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Research Article

The Last Viennese Classicist? Reflections on the Aesthetic Views of Carl Czerny Through a Comparative Review of the Aesthetic-Biographical Sources and Analysis of Impromptu or Variations on a Theme from "Oberon", Op. 134 for Piano

Nikola Komatović[1]

Ivana Mičurina 21/7, 11090 Belgrade, Serbia

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Abstract

This paper examines the stylistic positioning of the composer Carl Czerny (1791–1857) using biographical and aesthetic literature, combined with a case-study analysis of his piano work Impromptu or Variations on a Theme from "Oberon", Op. 134. Common assumptions about Carl Czerny frame him as Beethoven's most prominent student and follower, a leading piano pedagogue, and the author of a vast number of technically demanding compositions, most notably within the genre of piano études. Czerny was expected to remain loyal to his teacher's stylistic values; accordingly, the musical figures of his time did not approach him in search of innovation or creative breakthroughs but rather to commune, through him, with the spirit of Beethoven. But was Czerny truly a mere craftsman of his time—a composer of routine? Recent scholarship has revealed that he left behind several works that transcend the stylistic confines of their time and place—works that, due to the conservatism of their milieu, remained largely overlooked. The composition chosen as the subject of this case study was written in 1827, the year of Beethoven's death, and thus offers a valuable opportunity for a cross-sectional analysis of aesthetic and technical tendencies in Czerny's mid-period output. Although it consists of a single work, it may be examined independently, as it allows us to deduce the DNA of Czerny's compositional output. This is because the piece: (a) is written for Czerny's primary instrument by far—the piano—and (b) is based on an opera, reflecting one of the key stylistic traits of this composer. By examining the relevant literature and analyzing the work in question, this study aims to identify the defining features of Czerny's "average" individual style and offer a preliminary conclusion as to whether he may rightfully be considered the last Viennese Classicist.

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Introduction

Problematisation of stylistic considerations

"*What was permitted to Beethoven can in no way be allowed to others!*"—so resounded the musical circles of Vienna after 1815. (cf. Biba, 2008, p. 12, 14).

Musical Classicism—an era that, according to most conventional music-historical sources, ended no later than the third decade of the 19th century—was, as this paper will demonstrate, dissolving unevenly and asynchronously across different parts of the continent.This paper aims to show how Metternich-era Vienna, in the decades following Beethoven's (Ludwig van Beethoven, 1770–1827) death, remained a stronghold of Classicism, and how the work and

1 Dr., Independent research associate, Ivana Mičurina 21/7, 11090 Belgrade, Serbia. E-mail: nikolakom@gmail.com ORCID: 0000-0002-9932-5459

activity of Carl Czerny (1792–1857) serve as a remarkable litmus test for such tendencies. This will be demonstrated through various perspectives of Czerny's contemporaries and recent scholars who have critically examined this question.[2] Additionally, we will analyze one of Czerny's typical piano works, *Impromptu or Variations on a Theme from "Oberon", Op. 134*, in an attempt to identify the composer's individual stylistic imprint.

Our general understanding of the language of musical Classicism follows the line of thought developed by Charles Rosen (1927–2012), although we will by no means focus on the triumvirate of Viennese Classicists (Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven), which is often synecdochically equated with the entire epoch. Indeed, when the foundations of classical tonality were established (Rosen, 1998, p. 23), the sonata form—of which Czerny, the central figure of this study, proudly claimed to be the first to define (ibid., 30)—and finally, when genres such as the classical symphony or string quartet emerged in compositional practice, it can be said that Classicism was definitively established as a stylistic formation.

However, if one is to answer the question of the precise moment when classical stylistic tendencies were established—and, likewise, when they "dissolved"—this paper is certainly not the place to offer a definitive answer (not even in the sense of a subjective view), as both processes were undoubtedly evolutionary in nature and unfolded over decades.

Several stylistic and historical facts can easily relativize such positions when listed in concrete terms.

Even if one sets aside the fact that none of the three Viennese Classicists was born in the Habsburg capital, it is worth adding that Haydn and Mozart, in particular, composed a significant portion of their works outside the cultural context of this city.

The definition of the three composers as the "First Viennese School" is highly questionable, considering that, in artistic-stylistic terminology, a school implies a circle of close collaborators centered around a dominant figure. In the case of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, this is clearly not the case—all three remained prominent as distinctly individual voices. Therefore, the term "First Viennese School" is understood in this context as a "*necessary fiction*". (Rosen, 1998, p. 22) As Rosen notes, the only element that connected them was their joint formulation and transformation of the musical language (ibid., 23).

