

**The Prolongational Function of Secondary-Key
Variations in Brahms's
Variations for Four Hands on a Theme of Robert
Schumann, Op. 23**

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Introduction

A common feature of eighteenth-century variations is the preservation of the theme's key and voice-leading scheme in all variations. From a Schenkerian perspective, this discrete and repetitive nature of variation form poses substantial problems; the difficulty of generating a variation set from a single *Ursatz* led Schenker to adopt the conventional view of variation form, identifying the process of rhythmic diminution as the major means of large-scale organization.¹ Most of his analyses of variation sets consist of sketches of the themes alone, implying that variation form comprises a chain of variations, each of which duplicates the voice leading of the theme.² In the rare cases in which he does analyze a complete set of variations, such as Brahms's *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel*, Op. 24 ([1924] 2005, 77-114), and Max Reger's *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by J. S. Bach*, Op. 81([1926] 1996, 106-117), Schenker discusses the structural relationship between the themes and individual variations in great detail. While praising the high level of unity exhibited by the *Handel* variations, Schenker criticizes the lack of coherence in Reger's Op. 81, since the variations often deviate markedly from the voice leading of Bach's theme. These analyses indicate that Schenker

¹ Schenker's discussion of variation form in *Der freie Satz* is brief and general: "A set of variations can be unified most naturally by means of a gradual increase in motion, that is, progressing from larger to ever smaller note values" (Schenker [1935] 1979, 144).

² See Schenker's analyses of the second movement of Beethoven's *Appassionata* Sonata, Op. 57 ([1924] 2005, 49-51), and Haydn's *Andante con Variazioni in F minor* ([1935] 1979, Figs. 48.1 and 91).

adopts a different standard for unity in variation form than for other tonal forms; namely, instead of originating from a governing *Ursatz*, large-scale unity in variation form arises from voice-leading parallelisms between a theme and its variations.

Table 1. Keys, meter signatures, and tempo markings of Brahms's Variations for Four Hands on a Theme of Robert Schumann, Op. 23

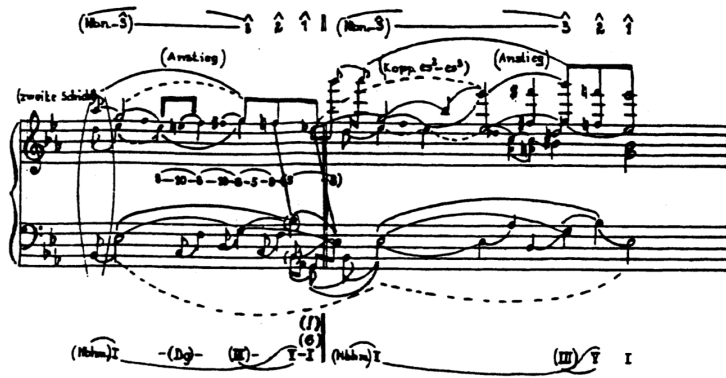
	KEY	METER	TEMPO
Theme	E♭ major	2/4	Leise und innig
Variation 1	E♭ major	2/4	L'istesso tempo. Andante molto moderato
Variation 2	E♭ major	2/4	
Variation 3	E♭ major	2/4	
Variation 4	E♭ minor	2/4	
Variation 5	B major	9/8	Poco più animato
Variation 6	E♭ major	2/4	Allegro non troppo
Variation 7	E♭ major	6/8	Con moto L'istesso tempo
Variation 8	G minor	2/4	Poco più vivo
Variation 9	C minor	2/4	
Variation 10	E♭ major	4/4	Molto moderato, Alla Marcia

The issue of whether one can determine a governing *Ursatz* for an entire variation set is a complicated matter, for the very construction of variation form goes against the theoretical premises that underlie Schenkerian theory, which typically explains the tonal motion of complete, continuous, monotonal compositions. Variation sets, however, are composed of individual, discontinuous units; each variation has its own melodic, rhythmic, textural, and registral profile. While there may be recurring models and surface associations that link successive variations in the chain, the discrete nature of each variation suggests that the set as a whole cannot necessarily be derived from a single *Ursatz*.

Despite this inherent structural tension between variation form and the Schenkerian notion of the *Ursatz* as the sole prototype of all monotonal compositions, attempts have been made to graph an entire variation set as the composing-out of a single *Ursatz*. The variation sets of these studies demonstrate freer variation techniques that give rise to increased flexibility in the theme-variation relationship. Such relationship creates large-scale registral and melodic connections, rendering a governing *Ursatz* possible. A well-known example is Schenker's own analysis of the finale of the *Ernica* Symphony (Schenker [1930] 1997, 10-68). Written in what Cavett-Dunsby 1986 calls a "hybrid form," this movement illustrates the influence of developmental procedures upon the organic unity of variation form. Schenker interprets the finale as a two-part form, with each part delineating a complete $\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}$ descent over a I-III-V-I progression (Example 1).³

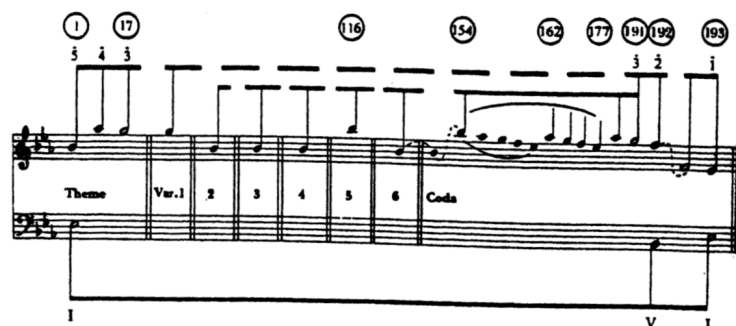
³ In contrast to its usual usage to represent interruption, the " $||$ " sign in this example to show a two-part sectional form, with each part delineates a $\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}$ *Ursatz* descent.

Example 1. Schenker's graph of the Finale of Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony
(*Meisterwerk* III, Figure 44)



The two sections are connected to one another due to weak harmonic closure at the end of the first section. Schenker treats the theme and opening three variations not as discrete entities, but rather as part of a middleground prolongation of the *Kopft*on. Their individual *Urlinie* descents are therefore considered to be middleground events. For variations in the conventional sectional-variation format, Marston 1989 reveals an *Ursatz* that spans the entire finale of Beethoven's String Quartet in E \flat major, Op. 74, an interpretation founded upon large-scale registral and melodic connections. His reading is supported by the fact that the theme does not have a complete *Ursatz*; this melodic incompleteness creates tension that intensifies over the course of the movement and is eventually resolved in the final variation. Example 2 displays Marston's graph for the entire movement. It shows an *Urlinie* descent from $\hat{5}$ to $\hat{3}$ in the theme, with the *Urlinie* closure taking place in the coda. The individual variations in this movement therefore function as middleground prolongations. Marston's study illustrates that the possibility of a governing *Ursatz* in a variation set relies on the presence of functional differentiation among variations. In the case of Beethoven's Op. 74, the theme and the final variation serve as two structural pillars on either end of the set, with the intervening variations performing a subordinate role.

