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**THE END OF A BEGINNING:  
THE “DIABELLI” VARIATIONS**

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*For Lewis Lockwood*

Now may be an appropriate time to reexamine an old notion in the literature on the “Diabelli” Variations, namely that Beethoven, initially scornful of so impoverished a theme, was persuaded to use it despite its triviality, and went on to demonstrate what implications could be drawn from such unpromising material. To give two examples out of many: in his classic book on Beethoven, Walter Riezler found the theme to be “entirely insignificant,” but “expounded with incredible versatility”;<sup>1</sup> and in his exemplary monograph on the “Diabelli” Variations, William Kinderman described Opus 120 as Beethoven’s “only major work to have found its origin in the commonplace, a static, repetitious, and thoroughly banal theme,” underscoring “the apparent absurdity of building a monumental edifice upon such slight foundations.”<sup>2</sup>

Naturally, the contrast between the theme and Beethoven’s elaboration of it was observed from the very beginning, with Adolf Bernhard Marx writing in 1830 that “a sort of mischievousness or high spirits” had “led [Beethoven] to grasp a wholly agreeable but nevertheless wholly insignificant waltz and to use the same as a veritable mine of new ideas.”<sup>3</sup> Even the publishers’ announcement in the *Wiener Zeitung* in 1823 stressed that “this work is the more interesting because of the fact that it is elicited from a theme which no one would otherwise have supposed capable of a working-out of that character in which our exalted Master stands alone among his contemporaries.”<sup>4</sup> Diabelli, however, saw no reason to apologize for his theme; quite the contrary—the announcement declares, “We are proud to have given occasion for this composition.” It was, then, left to Beethoven’s notoriously unreliable biographer, Anton Schindler, to inaugurate the legend that

Beethoven himself regarded Diabelli's waltz as trivial or even ludicrous. Schindler claimed that the composer initially declined to participate in a collective set of variations on it because he felt that the theme, with its "cobbler's patches"—exact transpositions of a sequence up one step, called *rosalias* or *Schusterflecken*—"would leave the contributors open to ridicule."<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, "not long after this categorical refusal," Schindler recalled, Beethoven asked him to find out how much Diabelli was willing to pay for a full set of variations on the theme, and he reported that the composer was so "happily surprised" at the prospect of receiving the "unusually high price" of eighty ducats that he reversed himself, and even became eager "to demonstrate what could be done with an ordinary waltz, and even with a 'rosalia.'"<sup>6</sup> But Beethoven's top asking price, documented in a letter to the publisher, was actually only half that amount;<sup>7</sup> and Schindler's account is defective in every other respect as well, misstating the planned number of variations as well as both the time and the place of composition, and getting the date of the project's initiation wrong by more than four years.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, he had no first-hand knowledge of the work's genesis, so his unsupported claim that Beethoven viewed the theme with contempt may safely be written off as an invention.

Of course, the theme has also had its eminent defenders, beginning with the very first reviewer, writing in 1823, who perceived "something simply remarkable in its construction and working out,"<sup>9</sup> continuing with Heinrich Rietsch's observation that because of the theme's "simple, clear construction, the lightly imprinted harmonic sequences provide a welcome playground for further creative fantasy,"<sup>10</sup> and culminating in Donald Francis Tovey's famous observation that the theme is "rich in solid musical facts from whatever point of view it is taken," cast in "reinforced concrete," as he put it, a prosaic theme that "sets the composer free to build recognizable variations in every conceivable way."<sup>11</sup> Despite Tovey's authority, the primary narrative about Opus 120 that we have inherited continues to deny the seriousness, not only of the work's theme, but of Beethoven's purposes. Told from Schindler's unimaginative, narrow perspective, this story trivializes Beethoven's motives, which are reduced to a composer's vanity, whimsy, and greed, and we are foreclosed from asking about the significance of the theme and how it may be essential to alternative ways of understanding the work. Perhaps, given a statement of aesthetic assumptions, Diabelli's theme really can be shown to be trivial, banal, or musically defective, or even all three. The more fruitful issue, how-



