

Variations on a Theme: Master Class | Chopin, Op. 34, No. 2

written by Guest Contributor | April 17, 2017



I cannot say he knew the clue he gave.
The piece seems simple: its note-chord-chord bass
a rudimentary skill would not trip over
is overlaid with minor melodies –

Legato, lento, like a summer saunter.
He must have known the problem he presented:
Valse brillante, slowed, must not collapse to dirge.
Mourning should feel the sway of dancing skirts.

Take the dedication as direction:
A Madame d'Ivry – another lady
whose lust to show well in society
furnished employment to the foreign.

In the name millenia are obscured:
Ivry, in English, Hebrew, ancient word
meaning “from beyond the river,” apt for
a people always foreign where they were.

For him, in Paris, years before the captain,
a Jew is someone whom he owes the funds
that deck the rooms he keeps with such élan
grandes dames may send their daughters to be trained.

Home for Chopin is a vanished kingdom,
a yearning that he feels when visitors
bring speech he can inhabit without thinking.
In music he can visit where he pleases.

Softly he plays, and Paris leans to hear
what meanders from keys like recollection
of an August excursion by a river.
He comes upon a shtetl, taking in

the odd garb and tongue of those whose forebears
sought refuge in a realm that is no more,
then overhears the tune of dancing sadness,
music that is wrung from nevertheless.

Its numbers map his journey into exile.
This is the point I need you not to fail.
Do not trouble with whether it happened.
Play so a baroness would understand.

Music can hold enormous power in memories and experiences, transporting us instantly to an age, location, or person. What sonic joys, mysteries, disbelief, and clarity have you experienced? Identify songs of influence in your life and explore them like variations on a theme, melding syntax and song structure, recalling the seriousness or levity that accompanies. Whether it's an account of when a specific song first entered your life, the process of learning to play a song, teaching someone a song, experiencing the same song in different places as it weaves through your life, unbelievable radio timing, sharing songs with those in need, tracking the passing down of songs, creative song analysis, music as politics, etc, I am interested in those ineffable moments and welcoming submissions of your own variations on a theme, as drawn from your life's soundtrack. Please email submissions to meganentropy@gmail.com and keep an eye out for others' [Variations](#).

("song" is a broad phrase: could be a pop song, a traditional tune, a symphony, commercial jingles, a hummed lullaby, 2nd grade recorder class horror stories, etc)



James Toupin, a retired government lawyer (former general counsel of the US

Patent and Trademark Office), now teaches in the law school of American University in Washington, DC. His poems have appeared in numerous journals, recently including Virginia Quarterly Review (online), Beloit Poetry Journal, Beltway Poetry Quarterly, and Canary. He is also a published translator, of Selected Letters of Alexis de Tocqueville on Politics and Society (University of California Press), and writer on legal topics.