

V Variations on a Theme
(Excerpt)

Kyungseo Min

SYNOPSIS

The four most recognizable musical notes in history weave the unlikeliest places together in *V Variations on a Theme*. What do 1800s Washington and Vienna, 1945 Nazi Germany and America have in common? The first four notes of a symphony written in 1808.

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTES

Characters can be doubled for a minimum cast of 3M, 2F.

The COMPOSER looks at his first four notes and is satisfied. With a flourish of the hand, the chaotic sound of an orchestra tuning their instruments before playing is heard. A conductor's baton taps four times. The chaos becomes order: utter silence. The COMPOSER treads back and forth, nervous for the unveiling of his new work. They start. The first four notes shake the stage. But the unpreparedness of the orchestra becomes more and more evident. With every mistake, the COMPOSER dives further into agony.

COMPOSER

No no no NO NO NO NO STOP! STOP!

He erases the notes furiously and falls into the chair, dazed and depressed. The ASSISTANT enters, sees his state, and shakes her head.

ASSISTANT

Mr. Beethoven sir, with all due respect, this room reeks. (No response.) Open the windows. Bring in some air. Maybe take a bath? Would you like me to run you a hot one? (No response.) For goodness sakes!

COMPOSER

Leave me alone...

ASSISTANT

If I leave you to your own devices, I'll come home to a corpse in my studio so no. You are going to stop drinking and wallowing and take a bath this instant.

COMPOSER

No.

ASSISTANT

Mr. Beethoven.

COMPOSER

...What.

ASSISTANT

Don't make me evict you.

COMPOSER

Go ahead. Who cares.

ASSISTANT

And where will you go, if you do get kicked out from here?

COMPOSER

Anywhere away from this travesty. All is lost.

ASSISTANT

Oh please do not air your pity anymore. It smells bad enough in here as it is. (No response.) I'm going to run a bath for you and force you into it, clothes and all, if I must.

She exits.

COMPOSER

Theresa!

ASSISTANT

(Offstage) Yes?

COMPOSER

The papers!

ASSISTANT

(Enters.) Excuse me?

COMPOSER

Where are the morning papers? (No response.) Where are they?

ASSISTANT

In the bath!

She escapes and the COMPOSER follows after her. Loud footsteps are heard. The COMPOSER re-enters, newspapers in hand, with the ASSISTANT right behind him.

COMPOSER

"Unpreparedness glaringly obvious..." "Messy, chaotic sound..."
"...too loud for its own good." (Pause.) What did you think?
(No response.) Well?

ASSISTANT

Since when did you care for my opinion? (No response.) Well, it started out very... impactful. But it was clear the musicians didn't practice for very long—which was the case, wasn't? So no harm in the truth. If they weren't prepared, they weren't prepared. A lesson learnt for next time, yes?

COMPOSER

But "chaos"?

ASSISTANT

Well it certainly wasn't no Haydn.

He throws the newspaper at her face.

ASSISTANT (cont.)

And this is why you can only write chaotic music. What goes on inside that head of yours must be complete and utter chaos!

COMPOSER

Yes! Full of it! I'm going mad with it! And what would you know of it!

ASSISTANT

I listen to it day and night as you go about with your chaos above my head!

COMPOSER

Then evict me! Chase me out like all the others!

ASSISTANT

Mr. Beethoven, you are going to get us both kicked out.

COMPOSER

What do they know of music? Nothing!

ASSISTANT

And yet you try so hard to please them. One favourable review has you on an ecstatic high for days and one slightly disagreeable review will have thunderclouds around your brow for weeks, completely erasing any good opinions you've heard before.

COMPOSER

I write for the men who understand what I am trying to say. If they would just listen! Listen and be swept away—but no,

their silly mind wander to silly thoughts. Why come to the theatre then?

ASSISTANT

The artist's amnesia.

COMPOSER

What?

ASSISTANT

And I rest my case.

COMPOSER

What?

ASSISTANT

Exhibit A.

COMPOSER

What are you muttering about?

ASSISTANT

And here, ladies and gentleman, we have the classic symptoms of the infectious ego taking over the entire system. Observe. The reddened cheeks of rage over not being heard while he himself does not listen. The crazed, blood-shot eyes: he is mad-with himself! And finally, the most classic, most textbook symptom: the cold hands, the cold flesh of the body. He is oblivious to everything, isolated from not only everyone else but most importantly, his true self. This is not a body alive with self-reflection but a corpse being moved by Man's disastrous ego! (Silence.) Tell me Mr. Beethoven, when you listen to Haydn, where does he sweep you to? (No response.) And where does Mozart take you?

