



# RUDOLF BUCHBINDER THE LAST WALTZ

33 Stories About  
Beethoven, Diabelli  
and Piano Playing



Amalthea

*Cap. 6. 1800.*

55

# VERÄNDERUNGEN

über einen Walzer

*für das*

Piano Forte

*componirt und*

Der Frau Antonia von Brentano

*geborenen Edlen von Birkenstock*

*hochachtungsvoll zugeeignet*

von

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

120<sup>tes</sup> Werk.

*N<sup>o</sup> 1380.*

*Eigenthum der Verleger.*

Wien, bey A. Diabelli et Comp. Graben N<sup>o</sup> 133.

*Leipzig bey H. A. Probst.*

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# RUDOLF BUCHBINDER

## THE LAST WALTZ

33 Stories About  
Beethoven, Diabelli  
and Piano Playing



**Amalthea**  
Verlag

This book is based on conversations between Rudolf Buchbinder and Axel Brüggemann, transcribed and adapted by Axel Brüggemann.

Translated from the German by Philip Yaeger

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## Theme

Few works have been such an integral part of my life for so long as Ludwig van Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*. In 1819, a Viennese music publisher by the name of Anton Diabelli sent a little waltz to a number of composers, requesting that each write a variation on it. From all of them, Beethoven replied not with one variation, but – after four years of work – with 33 transformations of the theme, which Diabelli immediately published.

The conductor and pianist Hans von Bülow once called the *Diabelli Variations* a “microcosm of Beethoven’s genius”. The aim of this book is to develop a wide range of ideas about Beethoven out of this microcosm, unfolding his genius, and along the way to describe my own personal relationship to the piano and to the composer who has had a greater impact on my life than any other.

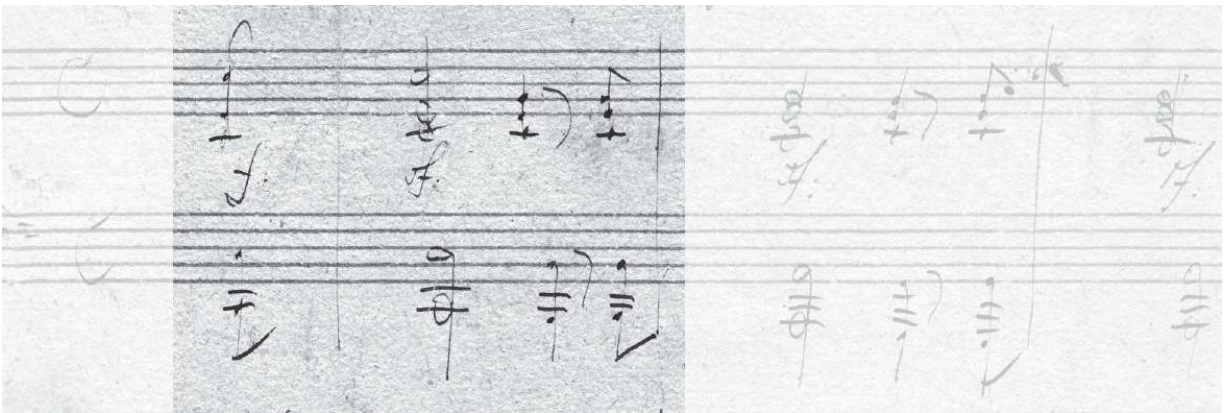
To me, Beethoven’s greatness permeates the *Diabelli Variations*: they are humorous, furious, melancholic, swinging; the entire range of human emotion is described in the cycle. In addition, they are music *about* music, a sequel to Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*; to this day they

remain a labyrinth of diverging cross-references, quotations, and interconnections.

A year after the appearance of Beethoven's variations, Anton Diabelli published the 50 reworkings by the other composers. In the project "Diabelli 2020", in honor of Beethoven's 250th birthday, I engaged contemporary composers to write new variations on Diabelli's waltz. In concert, and on a recording for Deutsche Grammophon, I play Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*, selected variations by his contemporaries, and - of course - the variations I commissioned myself.

