pitch center of G. The two other static pitches found in the oboe in the

While there is much room for interpretation with regard to the tonal direction of this movement, the driving forces are clearly the quick tempo, regular meter and cleverly placed syncopated entrances.

The meter is a straightforward simple duple for the entire movement, with syncopated entrances found in the first theme. In the first statement of this theme, the static pitch is on the beat in both voices. This emphasizes the static tones which happen to be the A and A♭ mentioned above.[29] By the second part of the theme, the static pitches in the oboe (B and D) fall after the beats. This lowers their importance, if only slightly, which can be seen in figure 10.[30] Due to the constant meter, changing the placement of the static pitches adds variety and interest to this movement.

The two separate musical ideas found in this variation are layered on top of each other instead of occurring sequentially. The contrapuntal effect is quasi-fugal, evincing the technique of alluding to earlier compositional techniques mentioned in the introduction. By labeling the themes with letters, the formal design can easily be seen. The first theme is labeled with an A, the second with a B and the return of the first with an A'. See figure 11.

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first section are B and D (both members of a G triad). The piano also refers to a G triad (different quality though) with the pitches G and B♭.

[29] The A is in the oboe line beginning in measure 84, and the A♭ is in the piano line beginning in measure 103.

[30] This switch in placement changes the focus from the static pitch to the chromatic line that is juxtaposed with it. Whichever gesture lines up with the metric pulse receives more emphasis.

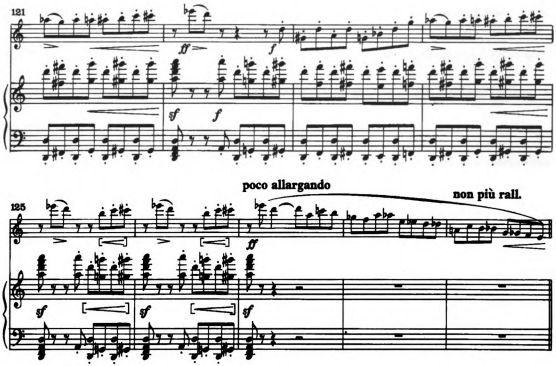
Figure 11. Internal structure of Exercises.

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Oboe | A | trans. | B | trans. | A' |
| Piano | B | trans. | A | trans. | A' |
| measures | 84-99 | 99-102 | 103-113 | 114-117 | 118-129 |

This variation is the first one to use the oboe and piano together to present a theme (A'). This new combination of the two parts contrasts with the previous music and acts as a signal to the listener that something important is about to happen. This theme drives the movement into the Commination but not without playing with our expectations about resolution once again.

The restatement of the first theme of Exercises has a tonal center of D. This D is emphasized by both instruments as the static pitch. The interesting twist is that the staggered entrances of the parts and the placement of the static tone cause the D to sound on every eighth note in this final section. The piano begins first with the D on the beat while the oboe begins two beats later with the D on the off beat. Even the climax highlights D with a descending chromatic dyad. See figure 12.

Figure 12. Measures 121-129.




Despite this constant presence of D, the movement does not end on this pitch. Instead the descent is abruptly cut off the note before the resolution. This type of ending is similar to the one found in the March with a slight difference. The desired E♭ of the March is completely skipped, while the missing D of the Exercises is found in the Commination. The first gesture in this movement is the original C♯-D chromatic dyad, which serves not only as a reference to the Theme but as a delayed closure to the Exercises.[31]

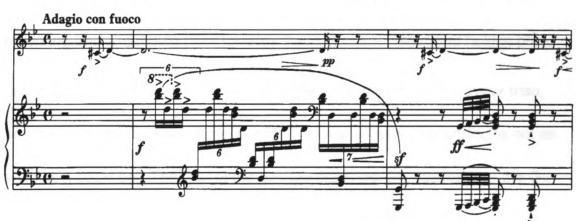
The Commination marks the halfway point in this set and the return to many of the same musical elements found in the Theme. The similarities are

[31] This is not full closure because the resolution is also the beginning of another variation. It is an important moment because this is the first sense of resolution for a movement in the complete work (albeit a dovetail into another one). This new idea is another signal to the listener that something important is about to happen.

most apparent in the oboe line which is almost identical to the Theme. There is a return of the incessant C♯-D dyad an octave lower this time, and the C♯ is again always a sixteenth note. There are some temporal differences, like the placement of gestures within measures and the length of held pitches, but most are superficial.[32]

In contrast, the piano provides new gestures to create variation from the original Theme. The gestures are less directed in this movement, intensifying the sense of instability to the originally unmeasured feel of the Theme. Whereas in the Theme, the piano helped push the music forward with a quasi-ostinato pattern, in this movement there are fewer block chords and more internal subdivisions. Even though the difference is subtle, the momentum of the variation is affected. See figure 13.

Figure 13. Measures 130-132.




[32] For example, the first oboe gesture occurs on the pickup to beat 4 versus beat 2 in the Theme, but because no strong metric background is established it is impossible to know this unless you have seen the score.