## II

We know Beethoven by his beginnings—by themes, figures, rhythmic patterns, harmonic motifs, and sonic textures that instantly establish something essential about the character of a composition, that set out a range of possibilities for what is to follow, that arouse expectations that will be fulfilled or frustrated, that provide apertures of particularity through which we may glimpse, enter, and begin to explore worlds we never knew, let alone made. I use a geographical image here, for there is an inimitable, metaphorical way in which music may evoke geographies, terrains, locations, places. Partly, this has to do with the ways in which musical genres, even apart from their use of conventional topics and characteristic styles, may remain associated with their original social functions and conditions of patronage. Thus, the opening of a Mass or requiem has the capability of conveying us in imagination to those enclosures in which sacred music is customarily performed; the first measures of a serenade tell us that we are outdoors, that it is evening, that we are celebrating a ritual occasion in a pastoral locale; the first notes of a string quartet or keyboard sonata move us indoors—into a connoisseur's salon or, later, a concert hall; the rhythmic gesture of minuet and gavotte, contredanse and waltz bring to mind a great variety of spaces, from court, theater, band shell, and ballroom to the bourgeois interior.

Sometimes a beginning may connect us to something much less tangible even than a suggested sense of place, but its connective powers are nevertheless fully in play. Such openings tell us to expect nothing more than that the work is to be an example of a particular style. Even here, we are “placed”: we find ourselves on familiar terrain simply because we are reminded of the sound of another composer; we are “in” Haydn or “in” Mozart, or perhaps “in” a denoted, recognizable subdivision of Classical style, therefore set within the borders of a tradition. Parody, quotation, and stylistic imitation are ways of locating us in time, or space, or tradition, ways of affirming or denying connections to the already existent, to the known. Analogously, the start of a work—say, the Sonata in C minor, op. 111, or the Grosse Fuge, op. 133—may bear the inimitable stamp of the hand that wrote it, summoning up images of the real or rumored workshop of its own composer, inviting us to use biographical knowledge (or legend) as a compass.

It is a question of orientation: the imagination is set in motion, taking the hint, seeking to find its bearings, asking directions, aiming to convert a

mysteriously fluid stream of sound into some semblance of solid ground or recognizable terrain. Of course, it goes without saying that these are imaginary landscapes. Nevertheless, they make it possible for us to situate ourselves, to fulfill our need to know where we are in order to offset the sense of the uncanny that comes from the shock of crossing a threshold to another world. And even if we do not know where we are, we need some signpost by which we can estimate our distance from the known. It is a matter of being either at home or away, or—sideslipping into a different set of metaphors—safe or imperiled, celebrating one’s own traditions or witnessing strange rituals. That may be why many listeners often feel an impulse to invent programs and literary prototypes for musical compositions—somehow to diminish the anxiety, terror, and loneliness that may be aroused by the musical evocation of an unrecognizable time and place.

In the openings of certain of his greatest works, Beethoven deliberately eradicates the implication of a safe haven. Instead, reckless of his listeners’ comfort, he turns from validating the expected to inventing places where no one has ever gone before, in beginnings that suggest heightened, altered, and anxious states. These imply not safety but terror; not the comfort of an earthly pastoral but the remote sublimity of the immeasurable heavens; not the warm Arcadian greensward but distant, astral, or enigmatic regions, as for example in the opening of the *Symphony No. 4 in B-flat, op. 60* (ex. 1.2).

We can hereafter forgo the geographical simile—which has perhaps been stretched a bit beyond its appropriate limits. For by now Beethoven has shifted the metaphorical terrain from recognizable locations in nature or society to unplumbed reaches of the universe and to those “psychical localities” that are the scene of action of dreams, fantasies, and every representation of the imaginary.<sup>13</sup> He does this, for example, in the openings of the Fourth, Fifth, Seventh, and Ninth symphonies, not to affirm the chaotic and the strange but to demonstrate more powerfully the importance of overcoming them, in scenarios of desire, estrangement, and humiliation that eventuate in fulfillment, reconciliation, and convalescence.

