

A portrait of George Lepauw, a man with curly brown hair and a full beard, wearing a dark blue blazer over a patterned shirt. The background is a soft-focus outdoor scene with green foliage and a body of water.

**BEETHOVEN**

**33 VARIATIONS**  
*on a Waltz by*  
**DIABELLI**

**GEORGE LEPAUW**  
*piano*



## Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

### 33 Variations on a Waltz by Anton Diabelli, Op.120

1	Thema - Vivace	0.51	23	Variation XXIII - Allegro assai	1.02
2	Variation I - Alla Marcia maestoso	2.10	24	Variation XXIV - Fughetta, Andante	4.02
3	Variation II - Poco allegro	0.53	25	Variation XXV - Allegro	0.55
4	Variation III - L'istesso tempo	2.05	26	Variation XXVI - Piacevole	1.54
5	Variation IV - Un poco più vivace	1.22	27	Variation XXVII - Vivace	1.07
6	Variation V - Allegro vivace	1.01	28	Variation XXVIII - Allegro	1.03
7	Variation VI - Allegro ma non troppo e serioso	3.09	29	Variation XXIX - Adagio ma non troppo	1.42
8	Variation VII - Un poco più allegro	1.20	30	Variation XXX - Andante, sempre cantabile	1.46
9	Variation VIII - Poco vivace	2.05	31	Variation XXXI - Largo molto - espressivo	9.25
10	Variation IX - Allegro pesante e risoluto	1.48	32	Variation XXXII - Fuga, Allegro	3.59
11	Variation X - Presto	0.48	33	Variation XXXIII - Tempo di Minuetto moderato	5.50
12	Variation XI - Allegretto	1.34		<b>Total time</b>	<b>1.11.36</b>
13	Variation XII - Un poco più moto	1.43		George Lepauw, piano	
14	Variation XIII - Vivace	1.13			
15	Variation XIV - Grave e maestoso	5.34			
16	Variation XV - Presto scherzando	0.43			
17	Variation XVI & Variation XVII - Allegro	2.12			
18	Variation XVIII - Poco moderato	2.03			
19	Variation XIX - Presto	0.55			
20	Variation XX - Andante	2.09			
21	Variation XXI - Allegro con brio	1.14			
22	Variation XXII - Allegro molto				
	<i>alla "Notte e giorno faticar" di Mozart</i>	0.42			





3 Beethoven statue in Bonn, Germany

## The Diabelli Variations

Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* are considered to be amongst the greatest masterpieces ever written for keyboard. Often compared to Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, they go in fact further, opening up entirely new worlds of musical expression, artistic creativity, and harmonic and rhythmic invention. They also represent, in a kaleidoscopic yet concise form, an abstract of Beethoven's entire musical thought.

Dr. Julia Ronge, Beethoven scholar and curator of the Beethoven-Haus archives and manuscript collection in Bonn, calls the variation form “Beethoven's superpower”. Indeed, it is true the variation form suited Beethoven's temperament perfectly. It was in fact a set of variations on a march by Ernst Christoph Dressler that launched the budding composer with his first published work. Written when Beethoven was just eleven years old during the year 1782, these variations on a march of no particular interest by an insignificant composer who is entirely forgotten today in some ways foreshadows his last variation set, on a commonplace waltz by Anton Diabelli (1781-1858), a composer and music publisher who would be nearly forgotten today were it not for his association with Beethoven.

The variation form accompanied Beethoven throughout his life, as he frequently used popular tunes of his day (and even England's “God Save the King”) to show off his rife musical ideas. In addition to his formally published variation sets on other composers' music, he also composed original themes of his own, most famously for the *Eroica Variations*, Opus. 35. But variation form was more than just a composer's intellectual exercise; it was also, and perhaps primarily in the first instance, a pianist's showcase. Indeed, Beethoven first rose to fame as a performer, virtuoso and improviser of unequalled genius, and it was common in his time to show off one's talent by improvising on given tunes during performances, as well as to battle other virtuosos in musical duels by showcasing one's ability to improvise on any popular air of the day. In these instances, Beethoven always came out the acclaimed winner.

Beethoven's variations on Diabelli's waltz were not, however, composed with the idea of performing them himself. By the time of their publication in 1823 (just one year

before the glorious premiere of his *Ninth Symphony*) Beethoven had not performed in public for nearly a decade and was pretty much entirely deaf. Rather, these variations were a way for Beethoven to experiment in the world of pure ideation, as he might have at the piano while improvising, but on paper only. This does not make them in any way less virtuosic, or less physical and more abstract, as any pianist who has been confronted to them knows!