The major difference between these two movements is the harmonic goal. The Theme travels from G minor to E♭ minor and then turns around while the Commination starts in G minor and moves to E♭ and stays there. The background has also been slightly altered beginning with the delay of the complete G minor triad. The first sonority is a third comprised of B♭ and D. This leaves it harmonically open to whether the oboe will be supported by B♭ major or some other harmony.[33] In the third measure, the G sounds, followed by a complete G minor triad, clearing up any doubt as to the harmonic center. The duration of the chromatic descent is also expanded in the Commination. The motion begins on G (just as in the Theme) in measure 132 and finally ends on E♭ in measure 143.

The design is almost identical to that of the Theme, but instead of reversing and ascending back towards the G, E♭ is restated and held in place until the end of the variation. The Commination ends with an E♭ minor triad, not the expected G minor of the Theme.[34] However even this ending is not as solid as it could be. The final piano gesture omits the E♭, focusing on the G♭-B♭ third while the oboe holds its B♭. See Figure 14.

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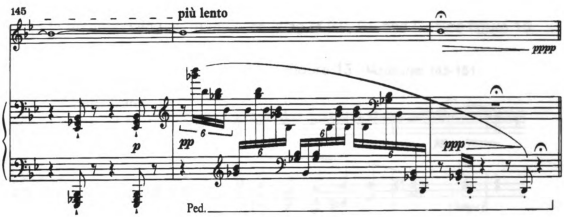
[33] The B♭-D dyad is continued through the entire movement, despite the chromatic descent of the piano. This triad can be grouped with the C♯-D of the oboe as another static element of this variation.

[34] Although the Theme never makes it back to the opening G minor, I feel the attempt is obvious and the intended goal is simply delayed to create a need to go on instead of having a self-contained movement.

Figure 14. Measure 145-147.

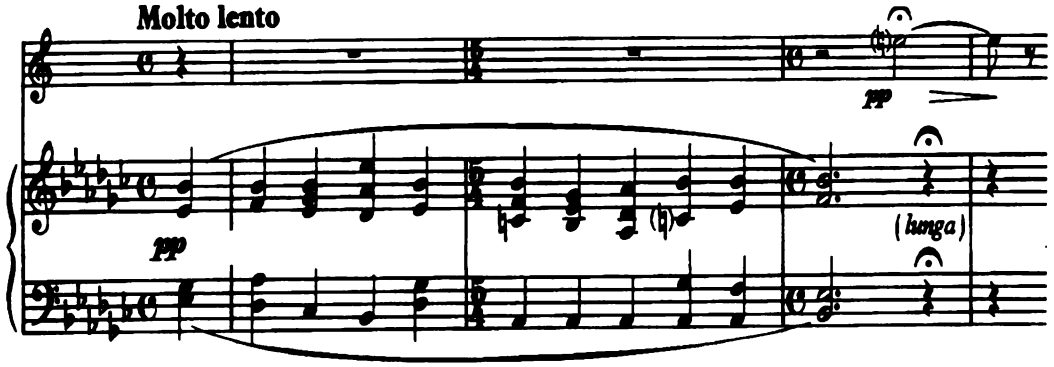



Although no E♭ is played in the last two measures, it is obviously implied, both by the complete E♭ minor triads in the piano part immediately preceding and the opening harmony of the next movement. The final inverted chord is unstable, giving emphasis to the B♭ instead of the root, a technique utilized before which creates an unsatisfying end. I will further discuss the significance of this ending along with the similarities to the Theme in the next section which deals with the overlying formal structure of the complete set.

As expected, the Chorale picks up where the Commination leaves off, in E□ minor. This variation appears to follow traditional harmonic progressions more so than the previous movements, but they are still combined with new harmonic ideas. Looking at the overall motion of the piano phrases, some traditional harmonies arise (E♭ minor moves to B♭ for example) but there always seems to be a pitch that doesn't fit.

The opening piano phrase begins with a complete E♭ minor triad and moves to an interesting harmony consisting of B♭, E♭ and F. See figure 15.

Figure 15. Measures 148-151.