Such works often are structured according to the ineluctable logic of clarification and familiarization. In stark contrast, most sets of classical variations open in the sphere of the recognizable, the familiar. The theme is given, taken for granted. When we hear the opening of a work like the *Six Variations in G* on Paisiello’s “*Nel cor più non mi sento*,” WoO 70, or the *Variations in E-flat* for Cello and Piano on Mozart’s “*Bei Männern, welche*

EXAMPLE 1.2. Symphony No. 4 in B-flat, op. 60, Adagio, mm. 1–14.

Adagio

The musical score is presented in three systems, each with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs).  
 System 1 (mm. 1-5): Treble clef has a whole note chord (B-flat, D, F, A-flat). Bass clef has a half note chord (B-flat, D, F, A-flat). Dynamics: *pp*.  
 System 2 (mm. 6-9): Treble clef has a melodic line with eighth notes and quarter notes. Bass clef has a half note chord. Dynamics: *sempre pp*.  
 System 3 (mm. 10-14): Treble clef has a melodic line with eighth notes and quarter notes. Bass clef has a half note chord. Dynamics: *fp* and *pp*.

Liebe fühlen,” WoO 46, we already know this music, whether it is as a folk song or a popular aria from a fashionable opera; the drawing card of such works is usually a melody already pleasantly engraved in our minds, as in all of Beethoven’s sets of variations from the 1790s (ex. 1.3).

Or, at least, we know its type; so that when Beethoven unfolds his “wholly new manner” in 1802, opening his Opus 34 Variations with a nostalgic Adagio instead of a hit tune, or his Opus 35 with the skeletal bass of a Haydn-esque theme that has yet to materialize, or, later on, his C-minor Variations, WoO 80, with a dramatic variant of “La Folia,” we do not experience these original themes as alien or disruptive, even though we recognize the daring of the composer having abandoned thematic ready-mades, fresh off the rack.

From this admittedly restricted standpoint, we may say that, embedded in the formal structures of Beethoven’s late works are two great arcs of experience, in both of which he sought to inscribe, from opposite perspectives, chronicles of illumination and achievement. One arc begins from a dangerous—at least, unfamiliar—territory or state of being and makes its way to safety by a circuitous route; the other takes its point of departure in

EXAMPLE 1.3. Six Variations for Piano on Paisiello's "Nel cor più non mi sento," WoO 70, mm. 1–8.

TEMA

the familiar, which is then disassembled, chaoticized, deconstructed, and defamiliarized before it, in turn, rediscovers an ultimate state of concord.

It is evident to which of these arcs the “Diabelli” Variations belongs. Thus, it should not be a surprise that this set of variations opens with a familiar theme-type—a German dance or waltz, or *Ländler*—one that is redolent of the commonplace, the here and now, the solidly present, the factual rather than the fanciful. And it should not occasion surprise that Beethoven chose to use such a theme for a major experimental work of his last period. The theme designates a beginning, launched from the terrain of the familiar. More closely, it can be seen to represent a special kind of reference to the quotidian. The issue now becomes whether we are able, with more specificity, to come closer to the meaning of this particular embodiment of the quotidian.

