

Free
Variations

For Flute, Clarinet, Violin,
Violoncello, Percussion, and Piano

Devin Burke

©2006

Notes

In their 2002 book, *Sweet Freedom's Song: "My Country 'Tis of Thee" and Democracy in America*, the late Robert James Branham and Stephen J. Hartnett write, "What makes "My Country 'Tis of Thee" so historically interesting, politically powerful, and artistically fascinating is the fact that it has been sung since 1744 and has thus accrued a deep and resonant series of voicings, all offering nuanced versions not only of what it means to love your nation, but of how patriotism has always been the subject of heated contestation. Indeed, the fact that the song has been appropriated in hundreds of competing versions means that it embodies the very dialogue and debate that distinguishes American democracy. Patriotism, the song teaches us, is not only about supporting your nation's policies, but also about questioning them when you think they need questioning. We would do well, then to remember that our forebears sang "My Country 'Tis of Thee" not only to focus their political ideals and to persuade their neighbors, but also to express their love of and dismay with their country..."

The question of what resonance a patriotic song has today is the starting point for these variations. Each variation is a meditation on the opening phrase of this theme, and it is the hope of the composer that the music will encourage the listener to reflect what this "American" music really means.

In each variation, the theme is either stretched or compressed in some way, but remains essentially whole at all times. Throughout the variations, the tension between the collective and the individual plays out both dramatically and musically.

My country! 'tis of thee,
Sweet land of liberty.
Of thee I sing!
Land, where my fathers died!
Land of the pilgrim's pride!
From every mountain-side,
Let freedom ring!

No more shall tyrants here
With haughty steps appear,
And soldier-bands;
No more shall tyrants tread
Above the patriot dead.
No more our blood be shed
By alien hands.

My native country! thee.
Land of the noble free.
Thy name I love:
I love thy rocks and rills,
Thy woods and templed hills;
My heart with rapture thrills
Like that above.

Let music swell the breeze,
And ring from all the trees
Sweet freedom's song.
Let mortal tongues awake;
Let all that breathe partake;
Let rocks their silence break,
The sound prolong.

First four stanzas of
Samuel F. Smith's "My Country! 'tis of thee." (as published in 1831)

¹ Robert James Branham and Stephen J. Hartnett, *Sweet Freedom's Song: "My Country 'Tis of Thee" and Democracy in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 13.

Performance Notes

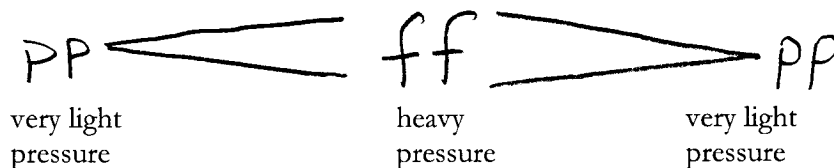
Movement I (Prelude):

1. Performer II is meant collectively, and refers to the entire ensemble minus the pianist.
2. Ensemble should begin the piece standing around the piano, with hands on harmonic nodes of lower strings.
3. Piano lid must be removed before the piece begins.

Movement II (The Sound Prolong):

1. Performers inside the piano should move quietly from their places on the harmonics of the strings to each taking up a piano bow. The choreography of this transition should be rehearsed beforehand, with the goal being to maintain a sense of quite focus between the movements. Performers should be positioned around with their piano bow close to the place where they will be sitting with their instrument.
2. The e-bow should be placed on the A4 piano string directly over the strongest harmonic node. Placement of the e-bow will greatly affect the resulting sound, so special care should be taken to place the e-bow's magnetic groove exactly parallel to the string. If placed too off-center, the body of the e-bow will dampen the string as the magnetic field tries to excite it. The keyboard player should monitor the e-bow to insure that it does not move and should adjust the e-bow if the sound begins to diminish.
3. The e-bow has a switch with two settings, differentiated by a smaller and larger loop symbol. The switch should be turned to the larger loop, which indicates a higher power setting.
4. The length of each block on the graph paper is equivalent to 2 seconds.
5. Accidentals apply only to the note to which they are attached.
6. Wind players may take breaths but must try to make them subtle, and should always change notes at the rhythmic position indicated. All pitches should be played as sostenuto as possible until a new note is given. Cutoffs are indicated by a diminuendo to niente.
7. All players should try to blend with the others. Ideally the timbres will be indistinguishable.
8. For piano bow technique, the concept are analogous to string bowing technique. Slower bow speed at first may be more effective for initially exciting the string. See diagram below:

means:



gradual
increase in
pressure

and/or

slow bow
speed

faster bow
speed

slow bow
speed

Movement III (Canons):

Performers should blend their sounds with each other overall, with two exceptions: one, each player may rise and fall in terms of dynamics with the contour of their melody, so that dynamic peaks happen at different times in each instrument; and two, performers should give a moderate accent to each new note in order to subtly punctuate the texture.

Movement IV (Arsis and Thesis):

1. Following Canons, the cellist should remain seated while the rest of the ensemble quietly puts down their instruments and returns to their positions around the piano. The cellist may begin playing whenever he or she is ready, regardless of the status of the rest of the ensemble.
2. The cello should be scordatura where the low C string is tuned down a perfect fifth.
3. If it is possible, a second cellist who does not perform in the first three movements may suddenly infiltrate the ensemble and perform this movement. In that case, the second cellist should perform with the rest of the ensemble for the final movement.