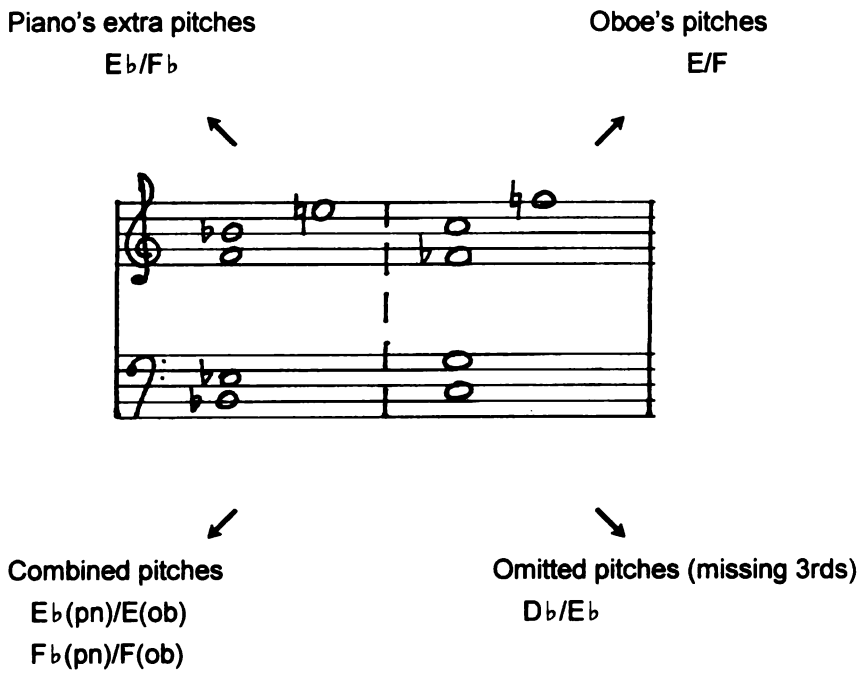

While the B♭ and E♭ make sense if the goal is an E♭ harmony, the B♭ and F make sense if the goal is instead a B♭ harmony. By comparing several of the phrase endings in this variation, I have concluded that the intended harmony is B♭, with the E♭ acting as the extra member. The main reasons I have chosen this interpretation are the similarities of the resting harmonies in the piano and the extra members' relationship to the oboe pitches.

The piano's first two phrase endings occur in measures 151 and 154, both consisting of three perfect fifths played simultaneously. By removing one pitch in each (E♭ in the first and F♭ in the second), two harmonies come to focus (B♭ and C♭).[35] One reason for choosing these harmonies is because

[35] While some may argue that I arbitrarily chose which pitches to remove, there is a connection between these pitches and the oboe pitches immediately following the chords.

they are part of the underlying harmonic sequence of this movement, beginning with E♭ moving to B♭ to C♭ and G♭. Another is the removed pitches' relationship to the oboe line. When the first extra member of the piano harmony, E♭, is viewed with the oboe's E natural, the first chromatic dyad is seen. The same is true for the second harmony- F♭ paired with the oboe's F natural. See figure 16.

Figure 16. Web showing all the chromatic dyads created by measures 151 and 154.




More chromatic dyads can be found by looking at the oboe's first two pitches (E-F) and the two removed pitches from the piano line (E♭-F♭). I feel that this web of chromatic dyads did not happen by accident, but their relationships

were planned and justify my choice for which harmonies I label as functional in this variation.

The overall harmonic motion of the Chorale is sequential, as mentioned above. The opening E♭ moves to B♭, B♭ to C♭, C♭ to G♭ and finally G♭ to B♭. The sequence is cut off before it moves back to the tonal goal of E♭, creating the same lack of resolution found in every movement of this work. The only deviation from this pattern is found in the motion from C♭ to G♭, measures 158-161. These harmonies are not functional, but act as passing harmonies. The Chorale, unlike many of the previous variations, does not find resolution in the opening of the next movement.[36]

The piano is the focus for the majority of the Chorale. The piano creates structure, provides the harmonic motion and establishes the metric foundation for this variation. In fact, the oboe almost feels like a completely different entity in this variation. The pitches found in the oboe line are not part of the harmonies presented by the piano. I see them more as interjections between the piano phrases and not as a supporting feature.[37] They create an atmosphere of uncertainty and help undermine the tonal center of the Chorale.

The beginning of the Waltz is also tonally ambiguous. The opening piano vamp presents two opposing voices; the left hand has a I-V-I (B♭-F-B♭)

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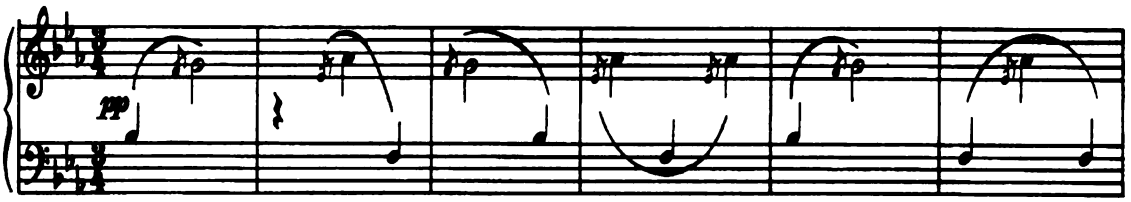
[36] The next variation is the Waltz. This movement is ambiguous in regards to a tonal center in its opening. See the next page for more detailed discussion of this movement.
[37] Due to the connotative nature of this variation, one can assume that the oboe line may be referring to church bells heard as accents to the chorale

pattern while the right hand oscillates between the two members of a chromatic dyad (G-A♭).[38] See figure 17.

Figure 17. Measures 167-172, piano.



The palette is further muddied by the embellishments to the alternating G and A♭. Harmonically the effect is unsettling and combined with the unstable meter; the traditional notion of the elegant Waltz is destroyed in this surreal variation.[39] The oboe's entrance in measure 171 adds more harmonic tension with a focus on G and B♭, hinting at a G minor tonality. Although there are common tones between the piano and oboe's tonal center (G and B♭ are both members of G minor and B♭[40]), the effect is bi-tonal and significantly adds to the oddity of this variation.

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[38] The piano lines have been analyzed in E♭ Major from the beginning of the Waltz (measure 167 as a $I^6$ with an omitted root and the next measure as a $V^4_3$ with an omitted root and third), but I disagree with this analysis. How is the listener supposed to assume the roots at this point with no prior tonal context to rely upon? I feel this analysis is just a way to make the pitches fit into a chord, not how the lines actually work. When listening to the orchestrated version, this idea of two separate lines is further validated by the instrumentation: the left hand is played by the cellos and the chromatic dyad is played by the violas.

[39] The metric instability will be discussed later in more detail.