The synecdoche by which Classicism is often (though certainly not always) reduced to the aforementioned composers in scholarly discourse does a serious historical disservice to other composers of the period. Among the many figures mentioned by virtually all authors in monographs and studies on Classicism, we will name only Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714–1784) and Antonio Salieri (1750–1825), whose work can be justifiably associated with the Habsburg capital as that of the so-called "Viennese Classicists."

Finally, just as "Viennese Classicism" is often used as a synecdoche for the style as a whole, Classicism itself is frequently employed, particularly in routine discourse, as a substitute term for *mature* Classicism. In that sense, discussions of the Rococo and/or the *Empfindsamer Stil* (sensitive style), as movements from the pre-Classical or early Classical period, are often treated separately from debates on the most canonical manifestations of the style. The same can be said for "residual" Classicism—works composed in this style during decades conventionally considered part of the Romantic era.

Thus, musical Classicism can neither be temporally confined to the period of Mozart's and Haydn's mature output, nor the entirety of Beethoven's oeuvre, nor can the city of Vienna be considered the sole geographical locus of its flourishing. Given the previously stated arguments concerning the limitations of defining Classical stylistic formations solely from the vantage point of the era itself, one may reasonably pose the following question: If there is such a thing as pre-classicism, can there not also be a post-classicism?

Through this study, we aim to analyze whether Carl Czerny can be placed within the Classical era—perhaps even chronologically labeled as the "last Viennese Classicist"—to assess the strength of his style and to explore whether elements of Romantic aesthetics are nonetheless present in his work.

Czerny in the Stronghold of Classicism

Let us now briefly turn our focus to the Habsburg capital. Although it might seem natural to begin from the most canonical period, this paper will not address that era; instead, it will focus on what is often overlooked in scholarly discourse—the decades following 1815, when Napoleon was definitively defeated and the great Congress of Vienna was held. If the "musical capital of the world" was ever in danger of permanently losing its primacy, it was between Schubert's death in 1828 and Johannes Brahms's (1833–1897) relocation to Vienna in 1862.

[2] In this context, one of the most valuable sources for this paper has been the volume *Beyond The Art of Finger Dexterity: Reassessing Carl Czerny*, edited by David Gramit. See Bibliography section for more details.

Following the formal dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire during the decade of French continental dominance, the Habsburg state was reduced to a territorially vast but demographically heterogeneous entity that the ruling dynasty struggled to control. De facto power was assumed by the powerful chancellor Clemens Wenzel von Metternich (1773–1859), whose decades-long policy could be summarized by the principle of "*preservation and perseverance*". (Biba, 2008, p. 12)

In contrast to later periods when the monarchy actively sought reform, Metternich's conservatism was rooted in the idea that the old, pre-revolutionary system must be preserved at all costs—even through repressive measures and censorship. This idea of a "proto-stabilocracy" in the 19th century quickly came to dominate all segments of society, including culture and the arts.

Thus, frozen in time, Vienna established itself as a musical "stronghold of Classicism"— a style whose time was, in every sense, passing. More precisely, some authors refer to this not-so-celebrated period in the city's musical history as either *Post-Classicism* or the *Biedermeier* era (ibid., 12, 17). Indeed, Beethoven (already advanced in years) was granted considerable leeway for his various experiments, thanks to his fame. (ibid., 14) However, these experiments were expected to be buried with him, leaving no lasting legacy.

Franz Schubert (1797–1828), although more widely recognized in his own time than earlier historians had assumed (ibid., 11), remained marginal enough to the Viennese musical establishment that his Romantic ventures in Lieder did not alarm the imperial censors (his final symphonies were not performed during his lifetime). Beyond this, critics tolerated Beethoven's avant-garde impulses, but not the freer aspirations of other composers. (ibid., 12, 14) Faced with general repression, Vienna sank into the "average" of its time. New centers such as Leipzig or Paris began to flourish where the soil was more fertile for the growth of Romantic aesthetics. Thus, Franz Liszt (1811–1886) may have begun his artistic path in Vienna, but he left the city in childhood.