In 33 chapters, or "variations", this book recounts stories about Beethoven the man, about the *Diabelli Variations*, and about piano playing: a pianistic panopticon with Beethoven's last waltz at its center. I hope you find it inspiring.





## Variation I

### **Leitmotiv of My Life**

In November of 1960, my wonderful teacher, Bruno Seidlhofer, wrote the following dedication in blue ballpoint pen on a “Wiener Urtext” edition of Beethoven’s *Variations for Piano*: “To my dear Rudolf Buchbinder, with the best and most cordial wishes for the future.” Erwin Ratz, musicologist and director of the Gustav Mahler Society, had just published the edition, to which Seidlhofer had contributed the fingerings. Now Seidlhofer had autographed a copy for me, his student, just two years after I had been accepted into his master class at the Academy of Music in Vienna. I was 13 years old. Seidlhofer, whose students also included Martha Argerich and Friedrich Gulda, usually referred to me not as Rudolf, and certainly not as Buchbinder: to him, I was just “the boy”. And for this boy, any performance of the music he presented to me that day was still a long way off.

Two years later, Seidlhofer brought up Diabelli with us, his students, once again. This time, he had the wonderful

idea of organizing a Diabelli evening, on which “the boy” was to play the first 25 of the 50 variations from the *Vaterländischer Künstlerverein*, as the collection of pieces by the other composers was officially called. Since they are ordered alphabetically, the variations from A (Ignaz Assmayer) to M (Joseph Mayseder) fell to me; one of my fellow students undertook the second part (from Ignaz Moscheles to Johann Hugo Worzischek), and a young Finnish woman concluded the evening with Beethoven’s 33 variations.

It wasn’t until much later that I became aware of the impression the evening had made on me. As it turned out, Diabelli’s waltz and its assorted variations were to accompany me my whole life long, a cornerstone of my understanding of Beethoven – and of piano playing in general.

In 1973, eleven years after our Diabelli recital at the Academy, I found myself in Teldec Studios in Berlin. I felt I owed it to Seidlhofer to record not only Beethoven’s work, but also the 50 variations from the *Vaterländischer Künstlerverein*. To the best of my knowledge, this was the first time all of the variations were recorded, allowing many people to hear the little-known pieces for the first time.

Back then, my goal was to record all of Beethoven’s sonatas someday. However, I knew I needed to go about this monumental task carefully; I had decided to tackle Beethoven’s other piano works beforehand. The first pieces were collected on six LPs; in 1976 I was offered the chance to make six more – this time including all of his variations. I decided to record the *Diabelli Variations* again, since it seemed wrong to smuggle an older recording into this ambitious project. Which meant: Diabelli again, for the second time in three years.

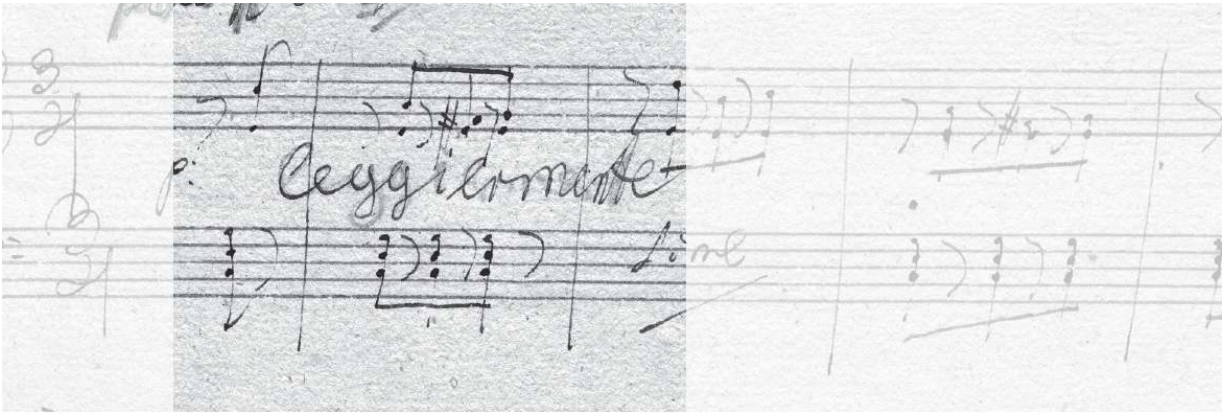
Much later, when one of my students recounted a meeting with the great Bulgarian pianist Alexis Weissenberg, I had to laugh: it was only then that I discovered the nickname my colleagues had bestowed upon me. My student had told Weissenberg that he was studying with me; Weissenberg looked at him, chuckling, and answered drily: “Ah, with Monsieur Diabelli!”

