JOHANNES BRAHMS was born in Hamburg, Germany, on May 7, 1833, and died in Vienna on April 3, 1897. Working from sketches made in spring 1873 (or possibly late 1872), he composed these variations, but for two pianos and in the form now known as Opus 56b, in May, June, and early July 1873. The first hint of their other and now far more familiar life as a piece for orchestra is in a letter of September 4, 1873, to his publisher, Fritz Simrock, and, more obliquely, in a request on the first of that month for a supply of orchestra manuscript paper. It may be that the idea of orchestrating the work came to him only after he had tried out the two-piano version with Clara Schumann in Bonn on August 20. At any rate, the orchestral score was quickly completed, so that Brahms was able to send it to Simrock on October 4. The letter accompanying the package for the first time attaches Haydn’s name to the work, previously referred to simply as “Variations for two pianofortes” and “Variations for orchestra.” The composer conducted the first performance on November 2, 1873, at a Vienna Philharmonic concert. As for the two-piano version, a performance by Hans von Bülow and Charles Hallé in Manchester, England, on February 12, 1874, is the first of which we have certain record.

BRAHMS’S “HAYDN VARIATIONS” IN ITS ORCHESTRAL FORM calls (as discussed more specifically below) for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, triangle, and strings.

Not the least of Brahms’s oddities was his informed connoisseurship of old music. For example, he participated as contributing editor to many scholarly publishing projects, among them the complete editions of Handel, Mozart, Schubert, Chopin, and Schumann, and he prepared publications of works of Couperin and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. He was a serious collector of musical manuscripts and, as a very young man, he began to make copies of works that came his way and that interested him. These he collected in a folder marked “Copies of outstanding masterpieces of the 16th-18th centuries for study purposes,” a practice he kept up until about 1870. In that collection we find a sheet with the Andante of Haydn’s Symphony No. 16 in B-flat on one side and, on the other, some music labeled “Second movement of a divertimento for wind instruments by Haydn. Chorale St. Antoni.” The side with the movement from the symphony is dated November 1870. The side with the Chorale St. Antoni is not dated, and in his edition of the variations for Norton, Donald M. McCorkle says that “from its appearance [it] seems to have been copied at a different time, probably later.” We don’t know, then, exactly when Brahms first saw the theme on which, in 1873, he made these beautiful variations. We do know that the person who showed it to him was Carl Ferdinand Pohl, librarian of the Society of Friends of Music in Vienna and author of an important, though unfinished, Haydn biography. There is no convincing evidence for Haydn’s authorship of the divertimento from which this movement is taken (nor of the other five pieces in the set). Most scholars now attribute the piece to Haydn’s pupil, Ignaz Pleyel.* McCorkle also points out that “the source of the title Chorale St. Antoni has not yet been explained to anyone’s satisfaction.” Eduard Hanslick’s review of the first performance suggests that the theme is “probably a pilgrimage song.” Others have speculated similarly, but their ideas, however plausible, have been no more than conjecture.

What matters is that Brahms found the theme beautiful and provocative. He took it over as he found it, for its first statement even staying with the wind-band character of the divertimento. The original is scored for two oboes, two horns, three bassoons, and serpent. Brahms gave the serpent line to the contrabassoon, doubling it with plucked cellos and basses, also adding a few tellingly placed notes for the trumpets. The full orchestra consists of two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, kettledrums, triangle, and strings. Brahms’s decision about the scoring of the theme is thoroughly characteristic: making it sound so much like the original delights the antiquarian in him, and adding (though discreetly) the strings from the outset suggests the possibility of expansion into a real orchestral texture. He set great store by organic, carefully and subtly prepared and modulated progress from event to event. The melody moves almost always by step and it stays within a narrow range. Its particular flavor resides in the emphasis (by reiteration) on the third and fourth notes of the major scale: the first six notes of the tune consist of nothing else—in fact, in half of the opening ten-measure strain, the melody note is D or E-flat. The prevalence of these notes suggests a certain kind of harmony—it is explicitly given in the two chords, something like an “amen” cadence, of the second measure—and that bias will indeed dominate the variations.
Something else that Brahms liked was rhythmic surprise and asymmetry, and when he first saw the Chorale St. Antoni, he must have been enchanted by its five-measure phrases. They go 3+2—or, more precisely, (2+1)+2—and that irregularity is what would have made the attribution to Haydn so plausible to Pohl, Brahms, and countless others. The middle section of the theme begins with two four-measure phrases, making a charming change from the fives, and Brahms faithfully maintains that design.

What the theme (Andante) has almost none of is minor-mode harmony—no more, at least, than just a hint at the beginning of the second strain. One of Brahms’s wittiest surprises as he varies, explores, and expands the Chorale is, then, his insistence on the minor: three of the eight variations are in minor, and so is a considerable—and crucially placed—portion of the finale.