[40] Due to a missing 3rd, the quality of the piano's tonal center is in question.

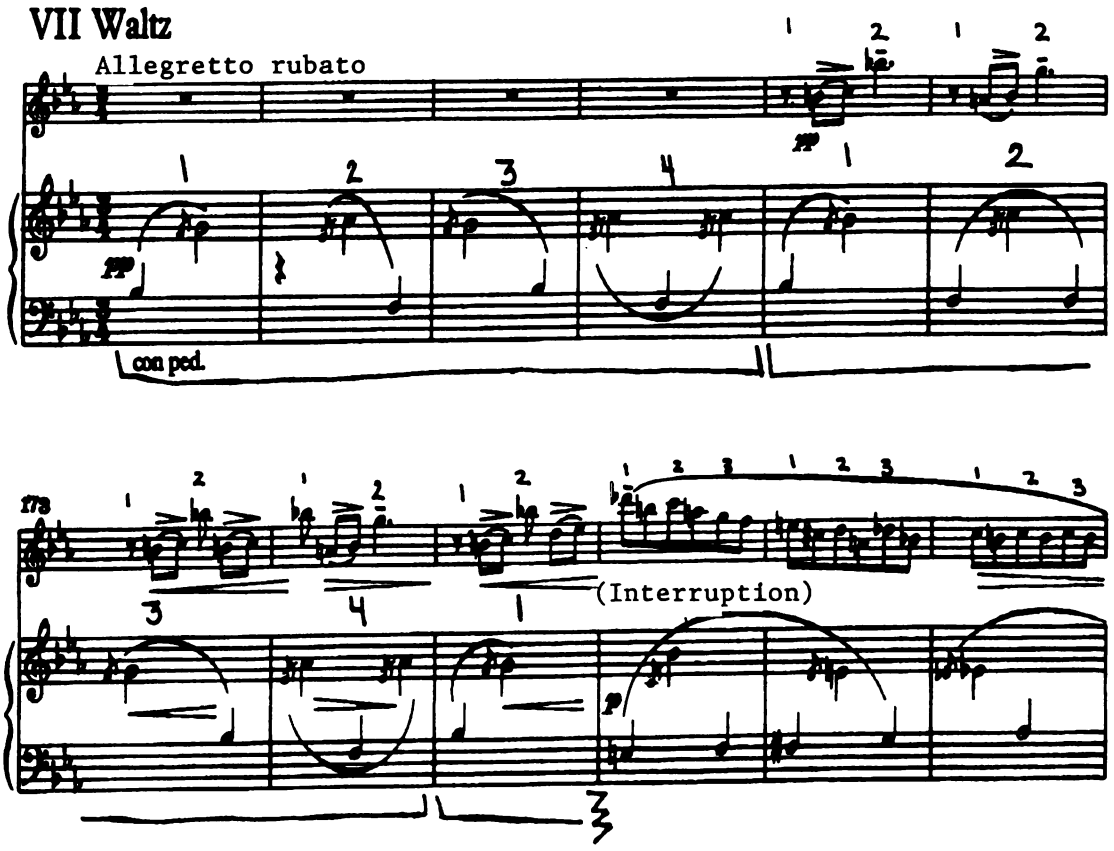
In measure 181 the B♭-F pattern in the piano is changed; the new alternation is between E♭ and B♭/F (played simultaneously). This modification begins the motion to E♭ as the overall tonal center of this movement. E♭ is further solidified when the oboe adds this pitch to the already established G and B♭.[41] By the final entrance of the melodic line (measure 109), both voices are centered in E♭ major; the oboe has the complete triad while the piano alternates between E♭ (I) and B♭ (V).

The chromatic dyads in this variation are most obvious in the oboe's melodic line. The focal notes of B♭ and G are always preceded by either the B/C or A/B♭ dyad. See figure 18.

[41] The modulations in this movement are very smooth due to the use of common tones. For example in the piano, B♭ is shared between the E♭ and B♭ triads. In the oboe, G and B♭ are held in common between E♭ major and G minor.

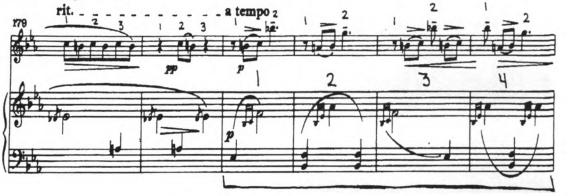
208, then there is the return of A in measure 209 and finally the movement ends with a 2 bar coda of material from B.[43] Notated in ¾, the traditional pattern of **1** 2 3, **1** 2 3, etc. is not found in this Waltz. The pattern is actually extended over a span of 4 bars. The combination of different meters for the oboe and piano give the variation a slightly off-kilter feel. The piano begins in triple simple while the oboe is in duple compound. See Figure 19 for an explanation of the meters.

Figure 19. Measures 167-184.




[43] This set up is similar to that of the March variation.

