

From Brighton Beach to Bellagio

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While accurate enough, this may seem like a rather odd title for an introduction to my 1980 string quartet called *Bellagio Variations*, a discussion which I suppose could be reduced to two sentences. (1) The quartet was composed during my resident fellowship at the Villa Serbelloni, Bellagio. (2) It is a set of variations on a musical work by Otto Luening called *The Bells of Bellagio*. As I began to write this essay, I wondered whether the simple facts underlying those two statements—suggesting a tenuous connection, at best, to Italian culture—could possibly justify inclusion of my narrative in this journal. My own ethnic heritage is Russian Jewish, and I grew up in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, hardly an Italian neighborhood. My performing entrée into the world of music was the piano (a distinctly Northern European invention), and the favorite composers of my childhood were Beethoven and Schubert. I have no experience as a singer, and I am definitely not an opera aficionado. So where's the Italian Connection?

Those were my initial thoughts. On further reflection, however, I've begun to realize that Italian culture, seen in its broadest perspective, actually played a critical role in preparing me for the act of writing *Bellagio Variations*. In fact, odd as it seems, Italy has been a presence throughout my musical background—part of my cultural DNA—and my presence at Bellagio in 1980 can be seen as the logical end of a trajectory extending back to my childhood in Brighton Beach. One of my closest school friends was a member of the Leoncavallo family, related to Ruggero Leoncavallo, composer of the great nineteenth-century *verismo* opera *I Pagliacci*. Over the years I spent a good deal of time at their house, listening to opera recordings; moreover, my adopted family would make an annual pilgrimage to the Metropolitan Opera House to see the classic *Cav-Pag* double bill, and I would join them.

My friend and his family moved to Los Angeles (we were not to meet again until our 50th high school reunion in 2003), but I continued the habit of going to the Met once or twice a year, almost exclusively for Italian fare. What I recall most vividly are performances of *La Bohème*, *Rigoletto* and *Aida*; I was struck by the qualities they projected—intense melodrama, heightened color, extreme contrasts of volume and texture. Verdi in particular struck me as having a particularly acute sense of dramatic timing and theatrical gesture.

I had become quite proficient as a pianist by my teens, with a special fondness for Chopin. (I didn't realize, until much later, that Chopin himself adored Italian opera, and that his florid, highly embellished melodic decorations owe a lot to Donizetti and Bellini). During my college and graduate school years, I continued my piano studies, and developed a special passion for the eighteenth-century keyboard sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti, who had been known to me only vaguely as a contemporary of Bach and Händel. (They were exact contemporaries, in fact, all three having been born in the year 1685). Scarlatti, the son of the opera composer Alessandro Scarlatti, was an Italian *émigré* who spent most of his career at the court of Spain. The sudden discords and surprising contrasts in Scarlatti's brilliant, virtuosic harpsichord music—the word “shocking” would not be inappropriate (nor would “operatic!”)—were so much more exciting for me than either Bach or Händel. I can't claim that I performed the Scarlatti sonatas very well, but I loved the experience, and I augmented it with a collection of Scarlatti recordings.

At the other end of the historical time line (the mid-twentieth century) I was struck by the piano music of Samuel Barber and Norman Dello Joio. The mildly jazz-inflected harmonic language of Dello Joio, and a melodic style often based on Gregorian chant, drew me to his work; I studied a number of his nocturnes and one of his sonatas. Barber was a stronger attraction—especially his *Excursions* and the piano sonata, which I played (badly) with great enthusiasm. Only later did I see the Italian connection to Barber. He came from an operatic family (to the degree, at least, that his aunt was a leading singer of her day), and studied composition with Rosario Scalerò at the Curtis Institute; his voice and piano teachers at Curtis were also Italian. Moreover, Barber had studied in Italy on a Rome Prize, and was linked (in life as well as music) to fellow composer Gian-Carlo Menotti.