Example 2. Nicholas Marston's graph of the Finale of Beethoven's String Quartet in E♭ major, Op. 74, Finale (Marston 1989, Example 9)



His notion that the theme—as an incomplete entity—strives for completion over the course of a variation set suggests how variation form can be goal-directed, as opposed to the conventional view of its additive nature.

In addition to large-scale melodic and registral connections, tonal contrasts may also play a leading role in the large-scale organization of a variation set. While most eighteenth-century composers usually wrote variations exclusively in the tonic key, nineteenth-century composers explored tonal contrasts by writing variations in keys different from that of the theme.⁴ Regarding the overall organization of a set, Schenker treats secondary-key variations in the same manner as their tonic-key counterparts—as discrete members of an additive structure. His discussions of secondary-key variations are found in his studies of Brahms's *Handel Variations*, Op. 24 (Schenker [1924] 2005) and Beethoven's *Eroica* Piano Variations, Op. 35 (Marston 1997). In accord with his conditions for unity in variation form, Schenker emphasizes the

⁴ “Variations in the tonic key” include variations in the parallel mode. I use the term “secondary-key variations” to refer to variations in non-tonic keys. Although such secondary-key variations are more common in the nineteenth century, it is not an exclusive feature of the Romantic period. For example, Variation 4 of the finale of Mozart's Piano Concerto in C minor, K. 491, is in A♭ major.

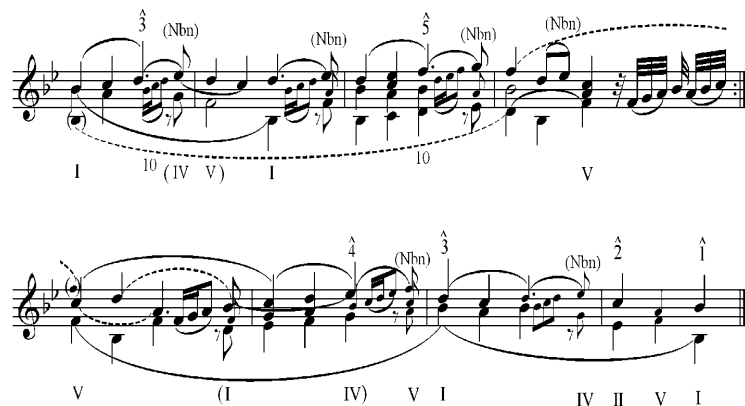
structural ties between the theme and its variations in both sets. Examples 3a and 3b reproduce Schenker's graphs of the theme and Variation 21 of the *Handel* Variations, respectively. His discussion of Variation 21—the only secondary-key variation in the set, written in the submediant key of G minor—focuses on melodic connections between this variation and the theme, calling attention to not only the theme's B♭-major melody that is disguised in the variation as grace notes in the right-hand part, but also the theme's *Urlinie*, which he claims “behaves here as before, as if [this variation] remained in B♭” (Schenker [1924] 2005, 96). He makes a similar observation in an unpublished essay on Beethoven's *Eroica* Piano Variations, again emphasizing the preservation of the theme's melody in Variation 6, which begins in the submediant key of C minor but ends in the tonic key of E♭ major: “With the exception of one pitch (e♯2 instead of e♭2 in m. 7) the theme is transposed note-for-note to C minor. However, this is fundamentally an E♭-major theme, not a C-minor one” (Marston 1997, 28). He offers further observations about the *Eroica* Variations in his study of the finale of the *Eroica* Symphony, commenting on the thematic and formal similarities between the two compositions. Regarding the form of the *Eroica* Variations, Schenker writes,

In Op. 35 an ‘introduzione col basso del tema’ begins by presenting what is to be the bass of the theme and displays it successively in the great, small, one- and two-line octaves. Then the ‘tema’ appears in the two-line octave. Fifteen variations follow, all of them in the main key—except for Variation VI, which places a C minor chord beneath the theme in a merely artificial manner... (Schenker [1930] 1997, 51)

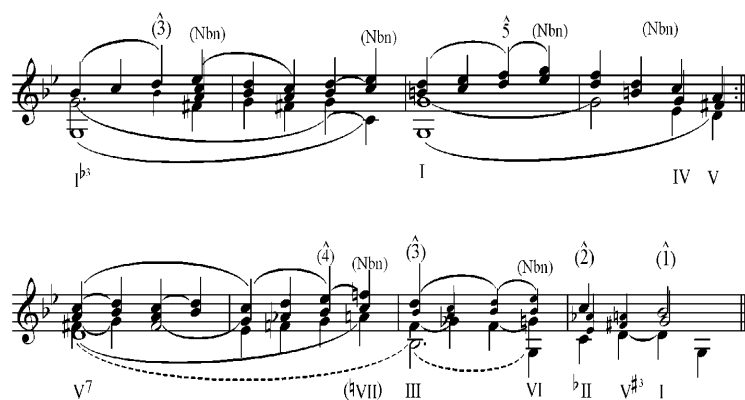
Unlike Variation 21 of the *Handel* Variations, which remains entirely in the submediant key, Variation 6 of the *Eroica* Variations presents an example of the so-called “auxiliary cadence.” The “artificial” key of C minor that dominates most of Variation 6 is retrospectively heard as VI of E♭ major, since the music modulates back to the home key in the last four measures of the variation. Variation 6 projects a middleground VI-II-V-I progression in E♭ major.

Example 3.