Cont. Figure 19




The awkward combination of meters seems to even out once looked at on a larger scale creating a more stable pattern, albeit not the traditional Waltz pattern, as stated above. Instead of the notated one, a 12/4 signature would better show the true metric pulse of the piano part. The syncopated oboe line also does not match the notated time signature. While these points may seem insignificant, they actually support the argument that Britten is using courtesy notations for the benefit of the performers.[44] The tonal centers and meters do not always match the written key or time signatures, a point some analysts have overlooked. [45]

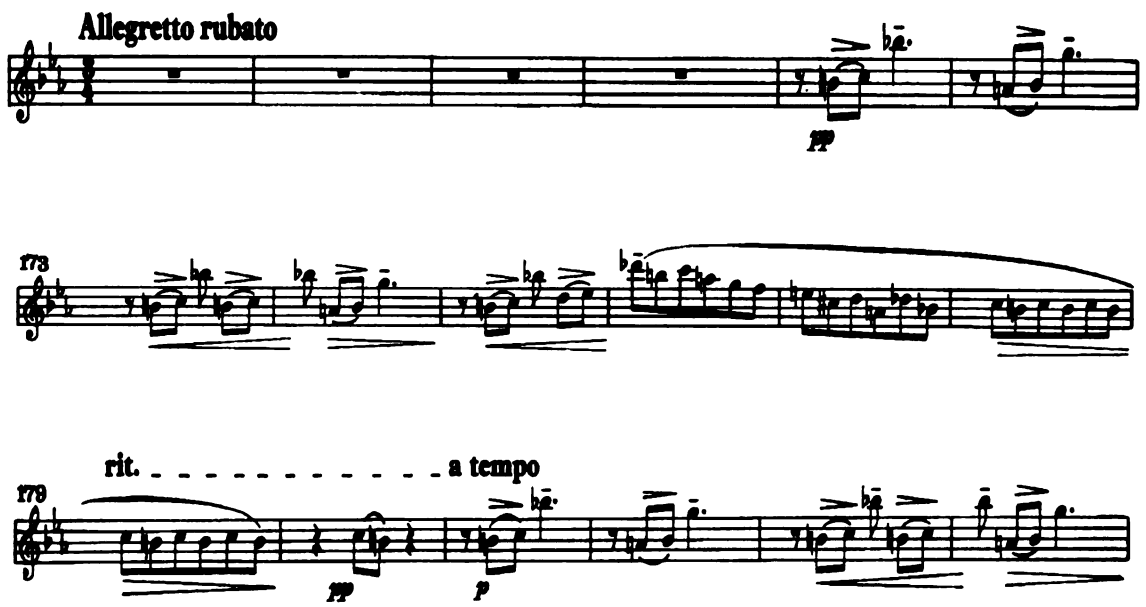
This variation is unique in many ways. First of all, it is the only movement to be referenced in another variation (excluding the Commination and Resolution).[46] Secondly, this movement does feel more completed because it ends with a resolution on the pitch center. The tonal center of E♭

[44] Although the use of courtesy accidentals is quite common in all music, I feel the hasty preparation of the piece is proof that the composer wanted to make reading the score as easy as possible.

[45] One such case is the analysis by Sotos Djovanis.

[46] As I will further point out in the discussion of the overlying formal structure of this piece, I feel that the Commination and Resolution are an extension of the Theme rather than being totally separate. For this reason I don't feel that they fit into this category with the Waltz.

Figure 18. Measures 167-178, oboe.




The interruption of the melody first occurs in measure 176, with a lilting descending line in the oboe. This gesture is full of chromatic dyads, but the most interesting pair is found in measure 178. The B/C dyad alternates for 3 measures, all the while slowing down. The effect is a feeling of the line dying away but before it disappears completely the pair leads us back to the melody.[42] Notice that this same pair precedes the oboe's opening B♭, refer to Figure 18. The piano also has chromatic dyads (the opening G-A♭ in the right hand, for example), but the majority are found in the oboe.

The internal structure of the Waltz is rounded; the first section (A) comprises measures 167-189, while the second (B) contains measures 190-

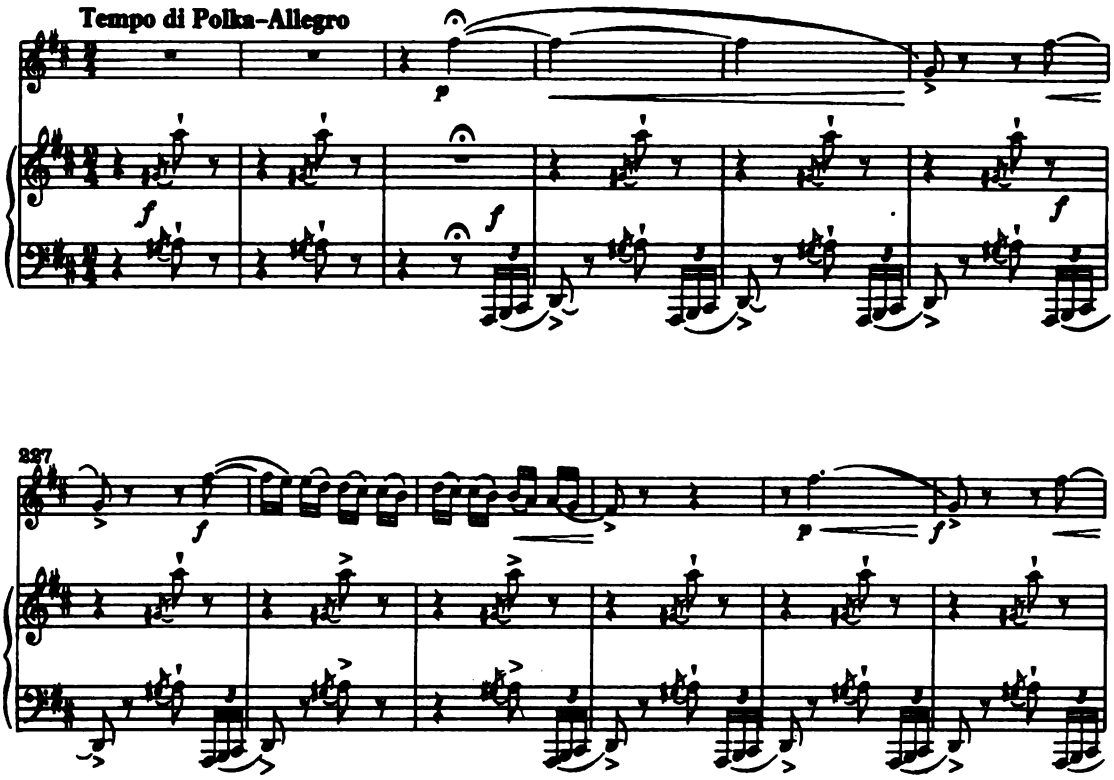
[42] The same idea occurs in measure 188, but with different pitches.