### III

I already have touched on how a composer may signify the familiar as a referential musical image. In doing so, Beethoven may have been appropriating to his purposes an idea of the familiar as a trope of poetic invention that was widespread among his contemporaries. The English Romantic poets, especially, were much concerned with dichotomies between the familiar and the unknown, defining the role of the poet as aiming to reveal the latter through an exploration of the former. In “A Defence of Poetry,” Shelley wrote that poetry

strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty, which is the spirit of its forms. . . . It makes us the inhabitants of a world to which the familiar world is a chaos. It reproduces the common universe of which we are portions and percipients, and it purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being. It compels us to feel that which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know. It creates anew the universe, after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration.<sup>14</sup>

It is not only a question of defamiliarization, but of discovery and renewal, for in addition to lifting the veil from “the hidden beauty of the world,” poetry “awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought.”<sup>15</sup> But where can the poet locate those familiar objects? Wordsworth’s famous prescription was to turn to the “humble and rustic,” and there “to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to . . . throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect.”<sup>16</sup>

Similar ideas were part of the fabric of German thought as well. Novalis described the need for chaos to “shimmer through the regular veil of orderliness” and referred to the “delight in revealing in the world what is beyond the world.”<sup>17</sup> It is only a short step to Wordsworth’s “humble and rustic” from Herder’s conception of poetry as a reflection of immediate life, his valorization of the folk and of folk art, his view that a vital national literature and language should keep “one foot on German earth.”<sup>18</sup> If the idea of the familiar opens on the quotidian, the sphere of the quotidian itself opens, not only on the humble, the popular, the rustic, and every manifestation of the ordinary, but on larger issues of identity as well. That such questions may be implicated in the “Diabelli” Variations may come to seem more probable when we look at some details of the origination and publication of Beethoven’s Opus 120.

#### IV

Sometime between early 1819 and early 1821, Diabelli conceived the idea of commissioning variations on his waltz as a collective project involving

numerous Viennese composers. Beethoven proceeded on his own, well before the collective set was under way, working without any commitment to Diabelli, and composed almost two-thirds of his variations by mid-1819; he revised and completed the work in late 1822 and early 1823 shortly after concluding an agreement for its publication. Entitled “Thirty-Three Variations on a Waltz for Pianoforte,” and dedicated to his intimate friend Antonie Brentano, Beethoven’s “Diabelli” Variations was rushed into print in June 1823 as a separate work, Opus 120, from the house of Cappi and Diabelli. One year later, on publication of the set of fifty variations on the theme by fifty composers, Beethoven’s opus was republished as part 1 of a two-volume set bearing the unusual and cumbersome heading, “Vaterländischer Künstlerverein.” The newspaper advertisement described the set:

*National Association of Artists*  
Variations for the Pianoforte,  
on a Given Theme,  
Composed by the Most Excellent Composers and Virtuosi  
in Vienna and the I. & R. Austrian States.  
Part I, containing 33 Variations by L. van Beethoven, op. 120 . . .  
Part II, containing 50 Variations on the same theme by the following  
composers . . .<sup>19</sup>

The announcement explained that “all the noted living national composers and piano virtuosos, fifty in number, had joined together for the purpose of each writing one variation on one and the same theme placed before them.” In the context of such an appeal to national pride one aspect of the theme’s significance becomes somewhat clearer, for a waltz, interchangeably called “Ein Deutsche” or “Deutscher Tanz,” is a plain musical product of German soil. Beethoven’s first reference to the set in his correspondence described it as “Große Veränderungen über einen bekannten ‘Deutschen’”—“Grand Variations on a well-known German dance.”<sup>20</sup>

On an uncomplicated level, then, the theme, composed by Diabelli in contemporary German musical vernacular and taken as the point of departure of Beethoven’s variations, represents the homeland through its native language. And this is consistent with Beethoven’s attraction to conceptions of a national culture in the years following his disillusionment with France and its First Consul. As early as 1812 he exalted creative artists as “teachers

of the nation,"<sup>21</sup> and after 1815 he began increasingly to use German-language expression marks and titles in place of the customary Italian, including designations like *Hammerklavier* for his Piano Sonatas opp. 101, 106, and 109, and *Veränderungen* rather than the Italian-derived *Variationen* for the "Diabelli" Variations.<sup>22</sup> I do not mean to suggest, however, that nationalist or patriotic motives are more than peripheral to Beethoven's intentions, for it is clear enough that the formulation of the collective project was Diabelli's rather than Beethoven's. After all, he worked independently of Diabelli in drafting his own set, and the first and post-1824 editions of Opus 120 make no reference to the *Künstlerverein*.<sup>23</sup> What interested Beethoven more deeply, I suspect, are issues flowing from the very idea of representing the quotidian and, in particular, the possibilities of utilizing an image drawn from the German vernacular as a point of departure for a metaphysical exploration.