Variation I (Poco più animato) takes as point of departure the reiterated closing chord of the theme itself, the tolling B-flat being now continued at a slightly more animated tempo in bassoons, horns, and drums. At the same time, the strings fan outward—violins going up in plain eighth-notes, violas and cellos descending in triplets. For the second five measures, everyone reverses roles: the tolling goes into the high woodwinds with horns, the rising eighth-notes are played down below by cellos and bassoon, and the triplets descend from on high in violins and violas. The first variation has thus stated several rules of this game: 1) the sense of organic continuity from movement to movement (the “tolling”); 2) the possibility of role exchanges or the inverting of textures; 3) grouping notes by threes and the setting up of tensions between twos and threes. The brief middle section, moreover, makes the first move in the direction of darker harmonic coloration.

Variation II (Più vivace), a little faster than its predecessor, marks the beginning of almost every phrase with a loud bump (the single exception goes to the other extreme of pianissimo), and Brahms continues to play with the idea of lines proceeding by contrary motion. Nor are the triplets of Variation I quite forgotten. All this happens in B-flat minor.

Variation III (Con moto), also quick, and back in major, is dolce and legato. No triplets here: when the flowing eighth-notes are subdivided, it is into sixteenths exactly half their length. And here, instead of repeating sections literally as in the theme and the first two variations, Brahms writes out decorated repeats, so that it is almost like having two variations in one.

After that brief respite from threes, Variation IV (Andante con moto) turns out to be the first in triple meter. Brahms’s choice of 3/8 rather than 3/4 is another way of expressing what his tempo direction of Andante con moto tells us: this is not a slow movement. Here the exchanging of parts as in Variation I returns: the gently grave melody in oboe and horn is soon heard an octave lower in strings, while the counterpoint that first was below it in the violas now adorns it from above in the voices of flute and clarinet. Another variation in minor.

Variation V (Vivace), very quick, is a scherzo with bumps at the beginnings of phrases (like Variation II) and with dazzling play on the two-against-three joke. And if the funny off-beat ending sounds familiar, that is because it, too, was first suggested in Variation II.

Variation VI (Vivace) begins with hunting horns and it sticks closer to the tune than anything we have heard recently. (The critic Eduard Hanslick once said that the theme in some of Brahms’s variations was as hard to recognize as his face behind his new beard.) Brahms brings back the sound of the full orchestra, not heard since Variation II. He has also held one effect in reserve for this moment: “minor,” so far, has always been B-flat minor, and now for the first time he explores the relative minor, G minor, which would normally be an obvious place to go to, which is even suggested ever so slightly in the theme, but which he has carefully avoided. A variation, then, that is obvious and subtle at the same time.

Variation VII (Grazioso) is a most lovely, lilting siciliana. Its climax is built on the two-versus-three tension. This is the only variation slower than the theme.

Variation VIII (Presto non troppo) is mysteriously scurrying music in minor, muted and pianissimo, full of imitations and whispered exchanges, breathless conflicts of twos and threes, and with yet another appearance of the witty off-beat cadence.

The whole genre of an independent set of orchestral variations was quite new in 1873. Now, for the Finale (Andante), Brahms did something so old and so forgotten that it, too, was new. He wrote a passacaglia, a set of variations over a repeated bass, thus creating a set of variations-within-variations. The bass is five measures long (of course) and hearing it is like looking at a child who resembles both parents—we aren’t quite sure whether we are reminded more of the original St. Antoni melody or of its bass. The tempo is that of the theme, and Brahms gives us seventeen varied
statements. They build rapidly and adventurously, and all the resources with which Brahms has made us familiar are paraded before us once more, and with wonderful freshness—contrapuntal imitations, groups of threes (often heard against twos), the minor mode (by suggestion at first, then explicitly in the last four statements), off-beats, things changing places within the texture (the bass, which had begun to creep upward in the tenth statement, has become the melody in the treble by the fourteenth). At the last statement, Brahms does the only possible remaining thing: he brings back the theme in quietly joyful triumph (and the patient triangle-player has his moment at last). And if you listen carefully to the last muttering scales in the violas and cellos, you will hear that the game of twos against threes isn’t finished yet.

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THE FIRST AMERICAN PERFORMANCE of Brahms’s “Haydn Variations” in its version for orchestra was likely the one given by Theodore Thomas and his orchestra in Boston on January 31, 1874.

THE FIRST BOSTON SYMPHONY PERFORMANCE of the “Haydn Variations” was on December 6, 1884, with Wilhelm Gericke conducting, subsequent BSO performances being given by Arthur Nikisch, Emil Paur, Willy Hess, Karl Muck, Max Fiedler, Otto Urack, Ernst Schmidt, Pierre Monteux, Sergei Koussevitzky, Richard Burgin, Charles Munch, Ernest Ansermet, Erich Leinsdorf, Eugene Ormandy, Aaron Copland, Seiji Ozawa, Mstislav Rostropovich, Kurt Masur, Edo de Waart, Dennis Russell Davies, Bernard Haitink, Christof Perick, André Previn, Daniele Gatti (the most recent subscription performances, in February 2002), and Andrey Boreyko (the most recent Tanglewood performance, on August 21, 2004).

* -Pleyel (1757-1831) as a young man spent five years with Haydn. He had quite a successful career as a pianist and composer, but eventually struck it rich in grand style with the piano factory he founded in 1807. Pleyel & Cie. is today the largest French manufacturer of pianos, and the Salle Pleyel is an important concert hall in Paris.