

Variations
Oliver Knussen
Analysis by David Mitchell

Oliver Knussen combines twentieth century harmonic and rhythmic concepts with traditional sentence structure and form in *Variations*. He uses traditional syntax to give this piece an element of familiarity and continuity. But he is very adventurous rhythmically and harmonically in *Variations*. Knussen uses rhythmic modulation that is very reminiscent of Elliot Carter. His tone clusters are reminiscent of Ligeti.

Oliver Knussen was born in 1952. He is one of Britain's great originals according to an article in [The Rough Guide to Classical Music](#). His father, Stuart, was a principle double bassist for the London Symphony Orchestra. Oliver Knussen conducted the London Symphony Orchestra in the premiere of his first symphony at the age of fifteen or sixteen. He collaborated with Maurice Sendak on two operas, *Where the Wild Things Are* and *Higglety Pigglety Pop!* He conducts and he is in demand worldwide for his interpretation of twentieth century music, according to his biography at Faber Music's website. He is not a prodigious composer, but his pieces are carefully crafted. Oliver Knussen writes pieces that incorporate elements of past composers in his works. He believes "that a whiff of something recognizable can help the first-time listener find some bearings in what is sometimes a profusion of activity – a sense that while the settings of some of these fairy tales may be forests, and quite dense ones at that, they are neither necessarily forbidding nor unwelcoming ones." This quote is from an interview in [The Rough Guide to Classical Music](#).

I agree with this philosophy. Every piece does not have to conform to this philosophy for me to enjoy the music or for it to be great music, but in order for it to find

a wider audience, I think it needs to have an element of familiarity. Familiarity can come from form, rhythm, harmonic structure, or the libretto.

Structurally, the variation form is a familiar form. The repetition of the theme from I in each variation gives structure to a piece that is harmonically and rhythmically very challenging to the listener and the player. Since Knussen uses variation form, he touches base with the past and gives the listener a “whiff of something recognizable”. For this reason, I’ve tried to incorporate sonata form and sonata rondo form into my pieces after I took Dr. Turci-Escobar’s class.

The theme from the beginning of this piece seems to be a sentence structure. Measures 1-7 contain a basic idea, repetition, continuation and a kind of cadential idea. This is marked on my copy of the score. The repetition of the basic idea is exact, but Knussen uses octave displacement to avoid an exact repetition. The continuation is highly condensed, but features fragmentation, sequencing, and rhythmic acceleration. This contraction of the continuation leads to a seven-measure sentence structure. Measures 6-7 are a cadential idea which ends with an a diminished chord that contains an added second. Measures 8-11 are a transition section that leads to variation II. This transition starts with a repetition of the basic idea with octave displacement. The basic idea is sequenced in measures 9-11.

Harmonically, if we abstract away the register, the basic idea contains m2, M2, M3 intervals that form chord clusters. These clusters are found throughout the main theme and transition. These clusters feature sequencing and octave displacement.

Rhythmically, this piece reminds me of Elliot Carter. There is metric modulation at the beginning of each variation. The metric modulations are mostly accelerating

throughout the piece. Acceleration is common in most variations. There is one variation that is metrically slower than the rest.

The last variation is a series of M3 intervals with an added octave. Most of the intervals in the last variation contain the notes from the clusters in variation I. The last variation is structured like variation I with a basic idea that is repeated and sequenced.

The last two measures are interesting. In the last two measures, Knussen uses the same cluster of intervals m2, M2, and M3 from the basic idea in measure 1 and 2. This is very revealing of Knussen's thought process regarding the harmonic language of this piece.

I like that fact that he helps the pianist by adding note name labels to notes that have an extreme number of ledger lines. I might try this in my piece for flute, cello, and piece.

Knussen combines familiar forms with harmonically and rhythmically adventurous material to give this piece continuity. Knussen uses variation form and all of its features of thematic repetition and rhythmic acceleration to give this piece a familiar structure. The listener finds a "whiff of something familiar" in an otherwise challenge piece. Knussen uses a sentence structure to create an even greater sense of continuity. But the harmonic structure employs tone clusters and octave displacement to create interesting and non-conventional sonorities. There is rhythmic modulation that is reminiscent of Elliot Carter.

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