## V

In Diabelli's German dance, his "Deutsche," Beethoven happened upon a subject that was drawn from "common life" in Wordsworth's sense, and embodied the national in Herder's sense. But Diabelli's theme has both a more extensive and a more elusive kind of referentiality, quickly exhausting the kinds of simple denotation suggested by Wordsworth or Herder, and expanding through a nebula of associations that rise from the initial moment of referentiality and overflow boundaries in all directions. Thus, to dip randomly into this reservoir of possibilities, Diabelli's theme conveys ideas, not only of the national, the commonplace, the humble, the rustic, the comic, but of the mother tongue, the earthly, the sensuous, and, ultimately, perhaps, of every waltzing couple under the sun.

The bedrock of this ordinariness may be in its implied celebration of the merely human, which Diabelli's theme is perfectly suited to symbolize because it is the approximate equivalent in music of what Erich Auerbach once described in connection with Dante's language as the "humblest vernacular."<sup>24</sup> As such, the theme has the potentiality to designate all those who are in need of redemption, all who are unnoticed, disinherited, or in quest of plenitude. We may number among those who are signified by these thirty-two bars, then, the shepherd, the child, the good soldier, the pilgrim, Parsifal, Tyll Eulenspiegel, the minstrel called "der lieber Augustin," Pirate Jenny,

Leporello and Zerlina, and the widest assortment of clowns, simpletons, and ordinary stiff s who, because of their place at the bottom of the heap, have the capacity of surviving and of trying to set things right. And to these we can add the lowly “cobbler” himself, the much-maligned shoemaker who manufactures those boots and shoes so vital to walkers on the road of life, and whose clumsy “Schusterflecken,” Beethoven once wrote laughingly, have the potential to be turned into works of art, if only one knows how—and, presumably, if one has the wit and the capacity to stick to one’s last.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, by virtue of its ordinariness, not to be mistaken for triviality, this theme, this beginning that Beethoven chose for his Opus 120, is suited to unpacking issues of firstness and lastness and their interchangeability. The purpose of this vernacular beginning may be to show us a lastness that calls not only for variation and metamorphosis but for transvaluation and reversal. The “Diabelli” Variations may be a version of pastoral in William Empson’s sense, in which—to use Kenneth Burke’s bold paraphrase—is designated “that subtle reversal of values whereby the last becomes first. They do this, not by assuming the qualities of the first, but by suggesting the firstness implicit in their lastness.” Those who have been cast down may be uplifted, “not by renouncing their humbleness, but by affirming it, until out of it there arises the prophetic truth.”<sup>26</sup>

By its utter indestructibility, its imperviousness to perpetual attempts to dismantle it, Diabelli’s theme comes to stand for the unwearying tenacity of every individual, and gives token of assurance of a permanent place in the order of things. The “Diabelli” Variations is not a conjurer’s trick demonstrating how an unlikely edifice can be built upon an absurd foundation. It is a demonstration of a different kind: how one thing can be radically transformed into another—or split into many—without itself being annihilated; it is an essay on creative metamorphosis and a promise of endurance.

## VI

Many of Beethoven’s memorable beginnings are declarations of discontinuity. Consider the first measures of the *Eroica*, Fifth, Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth symphonies, and of the “Pathétique,” “Appassionata,” and “Hammerklavier” sonatas, to name only some of the more obvious examples. But Beethoven is not always interested in rhetorical initiating gestures or world-

EXAMPLE 1.4. String Quartet in A minor, op. 132, *Assai sostenuto*, mm. 1–8.

