

Comparison of Beethoven's 32 Variations in C Minor

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Abstract. This article selects the recordings of Beethoven's "32 Variations in C Minor" performed by 4 world-renowned pianists as a sample. The whole work is considered from the overall performance style to the specific details. And this article compares and analyzes it from the aspects of speed, strength, rhythm and so on. The aim is to help people learn and interpret this work better.

Keywords: Beethoven; Variation No. 32 in C minor; performance version research.

1. Introduction

We usually take Beethoven's Third Eroica (1804) as the beginning of his heyday. Before that, the creation of early works was generally influenced by Mozart and Haydn, and strictly followed the symmetrical layout of classicism in structure. In the mid-term of creation, Beethoven's creation became more and more mature, and he continued to carry out a series of innovations. Beethoven broke through the shackles of creative forms. He paid attention to the expression of musical emotions, and formed his own unique and independent style. The works of this period are usually defined as "heroism".

C minor was created in 1806. Before that, Beethoven had completed such great works as the "Dawn" Sonata and the "Passionate" Sonata. In 1806, Beethoven was composing the Fourth and Fifth Symphonies at the same time. We now name this work wo080. Woo is the English abbreviation without opus. Some scholars speculate that Beethoven only numbered works that he thought were worthy of official publication at the time, so we can think that this piece did not reach his requirements. However, this work was published later and was widely loved by pianists and audiences. [1]

2. Comparison of performance versions

Since its inception, this work has been widely loved by pianists and audiences. Many performers have selected this piece in the concert and recorded it. Their performance styles are affected by various factors such as history and culture, growth experience, performers' personalities and understanding of works, thus forming different interpretation styles, which cannot be listed in this article. Here, four representative performance versions of Brendel published by Brilliant Classics in 2015, Gilels' London performance recording in 1968, Kissing's London performance recording in 1997 and Arau published in Warner Classics in 2011 will be selected as The research object of this paper helps us to study this work from different angles.

The piece consists of a short eight-bar theme with 32 variations. The scale of the work is second only to the 33 variations of Beethoven's great work "Diabelli Variations". The work has a huge structure and rich content. If we want to analyze the work systematically, we can divide the work into several different sections for Research. [2]

According to the different musical characteristics of different tonality and variation texture, we can divide the work into the following parts.

Part I in C minor: Variations I -III, Variations IV-VI, Variations VII - VIII, Variations VIII, Variations X - XI (Table 1).

Part II in C major: Variations XII, Variations XIII -XIV, Variations XV - XVI (Table 2).

Part III in C minor: Variations XVII, Variations XVIII, Variations XVIII, Variations XX -XXI, Variations XXII, Variations XXIII, Variations XX IV-XXV, Variations XXVI -XXVII, Variations XXVIII, Variations XXVIII, Variations XXX (Table 3).

Part IV in C minor: Variations XXXI, Variations XXXII (Table 4).