Similarly to the art of improvisation, variation allowed Beethoven to set aside the usual formalities and grand dramatic arc of the sonata form, which he used throughout his career in instrumental sonatas, chamber works, or symphonies. Variations allowed for greater freedom and could go in any direction without limitation of pieces. In the Diabelli case, Beethoven composed an impressive thirty-three variations, but he could as well have stopped at twenty-three or forty-three. So why thirty-three? Some have posited that it was one more than his set of thirty-two variations on an original theme in c minor (Beethoven did like to surpass himself), and others have thought instead that it was competitively intended to surpass Bach's thirty *Goldberg Variations*. Most probably he must simply have felt that he had explored all worthwhile aspects of the theme. Yet, however short each average variation is, many under two minutes, as a whole this work remains the longest he ever wrote for piano.

Anton Diabelli, a well-versed and honorably-skilled musician and composer, launched a music publishing firm in 1817. In 1819, he decided to ask the most famous musicians of Austria to compose a single variation on a theme he had composed for the occasion, to form the basis for a compilation which he would publish and sell to raise funds for the widows and orphans of soldiers killed during the recently-ended Napoleonic Wars. Fifty well-known composers of this period responded favorably to this request, including Franz Schubert, Carl Czerny and his eleven-year old student Franz Liszt, Mozart's son Wolfgang Amadeus *filis*, Ignaz Moscheles, Johann Nepomuk Hummel, and even the Archduke Rudolph, who was Beethoven's student and a good musician in his own right. Beethoven, however, initially turned down the request (not because he was against charity work, which

he himself contributed to multiple times) because he considered Diabelli's Waltz to be of no interest, and had other big projects on his mind.

The waltz, probably left upon his desk, entered Beethoven's inner ear like a worm. Contrary to his initial impression, he ended up finding Diabelli's tune of utmost interest and began to experiment with it. It took him just a few weeks to compose twenty-three variations! He thus negotiated a personalized contract with Diabelli, who agreed to Beethoven's condition to publish his set of variations in a separate volume and pay him a handsome sum for the forthcoming master opus. As was often the case, Beethoven did not complete the volume as quickly as he had started it, setting it aside for three whole years. It was at that time he began work on his *Missa Solemnis*, his last three piano sonatas (opus 109, 110 and 111) and the Ninth Symphony. Only after all but the Ninth had been completed did he come back to Diabelli's theme to compose ten more variations. He presented the completed set of thirty-three Variations to Diabelli in the Spring of 1823, and the first edition was printed shortly thereafter.

Much ink has been spilled on this work, and this recording's presentation is not the place for an in-depth analysis of this composition. However, it is to be noted that the title Beethoven used in the original German was “33 Veränderungen über einen Walzer von Anton Diabelli”, which is more accurately translated as “33 transformations on a Waltz by Diabelli” rather than the commonly used term “Variations”. This is an interesting point to mention considering that Beethoven took the original thematic material so far beyond its original statement that it becomes sometimes very difficult to recognize its inspiration in the variations it supposedly gives birth to. Rather than creating variations on a theme, Beethoven went toward a full metamorphosis and deconstruction of this theme, taking it apart, isolating melodic patterns, intervals, rhythms, tempi, and even playing with dynamics and registers prescient of techniques birthed by the Second Viennese School of Schoenberg, Webern and Berg.





7 Beethoven statue and Bonn Minster church

Beethoven tears Diabelli's theme apart, reconstructs it, cajoles it, tortures it, twists and turns it around. Diabelli's Waltz first becomes a March, then a tip-toed middle-of-the-night excursion, before finding its first moment of sweet repose. Later, it becomes frantic, then deranged, and gets knocked-about in unfathomable ways, somehow reminiscent of honky-tonk like in Variation XVI. Beethoven has fun and pokes fun, shows off his devilish virtuosity, his ability to speed up and slow down, of proclaiming loudly and also of whispering inaudibly. He proves his capacity to equal Bach and Handel in his fugues and Mozart in his closing, celestial minuet. If we were not aware of historical chronologies, we would even say he found inspiration in Chopin and Brahms, and maybe even in Debussy!