- a. Schenker's graph of the Handel Variations, Op. 24, Theme (Der Tonville II/8)



- b. Schenker's graph of the Handel Variations, Variation 21 (Der Tonville II/8)



Like his view of unity between a theme and its tonic-key variations, Schenker sees melodic/*Urlinie* affiliation as the major factor that unites a secondary-key variation with its theme. In both of these variations, the theme's melody is re-harmonized in the key of the submediant; the minor differences in foreground

progression are the results of re-harmonization and therefore do not undermine unity. To reiterate, Schenker sees secondary-key variations as individual members of an additive structure. Nowhere in the discussion does Schenker suggest a large-scale harmonic and voice-leading connection between a secondary-key variation and other members of the set.⁵

Such a view is challenged by Cavett-Dunsby 1985 and Forte and Gilbert 1982, who re-define the formal nature of secondary-key variations, the harmonic and voice-leading role secondary-key variations play in a variation set, and propose the possibility of a governing *Ursatz*. In her dissertation on Mozart's variations, Cavett-Dunsby distinguishes between the different structural functions performed by variations in the parallel mode and variations in secondary keys. She states that variations in the parallel mode exist independently, not requiring any voice-leading connection with other variations surrounding them. The function of these parallel-mode variations is rhythmic: usually located in the middle or near the end of the set, the parallel-mode variation—often in minor—typically interrupts the rhythmic acceleration set up in the previous variations and initiates another cycle of rhythmic acceleration that leads to the climactic finale.

Variations in secondary keys, however, derive their significance from neighboring variations. Their function lies in their long-range harmonic and voice-leading connections with other members of the set. For Cavett-Dunsby, the use of secondary-key variations changes the nature of variation form from one that is based on melodic/harmonic parallelisms to one that is based on tonal and

⁵ Schenker's treatment of secondary-key variations in the *Eroica* Finale is different (Schenker [1930] 1997). He interprets the modulations in the fugato section (mm. 106-254) as chromatic passing tones in the upper voice that connect the E \flat (the end of the theme in m. 107) with the *Kopftön* G; an 8-10 linear-intervallic pattern directs the outer-voice motion in this passage. Amid this fugato section, a secondary-key variation of the theme in D major occurs in mm. 175-210, supplying an F \sharp in the upper voice and a D in the bass. In comparison with the *Handel* Variations, in which the secondary-key variation is surrounded by variations in the tonic key, the D-major secondary-key variation in the *Eroica* Finale functions as the dominant of III; its large-scale harmonic and voice-leading relationship to the theme and the home key is therefore less direct.

voice-leading hierarchy. In contrast to variations in the parallel mode, secondary-key variations are not discrete entities in an additive chain; rather, their harmonic and contrapuntal subordination to their tonic-key counterparts gives them a middleground prolongational function. Allen Forte and Steven Gilbert expand upon Cavett-Dunsby 1985, stating “Variations in keys other than the tonic will tend to constitute middleground prolongations within the background structure of the set of variations as a whole” (Forte and Gilbert 1982, 321). Their analysis of Brahms’s *Variations on a Theme of Paganini*, Op. 35, interprets Variation 12, in F major, as a deep middleground prolongation of the A-minor tonic. Forte and Gilbert’s graph, reproduced as Example 4a, construes Variation 12 as providing support for an upper-neighbor embellishment of the *Kopfton*. Their middleground reading of the *Paganini* Variations and their claim of a “background structure of the set as a whole” are based on the following assumptions: 1) a variation set is a monotonal, single-movement composition; 2) the theme establishes the *Kopfton* for the entire set;⁶ and 3) secondary-key variations function as composed-out secondary *Stufen* that prolong the *Kopfton* of the theme.⁷

⁶ The *Ursatz* Marston displays in his analysis of Beethoven’s Op. 74 (Marston 1989) is also based on these two assumptions.

⁷ “Secondary *Stufen*” refers to all *Stufen* that do not represent the tonic triad.

Example 4.

- a. *Forte and Gilbert's middleground reading of Brahms's Paganini Variations, Op. 35 (Forte and Gilbert 1982, Example 271c)*

Theme Var. 12 Var. 13

5 6 5

1 VI I

- b. *Forte and Gilbert's middleground reading of Variation 12 of the Paganini Variations (Forte and Gilbert 1982, Example 271d)*

(1) (3) (4) (5) (6) (7) (8) (9) (10) (11) (12) (13) (14) (15) (16) (17) (18) (19) (20) (21) (22) (23) (24) (25) (26) (27) (28) (29) (30) (31) (32) (33) (34) (35) (36) (37) (38) (39) (40) (41) (42) (43) (44) (45) (46) (47) (48) (49) (50) (51) (52) (53) (54) (55) (56) (57) (58) (59) (60) (61) (62) (63) (64) (65) (66) (67) (68) (69) (70) (71) (72) (73) (74) (75) (76) (77) (78) (79) (80) (81) (82) (83) (84) (85) (86) (87) (88) (89) (90) (91) (92) (93) (94) (95) (96) (97) (98) (99) (100)

For Forte and Gilbert, secondary-key variations possess an identical middleground prolongational function as, for example, the middle section of a ternary-form composition.⁸ But while the latter has its own melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic profile, without necessarily drawing materials from the outer sections, secondary-key variations depend upon their respective themes for their contents. If one adopts Cavett-Dunsby's and Forte and Gilbert's views of secondary-key variations as middleground prolongations, then the following questions arise: How should the composing-out of the secondary-key variations occur? How should it contrast the composing-out of, for example, the middle section of a ternary-form composition? Finally, in particular, how should the local *Kopftón* of a secondary-key variation relate to the theme's *Kopftón* and the large-scale *Urlinie*? Example 4b reproduces Forte and Gilbert's reading of Variation 12. Although Forte and Gilbert select F as the structural neighbor tone in the first-level middleground of the whole set (in A minor), they interpret Variation 12 as a $\hat{5}$ -line, with C as the local *Kopftón*. Such a discrepancy between the tone that governs the large-scale structure and the local *Kopftón* of passages in secondary keys has been addressed in Smith 1996. Smith argues that while Schenker persistently regards the note that controls the deep structural level as the same one that initiates the local linear descent of a secondary-key area, a given passage is often better represented by a local *Kopftón* different from the one indicated by the large-scale structure. The following sections will first address this discrepancy through one of the underlying concepts of Schenkerian theory, namely, the descending linear progression. The ways in which the descending linear progressions relate to the tones of the *Urlinie* as prescribed in *Der freie Satz* indicate a specific relationship between a theme and its secondary-key variations. An analysis of Brahms's *Variations for Four Hands on a Theme of Robert Schumann*, Op. 23 will illustrate such relationship and how it gives rise to a governing *Ursatz* for the set.

⁸ Forte and Gilbert's middleground reading of the *Paganini* Variations is identical to Schenker's middleground paradigm of a three-part song form. See Fig. 153 in *Der freie Satz*.