It’s true: at that time no other work by Beethoven occupied and challenged me like the *Diabelli Variations*. Early in my career my uncle had begun documenting all of my concerts in a big, black notebook, and I thoroughly enjoyed continuing the little ritual. Every six months, I would enter my most recent concerts in the notebook, which is why I know that, to date, I have performed the *Diabelli Variations* exactly 99 times in public. As luck would have it, the performance in the Vienna Musikverein for Beethoven’s 250th birthday – the premiere of the “Diabelli 2020” project – will be the 100th time that I perform the pieces.

When I decided to make a new recording of Beethoven’s 33 variations for Deutsche Grammophon, 44 years after my last effort, I knew immediately that I could only complete my own personal Diabelli circle by uniting Beethoven’s work with the *Vaterländischer Künstlerverein* once again, as on that long-ago evening with Bruno Seidlhofer. And with this idea came another, the idea for “Diabelli 2020”, joining past and present: why not offer contemporary composers the same challenge to which the young Franz Liszt, the budding Franz Schubert, and the sagacious Carl Czerny rose? Why not bridge the present and the past with a *Diabelli Variations* for our time?

Before me lies Bruno Seidlhofer’s gift, the edition he gave me: a little white book that holds a great deal of meaning for me despite its modest appearance. As we

gradually worked our way through the variations together, my teacher added notes for me in yellow: here pedal notations, there suggestions for rests and interpretation. Today, at the age of 73, I think back to the dedication that Bruno Seidlhofer penned to his 13-year-old “boy” and wonder whether he could have imagined what an influence his gift was to have on me, on my music, and on my life. Scarcely another composition by Beethoven has engaged me for so long or so intensively as Op. 120; even now, it challenges me again and again to confront this idiosyncratic, groundbreaking composer afresh. Beethoven’s last waltz has become, if you will, a leitmotiv of my life.



## Variation II

### **“Für Elise” for Professionals**

There's no simple answer to the question of who Beethoven was; he was so many things. First and foremost, he was a product of his time – a time that was continually in flux, a circumstance that a child of the postwar era like me can hardly imagine. I have known only one government; fortunately it has been a democracy. To be sure, my world has changed as well, but it has never been so fundamentally rearranged and called into question as Beethoven's.

Beethoven grew up in Bonn, a city governed by the enlightened, liberal policies of the electoral princes Maximilian Friedrich and Max Franz. In 1792 he emigrated to Vienna, which, with its 250,000 citizens, was already an international city. The moderate Emperor Leopold II was about to be succeeded by his son, Franz II, who was quick to reverse his father's humanist reforms. Beethoven witnessed Napoleon's rampage through Europe under the banner of freedom, equality, and fraternity; he pinned his

hopes on the Frenchman as a champion of humanism – until Napoleon crowned himself Emperor on 2 December 1804, at which point Beethoven is said to have remarked that Napoleon had turned out to be “just like all the others”. He experienced the Battle of Austerlitz, composing a sort of acoustic war story about Napoleon’s downfall in the piece “Wellington’s Victory” (as it happens, several of the Diabelli composers also participated in the premiere of the work). He lived through the end of the old European order and the beginning of the new at the Congress of Vienna, for which the Austrian Foreign Minister Metternich spent the equivalent of a billion euros to entertain his international guests. The culture of the era was shaped by popular figures like Johann Strauss, the “Waltz King”, but Beethoven also conducted three successful “academies” during this period, and was named an honorary citizen of Vienna.