As a Columbia undergraduate, under the watchful eye of Otto Luening, I concentrated on composition rather than the piano. Luening traced his musical lineage back to Ferruccio Busoni, whose own roots were both Italian and German—and who played a critical role in the history of early twentieth century music. With an uncanny ability to foresee the future, Busoni had predicted three important developments: (1) new scales; (2) the use of electricity to control and/or produce sounds; (3) the move away from overblown Romanticism to lean, transparent, rhythmically incisive “Neo-classicism.” In one important respect Luening fulfilled the dream of his mentor—creating music through electronic means. It was Otto and his Columbia colleague Vladimir Ussachevsky who presented the first concert of tape music in the United States, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. This took place in 1952, one year before I entered Columbia. Although I couldn’t have predicted it at the time, electroacoustic music was to become an important part of my future musical background.

In my graduate student years I studied privately with the distinguished Italian-American composer Paul Creston, originally born Giuseppe Guttovveggiò. (The practice of name changing was not unusual for Italian-American creative artists. Walter Pistone altered his name to Piston; Peter Mennini became Mennin). For almost two years I studied with Creston, and found his swashbuckling, extroverted lyricism—reminiscent of Barber, Menotti and Dello Joio—refreshing. Through a kind of musical osmosis, I also absorbed his intensely chromatic (yet tonal) harmonic language and his passion for polyrhythmic patterns.

It wasn’t until the 1960s, when I had left graduate school and begun full-time teaching, that I discovered that remarkable trio of postwar cutting-edge composers: Luciano Berio, Luigi Nono, and Bruno Maderna. Berio was the one who fascinated me the most, and for a variety of reasons. In one of my talks with Otto Luening, with whom I stayed in touch after our professor-student relationship had ended, I learned that a youthful Berio, then studying with Luigi Dallapiccola, was in the audience at the historic 1952 MoMA concert of Luening-Ussachevsky tape music. Apparently he had flown in from Italy to attend the event. Soon afterward he and Maderna co-founded the Milan Radio studio, one of the most important electronic music centers in Europe, as a by-product of his visit to MoMA. It was at that Milan studio that John Cage created his groundbreaking tape collage works *Williams Mix* and *Fontana Mix*. The name “Fontana” was an homage to Cage’s landlady during his Milan stay, Signora Fontana. (Incidentally, while in Milan, Cage also appeared on the Italian quiz show “Lascia o Raddoppia” (Double or Nothing) and emerged as top prize winner, choosing mushrooms as his category).

In the late 1960s I had begun writing a book called *Electronic Music: A Listener’s Guide*, and at the same time Bowdoin acquired a rudimentary electronic studio. Accordingly, quite a few of my own 1960s and ’70s pieces made use of *musique concrete* tape splicing and voltage-control

synthesizers. One could chalk this up to the influence of my teacher Luening, a tape studio pioneer, perhaps a subconscious homage from student to professor. But I have to confess I had also been under the spell of Berio's masterful collages *Visage* and *Omaggio a Joyce*—two remarkable works of the 1950s in which phonemes of the human voice are cut up, recombined and overlaid (doing with Joyce's language, according to one critic, what Joyce had done with everyday language). My fascination with Berio's music was reinforced through my contact with the great trombonist Stuart Dempster, who introduced me to Berio's trombone *Sequenza*. I then began to encounter a number of other Berio *Sequenzas* for solo instrument; the ones for flute, oboe and viola—dazzling in their mercurial flights, sudden contrasts, color shadings and theatrical gestures—influenced my own work enormously.

At about this same time (1968), Bowdoin College commissioned Berio to write a piece for our annual new-music festival. The composer appeared on campus for the premiere, and the work he had written for the occasion, *O King*, was a wonder. The use of a rotating pitch series and gradually unfolding vocal phonemes (eventually coalescing into the words “Martin Luther King”), extending the tape collage technique and esthetic—which I had naively associated only with the tape studio—into a purely instrumental domain. *O King* was later adapted to become one movement of an even more remarkable work: the 1968 orchestral *Sinfonia*. The use of musical “collage” in the *scherzo* movement of this particular piece—its complex multi-layered textures, both instrumental and vocal, created from fragments of familiar icons—exerted a profound influence on many young composers. Even though other composers of the late 1960s and early '70s (including Foss, Crumb, Rochberg, Rasmussen and Schnittke) were attempting similar style juxtapositions, I found the Berio *Sinfonia* to be the most outlandish, provocative, and stimulating for my own creative thinking.