Secondary-key areas in single-movement monotonal compositions

This study examines only complete and self-contained passages in keys other than the tonic of the composition: such secondary-key areas possess definite beginnings and conclusive endings—usually perfect authentic cadences—in their respective keys. Typical instances of such passages include the second tonal area in the exposition of a sonata-form movement and the middle section in a ternary form. Schenker interprets such secondary-key passages as composed-out secondary *Stufen*, with their own self-standing descending linear progressions and bass arpeggiations in their respective keys. In his discussion of “Descending Linear Progressions of the First Order” in *Der freie Satz*—descending linear progressions that prolong a tone of the *Urlinie*—Schenker outlines the relationship between the descending linear progression and members of the *Urlinie*, specifying that the descending linear progression must be “related to a tone of the fundamental line [the *Urlinie*]. This can be any fundamental-line tone. In the case of a descending line, the fundamental-line tone will be the primary tone, the point of departure; in an ascending line, it will be the goal tone” (Schenker [1935] 1979, 44).⁹ Schenker’s specification that the beginning tone of a “descending linear progression of the first order” be an upper-voice tone usually gives rise to a local *Ursatz* form different from the global one. For example, a sonata-form movement that presents a $\hat{3}$ -line *Ursatz* implies a local $\hat{5}$ -line descent from $\hat{2}$ in the dominant key area. Similarly, a ternary form arising from a large-scale $\hat{5}$ - $\hat{6}$ - $\hat{5}$ motion harmonized by I-IV-I suggests a $\hat{3}$ -line local descent in the subdominant key area. While differences between local and global *Ursatz* forms do not threaten the unity of sonata or ternary form, such differences challenge the view that voice-leading parallelism is the source of unity in variation form.

⁹ As Example 5 will show, the same restriction also applies to descending linear progressions that prolong the tones of the upper voices of later middleground levels.

Figure 35.1 from *Der freie Satz*, reproduced here as Example 5a, is a commonly cited model of descending linear progressions. It sketches the second movement of Mozart's Piano Sonata in A major, K. 331. In Section a_1 (mm. 1-18), the descending linear progressions from $\hat{3}$ and $\hat{2}$ are harmonized by I-V-I bass arpeggiations in tonic and dominant keys, respectively.¹⁰ Figure 35.1 also represents the D-major Trio as generated from a deep-level upper-neighbor embellishment of the *Kopftone*. In a detailed analysis of this Trio (Figure 20.4, reproduced here as Example 5b), Schenker illustrates an 8-line descent; the large-scale neighbor-note $\hat{4}$ in A major (see Example 5a) functions as the local *Kopftone* of this D-major Trio.¹¹ In Examples 5a and 5b, Schenker considers secondary-key areas to be self-contained sections. The ways in which these secondary *Stufen* unfold resemble the generation of the *Ursatz* from the tonic triad: the descending linear progression departs from the upper voice to an inner voice and the note of departure—the *Kopftone*—remains in control throughout the span; these *Kopftöne* carry a greater structural weight than the remaining members of the descending linear progressions.

Returning to the *Paganini* Variations, Example 6a presents a hypothetical middleground that conforms to the model described above. It interprets $\hat{6}$ as both a large-scale upper neighbor to the *Kopftone* and the local *Kopftone* of Variation 12, suggesting an 8-line descent for this secondary-key variation. The graph shown in Example 6b integrates the two Forte and Gilbert graphs (see Examples 4a and 4b), producing a large-scale reading that is absent from Forte and Gilbert's discussion of this composition. This reading presents the end tone of the descending linear progression as structurally superior to the local *Kopftone*.¹²

¹⁰ Mm. 11-18 form a miniature secondary-key area that features a sentence in the key of the dominant.

¹¹ For more detailed discussion of these examples, see Smith 1996.

¹² In another section of their book where a similar situation is encountered, the authors offer the following explanation of this discrepancy: "As a component of the fundamental line it [the end tone] therefore takes precedence over the head tone of the linear progression. In general, determination of the priority of the head note or tail note of a linear progression is not arbitrary, but depends upon the role

*Example 6.*a. Hypothetical middleground of the *Paganini* Variations according to Schenker's paradigm

Theme Var. 12 Var. 13

I VI I

b. Hypothetical middleground paradigm for Forte and Gilbert's reading of the *Paganini* Variations

Theme Var. 12 Var. 13

I VI I

of the progression in the middleground and background levels. Ultimately, middleground melodic and harmonic structures adjust to fit the background, either explicitly or implicitly, since it is the background structure which governs the entire composition" (Forte and Gilbert 1982, 238).

Rather than prolonging the *Kopftón* of Variation 12 throughout the span, the C-to-F descent functions as a prefix that embellishes a rhythmically-displaced end tone F. This means of composing-out can be understood as a result of reaching-over: originating from an inner voice, the C is then placed in a higher register and connected linearly to the large-scale upper-neighbor F.

Forte and Gilbert's interpretation of the *Paganini* Variations demonstrates a background parallelism between Variation 12 and the theme: in their interpretation, both the theme and Variation 12 present a $\hat{5}$ -line descent. The local *Kopftón* of Variation 12 in that interpretation does not function as a *Kopftón* in the strictest sense, since it is structurally inferior to the end tone and does not govern the span. If a secondary-key variation is generated on the middleground in the manner that Schenker describes, the *Kopftón* of the secondary-key variation will be structurally superior and remain in control throughout the span. But at the same time, it must relinquish its voice-leading parallelism with its theme, resulting in a different *Ursatz* form.¹³

¹³ Schenker's analysis of the *Eroica* Finale is an exception. In his graphs (Figs. 44 and 45), his choice of F \sharp as the structural top voice over the D in the bass suggests a local $\hat{3}$ -line *Ursatz* for the D-major variation, an *Ursatz* form that is identical to the theme. But as discussed in footnote 4, such an *Ursatz* parallelism between the theme and the D-major variation is only possible because of the latter's indirect relationship with the tonic *Stufe* and the theme's *Kopftón*. Recent scholarship on variation form from a Schenkerian perspective has studied variations that show significant voice-leading differences from the theme. In Marston's study of the last movement of Beethoven's Op. 74 (1989), the different levels of structural divergence between the theme and individual variations define the latter's voice-leading and formal functions. Cummings 1991 illustrates cycles of statement, development, and return in selected nineteenth-century variations, in which modifications of different parameters of the theme, in particular its deep-level voice leading, play a vital role.