Nonetheless, even under such circumstances, musical life remained quite rich from the perspective of the public and performance culture. Otto Biba (1946–) cites a testimony by a certain Carl Landsteiner (1835–unknown), who, albeit with noticeable sarcasm, describes concert, opera, and salon life as still highly developed. (Biba, 2008, p. 13) Therefore, although the Viennese music scene was no longer "radical" but rather routinized, there were still figures for whom such a climate was, in some ways, actually quite suitable.

Therefore, if one aspired to be the genius of their era while still in their relatively young years, as Carl Czerny did in the 1820s, Vienna was likely the wrong place to build such a career.

Czerny's musical path began two decades earlier, when, at the very start of the 19th century, his family's friend and violinist, Wenzel Krumpholz (1750–1817), arranged for him to perform before the greatest musical star of the Habsburg realm—Ludwig van Beethoven. Beethoven subsequently decided to take the child under his wing as a student. After some initial difficulties in maintaining regular lessons, the pupil soon became the maestro's go-to man for special assignments. As Beethoven's hearing deteriorated, Czerny increasingly took on interpreting his works at the piano—a role he would maintain until his teacher's death.

By 1820, there was no doubt within Viennese circles that Czerny had acquired the status of Beethoven's most prominent student and loyal disciple. When Beethoven died in 1827—and continuing until Czerny's death—there emerged a prevailing perception of him as what Ingrid Fuchs (1954–) refers to as Beethoven's "*ambassador posthumous*" (ibid., p. 82). Consequently, many who sought some form of connection to the spirit of the departed genius in the following decades turned to Czerny in various ways.

A composer of routine

Czerny proved to be an exceptionally prolific composer in both quantitative and generic terms. However, in the writings of both his contemporaries and later music historians, there often appears—between the lines—a recurring implication that he does not belong among the ranks of inventive or creative composers. Nevertheless, his contemporaries did recognize both his interpretive and creative merits. (Biba 2008, p. 13) Here, it is worth returning to the context of post-classical Vienna and recalling the observation that after 1815, innovation was tolerated solely in the case of Beethoven. (ibid, p. 12)

In this regard, he often took an eclectic approach, emulating the creative traits of his great predecessors and contemporaries. However, the claim that he was an "uncreative" composer has been partially undermined only relatively recently, thanks to performances and recordings of works he bequeathed posthumously to the Society of Friends of Music in Vienna—works we might succinctly label as his "drawer compositions." These pieces include, for example, the *Piano Concerto in D minor* from 1812 (!), in which Czerny already distances himself from Beethoven. According to Biba,

he even begins to merit comparison with the Viennese counterparts of Robert Schumann (1810–1856) or Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847), particularly in the field of instrumentation.[3] (ibid., p. 16)

Thus, it could reasonably be argued that Czerny, pressured by the spirit of his environment and his status as Beethoven's most faithful disciple, stagnated in a creative sense, particularly in musical style. In this regard, whether unfortunately or not, one would not be far off in describing him as a composer of routine.

At this point, we will turn to some of the fundamental characteristics of Czerny as a composer.

The first of these characteristics is undoubtedly virtuosity. As Matej Santi (1980–) notes, during the 18th century, the concept of a virtuoso implied mastery in all aspects of activity, both technical and intellectual (Santi, 2013, p. 56). On the other hand, Carl Dahlhaus (1928–1989) correctly observes that in the 19th century, virtuosity assumed an entirely different paradigm, being reduced primarily to the interpretative aspect. (Dahlhaus, 1980, p. 114) In this sense, Czerny aligns much more closely with the definition of an "Enlightenment" intellectual of the 18th century than with that of a Romantic. For him, as a fully rounded musician from the turn of the century, it would have been nearly unimaginable to pursue a narrowly specialized professional path.

He himself was regarded as a technically highly accomplished pianist, especially in his earlier years, though he later distanced himself from the notion of virtuosity. (Deaville, 2008, p. 56) James Deaville[4] reminds us that Czerny was not inclined to tour during his youth (due to both personal and objective reasons), and even later in life, he "*always lacked that brilliant, well-prepared charlatanry that is in large part so necessary for traveling virtuosi... Brilliance on the piano was still in its infancy at the time*". (ibid.) In this context, his numerous piano études should primarily be perceived as studies intended to teach students technique, rather than as concert pieces composed to demonstrate high virtuosity in the 19th-century sense of the term.