*Assai sostenuto*

The musical score shows four staves. The first staff (Violin I) starts with a whole rest, then enters in measure 2 with a half note G4. The second staff (Violin II) enters in measure 2 with a half note F#4. The third staff (Viola) enters in measure 2 with a half note E4. The fourth staff (Cello/Double Bass) enters in measure 2 with a half note D4. The music continues with various intervals and dynamics, including *pp* and *cresc.* markings.

birthing starts. Frequently in the late sonatas and quartets he wants us to join him in overhearing events that are already ongoing; he is the brooding observer, inviting us to share what he has seen, to let this music enter us, unresisting. Such works may begin imperceptibly, creeping into existence, gradually emerging from stillness, as in the opening of the String Quartet in A minor, op. 132. In these beginnings, Beethoven slips into a parallel universe, which unfolds without demanding either a break or a confrontation (ex. 1.4).<sup>27</sup>

It may be that the Diabelli theme blends both kinds of beginnings. It offers both a continuation and a new start. Yes, it has suddenly sprung into existence, but it has not required any forcible event, let alone a shock, to announce its presence. It is *there* because its very nature is to be present. Perhaps it has always been there. It inaugurates activity, it sets things in motion; it sets the scene. It authorizes us to begin. In this sense it is a prologue rather than—or as well as—a beginning; in other words, it is a beginning before a beginning.

Well, then, for better or worse, we may have made a beginning. We now know a bit more about how this music starts, where it comes from, and even something of what the theme may signify. But a beginning also demands a continuation and a goal. What, then, is the end of this beginning? In asking this question, we perhaps approximate Beethoven's own question, one that took him four years to settle. In the "Diabelli" Variations, Beethoven knows the beginning right from the start, and he is in search of something beyond it—implication, potentiality, something worth searching for. The

point of departure ought somehow to make possible the discovery of a point—a moment, or a locus—of arrival.

## VII

On reflection, it seems to me that the philosopher Ernst Bloch was only partially right when he wrote in the opening words of his *The Principle of Hope*, “We begin empty [*Wir fangen leer an*].”<sup>28</sup> If my reading of Diabelli’s theme has any validity, it suggests that we can also begin in a limited state of plenitude, imbued with the earth’s simple pleasures, unaware, however, of such things as beauty and spirit, passion, despair, and death; which is to say, all those things that lie beyond a state of undisturbed innocence, real or imagined. The “Diabelli” Variations tells of dissatisfaction with qualified pleasures and simplicities, urges the necessity of going further, of delving and plunging and climbing and seeking in realms that do not appear in the lives or the dreams of thoroughly contented folks (or of ordinary music). It is not a willed dissatisfaction; rather, it rises from the essential nature of those—Faust, Don Giovanni, Egmont, Beethoven—who are driven to go further, even as it causes them enormous pain, even as it opens onto dangers of unnecessary journeys and brings them face to face with mortality.

From innocence to knowledge, earth to Paradise, the human to the infinite. These are some of the metaphors that are put into play by Beethoven’s Opus 120. I don’t believe, however, that its overarching metaphor is just a variant of Schiller’s and Rousseau’s scenarios of alienation and reconciliation; Beethoven doesn’t here seek a return to nature or the classic, he seeks wisdom, ecstasy, the empyrean, whatever the cost. He will not settle for a bustling waltz, even with all that it symbolizes. Nor will he reject it. Rather, he will use it, seeing in the cobbler’s patches—which propel us unceremoniously up the scale with neither preparation nor apology—the emblems of emergence, of ascent, of every potential upward pathway, however daunting, that leads from the quotidian to the celestial.