Brahms, *Variations for Four Hands on a Theme of Robert Schumann*, Op. 23

Brahms's *Variations for Four Hands on a Theme of Robert Schumann*, Op. 23, manifests Schenker's middleground paradigm for secondary-key areas. In comparison to the *Handel* Variations and the *Eroica* Variations, Brahms's Op. 23 differs in both the structural significance of its secondary-key variations and in the ways the melody and voice leading of its secondary-key variations relate to the theme. With respect to structural significance, while there is only one secondary-key variation in each of the *Handel* Variations and the *Eroica* Variations, Brahms's Op. 23 has three secondary-key variations out of a total of ten variations; and regarding the melodic relationships, unlike the two piano variation sets that Schenker studies, Brahms does not transfer the theme's melody in its entirety to the secondary-key variations of his Op. 23. Although fragments of the theme's melody are traceable in the variations, the difference in variation styles renders the melodic relationship between the theme and individual variations less apparent.¹⁴ The theme's *Kopftön* plays the principal role in uniting this variation set. Pitch-class G and its modal mixture counterpart, G^b, function not only as *Kopftön* in the theme and its tonic-key variations, but also in the three secondary-key variations. Within the middleground, the reharmonization of the theme's *Kopftön* (and its mixture counterpart) with secondary *Stufen* gives rise to secondary-key variations, each of which contains a different *Ursatz* than the theme. The following analysis will examine each of the three secondary-key variations, placing particular emphasis on how the theme's *Kopftön* is highlighted in these variations and how their middleground voice leading compares with that of the theme. The analysis will also address the role that the tonic-key variations play

¹⁴ Sisman (1990, 141) states that Brahms's choice of a theme is closely linked to the ways in which he varies it. She writes, "A theme that is a song led to melody-oriented variations...By the same token, Brahms's choice of a Schumann theme seemed to require or imply a more characteristically Schumannesque expression in the variations; a Handel theme received a stricter application of the variation principle, as well as the use of such Baroque topics such as *Siciliana* and *Musette*; a theme by Paganini was chosen for virtuosic variations."

in the large-scale organization of the set; despite the fact that all the tonic-key variations of Op. 23 duplicate the theme's *Ursatz*, Brahms modifies the surface and middleground details of the tonic-key variations to forge connections with the secondary-key variations and express their formal function within the set.

Table 1 lists the keys of individual variations. There are ten variations, three of which are in keys other than the tonic of the theme: Variation 5 in B major (functionally C♭ major but notated enharmonically), Variation 8 in G minor, and Variation 9 in C minor. The ten variations are divided into two groups: Variations 1 through 6 and Variations 7 through 10. Among the variations in the first group, subgroups are formed according to the harmonic function of individual variations: Variations 1 through 3 confirm the tonic established by the theme; Variations 4 and 5—in the keys of the parallel minor and flat submediant, respectively—present the first sign of tonal divergence; and Variation 6 recapitulates the keys of Variations 1 through 5. In the second group, the tonics of Variations 7 through 9 arpeggiate a C-minor triad, while the final variation, Variation 10 in E♭ major, provides harmonic and melodic closure for the entire set.


The Theme

Example 7 reproduces the score of the theme.¹⁵ Section A (mm. 1-16) consists of a sixteen-measure parallel progressive period; the antecedent (mm. 1-8) phrase is a nested sentence. Section B (mm. 17-28) contains three four-measure subphrases, of which the first two feature an ascending-third sequence harmonized by the dominant harmony.

¹⁵ For the sake of clarity, a solo piano arrangement by Theodor Kirchner is used for illustrations. In my examples, the beginning of each variation is numbered m. 1 for easy comparison with the theme.

Example 7. Brahms, *Variations for Four Hands on a Theme by Robert Schumann, Op. 23, Theme*.

Section A
Antecedent
Leise und innig



Consequent



Section B




VI II₆⁵ V7 I

Despite its surface binary division, this theme presents a one-part through-composed form.¹⁶ Example 8 displays the middleground sketch of the theme. The voice-leading scheme is straightforward: a $\hat{3}\text{-}\hat{2}$ descent spans both the antecedent and

¹⁶ The theme's simple binary format contributes to its one-part through-composed middleground scheme.

consequent phrases in Section A. $A\flat$ serves as an upper neighbor to the *Kopftön* on two levels: a middleground upper neighbor in the antecedent phrase of Section A (m. 5) and a more remote occurrence over the back-relating dominant in mm. 17-23. In addition to the governing *Urlinie*, linear descending thirds saturate the surface and middleground levels. On the surface, this motion (at both original and transposed pitch levels) constitutes the primary melodic motive; on the middleground level, the G-F- $E\flat$ third descent embraces the first subphrases of both antecedent and consequent phrases in Section A (mm. 1-4 and 9-12).

Example 8. Middleground of the Theme.

A

Antecedent Consequent

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15

B

17 25 26 27 28

6 6 6

V7 6 VI 6 II6 V7 I

(BRD)

Before examining the individual variations, one further surface detail of the theme is worth noting: rhythmic displacement. At the very first downbeat of the theme, two accented passing tones (F^4 and $A\flat^3$) in the upper voices sound against an $E\flat$ in the bass. Despite the modest amount of rhythmic displacement in the

theme, this feature is intensified in several variations and is a major surface connection between the theme and the variations.

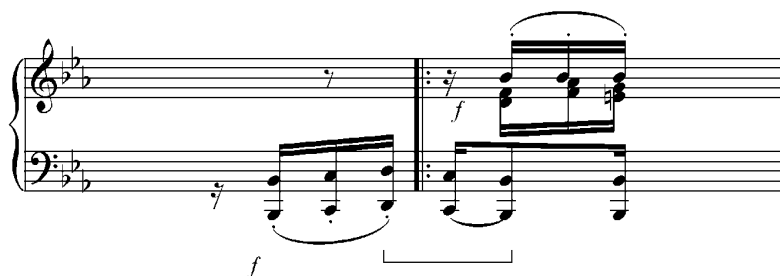
Variations 1 - 3

Variations 1 through 3 are in E♭ major, the same key as the theme. Written in the conventional eighteenth-century ornamental style, Variation 1 preserves the same dynamic level, meter, harmonies, and form as the theme, using prefix-type incomplete lower neighbors and arpeggiations in sixteenth notes as embellishments. Rhythmic displacement is more pervasive in this variation: in the first subphrase, for example, lower neighbors are found on all eighth notes of mm. 1 and 3. The implied harmonic progression of mm. 1-4 is clarified as Brahms replaces the tonic pedal in the theme with bass notes E♭-A♭-B♭-E♭, outlining the foreground progression I-II⁶-V⁷-I.