Certain biographical sources emphasize Czerny's apprehension toward free and overly frequent improvisation. However, this does not mean he never engaged in it. On the contrary, by listening to Beethoven and Johann Nepomuk Hummel, he recognized their improvisational skill, studied it, and soon applied it to his oeuvre. (Saffle, 2008, p. 205) Additionally, in this context, he paid particular attention to the technical and harmonic methods of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714–1788). (ibid.) These, along with his analytical engagement with the work of other composers, led to the creation of distinct hybrid forms such as *sonata-fantasias* and *fantasia-sonatas*. (ibid., p. 206)

Another significant aspect in shaping Czerny's style was the influence of opera, primarily Italian, though not exclusively. This is evident in his original solutions, development, and rearrangements of operatic works for piano and chamber ensembles. As noted by Michael Saffle (1946–), Czerny's experience with opera significantly shaped the character of his piano music. He used potpourris of popular operatic melodies, although he did not invent this practice (ibid., p. 204). His Op. 131 features the *Elegant Fantasy or Brilliant Potpourri on Favorite Themes from the Opera La Dame Blanche*[5] for piano solo. The work that serves, to some extent, as the subject of this paper also falls into this category: Op. 134, *Impromptu and Variations on a Theme from "Oberon"* by Carl Maria von Weber (1786–1826), also for piano solo.

This very composition is the subject of the following chapter's stylistic and analytical case study.

Analytical and stylistic case study: impromptu and variations on a theme from 'Oberon'

In the following chapter, we will briefly analyze the specific characteristics of the composition *Impromptu or Variations on a Theme from Oberon* as a case study, aiming to understand how this piece reflects Czerny's stylistic inclinations within his piano oeuvre.[6] The composition was written in the historically significant year of 1827, approximately coinciding with Beethoven's death—a moment when Czerny's individual stylistic characteristics were crystallized at large (he was around 37 years old at the time). For the next 32 years, until his death, Czerny would continue composing largely beyond the direct influence of his former tutor. However, as biographical accounts indicate, he remained profoundly in Beethoven's shadow throughout that period.

The theme is a sixteen-bar simple binary form, predominantly diatonic in harmonic structure, set in A major—a key maintained throughout the first six variations (see example no. 1 in the *Appendix*).

[3] Unfortunately, the sheet music for this concerto is not publicly available. However, aural analysis reveals elements of both stylistic periods. From a compositional and technical perspective, the work remains within the framework of classicism, albeit with noticeable traces of *Sturm und Drang* aesthetics. In terms of performance technique and orchestration, however, the concerto clearly leans toward Romanticism, as evidenced by pronounced virtuosity: intricate passagework in the piano part and the prominent use of the brass section (Czerny 2018).

[4] Unknown year of birth.

[5] The author is not precise here; it is most likely a reference to the opera *La Dame Blanche* by the French composer François-Adrien Boieldieu (1775–1834), known by the nickname "the French Mozart."

[6] The parallel use of the score alongside the descriptive analysis is encouraged. For the purposes of this study, we refer to the score listed in the bibliography, which is publicly available through online sources.

The following three variations largely preserve the theme's structure and, with only occasional exceptions, adhere to the general harmonic framework.

The first variation introduces arpeggios and figurations in even rhythm in the right hand, accompanied by chords in the left.

The second variation features a similar texture, incorporating triplet arpeggios, figurations, and partially broken chords in the accompaniment.

In the third variation, the figurations are shifted to the left hand, while the right hand is entrusted with marked octaves and chordal accompaniment.

The fourth variation differs somewhat from the previous three in that the thematic material of the first section is presented in a fugato style, which, for the first time, somewhat alters the structure compared to the original theme. However, the harmonic structure of the second section remains unchanged, and in terms of texture, the movement is characterized by rhythmic complementarity between the two parts (see example no. 2 in the *Appendix*).

The fifth variation returns to the "model" established in the first three, though it introduces occasional strikes of altered chords not previously present in either the theme or earlier variations. Regarding texture, the right hand again carries the sixteenth-note motion, while the accompaniment outlines eighth notes and chords in quarter-note values. Although the sixth variation maintains the overall structure, it may be regarded as the most technically demanding movement thus far. It features a combination of runs, arpeggios, and figurations in the left hand, employing thirty-second-note motion. In contrast, the right hand avoids merely marking time—instead, it complements the left hand through broken chords in dotted rhythms, octave movement, and sequences of chords in eighth notes.