Movement V (By Alien Hands):

1. Pianist may begin immediately after cellist finishes fourth movement.
2. General character of the movement is that of an individual becoming engaged in a shouting match with a group of agitated people. In such a situation, the agitation escalates and goes from the initial confrontation to a few individuals taking up against each other to the group as a whole becoming involved. In the same way, this piece should grow, where only individual performers are engaged at any given time to more members of the ensemble getting involved. In light of this character, here are some suggestions for the group improvisation:
 - a. For the first 20-30 seconds of the piece, only one player should be playing anything inside the piano at any given time. After 20-30 seconds, the texture should begin to get denser as more players begin to make sound simultaneously.
 - b. There should be a general crescendo in dynamics, and the group improvisation should be responding dynamically to the similar crescendo in the piano part.
 - c. Silence is an extremely potent tool for the improviser, and use the muting effect, where a performer mutes the piano, only sparingly. The ensemble should try to overcome the pianist not by silencing him but by shouting him down, as it were.
3. The ensemble may or may not continue making sound after the pianist executes his or her final chords. However, if the ensemble decides to keep playing, they should not play for much longer.


Prelude

Devin Burke

Freely- as if blown in the wind ♩ = c. 60

Piano

Quiet

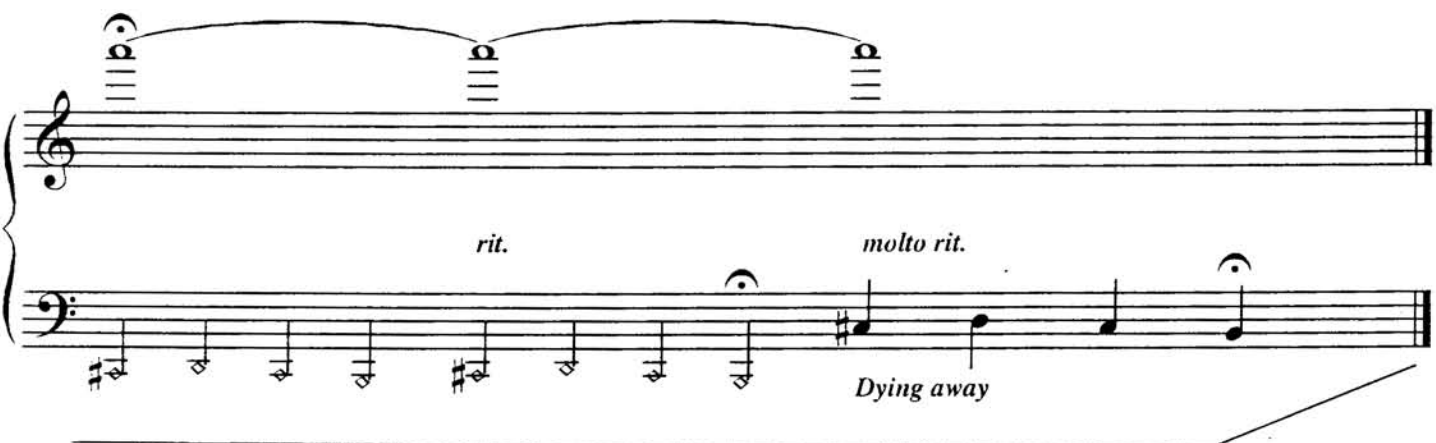


sfz

Performer II stands dampens strings lightly with finger to produce bell effect

sfz

Cel.



rit. *molto rit.*

Dying away

Canons

Devin Burke

Slowly, calmly ♩ = 40

Flute

Clarinet in Bb

Violin

Violoncello

Piano

pp always sotto voce

pp always sotto voce

ff strong Ped.

mf reflective

8^{va}

8^{vb} ppp delicate

Detailed description: This system contains the first five staves of the score. The Flute and Clarinet in Bb staves have rests for the first two measures, followed by notes in the third and fourth measures. The Flute part is marked *pp always sotto voce*. The Clarinet part is also marked *pp always sotto voce*. The Violin and Violoncello staves have rests for the first two measures, followed by notes in the third and fourth measures. The Piano part has a melody in the right hand starting with a grace note marked *8^{va}*, followed by notes in the third and fourth measures. The left hand has a bass line starting with a grace note marked *8^{vb} ppp delicate*, followed by notes in the third and fourth measures. The piano part is marked *ff strong Ped.* for the first two measures and *mf reflective* for the last two measures.

6

Fl.

Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

Pno.

pp always sul tasto

sul D ppp

pp patient

Detailed description: This system contains the next five staves of the score, starting at measure 6. The Flute part has a melodic line with triplets in measures 6, 7, and 8. The Clarinet part has a simple melodic line. The Violin part has a melodic line with a triplet in measure 8, marked *pp always sul tasto*. The Violoncello part has a simple melodic line. The Piano part has a long sustained chord in the right hand, marked *sul D ppp*, and a simple melodic line in the left hand. The piano part is marked *pp patient* at the end of the system.

Copyright © 2007

8

Fl.

Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

Pno.

p calm

p resolute

11

Fl.

Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

Pno.

pp serene

mp content

15

Fl.

Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

Pno.

pp intimate

pp inviting

20

Fl.

Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

Pno.