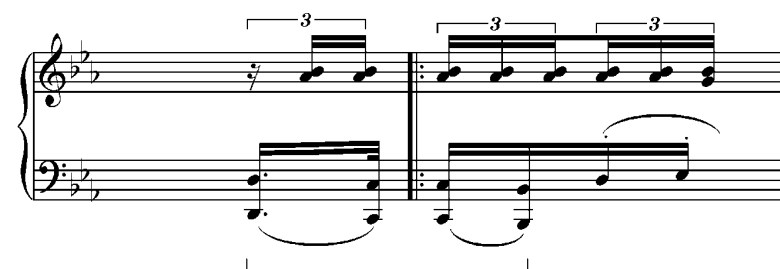
Variations 2 and 3, however, are written in the nineteenth-century style of character variations, in which a single motive—often derived from the theme—dominates an individual variation. In Variation 2, Brahms complements the theme's trademark descending motive with its inverted version (see the ascending thirds on the upbeat of m. 1 and second beat of m. 2). The use of complete triads in close position thickens the texture; this, together with sixteenth notes and *portato* articulation, produces a dynamic and energetic effect markedly different from the lyrical expression portrayed by the theme and the opening variation. As in Variation 1, rhythmic displacement is used extensively here: on the eighth-note pulse level, most melodic pitches are dissonances whose resolutions take place on the following sixteenth note. Additionally, G♭ makes its first appearance in the set seven measures into Variation 2; while it functions here as part of a VII^{o7} of V, the G♭ foreshadows the use of minor mode in Variation 4.

Example 9.

a. Variation 2 (mm. 16-17)



b. Variation 3 (mm. 16-17)



The thick chordal texture and rhythmic vigor of Variation 2 give way to a relaxed and dance-like quality in Variation 3. Beginning with the trademark linear descending thirds of the theme, the melodic materials consist mainly of stepwise motion in parallel thirds and sixths, creating a hemiola over the sextuplet accompaniment in sixteenth notes. As a means to achieve continuity between consecutive variations, Brahms recycles several surface details from Variation 2: first, the use of D \flat in m. 1—in a tonicization of IV—draws parallels with the opening measure of Variation 2; second, the VII o7 of V that first introduces the G \flat in Variation 2 reappears in the corresponding location in Variation 3; and third, the D-C-B \flat anacrusis of Section B evokes a similar occurrence in the same location in Variation 2 (Examples 9a and 9b). On the whole, Variation 3 adheres closely to the harmonic and

contrapuntal scheme of the theme, and together with its specific surface connections with Variation 2, creates a strong sense of summation for the first three variations.

In summary, Variations 1 through 3 exhibit features of both Classical and Romantic variation styles. On the one hand, the use of sixteenth notes in Variations 1 and 2 followed by sextuplets in the accompaniment of Variation 3, reflects the process of rhythm diminution typically used in Classical ornamental variations. In contrast, Variations 2 and 3 present motivic development, a common variation technique of the nineteenth century. Modifications within the middleground and background levels become more prominent in the next three variations. The use of parallel mode in Variation 4 and modulation to \flat VI in Variation 5 are both accompanied by an alteration in middleground and background plans, respectively. Like Variations 4 and 5, Variation 6 differs markedly from the theme in a number of harmonic and voice-leading respects—changes that are most apparent in Section B. This deeper-level modification in Variation 6 has a specific formal function: the harmonic progression summarizes the large-scale harmonic progression of the first six variations, thereby concluding the first group of variations in the set.

Variation 4

In this $E\flat$ -minor variation, Brahms modifies the dominant prolongation of Section B to foreshadow the key of B major in Variation 5. Example 10 displays the voice leading of this variation.¹⁷ An $F\sharp$ appears five measures into Section B amid the dominant prolongation (mm. 17-27); functioning enharmonically as a German augmented-sixth chord in $B\flat$ major, it resolves to the dominant of $B\flat$ in m. 27. The graph illustrates that the dominant prolongation in this variation harmonizes a middleground $\hat{2}$, as opposed to the theme's upper neighbor $\hat{4}$. Brahms's addition of the German augmented-sixth chord enriches the voice leading of this

¹⁷ Mm. 29-41 is a written-out repeat of mm. 16-28.

passage by not only instigating a bass descent from B \flat to F, but also providing chromatic embellishments to the upper voices: a chromatic lower neighbor E \sharp in the soprano and a chromatic passing tone D \flat in the alto. Lastly, it might seem strange that Brahms first spells the augmented-sixth chord as an F \sharp 7, which requires more accidentals in the key of E \flat minor. The significance of the F \sharp 7 here lies in its referential role: it suggests the key of B major, the key of the next variation.

Example 10. Middleground of Variation 4

The musical score for Example 10, Middleground of Variation 4, is presented in two systems, A and B. The key signature is E-flat major (three flats). The score includes measure numbers 1, 16, 17, 20, 26, 27, 28, and 42. Below the staves, harmonic analysis is provided: I, V (BRD), Ger6, V/V, IV6, V8 (6/4), 7 (5/3), and I. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, accidentals, and dynamic markings.

Variation 5

Variation 5, written in the key of B major, is the first secondary-key variation in this set. In spite of its disparate key, the variation relates to the theme by preserving not only the theme's formal scheme and foreground harmonic progression, but also its surface motives. Example 11 reproduces the beginning of this variation along with the end of Variation 4.

Example 11. The ending of Variation 4 and the beginning of Variation 5.

The musical score is divided into two systems. The first system shows the end of Variation 4 and the start of Variation 5. Variation 4 ends with a triplet of eighth notes in the right hand. Variation 5 begins with a piano (p) dynamic and markings 'dolce ed espress.'. The second system continues Variation 5, showing a stepwise descent from F# to B in the upper voice. Above the staff, the notes E, D#, C#, and B are labeled. The lower voice has markings 'APTS' and 'SUS.'.

Rhythmic displacement is used extensively: for example, the upper voices on the downbeats of mm. 2 and 3 are accented passing tones, with their resolution taking place on the last eighth note of the following beat. The surface salience of F#, the *Kopftön* in this variation, is apparent from the very beginning: first, as a means of connection to Variation 4, Variation 5 immediately adopts the Gb (respelled as F#) from the end of Variation 4; second, the first four measures prolong F# by outlining a stepwise descent from F# to B; and third, Brahms deliberately avoids surface melodic closure at the end (Example 12), as the final melodic gesture features a stepwise ascending fourth from C# to F#. Also noteworthy is the arrival of the final tonic harmony in the upper parts on a weak beat. Although this displacement compromises the strength of the concluding cadence, it creates a strong sense of continuation to Variation 6 not only rhythmically, but also contrapuntally: through contrary motion by half step, the concluding outer-voice interval B-F# proceeds to Bb-G to begin Variation 6.

Example 12. Variation 5 (mm. 39-40) and Variation 6 (mm. 1-2).