may not appear right away, but once it is established, there is no motion away from it. The final gesture even highlights this center, with both voices ending on E♭. The only lack of resolution, although it is very minor, is the missing return of the chromatic dyad that ends the interruption of the melody and begins the melody anew.[47]

The next variation is another dance, the Polka. The minor 2$^{nds}$ that saturate the other movements are also present here. Immediately the piano opens with two chromatic pairs. While the left hand plays the G♯/A as a minor 2$^{nd}$ (the original form of this motive), the right hand plays the same pitches but as a minor 9$^{th}$. In the oboe line the chromatic dyads are inverted to become major 7$^{ths}$. Although this is not a unique idea (the March first presents the dyad as an inversion), the downward direction of the interval is a new alteration. See figure 20.

[47] The first pair was the B/C discussed earlier. This omission is really not that odd. If it were present the movement might never end because this figure always signals a return of the melody.

Figure 20. Measures 221-232.




The form of the Polka is similar to many of the other variations; A B A'. The A lasts from measure 221 to 246, B from 246 to 270 and A' from 271 to 289. The first section is very repetitive and remains at a constant tempo. It is metrically stable and could be harmonically closed, but the motion to D is cut short.[48] The B on the other hand is full of gestures that are marked *rallentando* and *subito vivo*. The piano's slowing gestures are snapped back to the original tempo by the oboe's interjections. This push/pull feel creates some unsteadiness but does not really affect the variations overall metric stability. The return to A brings back the same oboe gestures with some

[48] The piano continues its alternating pattern of D and A while the chromatic line of the oboe ends on C instead of moving to the expected D.

elaborations in the piano figurations. Although the original tempo returns and is maintained for the rest of the variation, the gestures of both instruments create an illusion of an *accelerando* to the end.[49]

From the start, this variation is full of harmonic and temporal momentum. The duple meter is clear and steady throughout this dance,[50] and the tonal area is clearer than in the previous seven movements. Right from the start, the piano sets up the harmonic backbone focused around D, alternating between D (I) and A (V). The third of the triad (F♯) is provided by the oboe; this helps solidify the D major harmony. Through the repetition of this beginning pattern, D remains the tonal center for the entire Polka.

The Polka, although it ends strongly in D major, does not leave the listener satisfied. This is due partially to the harmonic motion (or lack thereof) of the variation. The constant pounding of one harmony for an entire movement actually begins to undermine the status of the solitary center; it begins to feel static and motionless. The desire to move on surfaces and the original tonal center begins to feel very much like the repetitious pedal tone of a development section of a sonata form. The intensity builds and builds until finally some motion (usually back to the tonic of the work) has to occur. In this

[49] This is accomplished via more subdivisions of the beat and with some syncopations added to the piano part.
[50] While there are sections of rhythmic instability during the *accelerando* and *rallentando*, the meter is not compromised.

movement the D therefore begins to shift from a tonic function to a dominant one. This leads us back to the original key for the entire work, G minor.[51]

Just as the Commination brought back elements from the Theme, so does the final movement of the work. In the Resolution, the chromatic dyad reappears in the oboe line, this time back at the original pitch level. In fact the C♯-D (with the C♯ always being a sixteenth note decoration[52]) is the only gesture the oboe has for the entire variation. There is also a return of the static element being juxtaposed with moving ones in this variation. While the C♯-D gesture never budges, the piano's line is everywhere. Although the idea is similar, the Resolution is different because there is no apparent pattern in the piano as there was in the Theme.[53]

As expected this return of the opening oboe material is accompanied by a lack of metric regularity. Although the oboe places the majority of emphases on the 2nd beat of each measure (the movement is notated in 4/4), this does not mean much because there is no downbeat to orientate the listener. The piano gestures are even less direct than in the Commination; none of the

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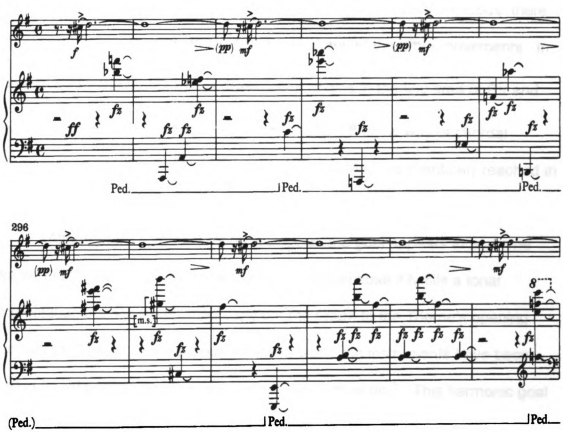
[51] Remember that this idea was already attempted in the Exercises. The tonal center of D led directly into the G of the Commination.