Although the seventh variation remains faithful to the binary structure, maintaining a total of sixteen measures, it is the first to depart from the original key, modulating to the parallel minor (A minor), despite a single sharp still appearing in the key signature—the movement is additionally marked "Minore." This variation is characterized by steady eighth-note motion in the right hand (with each measure beginning with an eighth rest), reinforced by octaves in the left hand. By this point, the work has drifted somewhat from the harmonic landscape presented in the theme.

The final, eighth variation—marked "Maggiore vivace" and, nominally, returning to the original key of A major—introduces a distinctly new character to the cycle. As with all seven preceding variations, Czerny "meets the expectation" by adhering to the initial structure of a simple binary form, but only within the first section of this movement, which soon evolves into something entirely different. Regarding texture, the composer opts for a passagework-based, figural motion in the right hand with a compound triple rhythm, supported by chords and double stops in the accompanying part.

A significant innovation, however, is Czerny's decision to append a kind of extended fantasy—approximately one hundred measures in length (!)—as a coda to the entire cycle, initially marked "loco". As previously noted, the fantasy form was particularly familiar to Czerny, and hybrid forms were not foreign to his compositional practice. Regarding texture, the composer alternates and freely combines nearly all technical devices encountered throughout the earlier variations. Harmonically, chromaticism finally prevails, rendering the movement tonally unstable—at one point, there is an abrupt chromatic modulation to the polar key of E-flat major (!) (see example no. 3 in the *Appendix*). Nevertheless, as the piece concludes, the harmonic landscape gradually stabilizes, rediatonizes, and resolves in a prolonged cadential passage.

Despite the significant formal experiment at the end of the cycle, as well as certain deviations such as the fugato in the fourth variation, Impromptu or Variations on a Theme from "Oberon" remains closely aligned with the conventional form of ornamental variations, more typical of the Classical era (Peričić & Skovran, 1973, pp. 107–108). The appended fantasy, however, represents a further marker of Czerny's individual style, and the application of diverse virtuosic techniques and rich harmonic language likewise underscores his vivid creativity in structuring this work. Perhaps this is the moment to ask whether Czerny—briefly, yet formally, the only teacher Franz Liszt ever had—exerted some form of early influence on his young pupil, who would, in the following decades, become the undisputed master of free and programmatic forms.

This is a significant counterargument to the claims portraying Czerny as a mere composer of routine who adhered rigidly to formal-structural templates. On the contrary, this points to certain liberties Czerny possessed, suggesting that—even within the framework of "belated" classicism—he cultivated a distinct individual signature to a notable extent.

Czerny's legacy

Reflections on Czerny as an "uncreative" composer and, more broadly, a musical routinist may be aptly concluded with a paraphrase from the Leipzig "Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung", which asserts that "Czerny is to piano music what Rossini is to opera" (Biba, 2008, p. 20). This statement may reflect not only his approach to operatic material but also

his overall position within the musical life of Vienna in the years immediately following Beethoven's death. In the Habsburg capital's politically charged and complex musical climate, Czerny would occupy a central role, almost like a guardian of the throne.

When the composer passed away on July 15, 1857, the critic Josef Klemm (1821–1882) issued an obituary in an almost humorous—perhaps even cynical—tone, stating: "*He wrote piano études like Clementi, fugues like J.S. Bach, quartets like Mozart, masses like Haydn, and in addition, potpourris on operatic melodies of all kinds*" (Biba, 2008, p. 18). Such a view, perhaps unfair, sought to undermine Czerny's image as a creative and innovative figure. As Catherine Wong rightly observes, Czerny received far more negative criticism during his lifetime than he deserved, with occasional praise only coming posthumously (Wong, 2008, p. 2). Nonetheless, one important contextual fact must be acknowledged: by 1857, Metternich no longer had significant influence on the political affairs of the Habsburg monarchy, which had already survived the revolutionary upheavals of 1848 and entered the long reign of Emperor Franz Joseph I (1830–1916). (Post-)Classicism, even in eternally conservative Vienna, had become outdated, and the city was finally preparing—albeit belatedly—to embrace Romantic aesthetics.

His environment undoubtedly conditioned his apparent conservatism. Indeed, it remains a matter of speculation how Czerny's creative trajectory might have developed had he not chosen to spend his entire life within the stagnant Viennese microclimate—a milieu that repressively and artificially sustained the aesthetic tenets of an endemic classicism.