The image displays two musical excerpts. The top excerpt, labeled 'Variation 5', is in 9/8 time and F# major. It features a piano accompaniment with chords in the right hand and a melodic line in the left hand. The bottom excerpt, labeled 'Variation 6', is in 2/4 time and F major. It also features a piano accompaniment with chords in the right hand and a melodic line in the left hand. Above the first staff of Variation 6, the notes F, Eb, Ab, G, and F are written, corresponding to the chords in the right hand.

Example 13 displays the middleground of Variation 5. It identifies F# as the *Kopftón*. A complete fifth descent from the *Kopftón* replaces the theme's third descent to prolong the opening tonic harmony (mm. 1-4). The theme's outer voices in mm. 5-7 exchange places in this variation, producing an upper neighbor $\hat{6}$ to the *Kopftón* (m. 5). In m. 7, the bass $\hat{1}$ is re-harmonized with a secondary VII³, which pulls the upper voice up to complete the $\hat{5}$ - $\hat{6}$ - $\hat{5}$ neighboring motion (as opposed to the theme's large-scale $\hat{3}$ - $\hat{2}$ descent). Section B inherits the theme's V⁷ expansion that is terminated by a deceptive progression. The difference in *Ursatz*, however, gives rise to a different large-scale scheme: while the V⁷-VI progression in the theme supports the middleground upper neighboring $\hat{4}$ - $\hat{3}$ motion, the same progression here completes a middleground $\hat{5}$ - $\hat{4}$ - $\hat{3}$ descent.

Example 13. Middleground of Variation 5

A

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 15 16

Antecedent Consequent

B

17 23 24 25 26 27 28

29 35 36 37 38 39 40

Variation 6

Following the first secondary-key variation in the set, Variation 6 conveys a strong sense of thematic and harmonic return. In addition to restoring the theme's key and meter, the melody of the opening four-measure subphrase returns in recognizable form for the first time since Variation 1 (see Example 12), accompanied by other motives—descending thirds and neighboring figures—derived from the theme. Variation 6 also incorporates two features of preceding variations: the sixteenth-note sextuplets evoke the accompaniment figuration of Variation 2; and the chromatic neighbor note G \flat in m. 2 recalls the use of the parallel minor key in Variation 4.

The summative role of Variation 6 is best illustrated in the harmonic scheme of Section B. A middleground graph of the variation is given in Example 14. Rather than remaining stationary

on B \flat as in the theme, the bass in mm. 17-20 delineates a stepwise decent in E \flat minor. The next four-measure phrase (mm. 21-24) imitates mm. 17-20 and modulates to the key of the Neapolitan: the B-major triad at m. 21—first heard as \flat VI of E \flat , then reinterpreted as V of \flat II—resolves to the Neapolitan triad at m. 23, with the expected dominant chord returning at m. 25. The graph indicates that the upper voice of mm. 17-24 outlines a passing motion from F to the large-scale upper neighbor A \flat . The B-major and E-major triads harmonize enharmonically-notated versions of the upper voice's G \flat and A \flat , respectively, as well as the upper neighbor C \flat in the tenor voice. Similar to Variation 4, Brahms modifies the harmony and voice leading in this variation to reflect the use of mixture and secondary key in the previous variations: the tonicized E \flat -minor and B-major triads recall the respective keys of Variation 4 and Variation 5.

Example 14. Middleground of Variation 6

The musical score for Example 14, Middleground of Variation 6, is presented in two staves. The upper staff is labeled 'A' and 'B' at the beginning. The lower staff is labeled '10' and '10' at the beginning. The score includes measures 1, 16, 17, 19, 21, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, and 28. The key signature is one flat (B-flat). The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings (p, f). Below the staves, there is a harmonic analysis: 1 V (1b > V) #5 #3, (1b > V) #5 #3, #11 #5 VII 6 #5, V7, VI, V7, I.

Variation 7

Variation 7 marks the beginning of the second group of variations. The upper voice of Section A consists solely of neighboring motion with rhythmic displacement, with a more tuneful melody found in Section B. Brahms's use of compound duple meter and generally soft dynamic gives this variation a lighter, dance-like character. Other than the difference in

expressions and character, Variation 7 preserves the phrase divisions, formal structure, and surface harmonic progressions of the theme; its structural adherence to the theme corresponds to its function as the beginning of the second group of variations.

Variation 8

Variation 8 is written in G minor. The dominance of G in this variation is evident from a strong linear fourth ascent from D to G that spans the opening four measures (Example 15); after two plagal motions in mm. 5-6, Brahms restores the G in m. 7 with registral and dynamic emphasis. Example 16 illustrates an $\hat{8}$ -line *Ursatz*, and a chromatic ascending-fourth *Anstieg* connects the first melodic note D with the *Kopf* on G. As in the theme, both eight-measure phrases in the first section conclude with a half cadence; the upper voice descends by a half step to F \sharp in the antecedent phrase (mm. 4-8) and by a fourth from G to D at the end of the consequent phrase (mm. 12-16).

Section B features a highly chromatic progression. Instead of a dominant pedal, mm. 17-23 bring the music from the dominant to a tonicization of III through an ascending third sequence. The *Urfinie* descent $\hat{7}$ - $\hat{6}$ - $\hat{5}$ proceeds in parallel tenths with the bass, as $\hat{5}$ - $\hat{4}$ - $\hat{3}$ over the I⁶-V $\frac{4}{3}$ -I in the key of the relative major; a D half-diminished-seventh chord in m. 24 introduces the background $\hat{4}$. It resolves to a VI triad in m. 25, which functions as an upper-third elaboration to the structural IV chord in m. 26. Among the three minor-key variations (Variations 4, 8, and 9), tonicization of the relative major is found only in Variation 8. The tonicization of III plays an important harmonic role: in addition to providing an upper-third prolongation to the opening tonic harmony—a middleground bass motion found only in this variation—the

median *Stufe* also harmonizes the background $\hat{7}$ - $\hat{6}$ - $\hat{5}$ descent, creating a favorable condition for a background $\hat{8}$ -line reading.¹⁸

Example 15. Variation 8 (mm. 1-8)

Poco più vivo

espress.

pp dolce

3 3

5

Example 16. Middleground of Variation 8

A **B**

1 2 3 4 5 7 8 9 10 11 12 14 15 16 19 21 23 24 25 26 27 28

Antecedent Consequent

10 10 10 10

10 10 10

I I IVI 6 6 #6 #6 V# I V# 16 V4 3 1 7 b5 VI IV V8-7 I 6-5 4-3

¹⁸ Beach 1988 asserts two minimum requirements for an $\hat{8}$ -line *Ursatz*: first, the *Kopftön* ($\hat{8}$) must be emphasized melodically; and second, both $\hat{7}$ and $\hat{6}$ must receive sufficient harmonic support.