Table 1. Theme and Variations I- XI

| | Virtuoso | Speed | Rhythm | Processing, tone | Whether there is a large interval between variations |
|----------|-----------------|--------------|--|--|---|
| Theme | Brendle | 94 | Strictly follow the rhythm | Moderate volume sound stable and thick | |
| | Gilels | 104 | Slight delay on polyphony | Loud voice | |
| | Kissin | 88 | Slight delay on polyphony | Clean and bright sound | |
| | Arrau | 72 | Slight delay on polyphony | Moderate volume touch keys are loose | |
| I-III | Brendle | 94 | Strictly follow the rhythm | Strong touch, strong staccato chords | No |
| | Gilels | 126 | Strictly follow the rhythm | Both hands play in short staccato notes, | No |
| | Kissin | 132 | Strictly follow the rhythm | Both hands play in short staccato notes, | No |
| | Arrau | 100 | Variation III end crescendo | Chords preserve the duration of notes | Yes |
| IV-VI | Brendle | 94 | Strictly follow the rhythm | Variation IV has an even tone for longer staccatos | No |
| | Gilels | 126-108-126 | Variation V, the first sentence of each measure is tight, and the next sentence is loose | Variation IV is a long staccato in the high voice, and a short jump in the middle and low voices | Yes |
| | Kissin | 132-68-140 | Variation V, the first sentence of each measure is tight, and the next sentence is loose | Variation IV continues the short staccato, emphasizing the middle voice triplet | Yes |
| | Arrau | 80-68-124 | Variations IV, VI ending with slowing down | Variations IV are all longer staccatos, and the treble part is longer than the other two parts | Yes |
| VII-VIII | Brendle | 94 | Strictly follow the rhythm | Clear ups and downs, clear voice | No |
| | Gilels | 76 | Variation VIII has a noticeable crescendo at the end | Gentle ups and downs, soft voice | Yes |
| | Kissin | 54-70 | Variation VIII has a noticeable crescendo at the end | The sound is soft and very romantic | Yes |
| | Arrau | 72 | Variations VII, VIII end with a slowing down | Gentle ups and downs, soft voice | Yes |
| IX | Brendle | 94 | Strictly follow the rhythm | All three voices are clear | Yes |
| | Gilels | 74 | Significant slowdown at the end | The treble part is clear, the middle and low parts are hazy | Yes |
| | Kissin | 46 | Emphasis on the second beat, with a clear gradual slowdown at the end | The treble part is clear, the middle and low parts are hazy | Yes |
| | Arrau | 60 | Significant slowdown at the end | All three voices are clear | Yes |
| X-XI | Brendle | 94 | Strictly follow the rhythm | Octave is firm and powerful, running evenly and clearly | No |
| | Gilels | 104 | Significant deceleration at the end of variation xi | Octave is light and fast, running evenly and cleanly | Yes |
| | Kissin | 90 | Strictly follow the rhythm | Octave is short and powerful, with a strong sense of running push | Yes |
| | Arrau | 80 | Significant deceleration at the end of Variation XI | Octave is firm and powerful, running strong and full | Yes |

Table 2. Variations XII-XVI

| | Virtuoso | Speed | Rhythm | Processing, tone | Whether there is a large interval between variations |
|----------|----------|-------|---|--|--|
| XII | Brendle | 62 | strictly follow the rhythm | Very weak, rustic, soft | No |
| | Gilels | 60 | Extended second beat, emphasizing syncopation | Medium volume, still maintaining the heroic character of the minor theme | No |
| | Kissin | 54 | Extended second beat, emphasizing syncopation | Medium volume, still maintaining the heroic character of the minor theme | No |
| | Arrau | 60 | strictly follow the rhythm | Medium volume, still maintaining the heroic character of the minor theme | There is a big pause |
| XIII-XIV | Brendle | 66-72 | strictly follow the rhythm | Soft weak voice, natural phrases | No |
| | Gilels | 80 | Variation XIII long tone slightly extended, making the melody more singing | Medium volume, natural phrases | No |
| | Kissin | 66-72 | Variation XIV ends with a crescendo | Medium volume, very vocal | No |
| | Arrau | 66-72 | Variation XIV ends with a crescendo | Full sound with natural phrases | No |
| XV-XVI | Brendle | 70-76 | strictly follow the rhythm | Variation XVI full sound | No |
| | Gilels | 74-80 | Variation XVI has a crescendo at the end | Variation XVI full sound | No |
| | Kissin | 48-52 | The rhythm is relatively free, and the phrases are divided into tight middle and loose ends | Variation XVI full sound | Yes |
| | Arrau | 66-72 | The rhythm is relatively free, and the phrases are loose in the middle and tight at both ends | Variation XVI full sound | Yes |

Table 3. Variations XVII-XXX

| | Virtuoso | Speed | Rhythm | Processing, tone | Whether there is a large interval between variations |
|-------|----------|-------|--|--|--|
| XVII | Brendle | 70 | Strictly follow the rhythm | Very weak, rustic tone | No |
| | Gilels | 72 | Extended second beat, emphasizing syncopation | Moderate volume, smooth, high-pitched sound bright | No |
| | Kissin | 50 | The rhythm is relatively free, emphasizing the syncopated rhythm | Very singing | Yes |
| | Arrau | 66 | Slow down | Medium volume, clear sound | Yes |
| XVIII | Brendle | 74 | Strictly follow the rhythm | Simple music | No |
| | Gilels | 108 | Basically by rhythm | Bold and powerful, the scale is like the wind, ignoring individual notes and focusing on momentum | No |
| | Kissin | 96 | Basically by rhythm | Rough and powerful, emphasizing the end of the scale, highlighting the stress of each beat | No |
| | Arrau | 94 | Slow down | Strong voice | Yes |
| XVIII | Brendle | 100 | Strictly follow the rhythm | Medium volume | No |
| | Gilels | 108 | Basically by rhythm | Run fast like a storm | No |
| | Kissin | 96 | Basically by rhythm | Emphasize the first beat of each measure, and the volume contrast between the upper and lower sentences is obvious | No |