Suggestions for further studies

Ultimately, how should Czerny be stylistically categorized? There is no definitive answer, yet certain indicators begin to crystallize when viewed through the lens of the "gray zone" to which he arguably belongs—perhaps somewhat analogously to those in which Domenico Scarlatti (1685–1757) or Richard Strauss (1864–1949) found themselves. Even the analytical example we have selected does not provide a definitive answer regarding his stylistic positioning. On the one hand, we are clearly dealing with a composition that—up until the final variation—is simplified, even by Classical standards, with "textbook" harmony, structure, and form. On the other hand, the final variation (a fantasy) reveals the composer's strong desire to break free from these stylistic constraints.

One suggestion for further research involves investigating such transitional zones, particularly concerning Classicism. A more nuanced examination of stylistic dissolution and the precise positioning of composers such as Czerny and cultural centers such as early 19th-century Vienna may yield significant insights.

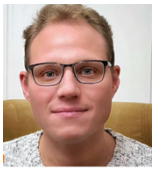
Undeniably, his primary compositional tendency, broadly defined, is rooted in classicism—even if pejoratively labeled "outdated"—which was indeed the stylistic reference point of the place and time he composed during his period of creative maturity.

As noted at the outset of this study, it is not implausible, in the spirit of contemporary Vienna, to position Czerny within the framework of post-classical, "relaxed" Biedermeier—a stylistic current born on the laurels of the previous epoch but devoid of the pretentiousness of Romanticism, as noted by Iwo and Pamela Zaluski (Iwo Zaluski, 1939–; Pamela Zaluski, 1935–2003). They observe that he was a paradoxical figure of his era—a pianist who never performed, and the most successful composer consigned to oblivion (Zaluski and Zaluski 2002). This may indeed be true from the vantage point of nineteenth-century Romanticism, but it is far less surprising when viewed from the perspective of Metternich's Biedermeier Vienna.

However, the picture of Czerny may become significantly more complex if future researchers approach him with fewer readily accepted prejudices. The label of "routine," often attached to his work, tends to mark a composer as "non-creative"—particularly within the context of 19th-century aesthetic values. A crucial first step toward recontextualizing his opus would be a more critical and sustained examination of his unpublished or rarely performed compositions. Even if we accept the prevailing view of Czerny as an "average" composer of late Classicism, it is worth recalling that he was the only—albeit brief—piano teacher of one of the most iconic Romantic figures: Franz Liszt. Unfortunately, the scope of this paper does not permit a more detailed examination of the notable parallels between the two composers in terms of their approach to virtuosity, which should certainly be a topic of future research.

Therefore, if there is any figure—whether a composer or a broader musical personality—for whom it may be said that a high degree of creativity, intellectual rigor, and personal energy was not constrained by the stylistic limitations imposed by time and place, that figure is undoubtedly Carl Czerny.

Biodata of Author



Nikola Komatović concluded Ph.D. at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna under the mentorship of Prof. Dr. Gesine Schröder (his thesis focused on the harmonic language of César Franck) in 2018. He previously completed his Bachelors in Music Theory (2011) and Master's (2012) studies at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade. Komatović researches historical theories (in the first line, historical theories of tonality and harmony in France), the development of methodology in Eastern Europe (the Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia) and China, popular music, and certain aspects of modern and postmodern music (heritage of Ancient Greek and Byzantine music). In 2023, the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts's home board granted him the title of Independent research associate.