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The autobiographical trajectory I've covered so far, beginning in 1940s Brooklyn, leads to Lake Como in the year 1980, setting the stage for the gist of my narrative: the creation of my string quartet *Bellagio Variations*. Although I wasn't aware of this when I composed the piece, *Bellagio* draws together all the strands of my Italian-influenced esthetic. The work's title has dual meaning. First of all, it reflects the fact that I composed it during my 1980 month-long resident fellowship in Bellagio, at the Villa Serbelloni. Secondly, it was conceived as a set of variations on a composition also written in Bellagio, and about Bellagio.

Our 1980 stay was not our first visit to Italy; beginning in 1967, my wife and I had made previous visits to Florence, Rome, Milan, Venice, and Bologna for various musical and artistic reasons (I had heard a great deal of choral music, seen performances of *Aida* and *Otello*, and finally began to comprehend the subtlety and sophistication of Verdi). And there would be future Italian visits after 1980, including another fellowship to Bellagio in 1989. But 1980—our first visit to the Villa Serbelloni—was special! I had worked at the Yaddo, MacDowell and Wolf Trap, but this was an “art colony” more luxurious than anything I'd seen before. The Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center consists of a grand, imposing main building and several smaller ones, spread across a 50-acre hilltop estate on a peninsula at the junction of Lake Como and Lake Lecco, offering a panoramic view of lakes and towns below. It didn't take long for us to discover

the small village of Bellagio at the foot of the hill, with its own steep hills and winding steps leading down to the lake, its lovely gardens, shops and churches. Thinking back, thirty years later, most town images have become blurry. Small details stick in the memory, however: among them, a plaque affixed to a wall near a steep staircase in town, commemorating the fact that Cosima Liszt—later to become Cosima Von Bulow and then Cosima Wagner—had been conceived on that very spot (a curious bit of musical trivia, if true), the tastes created at the most marvelous *gelateria*, and the operatic crowd scene enacted daily—what a chorus!—as the mail boat would come in from Como.

Memories of the Center up on the hill are much more vivid, most likely because we spent virtually all of our time there. The estate's commanding location had lent itself to a variety of uses (medieval fortress, monastery, palace, Nazi command post) over the centuries. During the post-war era, the center was owned by the Princess Della Torre e Tasso, originally an American named Ella Walker (granddaughter of whiskey distiller Hiram Walker); in 1959 she was persuaded by Dean Rusk, who was at that time president of the Rockefeller Foundation, to bequeath it to the Foundation. It is now a world-class research and conference venue; its residency program brings scholars, artists, writers, musicians, scientists, policymakers and development professionals from around the world to work on individual projects, usually for a period of four weeks. Numerous Nobel laureates, Pulitzer winners, National Book Award recipients and MacArthur fellows have worked at Bellagio. I felt honored (and incredibly lucky!) to be among those selected for a residency.

Like the other resident fellows, I was provided with living quarters, studio space, solitude, and the opportunity to interact with colleagues at meal times and evenings. Very rarely did any of the residents leave the confines of Bellagio during our four weeks, our individual projects keeping us glued to our desks or easels or pianos. My wife and I made only three brief trips for concerts—to Milan, Arezzo, and Zurich. She is a graphic artist, and responded to the visual lure of Bellagio by creating a series of drawings. Some of them capture the chiaroscuro of mountains and water, others of tall trees and sky—shades of Respighi!—while others seem to be more of a response to the shimmering light. I had them in my studio while I was composing, and I have to confess they provided me with ideas about musical texture, density and contour.