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|------------|---------|---------|---|---|-----|
| | Arrau | 94 | Slow down | The left hand is strong in singing, and the right hand is dexterous | Yes |
| XX-XXI | Brendle | 100 | Strictly follow the rhythm | Full and powerful chords | No |
| | Gilels | 110 | Basically by rhythm | Strong sense of chord line, softer sound | No |
| | Kissin | 102 | Basically by rhythm | Firm and powerful, the running part has a clear sense of impetus, emphasizing the third beat | No |
| | Arrau | 108 | Basically by rhythm | Medium volume | Yes |
| XXII | Brendle | 104 | Slow down | Firm and full | No |
| | Gilels | 108 | Basically by rhythm | Firm and full | No |
| | Kissin | 94 | Basically by rhythm | Firm and full | No |
| | Arrau | 100 | Basically by rhythm | Firm and full | No |
| XXIII | Brendle | 82 | Strictly in rhythm | Very weak | Yes |
| | Gilels | 58 | Basically by rhythm | Full-bodied sound, highlighting repetitive sound lines | Yes |
| | Kissin | 60 | The melody on the first beat is slightly extended | Very singing, prominent first beat, free rhythm | No |
| | Arrau | 62 | Slow down, slow down | Full tone | No |
| XXIV-XXV | Brendle | 90-92 | By rhythm | Weak voice | No |
| | Gilels | 136-100 | By rhythm | Variation 24 is short and powerful, variation 25 has a soft sound, and the left hand is a longer staccato | No |
| | Kissin | 150-118 | By rhythm | Both variations are short and powerful, full of rhythm | No |
| | Arrau | 106-76 | By rhythm | Both variations are longer staccatos with a softer sound | No |
| XXVI-XXVII | Brendle | 90 | Strictly follow the rhythm | The sound is simple, not too strong | No |
| | Gilels | 108-114 | Strictly follow the rhythm | Calm and powerful voice | No |
| | Kissin | 118-120 | Strictly follow the rhythm | The voice is sharp, powerful, passionate and explosive | No |
| | Arrau | 90-94 | Strictly follow the rhythm | The sound is round and not overly strong | No |
| XXVIII | Brendle | 78 | Strictly follow the rhythm | Soft singing | Yes |
| | Gilels | 84 | Slow down | Soft singing | Yes |
| | Kissin | 100 | Slow down | Bright and smooth sound | Yes |
| | Arrau | 80 | Slow down | Soft singing | Yes |
| XXVIII | Brendle | 94 | Strictly follow the rhythm | The clauses are obvious, emphasizing the first sound of each sentence | No |
| | Gilels | 110 | Strictly follow the rhythm | The sound is full of explosive power, and the strength and weakness of phrases fluctuate obviously | No |
| | Kissin | 120 | Strictly follow the rhythm | Sharp and explosive voice | No |
| | Arrau | 100 | Strictly follow the rhythm | The sound is round and not overly strong | No |
| XXX | Brendle | 66 | Strictly follow the rhythm | Plain and simple sound | No |
| | Gilels | 62 | Slow down | Singing | No |
| | Kissin | 52 | By rhythm | Expressive and expressive | Yes |
| | Arrau | 60 | By rhythm | Plain and simple | Yes |

Table 4. Variations XXXI-XXXII

| | Virtuoso | Speed | Rhythm | Processing, tone | Whether there is a large interval between variations |
|-------|----------|-----------|--------------------|--|--|
| XXXI | Brendle | 76 | Strictly in rhythm | Natural sound | No |
| | Gilels | 82 | Strictly in rhythm | Singing softly | Yes |
| | Kissin | 58 | Strictly in rhythm | Full of fantasy | No |
| | Arrau | 78 | Strictly in rhythm | Natural sound | No |
| XXXII | Brendle | 76-86-80 | By rhythm | The last 10 bars are marked strictly according to the music score, and the crescendo of the left hand is obvious | No |
| | Gilels | 82-104-96 | By rhythm | The ending is clean and powerful, and the last two notes are calm and steady | No |
| | Kissin | 58-118-90 | More speed changes | The timbre changes richly, full of romantic colors, and the ending is short and clean | No |
| | Arrau | 78-94-74 | By rhythm | The sound is thick and the music style is stable | No |

