
Theme and Variations, op. 43a & b



Title	Theme and Variations for Wind Band, op. 43 a & b
Time of Origin	1943
Premiere	27 June 1946, New York (op. 43a) 20 October 1944 Symphony Hall, Boston (op. 43b)
Duration	ca. 12 min.

With its scoring for large wind orchestra, Arnold Schönberg's "Theme and Variations," op. 43, is unique in the composer's catalog of works. Although in autobiographical references he mentions military bands as an important factor in his musical socialization, he did not compose any works exclusively for wind orchestra apart from the fragmentary "Fanfare for a Bowl Concert." So how did this work and its scoring come about? In January 1934, two months after emigrating to the United States, Schönberg received a letter from Edwin Franko Goldman, founder of the American Bandmasters Association. Goldman asked for a statement for his book, *Band Betterment*, which summarized his many years of experience as a band leader. It was the exiled composer's first contact with the American wind band movement. These mostly semi-professional bands were established primarily at schools and universities and contributed significantly to the reputation of the institutions. Goldman was keen to enhance the general artistic reputation of these bands: "Above all, I would like a comment from you emphasizing the importance of the band in the musical world, its musical value in artistic as well as cultural terms [...]." Schönberg complied with the request – and a few years later he was to enrich the band repertoire with his own contribution. The idea came from Carl Engel, president of Schirmer Music, and was supported by Schönberg's son-in-law Felix Greissle, who was in charge of the school music department at Schirmer. In the fall of 1943, Schönberg began work on the piece. It quickly became clear that his composition would be very challenging for amateur orchestras. In order to create additional performance possibilities for the work, Greissle suggested that a variant for large orchestra be offered. Schönberg was enthusiastic about this suggestion, and began working on an orchestral version in parallel. When he reported to Carl Engel on the progress of the composition in a letter dated July 10, 1943, he was full of confidence, stating that "I believe I have not only written a very good and effective (tonal) piece, but also created something that can easily become a commercial success as well." A few years later, he wrote the following regarding the work's formal structure: "There are seven variations based on an original theme – roughly in the character of a march – and a finale. In general, the variations proceed in a traditional manner, using motivic and harmonic ideas from the theme and thereby producing new themes that contrast with the original theme in character and mood. The tempo increases considerably in the first two variations. Variation III is an adagio with a song-like character. Variation IV is a stylized waltz; Variation V, *molto moderato, cantabile*, is a canon in

inversion; Variation VI is very fast (*alla breve*) and impetuous in character, while the texture is contrapuntal. Variation VII recalls the style of a chorale prelude. The finale, as is common in classical music, adds a number of ideas that vary only parts of the theme. These are treated mainly contrapuntally and strive toward a final climax.”

The hoped-for success took a long time to materialize. The version for wind band, op. 43a, presented considerable technical challenges to amateur orchestras. With the Goldman Band, a professional ensemble was entrusted with the premiere. The conductor was none other than Edwin Franko Goldman, who had already communicated with Schönberg and had asked him to promote his cause in 1934. Since Goldman was called up for military service, the premiere was considerably delayed. In the meantime, the orchestral version had been premiered on October 20, 1944, at Boston Symphony Hall by the Boston Symphony Orchestra conducted by Sergei Koussevitzky. Schönberg had been able to follow the performance via radio transmission and was initially satisfied. When he heard the recording again on disc, however, he severely criticized Koussevitzky’s interpretation especially for its lack of contrast and rhythmic liveliness. Felix Greissle, on the other hand, was impressed by the rehearsals for the premiere of the wind band version that finally took place on June 27, 1946. Edwin Franko Goldman and his son Richard Franko supervised the project and showed considerable commitment. Edwin reportedly paid for some rehearsals of the ensemble, which was in permanent financial difficulties, out of his own pocket, while Richard knew the entire score by heart and scrutinized every detail after each rehearsal. Greissle was also generous towards the instrumentalists: “The seriousness with which these mostly unsophisticated, well-behaved musicians dedicated themselves to their task puts everything I have ever seen in this country in the shade. It was really like the good old days of the Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen.” (Letter of 29 June, 1946)

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