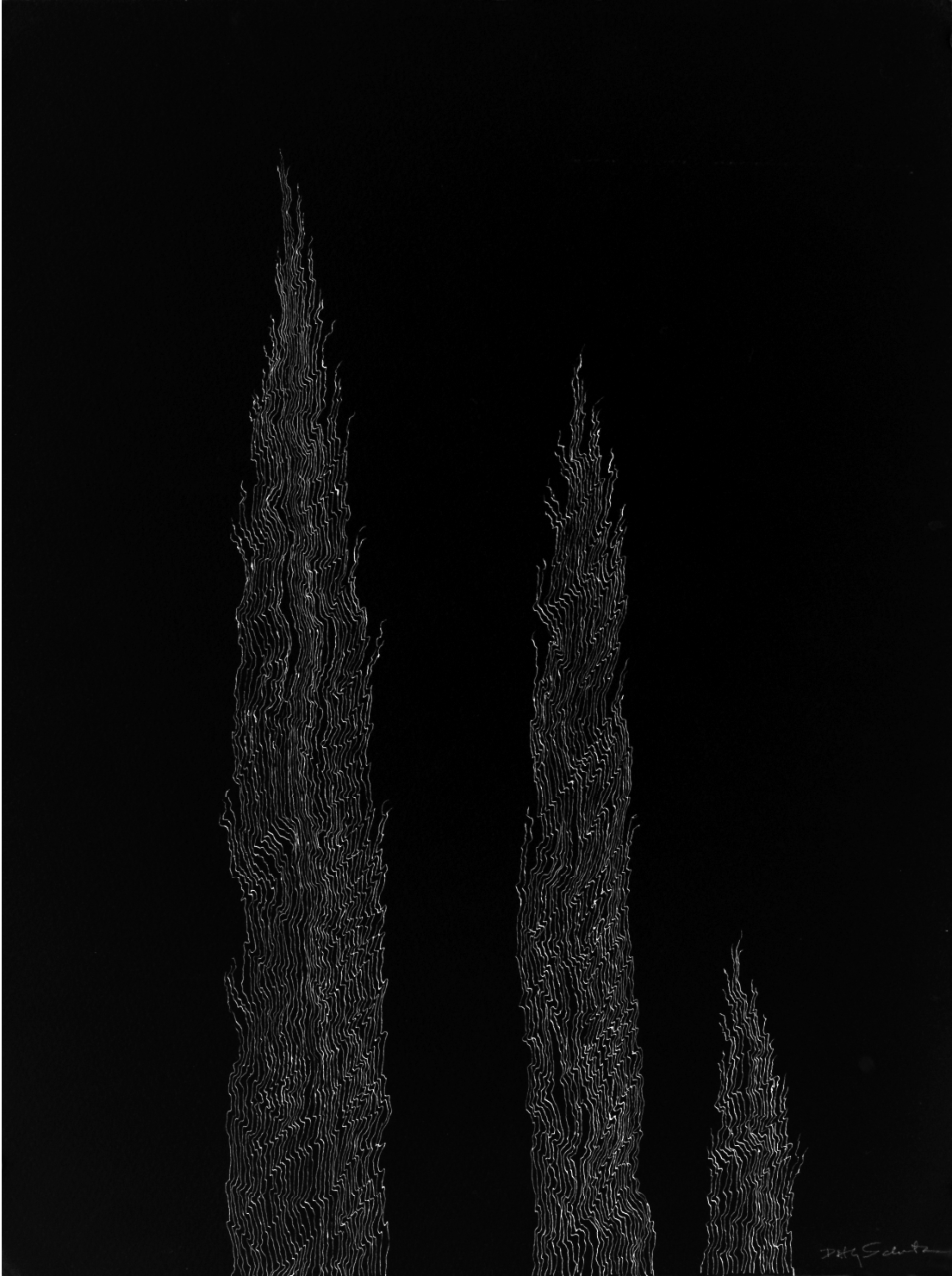


FIG. 1 "Lago di Como Cypresses," pen and ink drawing by Dorothy Schwartz, 12" x 18", 1980.