All this turbulence naturally had an effect on Beethoven’s music. His inner conflict is perhaps best exemplified in the Third Symphony, which was initially titled *Bonaparte*; the composer retracted the dedication after Napoleon’s self-coronation. But it wasn’t just historical events that influenced the composer’s sound; his patrons had an effect as well.

Beethoven was dependent on music-loving contemporaries like Count Ferdinand von Waldstein, a supporter in Bonn who financed his journey to Vienna in 1792. In his new home, he found fresh allies in individuals like Joseph von Lobkowitz and Karl von Lichnowsky. The nobility and the middle class were on the rise; in contrast to the church, they were hungry for music that attracted attention, music that was bigger, more radical, more provocative than anything that had come before. Beethoven wrote for ruling kings and princes as well, including Czar

Alexander I, Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm II, the King of Sweden, and Archduke Rudolph. Love engaged him too, now and again: he composed for ladies who had captured his heart, or for amateur musicians who threw soirées in the salons of Vienna. He also performed regularly at piano battles, popular at the time, where he swept rival pianists from the stage with his creativity and virtuosity. These activities all left their mark on the variety of his works.

In order to convey the significance of the *Diabelli Variations* – the breadth of Beethoven’s work, the transcendence of his musical imagination, and his down-to-earth quality – I’ll allow myself a brief digression into a completely different part of Beethoven’s world. Isn’t it amusing that one of Beethoven’s best-known piano works isn’t Op. 57, the “Appassionata”, or Op. 106, the “Hammerklavier Sonata”? Neither is it his famous Piano Sonata No. 32, Op. 111, nor the *Diabelli Variations* themselves: it’s a little piece only three minutes long, without even an opus number of its own, the piano hit “Für Elise”! Some of Beethoven’s later works – the complex string quartets and piano works – still struggle to attain recognition long after his death, but “Für Elise” is part of our daily lives. You hear it while waiting on the telephone, and on cheap little music boxes that can be found in any souvenir shop (including in the Beethoven Museum in Vienna). As a film lover, I find it particularly interesting that the piece has made it into film history: in Roman Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby*, you hear someone practicing it in the neighboring apartment; it plays as an irritant, a spooky foreshadowing of things to come. It also underscores a love scene in the James Bond film *Licence to Kill* (today the effect borders on the unintentionally comic), and when the great Austrian actor Christoph Waltz appears as an archetypical Nazi in Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglourious*



*Basterds*, he, too, is accompanied by “Für Elise”. This time the piece serves as an ironic commentary on German high culture, seemingly at odds with National Socialism – which doesn’t keep Waltz from finding and executing hidden Jews in the first few minutes of the film.

My point is this: it’s this minor, commissioned work – nothing special, compared to the *Diabelli Variations* – that has universally come to represent Beethoven. The only other works that come close are the opening of the Fifth Symphony and the Ninth Symphony, to which Stanley Kubrick pays homage in *A Clockwork Orange*. Chuck Berry dedicated a rock’n’roll song to Beethoven; the “Moonlight Sonata” appears (played backwards) on a record by the Beatles, who were Beethoven fans as well. In short, there can be no doubt that the composer has become an icon in rock and popular culture as well. However, his later works, including the *Diabelli Variations*, still haven’t entirely made their mark. Thomas Mann, at least, discusses Op. 111 in depth, but I am aware of no film that deals with the *Diabelli Variations*. Little wonder, of course: they’re too complex, too deep, too difficult to grasp. They are far removed from shallow popularity, and therein lies their worth.

The radical courage with which Beethoven freed himself of all constraints in this composition is quintessentially modern. The *Diabelli Variations* are indebted to no fashion or vogue. They exist neither to enhance the prestige of some noble sponsor or ruler, nor are they calculated to charm their way to popularity in Vienna salons – they’re simply too complex for such objects.

It seems important to me to understand the *Variations* from this basic standpoint. Music historians have often wondered how a simple waltz like Diabelli’s could inspire Beethoven to such heights of complexity. Perhaps it was because Diabelli’s template didn’t force him in any