He uses it because this theme, this beginning, sets up the possibility of mobilizing every conceivable metaphor of maximum contrast—the miniature and the boundless, the blade of grass and the starry vault, the earthly and the unearthly, the profane and the sacred, the lowliest and the divine. Diabelli’s theme and its fraternal twin, Leporello’s buffo “Notte e giorno

## EXAMPLE 1.5. "Diabelli" Variations, no. 22, mm. 1–8.

## Var. 22

*Allegro molto alla "Notte e giorno faticar" di Mozart*

Musical score for Variation 22, measures 1–8. The score is in common time (C) and features a piano introduction with a forte (f) section. The right hand has a melody with triplets and slurs, while the left hand provides a steady accompaniment. Dynamics include *p*, *f*, and *cresc.* markings.

## EXAMPLE 1.6. "Diabelli" Variations, no. 24, mm. 1–9.

## Var. 24 Fughetta

*Andante*

Musical score for Variation 24 Fughetta, measures 1–9. The score is in 3/4 time and marked *Andante*. It features a single melodic line in the right hand with a *una corda, sempre legato* instruction. The left hand provides a simple accompaniment. The piece ends with a repeat sign.

faticar”—not coincidentally, the “beginning” of *Don Giovanni*, act 1, scene 1—are accorded equal time with a devotional fughetta that might have issued from Bach’s Goldberg Variations (exx. 1.5, 1.6).

By the use of extreme registral contrasts, Beethoven extends to its furthest limits the distance between the theme and its spiritualized metamorphosis. And he accelerates the animated character of the theme in a variety of prestos, vivaces, and allegro assais, which convey the sense of hastening toward a desired destination, as in variation no. 10. But as the narrative continues, we also begin to encounter moments in which the action is greatly decelerated, approaching ever closer to motionlessness in such later variations as no. 20.

In the end, this set of variations abandons none of the terrain it has traversed, the terrain that lies between Diabelli’s humble “Deutsche” and a composer’s astonishing vision of a transfigured universe. All of it is necessary; no part of it is sufficient. It describes a long journey, this Pilgrim’s Progress on a Biedermeier waltz (as I once called it).<sup>29</sup> A voyager pauses on his way, reflects, looks back whence he came, measures the distance from his starting point and estimates the distance yet to be covered. The implied protagonist of Beethoven’s “Diabelli” Variations looks back to the theme, which is the link to the home that he left in favor of an arduous pursuit of every conceivable metaphor for a desired goal—toward God, Paradise, reason, wisdom, order, peace, achievement, perfection, healing, and love. Setting aside inexact poetic analogies, however, we may want to say that although Beethoven’s Opus 120 may be about many things, it is always a set of studies in musical transformation. Beethoven called it “Veränderungen”—implying changes, metamorphoses, rather than *Variationen*—with good reason.

One might expect that ultimately it is about the transformation of a waltz into a fugue, in Variation 32; and this would be appropriate as the traditional way of ending a work in the learned style, of marking an arrival, and of reinforcing its sacred implications. But Beethoven defeats the traditional expectation and chooses to close with a wordless song, a spectral dance in tempo di menuetto, moderato, marked *grazioso e dolce*. In the long run, then, the “Diabelli” Variations seems to be about the transformation of an earthly waltz into a celestial minuet. From a seemingly inconsequential starting point, Beethoven’s wayfarer entered the ascending path, reached toward perfection, encountered loss and the prospect of death, and was overcome by homesickness for the beginning as the last days came dimly into view. The

EXAMPLE I.7. “Diabelli” Variations, no. 33, mm. 1–5.

Var. 33

**Tempo di Menuetto moderato** (*ma non tirarsi dietro*)(*aber nicht schleppend*)

*p grazioso e dolce*

thirty-third variation is introduced by a *Poco adagio* that breaks the fugue’s agitated momentum and finally takes us to the brink of utter motionlessness, providing a curtain to separate the fugue from the minuet and serving to introduce the final image—of a tender, songful, profound nostalgia, a vantage point from which we can review the purposes of the entire journey (ex. I.7).