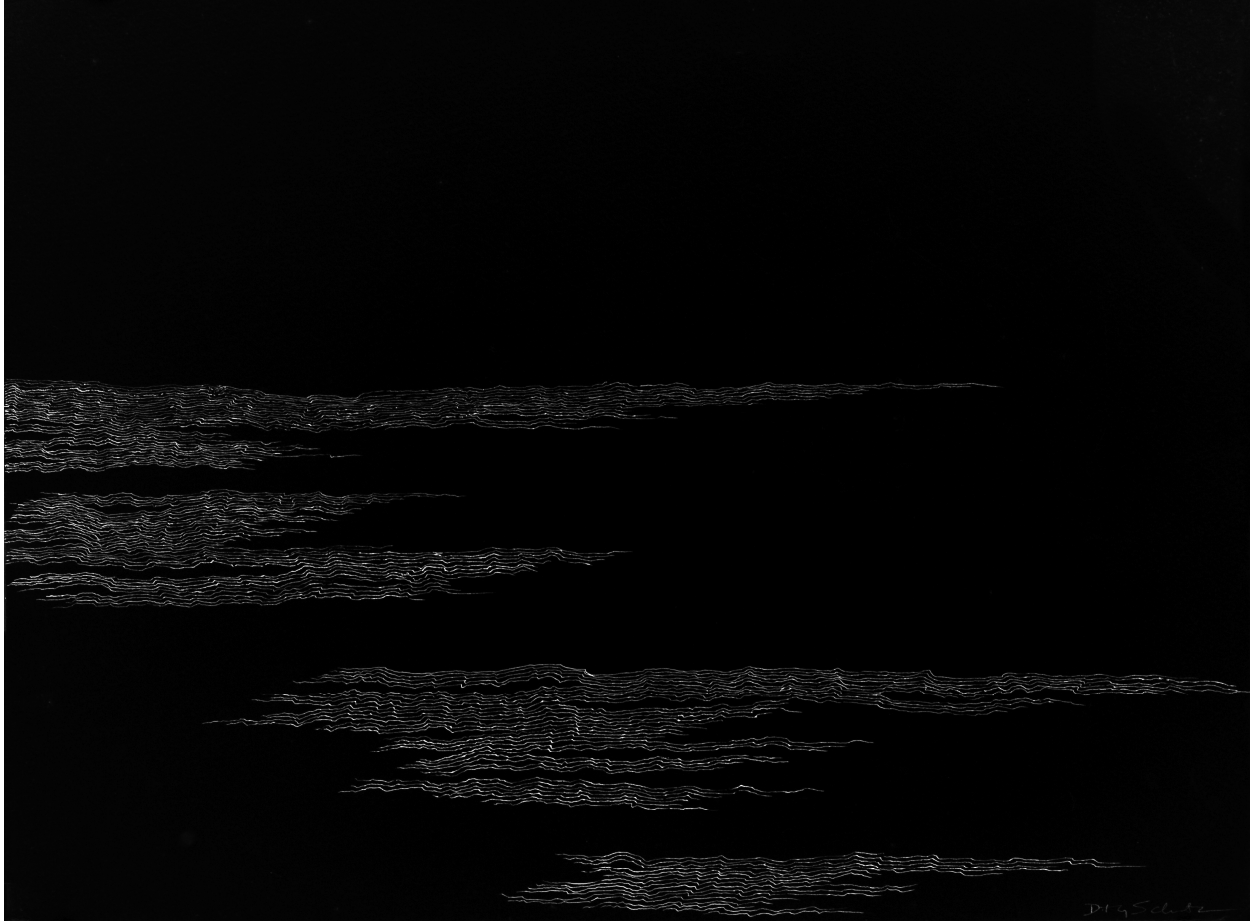


FIG 2 "Lago di Como," pen and ink drawing by Dorothy Schwartz, 12" x 18", 1980.

I had come to the Villa Serbelloni to compose a string quartet, specifically a new work to be premiered by the Portland String Quartet during their upcoming 1980-81 season. Initially I had very few specific ideas about the new work-to-be, other than general instructions about its duration. Almost immediately after our arrival, however, I discovered the score of a work composed by my old professor Otto Luening when *he* had held a fellowship at the villa. It was a piece for piano duet—in fact, I found it in the piano bench—called *The Bells of Bellagio*. Otto's title was most appropriate, and his use of high-register sonorities, open intervals and canonic imitation evoked the sound of many church bells pealing simultaneously. A relationship to my own project clicked immediately, and I decided to write a set of variations on this piece.