COMPOSER

What does Mozart have to do with me?

ASSISTANT

Eureka! He's almost got it!

COMPOSER

Do not make a fool out of me!

ASSISTANT

And he relapses...

COMPOSER

I will take that bath now.

ASSISTANT

Maybe clearing the stench will help the brain think better.

COMPOSER

Not another word!

ASSISTANT

I think you mistake where the power lies in our relationship Mr. Beethoven. I am the landlady and you pay your monthly to me.

COMPOSER

Women!

ASSISTANT

Men!

COMPOSER

Their wit will be the end of us all. (Exits.)

ASSISTANT

Fool. An imbecile. ...Yet still a genius.

She looks at the first four notes,
scratched out.

ASSISTANT (cont.)

Can such a tragic, limitless man write any other way?

An idea. She writes on a blank letter,
seals it in an envelope, and kisses it.
She takes the envelope and newspapers
and exits. The COMPOSER enters, freshly
washed. The doorbell is heard. He sits.

COMPOSER

Theresa! (No response.) THERESA!

ASSISTANT

(Enters) Can't a woman have any time to herself in the morning?

COMPOSER

Some whiskey.

ASSISTANT

No. It's for your own good.

COMPOSER

To hell with—

ASSISTANT

I was answering a call for you. Look, someone personally delivered a letter.

COMPOSER

Who was it?

ASSISTANT

I don't know. Just a plain old lad. Go on. Read it.

COMPOSER

It's probably another request for a teacher. Gah, take it away.

ASSISTANT

Well, you can use the extra funds. And I'm speaking as your landlady who is still expecting some payments by the end of the month.

COMPOSER

...Give it to me.

She gives it to him and steps away, a knowing smile on her lips. He reads it, becomes enamored by it. She can't help but laugh.

ASSISTANT

Is it some pretty young lady wishing to learn the piano? You always like those.

COMPOSER

Who—who—who dropped this?

ASSISTANT

Didn't mention the name. He didn't sign it on the letter?

COMPOSER

No!

ASSISTANT

He seemed a plain old boy, nothing special. Or maybe that was the errand boy. Why?

COMPOSER

A—a—a listener!

ASSISTANT

What does it say?

COMPOSER

(Reads) "Mr. Beethoven, I would like to give out my sincerest congratulations to your success yesterday night. Not a success in terms of performance but your composition. Despite the less than perfect execution, the music moved me. It swept me off my feet to a tragic world of endless longing, where the sounds consumed and struck me with grief, horror, terror, and fear. If the pieces does not receive international recognition, it will live on in my humble heart with the greatest honour and distinction."

ASSISTANT

A way with words this boy has.

COMPOSER

No, the writing is a woman's. I'm sure of it.

ASSISTANT

It was a boy who delivered it.

COMPOSER

Simply the errand boy! It much be a—a—a rich Countess with a sophisticated, refined taste that must have come yesterday.

ASSISTANT

A rich Countess?

COMPOSER

Yes, judging by her penmanship and her way with words—so exquisitely eloquent! No other woman but a Countess or Duchess even could write like this—and who else can understand my music this way?

ASSISTANT

Hm, yes. Must be a Duchess or perhaps, a foreign Princess?

COMPOSER

Yes, it's quite possible. Quite.

ASSISTANT

Well you have your recognition there! Like she said, at least you have the satisfaction of knowing it has the highest recognition in her heart.

COMPOSER

The greatest satisfaction!

ASSISTANT

See? All is not lost.

COMPOSER

No, most definitely not. (Pause.) Do you think she wants to be my pupil?

ASSISTANT

I think she prefers to... admire you from afar. Just a woman's intuition.

COMPOSER

You think so?

ASSISTANT

She definitely strikes me as a faraway admirer. You should spare her the embarrassment and respect her anonymity. And knowing your luck with women...

COMPOSER

An anonymous admirer...

ASSISTANT

Lucky you Mr. Beethoven! Well, I must be off. Do try to get some fresh air today though.

COMPOSER

Admirer... Wait, my luck with women?

ASSISTANT

Ta-ta!

She exits, laughing.

COMPOSER

The woman is mad. (Looks fondly at the letter) The greatest honour and recognition, eh?

He looks at his first four notes. He erases them and draws five fresh music lines on the wall. He breathes.