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**West Cork Chamber Music Festival 2021**  
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presents

**Bantry and Beyond**

*Solos*

**11. Thirty-Three Variations**

Filmed at the Abbaye Royaumont, Paris

**Cédric Tiberghien**

**Beethoven**

*Diabelli Variations Op.120*

**Ludwig van Beethoven** [1770-1827]

***Thirty-three Variations on a Waltz by Anton Diabelli in C major Op.120***

*Theme – vivace*

- |                                           |                              |                                         |
|-------------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| 1. <i>Alla marcia maestoso</i>            | 12. <i>Un poco più mosso</i> | 23. <i>Assai allegro</i>                |
| 2. <i>Poco allegro</i>                    | 13. <i>Vivace</i>            | 24. <i>Fughetta – Andante</i>           |
| 3. <i>L'istesso tempo</i>                 | 14. <i>Grave e maestoso</i>  | 25. <i>Allegro</i>                      |
| 4. <i>Un poco più vivace</i>              | 15. <i>Presto scherzando</i> | 26. <i>L'istesso tempo</i>              |
| 5. <i>Allegro vivace</i>                  | 16. <i>Allegro</i>           | 27. <i>Vivace</i>                       |
| 6. <i>Allegro, ma non troppo, e serio</i> | 17. <i>L'istesso tempo</i>   | 28. <i>Allegro</i>                      |
| 7. <i>Un poco più allegro</i>             | 18. <i>Moderato</i>          | 29. <i>Adagio, ma non troppo</i>        |
| 8. <i>Poco vivace</i>                     | 19. <i>Presto</i>            | 30. <i>Andante, sempre cantabile</i>    |
| 9. <i>Allegro pesante e risoluto</i>      | 20. <i>Andante</i>           | 31. <i>Largo, molto espressivo</i>      |
| 10. <i>Presto</i>                         | 21. <i>Allegro con brio</i>  | 32. <i>Fuga – Allegro</i>               |
| 11. <i>Allegretto</i>                     | 22. <i>Molto allegro</i>     | 33. <i>Tempo di menuetto – moderato</i> |

Beethoven's compositional process was far from straightforward. Some time in April 1819 Diabelli issued his invitation to all the major composers in Vienna to compose a variation on a waltz he had written. As Beethoven disliked collaborative ventures, he offered to write a set of variations instead. He finally delivered the finished work four years later. In this period he also wrote the *Missa Solemnis*, the last three piano sonatas, some bagatelles and other minor works as well as starting work on the Ninth Symphony. The first draft of 23 variations was done in the summer of 1819 but he then turned to the Mass which was originally planned for Archduke Rudolf's coronation in 1820 (he eventually received his manuscript score three years too late!). The Mass was itself interrupted by the last three piano sonatas. He finally started on the Variations again in February 1823 after pressure from Diabelli and finished it by 30 April.

*We present here to the world Variations of no ordinary type, but a great and important masterpiece worthy to be ranked with the imperishable creations of the old Classics...more interesting from the fact that it is elicited from a theme which no one would otherwise have supposed capable of a working-out of that character...All these variations...will entitle the work to a place beside Sebastian Bach's masterpiece in the same form.* So wrote Diabelli in his introduction to the work and his point that his waltz theme seemed an unlikely starting point for such a major work was a good one. Beethoven had already demonstrated in both his youthful improvisations and his compositions his staggering ability to create great art out of nothing and these Variations are the supreme example of this skill. The reference to the Goldberg Variations is of particular interest as there is no other hard evidence that Beethoven was consciously trying to emulate Bach's achievement.

Diabelli's waltz is a cheerful and lively little ditty. When you hear it bouncing along for less than a minute, it is hard to believe that so much can be developed from such a beginning. Almost every variation has its own tempo mark, different from the preceding one. This

creates the feeling of variety although most of the variations are in 3/4 time like the waltz. However towards the end there are an increasing number of other time signatures. In every variation Beethoven takes one or more motifs from the waltz's melody and develops it intensively, but this means the main contours of the theme itself are almost completely ignored and the motifs that are being developed are not easy to recognise. Beethoven seems to have recognised this as when he returned to the work in 1823 he inserted new variations that recall the melodic shape of the original theme.

Some commentators divide the work in four or five large segments like the movements of a symphony. There is certainly something in this as the variations begin in a light-hearted way and conclude with the utmost seriousness, but the diametrically contrasted moods of some of the central variations make this model hard to sustain. Others take the Goldberg model and treat it as a succession of linked groups of four variations in which the speed increases or decreases. Or it can be seen as a single monumental structure whose content increases gradually in complexity culminating in the fugal Variation 32. Or you can pick out a number of prominent pillars like the first, sixth, fourteenth, twentieth, twenty fourth and thirty second around which other variations are grouped. Perhaps the simplest approach is to see the series as contrasting miniatures each throwing new light on the theme, but you will undoubtedly become aware that there is an overall vision holding the whole edifice in place.

Beethoven also ranges over an extraordinarily wide spectrum of human emotions. The first Variation is surely mocking just as Variations 13 & 15 undoubtedly make fun of the theme, while in Variation 22 he manages to find a connection with Leporello's *Notte e giorno faticar* from Don Giovanni. As he jumps from one variation to the next you get a picture of what it must have been like watching Beethoven improvise at his instrument, as he works this way and that through the possibilities of the given theme, mocking, witty, tender, clever, virtuosic, serious, profound, transcendent. There is this feeling of keep-up-with-me-if-you-can and it is probably counter to the spirit of the work to follow it with a score. The individual variations do not really need signposting except to point out that with the first fugue in Variation 24, the work takes on a new intensity as we approach the final quarter. The Variations 29-31 are all in C minor and explore a profundity that the original theme never even considered. The intricate double fugue of Variation 32 is the crowning glory of the work with the concluding *Tempo di Minuetto* providing an ethereal transformation as epilogue. Diabelli, like us, was clearly overwhelmed.

*Francis Humphrys*