Here is a recording of *Bellagio Variations* in its entirety, as performed by the Kreutzer Quartet. You may want to hear the piece, then read about it, and then listen again.

For many composers, the decision to create a set of variations sets up a relatively simple plan of action. You look at the “theme,” play it many times, focus on its salient features, and then create a series of brief miniatures or “character pieces” (a term often applied to Schumann and Mendelssohn) based on permutations of those features. But then other nagging questions emerge. In what order should the variations appear? Should some of them be much longer or shorter than others? Should they be discrete and separate, or could some of them be connected

with each other? Many questions of this sort are dealt with only after the process of composing has begun. But before a note of this work had been written, I had made a number of critical decisions. Here are five such decisions:

One. The variations would be grouped together to create a small number of larger “movements,” with noticeable pauses between each movement. This format had served me well in previous variation-format pieces.

Two. I would include, among the variations, one for each individual member of the ensemble, a concerto-like scenario where that player could shine as a soloist.

Three. A very tonal, lyric—even “Romantic”—variation would occur about two-thirds of the way through the entire piece. I had in mind something melodic in an *arioso* way, providing a moment of repose before going on to the final rush. I had two models in mind, where a broad, slow theme interrupts the hectic chatter: Rachmaninoff’s *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* and the Elgar *Enigma Variations*.

Four. As I’ve done in so many other works, I wanted to quote fragments of (or make allusions to) pre-existing sources, especially ones from the classical canon. As I looked at Otto Luening’s *The Bells of Bellagio* I was struck by the consistent use of one particular melodic contour (an octave leap, prominent interval of a fourth, and diatonic scale patterns filling in those skips). The polyphonic texture (canonic imitation, in the manner of a round) was another consistent feature. Here is Otto’s material, as it appears in my piece:



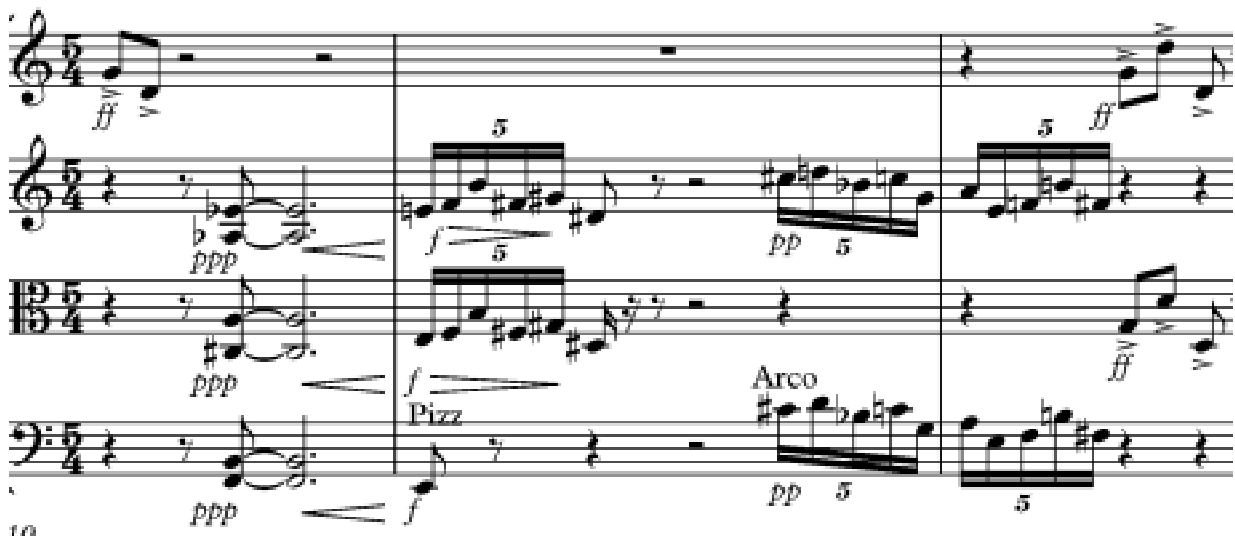
FIG. 3 Luening material, as heard in my piece