[52] The exception is the final statement. The C♯ here is an eighth note in notated length, but taking the *rallentando* into consideration lengthens the C♯ to make this statement almost identical to the final C♯-D found in the Theme.

[53] Remember that in the Theme the piano was moving descending chromatically from G to E♭ and then attempted to return after reaching E♭.

original quasi-ostinati are present, only sporadic quarter note gestures.[54] See figure 21.

Figure 21. Measures 290-301.




The momentum is further blurred by the use of the pedal to sustain the chime-like entrances, even after the notation fades. The lack of metric pulse also ties into the lack of an internal form for the Resolution. There are no signposts for the listener; no internal harmonic goals, no repetitions and no returns pf previous statements. The oboe is static while the piano's motion does not

[54] There are no subdivided beats in the piano part of the Resolution. All the groups of 6's and 7's found in the Theme and Commination have been left out.

help clarify, but instead creates more confusion. This lack of drive is supported by the harmonies presented in this movement.

The supporting harmonies in the piano are as elusive as the temporal direction of the Resolution. After the use of several analytical methods, there is no conclusive progression similar to that of any of the other movements. In one analysis, the author states "Resolution begins in the key area of B♭ and makes progressive motions around the circle of fifths, by way of chordal motions in the piano part, until the key area of G Major is eventually reached in measure 308".[55] However, there is no harmonic support for this idea.

Although the internal motion is unclear, the goal appears to be some form of G.[56] This tonal area is a logical choice because it fulfills a tonal expectation the set established early on, the return to the Theme's opening tonality of G minor. Throughout the entire work, the instruments have been trying to get back to this tonal center and finally they do.[57] This harmonic goal also helps pull together the piece as a whole, giving the set an overall tonal design that reinforces the overlying formal structure.

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[55]Christopher Mark. *Early Benjamin Britten: A study of Stylistic and Technical Evolution.* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995) 126-127.

[56] The quality is unclear because the third is missing from the final measure.

[57] There is one problem with this final harmony, the dissonant A against the G/D perfect fifth. I feel that the A represents an extra-musical idea; that although there is resolution on the surface, there is always dissonance underneath. This relates to the work's theme of war and Britten's personal feelings about the subject.

The overlying form of *Temporal Variations* consists of 5 parts, grouped as follows.[58]

| Group # | Title | Tonal center |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Theme | G/E♭ |
| | Oration | E♭ |
| 2 | March | E♭ |
| | Exercises | D |
| 3 | Commination | G/E♭ |
| | Chorale | E♭ |
| 4 | Waltz | E♭ |
| | Polka | D |
| 5 | Resolution | G |

There are several reasons for grouping the set in this manner. They include: harmonic and melodic pitch centers, similar musical gestures, metric stability and the significance of the titles of each movement.[59] The harmonic centers of G minor and E♭ minor act as opposite poles in this work, much like the tonic-dominant relationship found in tonal works. By 1936 (the year *Temporal Variations* was composed) many composers like Wagner, Tchaikovsky and Schubert had experimented with third relationships as one way of creating structure in their music. By looking at the overall harmonic movement, the

[58] As shown in later discussion, the 5 parts are actually 4, with the Commination and Resolution being grouped together as the consequent to the Theme.
[59] I have not discussed any extra-musical aspect of this work up to now and will not after the next footnote.

above structure can be seen. Please refer to the previous page for a general picture of the harmonic and melodic centers.

The Theme is centered around G and E♭ minor, while the Oration and March stay centered on E♭ (as mainly a melodic center) with D arising at the end of the Exercises. The D presents two options for movement. The first is a return to the E♭ by acting as the leading tone or lower partner of a chromatic dyad (a gesture that is found in every movement). The second is motion to G acting as a traditional dominant. The dominant pull to G is undermined because the quality of the D harmony in this variation is minor, so there is no leading tone or other tendency tones that want to resolve to G. Despite this lack of pull, the D does move to G, but the motion is through common tone rather than harmonic drive. The Commination also moves from G minor to E♭ minor, but this movement ends solidly in E♭. The next three variations mirror those of II, III, and IV. The Chorale and Waltz are centered on E♭ and the Polka in D. The major difference is that the quality of the D harmony is now major, creating an intense pull to G. This harmonic pull is finally fulfilled in the last measure of the work.