Academia.edu: https://independent.academia.edu/NikolaKomatovic

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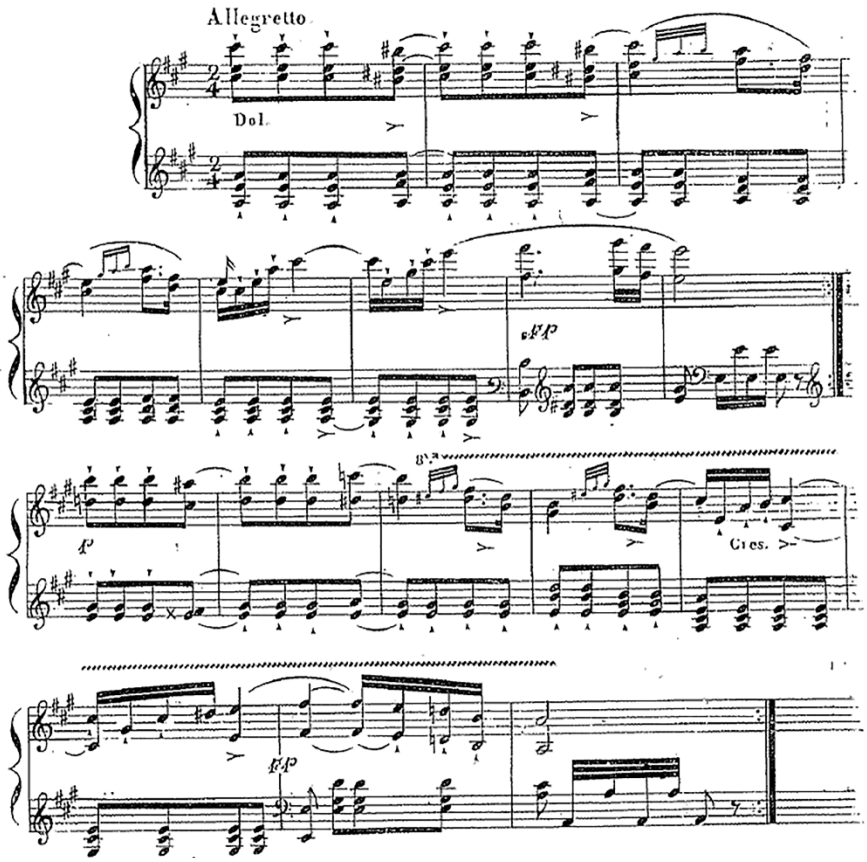
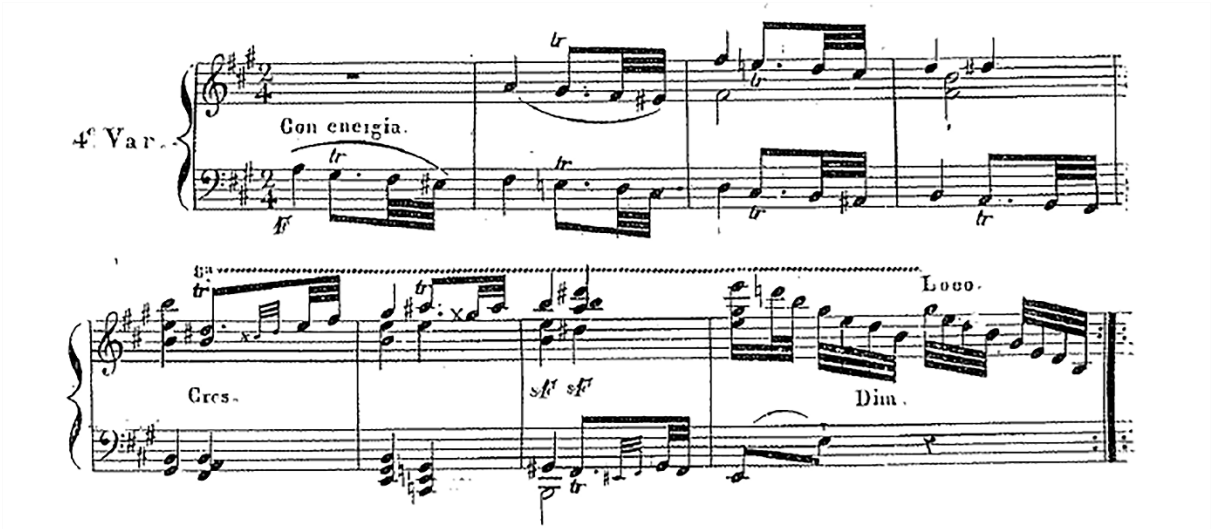
Appendix

Example No. 1. C. Czerny – *Impromptu or Variations on a Theme from "Oberon",* Op. 134 (Czerny 1827, 2). Theme.



Example No. 2: C. Czerny – *Impromptu or Variations on a Theme from Oberon*, Op. 134 (Czerny 1827, 6). Fourth variation, mm. 1–8. Note the use of fugal texture.



Example No. 3: C. Czerny – *Impromptu or Variations on a Theme from Oberon*, Op. 134 (Czerny 1827, 11). Eighth Variation, mm. 30–35. Note the sequential yet chromatic modulation from the original key of A major to the polar key of E-flat major.