When I looked at Luening’s work, then, its contours immediately brought other music to mind—music which could enter the fabric of my own work, or at the very least stimulate my imagination. For example, the Mahler *Symphony No. 1*, the Schubert *Unfinished* and the Mozart *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* all feature falling fourths and octave spans. Fourth, octaves and scale fill-ins are also the building blocks of some beloved Verdi and Puccini arias (at least as I perceive them): *Che Gelida Manina* from *La Bohème*, *La Donna è Mobile* of *Rigoletto*, and *Celeste Aida*. Closer to home, I was struck by the family resemblance to the Bowdoin College *Fight Song*

(which starts with the falling fourth and sounds remarkably similar to *Shave and a Haircut*) and an early 1960 flute sonata of my own.

Five. The Luening passage noted above in FIG. 3 does not occur until the final minute of my quartet. My fifth pre-compositional decision, then, was to bypass the traditional format of presenting the theme first. Instead, Otto Luening's theme would remain virtually "disguised" throughout. One hears it only at the very end of *Bellagio Variations*.

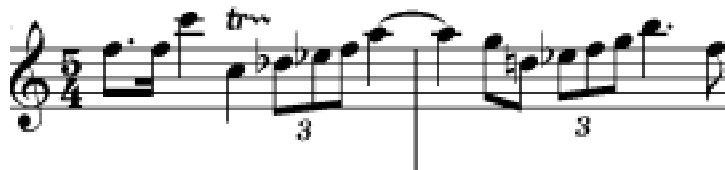
My set of variations begins, then, not with a "theme" but rather with a "statement" of basic material (almost a manifesto) including hints of the textural and harmonic world the listener will inhabit as the work develops. In FIG. 4, note the fourth drop at the very outset, within a discordant non-tonal fabric, and then (two measures later) the octave leap.



The musical score for FIG. 4 consists of four staves in 5/4 time. The top staff begins with a *ff* dynamic and a trill. The second and third staves start with *ppp* dynamics. The fourth staff includes *Pizz* and *Arco* markings. The score features various dynamics such as *f*, *pp*, and *ff*, along with performance instructions like *Pizz* and *Arco*. There are also numerical markings '5' above and below notes, and a 'tr' marking above a note in the second measure.

FIG. 4

A few moments later a more extended line emerges, as the fourths are filled in (FIG. 5), and by the end of this introductory statement (FIG. 6) simple major and minor triads have entered the texture—pre-figuring the overlap of harmonic languages that will dominate the entire quartet.



The musical score for FIG. 5 is a single staff in 5/4 time. It features a trill marked 'tr' above a note, followed by two triplet markings '3' below notes.

FIG. 5



FIG. 6

Variation I which follows is rapid, brisk and even a bit jolly, while Variation II presents a slow-moving, expansive, even meditative soundscape. As it fades away, it leads directly without pause to the viola solo (cadenza?) of Variation III.

After a pause, signaling the end of the quartet’s first large “movement,” the opening of Variation IV should come as a great shock to the system. Clusters, jagged lines, asymmetrical rhythmic jolts, violent accents, and unsettling *glissandi*—all contribute to the nastiest, ugliest, most off-putting variation of the entire work. It culminates in a loud held chord, fading away to silence, against which the cello *cadenza* (and Variation V) begins. This cello solo with unobtrusive background is where a fragment of the Bowdoin *Fight Song* makes a fleeting appearance (FIG. 7); it is followed by Variation VI, in which the spotlight is upon the second violin.