By examining the three single movements separate from the two multi-movement sections, different aspects of the overall form are highlighted. In these three movements, the compositional idea of conflict and resolution is extremely concentrated. As shown earlier, the Theme begins in G minor and

moves to E♭ minor but never makes a successful return to G minor. The Commination on the other hand begins in G minor and moves to E♭ minor with no attempt at a return, while the Resolution begins vaguely but eventually ends in G.

| I | V | IX |
|---|---|---|
| G:E♭ | G:E♭ | ?:G |

This progression looks similar to that of a tonally orientated parallel interrupted period and although I do not think that Britten consciously used it as a model for this work, I do feel that the idea of antecedent-consequent is central to this piece. As stated earlier the Theme is open-ended, an uncommon trait for traditional themes. A desire to progress is created by playing with the listener's expectations and withholding any resolution. This need to move forward changes the normally additive form into a continuous one.

These three sections are not only bound together not only by harmonic motion but by melodic gestures, metric instability and their titles, the significance of which is discussed below. The oboe line is the outstanding feature that first connects these movements for the listener. The same C♯-D gesture permeates all of them, occurring 15 out of 32 times in the Theme, 9 out of 16 in the Commination and 12 out of 12 in the Resolution. With each new movement, the fraction of these gestures increases until reaching complete saturation in the Resolution.

These movements are also the only ones of the set to lack metric stability. Their gestures actually hinder a pulse and help establish the unmeasured, almost dream-like or fantastic atmosphere that contrasts with the inner sections. Similar to the saturation level of the chromatic dyad of C♯-D, with each new movement the instability increases. In the Theme, a quasi-ostinato helps create some sense of structured rhythmic motion. In the Commination, these blocked chords reappear, but less frequently, and then they finally disappear altogether in the Resolution. The result of this disappearance to the listener is a feeling of no rhythmic stability whatsoever. The two ideas of the chromatic dyad and rhythmic stability work as opposing forces; as the pitch material becomes more focused and stable the rhythmic integrity is adversely affected.

Much extra-musical significance for this change can be surmised; however, the effect of one idea supported by different backgrounds allows for musical progression.[60] In this case, the chromatic dyad is heard in three different contexts separated by time gaps of about three minutes each time. By bringing back just this one element, the three are connected despite the

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[60] I would like to make a few statements about the title choices for this set. Out of all the titles, only Theme, Commination and Resolution are abstract ideas, the others are concrete things or actions. Their significance relates to life surrounding war or conflict. The Theme presents the seed of discontent which is ultimately ignored, progresses into a threat (Commination) and eventually ends in Resolution. The 1st multi-movement set of Oration, March and Exercises deals with pre-war activity. Preparations, such as military training in exercises and marches, mix with the propaganda sound in orations to fuel the discontent of the original problem. The 2nd set of Chorale, Waltz and Polka represent the daily activities not connected to war. The lack of regard for serious matters is obvious in the set. I feel that these title choices spotlight the apathetic attitude Britten felt many people had about war and violence in general. While these titles hold significance for me and many others, I do not wish to explore them any further in this study which focuses on creating coherency in a work of the post-tonal world.

temporal separation, thus creating a continuous progression instead of three discrete events.

By examining the multi-movement sections, a new perspective is highlighted. In both sections the three individual variations are related by title[61], metric stability and tonal centers. The first group consists of Oration, March and Exercises. While the Oration's metric stability is questionable by itself, the juxtaposition of this variation to the Theme gives it the desired measured feel. The March and Exercises need no help from placement because both are very stable metrically. The tonal areas this group highlights are E♭ and D; the Oration and March center on E♭ while the Exercises centers on D. The 2nd group of Chorale, Waltz and Polka follows basically the same design as the first. While the subjects of the titles differ, this group is stable metrically and the tonal pattern is the same; the Chorale and Waltz center on E♭ while the Polka centers on D.[62]

While these two groups are not dependent on each other they do need something to put them into context. Individually the variations can be viewed as character pieces, but in the context of the entire set the three-movement groups are dependant on the single movements that surround them. On the other hand, the Theme, Commination and Resolution do not need these internal groups to be coherent. This creates a very interesting hybrid form that

[61] The titles are discussed in footnote 23; please refer to this for more information.
[62] These centers are made even more interesting when related back to the chromatic dyad idea first explored in the Theme. The C♯-D dyad saturates the repetitive movements of the Theme, Commination and Resolution while the D-E♭ provides the tonal background for the two multi-movement groups being discussed.

combines the continuous skeleton with the internal additive sections. Looking at the grouping again, a five-part Rondo surfaces, but with a twist. Normally, the recurring sections of a Rondo are self-sufficient; in this work the recurring sections are actually progressive. Another way to think about the overall structure is that the three single movements are the central focus and the multi-movement groups are interjections or interpolations. This combination of traditional and innovative ideas makes this work fresh and challenging to analyze while remaining accessible to a variety of listeners.

With Britten's ingenious synthesis of traditional methods and innovative thought, *Temporal Variations* is quickly becoming a part of the standard repertoire for oboe. Although the work is not tonal in a traditional sense of the word, many tonal ideas are present; the importance of tonal centers, pitch hierarchies and direction are all part of this work. While Britten is innovative in his choices, (using a third axiom instead of a fifth and altering traditional forms to create a continuous/additive hybrid structure) he also uses well established compositional ideas such as theme and variation method. This combination allows for experimentation while maintaining a coherent structure, providing a wide variety of music lovers the chance to appreciate and admire this undeservedly neglected work.

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