3. Performance version evaluation

Brendel (Alfred Brendel, 1931 -) is considered to be the authoritative interpreter of the works of Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, Beethoven and Liszt. He was the first pianist to record the complete works of Beethoven's piano music (1964). Blundell's playing was considered "sane", and he believed that the pianist's first task was to respect the composer's intentions rather than to express himself and add to his own making of the music. He once said: "I am responsible to the composer, and particularly to the piece." The 32 variations he played, like his previous ones, highly followed the specific marks on Beethoven's score, and the rhythm and volume of the whole piece were grasped very strict. Except for the changes marked by Beethoven, Blundell has almost no free play in processing. The Beethoven he plays is simple and simple, the music style is straightforward, and he can combine emotion and reason in a rational and rigorous way. His performance is most intrusive to the classical style, with rigorous rationality and delicate timbre, which is a typical representative of the Vienna School. [3]

Gilels (Emil Gilels, 1916 — 1985) is one of the representatives of the Soviet piano school, his playing is firm and powerful, with explosive force. It is known as "steel-like touch key". This coincides with the spirit of Beethoven. The 32 variations he played, both poetic and skillful, not only maintained the inner tension required by the work, but also handled the timbre delicately and gracefully. In addition to the superb skills, it also incorporates sincere emotions, and the timbre of the entire piece exudes a translucent brilliance. The famous German music critic Kaiser once quoted Goethe's impression of Beethoven when talking about Gilels: "I have never seen an artist so concentrated, so energetic, and so introverted."

Kissin (Yevgeny Kissin, 1971 —) As a representative of the younger generation of the Russian piano school, his playing style is gorgeous and full of passion. His performance follows the tradition of the Soviet piano school, with superb technique and strong appeal. Compared with the other three performers, Kissin's 32 Variations are bold and exaggerated without loss of proportion. Rich timbre changes and dramatic speed changes all make this familiar work quite new. We can not only hear the shouts like a storm, but also feel the tranquility that seems to come from the depths of our hearts. He dedicated his extraordinary technique to the music and integrated his musical taste and understanding to reproduce the power and beauty of this work in a new way.

Claudio Arrau (Claudio Arrau, 1903-1991) is recognized as one of the greatest pianists of the twentieth century. And is considered the authoritative interpreter of Beethoven's works in the twentieth century. This is not only due to his convincing teacher-student relationship, Martin Krause, who he once studied under, was a student of Liszt, so Arrau inherited Beethoven-Czerny-Liszt to Martin Krause. Piano performance tradition, but also because of his in-depth study of Beethoven.

Arauc participated in overseeing the compilation and publication of Peters' edition of Beethoven's piano sonatas. Arauc's performance is strictly faithful to the original score, integrating pure classical style with profound emotion through rich timbre changes and brilliant performance skills. In his early performances, Arauc's playing speed was fast and his skills were excellent. His performances of Islami and Liszt's Paganini etudes are typical representatives of this type. However, after his middle age, he played at a slower speed. Slow down, and the playing style becomes more rigorous and personal, yet majestic. From the recordings we selected, we can find this characteristic of performance: Arauc is slower than other performers in the selection of most variation speeds, and he chooses to use more gradual slowdowns at the end of the variation than others. And choose a moderate volume. [4]

On the whole, the performance of the German-Austrian School advocates rational performance, strictly respects the music work itself and its internal structure, pays attention to the inner thinking of music, and strives to reproduce the music work truly and objectively through performance. In comparison, the Soviet school paid more attention to the character and performance of music. While maintaining the classic character of the work, he combined his personal rich emotions to express the work to the best of his ability. Pay attention to the expression of each musical character. Interpretation of works by personal emotions occupies a very important position in the performance of the Russian school.

4. Summary

Through the horizontal comparison and comprehensive analysis of the charts, we have a more intuitive understanding of these four performance versions. Although their performance styles are different, they all formed their own performance styles based on the analysis and study of the original works. Therefore, when we are studying this work, after dissecting and analyzing the various factors of the work, we also analyze and study the interpretation of different versions, and get a variety of interpretation methods from it, so as to actively help our own performance.

References

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