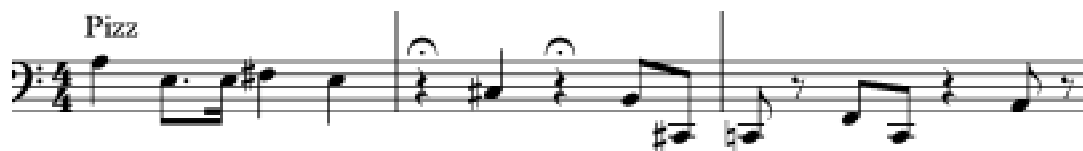


FIG. 7

By this point the listener should have noticed that each variation of this big “second movement” is increasingly gentler, warmer in sonority, and more triadic in its harmonic language than its predecessors. The overall sense, then, is that of the music gradually becoming more accessible and listener-friendly eventually leading to Variation VII—a traditionally tonal Romantic “aria” in the key of E-flat Major (FIG. 8). This is the one based on my early flute sonata, which conveniently lends itself to Luening’s melodic contour *and* his fondness for imitative polyphony. Note that the first and second violins are playing in exact canon with each

other. The variation, and the large “movement,” both fade away on an inconclusive G minor triad.



FIG. 8

The third large movement of *Bellagio Variations* is a cyclic recap, intended to sum up everything one has experienced before. Accordingly, it opens with an inverted form (a mirror echo) of the quartet’s very beginning: a solo cello figure rather than first violin, and rising fifth rather than falling fourth. As with the quartet’s opening, this passage is not given a variation number. It leads directly to Variation VIII (see FIG. 9), which begins as a manic duo between the two violins—the Luening motive in octaves—and the two lower instruments playing a triadic “oom-pah” bass.

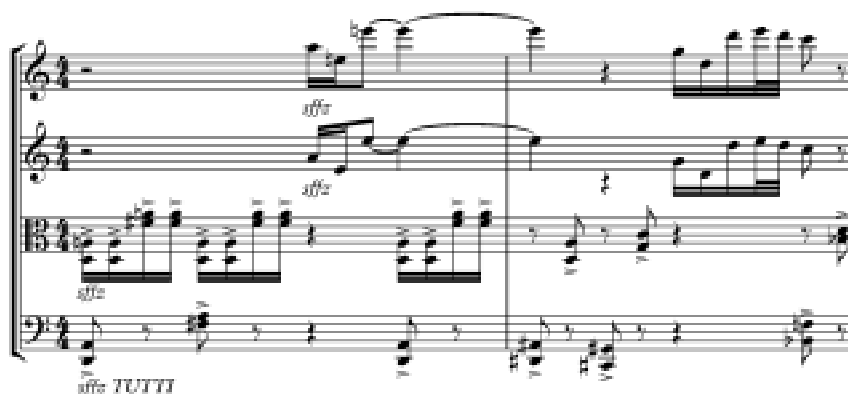


FIG. 9

The dynamics are super-loud, the tempo is brisk, the melodic line is syncopated, and the “oom-pah” chords shift without any tonal logic: a Coplandesque look at Satie, perhaps. From all of this, the first violin solo begins—a doggedly manic, virtuosic passage of tiny cells repeated again and again (against violent unsynchronized outbreaks from the remaining trio), culminating in a chaotic Ivesian collage of gestures and the same loud chord heard at the end of the “discordant” Variation IV.

The massed cluster gradually fades away. And out of the ensuing silence Otto Luening’s

theme (finally) emerges. It gives way to a whispered fragment of the flute sonata variation, and then a held C Major triad.

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It's now more than thirty years since I composed the *Bellagio Variations*, and I have to confess it's one of my favored children. Looking at the score, or hearing it in my mind's ear, always brings back memories of a remarkable month spent in that magical place perched high above Lake Como. Beyond that, I've discovered that preparing this essay (not only returning to the work but re-living my personal history) has thrown my "Italian Connection" into the sharpest possible focus. It would not be going too far to state that the influence of Italy on my musical development is profound and all-pervasive. And I would venture to guess that I'm not alone. Perhaps I can speak for every American composer of my generation, certainly anyone who has ever worked in an electronic studio, or created eclectic stylistic collages, or thrilled to the sounds of New Romanticism—and say "we are all Italian."