Variation 9

The dance-like Variations 7 and 8 lead to the penultimate variation, which is more serious in character and weightier in structural significance. The structural superiority of Variation 9 is supported by several surface features. First, this is the only variation in the set so far in 4/4 time; since Brahms indicates that the quarter note of this variation should have the same duration as the quarter note in Variation 8 (in 2/4 time), Variation 9 is therefore twice as long as Variation 8. Second, the solemn disposition of this variation, portrayed by the French-overture-style dotted rhythms, thick chordal texture, wide register, and a *forte* dynamic level, adds to its structural weight. Lastly, the cadences of Variations 7, 8, and 9 are successively more conclusive (Example 17). In Variation 7, the use of an imperfect authentic cadence contributes to a sense of incompleteness. A more definite ending is found at the end of Variation 8—its strength is compromised by the soft dynamic level. Finally, in Variation 9, the use of a perfect authentic cadence together with a *forte* dynamic and low bass register provides the most conclusive cadence among these three variations. In addition, Variation 9 structurally supersedes Variations 7 and 8 in terms of key areas; the progression of keys in these three variations—E♭-G-C—unfolds a C-minor triad, the tonic triad of Variation 9.

*Example 17. Cadences of Variations 7, 8, and 9***a. Variation 7 (measures 28-29)**

Example 17a shows the cadence of Variation 7, measures 28-29. The music is in 6/8 time and B-flat major. The right hand features a series of chords, while the left hand plays a descending eighth-note scale. The piece concludes with a final chord in the right hand.

b. Variation 8 (measures 28-29)

Example 17b shows the cadence of Variation 8, measures 28-29. The music is in 2/4 time and B-flat major. The right hand plays a descending eighth-note scale, and the left hand plays a series of chords. The piece concludes with a final chord in the right hand, marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic.

c. Variation 9, measures 27-28

Example 17c shows the cadence of Variation 9, measures 27-28. The music is in 4/4 time and B-flat major. The right hand features a series of chords, and the left hand plays a descending eighth-note scale. The piece concludes with a final chord in the right hand, marked with a forte (*f*) dynamic.

Example 18. Middleground of Variation 9

A
Antecedent

1 2 3 4 6 7 8 9

1 IV V7 7 6 5 6 5 IV V⁷ 7 I V

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Consequent

9 10 11 12 13 15 16

1 IV V⁷ 7 b7 b7 7 6 #4 #6 V7/V V⁷

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16

B

17 22 23 25 26 27 28

8-7 7 IV I #6 6 6 I II6 V 8-7 1

6-5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5

4-3 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4

In the graph shown in Example 18, the *Kopftón* G is approached via an arpeggiation of the C-minor triad. As in the theme, both phrases of Section A feature a large-scale harmonic progression from tonic to dominant that prolongs the *Kopftón*. In Section B, a descending-fifth progression in the bass (G-C-F) brings the music to the key of the subdominant, accompanying an upper voice's sixth-descent from F to A♭.¹⁹ The A♭ serves its expected function as a middleground upper neighbor to the *Kopftón*, which returns in m. 25 over the tonic triad. Despite its harmonic and voice-leading differences, Variation 9 relates to the theme through the G-A♭-G middleground prolongation: in the theme, this G-A♭-G neighboring pattern is harmonized by I-V-VI in the key of E♭ major; in Variation 9, the G-A♭-G is harmonized by a I-IV-I plagal motion in C minor.

Variation 10

The final variation, beginning with a march, inherits the dotted rhythm from Variation 9. The first fourteen measures of this variation have the same formal scheme and foreground harmonic plan as the theme. In spite of these similarities in harmonic and voice-leading structure with the theme, mm. 1-14 in fact function more as an introduction than a variation proper in that they contain scant surface melodic connections with the theme. Thematic reprise occurs in mm. 17-28, where the melody of mm. 1-4 of the theme appears twice. It is first heard over a dominant pedal in mm. 16-18, then with its original pitch classes in mm. 21-23. Example 19 shows that the two thematic reprises are connected by a large-scale D-E♭-F-G ascent in the upper voice. Mm. 17-21 feature a dominant prolongation; the brief resolution to tonic at the end of the first reprise in m. 18 provides consonant support for the E♭ in the upper voice. A V_2^4 of IV terminates this dominant prolongation and resumes the *Kopftón* at the beginning of the second reprise at the

¹⁹ The descending sixth appears to be an ascending third on the graph because of the register transfer of A♭ in m. 25.

end of m. 21. The *Urlinie* descent of this variation—as well as the entire set—takes place in the last four measures.

Example 19. Middleground of Variation 10

CODA

1st Reprise 2nd Reprise

1 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26

1 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26

1 V7 V 4 IV6 II6 I6 b7 IV8 —b7 6 V7 I

2 3 5 5

Example 20. Large-scale voice leading of Op. 23

Th. and Var. 1 to 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

1 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

1 b bVI I VI I IV b7 6 V I

5

Conclusion

Contrary to Schenker's belief that variations should conform to the theme's *Ursatz*, the differences in background scheme of the secondary-key variations in this composition do not undermine the organic nature of the variation set as a whole. Instead, they support a deep middleground prolongation of the *Kopftón* over the course of the composition.²⁰ Example 20 presents the middleground plan of the entire variation set. In the first group (Variations 1 to 6), the *Kopftón* is prolonged from the theme until Variation 6—with its mixture counterpart in Variations 4 and 5—over the large-scale motion I- \flat VI-I. In the second group, Variations 7 to 9 prolong the *Kopftón* over an arpeggiation of a C-minor triad. The return to the home key in Variation 10 completes another large-scale I-VI-I motion and provides structural closure for the entire set.

This paper has addressed some voice-leading consequences of secondary keys for the Schenkerian notion on large-scale unity in variation form, and has illustrated how Brahms reworks the voice leading of the secondary-key variations of his Op. 23 in order to prolong the theme's *Kopftón* throughout the set, and in so doing, reveals a middleground that conforms to Schenker's paradigm. I hope this paper has provided insights into the study of secondary-key variations in nineteenth-century variation form, a feature that has not been widely explored. It will be of interest to see more research into nineteenth-century variations, research that will shed new light on the analysis of this ever-popular genre.

²⁰ Although the half-step motion ($\hat{3} \rightarrow \hat{3}$) generated by the *Kopftón* prolongation from the Theme through Variation 6 resembles a chromatic lower neighbor elaboration, it is derived from modal mixture rather than neighbor-tone transformation.

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