Through it all, Beethoven seeks total expressive freedom, in a constant dialogue with his world and with himself. This work is one of extreme contrasts, and unlike Bach's *Goldberg Variations* which can fall into the category of easy listening masterpieces, Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* require absolute listening and the full engagement of the listener. Indeed, the joys of this work come to those who let Beethoven take them for the ride, all while remaining fully alert. Beethoven will then show his true colors, from gregarious jokester to the deeply lonely soul he hid within. At the end, he will reaffirm the beauty of life (despite its many hardships) and will give his attentive listeners renewed strength and hope.

With these variations, Beethoven the alchemist will have managed to transform Diabelli's common waltz into pure gold, just as his very own mythological hero Prometheus brought fire, and thus life as we know it, to humanity.







9 The Rhein flowing through Bonn

## **George Lepauw**

George Lepauw is a Franco-American pianist based in Paris, France. Recent recordings include his *Bach48 Album* of the complete *Well-Tempered Clavier* by J.S. Bach on Orchid Classics, which has earned wide praise from critics and audiences alike, and the complete Debussy Preludes for piano on the same label. His upcoming traversal of the Beethoven Piano Sonatas and several Variation sets will be released beginning in late 2020 and throughout 2021 in celebration of Beethoven's 250th anniversary.

George Lepauw's musical education has included private studies with Aïda Barenboim, Elena Varvarova, Brigitte Engerer, Rena Shereshevskaya, Vladimir Krainev, James Giles, Ursula Oppens and Earl Wild. He has been additionally mentored and supported by Carlo-Maria Giulini, Maria Curcio, Charles Rosen and Kurt Masur. He also holds degrees in History and Literature from Georgetown University and in Piano Performance from Northwestern University.

George Lepauw is also recognized for his visionary artistic leadership in music, art and film festival programming. Concurrently to his performing and recording career, George Lepauw teaches piano online and in masterclasses, composes music, produces music films and writes occasional articles on various topics. Follow George Lepauw's musical journey at [www.georgelepauw.com](http://www.georgelepauw.com).







11 The house where Beethoven was born

## About the recording

Beethoven, who was born and raised in Bonn, a pleasant city then as it is today on the banks of the Rhein River just a few miles upriver from Cologne, left his native environment at the age of twenty-one never to return, choosing instead to make Vienna the center of his activity. Yet it was in Bonn that he learned to be a musician, and it was there that he discovered the beauty and regenerating power of nature, which surrounds Bonn. While the *Diabelli Variations* were composed late in the composer's life, and in Vienna, the logic of recording in Bonn was partially motivated by the idea of finding inspiration in the heart of Beethoven's formative physical environment. While our lives are different now, Bonn remains on the Rhein and within sight of the "Seven Mountains" upon which the Drachenfels (Dragon's Rock) medieval fortress, in ruins today, still stands (and from where the album cover photo was taken). The power of nature, of the majestic Rhein, the many forests and hills of the area make Bonn and its surroundings recognizable across the centuries and to this day.

Recording inside the Beethoven-Haus auditorium, just next to the house where Beethoven was born, made additional sense in the year of his 250th anniversary. But of greatest significance was the fact that the Beethoven-Haus owns the original sketches and final manuscript in Beethoven's hand of the *Diabelli Variations*, and this treasure was kept just a few feet away from where the Steinway piano stood, making the recording sessions ever-more significant.

This recording was made in Bonn, Germany at the Beethoven-Haus "Hermann J. Abs" Chamber Music Hall on September 19th, 20th, and 22<sup>nd</sup> 2020. Sebastian Kienel was the audio producer. Audio post-production took place at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater München. Additionally, Martin Mirabel filmed the recording sessions for the film version of the album (see website for more information). Photographer Céline Oms documentend the sessions and the Bonn sights, and all album photos are by Céline Oms.



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I owe much gratitude to Matthew Trusler, visionary founder and director of London-based Orchid Classics, for offering his full support and making this and other musical projects possible.

My deep gratitude also goes to Christopher Hunt, without whom this album would not have come together in this challenging year, and to Tim and Paula Friedman, for their unfailing support of the International Beethoven Project over many years.

This album is dedicated to Céline Oms, with my deep love and complete admiration.

This album is a production of the International Beethoven Project in association with Orchid Classics.

Learn more: **[www.internationalbeethovenproject.com](http://www.internationalbeethovenproject.com)**



Title page of the first edition of the Diabelli Variations

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