

CYAN MAGENTA YELLOW BLACK

## Opus Spongebobicum

or

40 Veränderungen über die Geheimformel von SpongeBob Schwammkopf

xor

40 Variations on the Secret Formula from Spongebob Squarepants

The dialectic reveals itself only to an observer situated in the interior, that is to say, to an investigator who lives his investigation both as a possible contribution to the ideology of the entire epoch and as the particular praxis of an individual defined by his historical and personal career within the wider history which conditions it.

Jean-Paul Sartre "Critique of Dialectical Reason"

Ludwig van Beethoven was deaf when he wrote his "Diabelli Variations" opus 120. However, he did not call them variations, which perhaps had too much of an Italian aftertaste, but "Veränderungen", which could stand for a German translation of variations, but the meaning is closer to "alterations" or "changes". Anton Diabelli had originally approached fifty composers asking them to write a variation on his theme, Beethoven among them, to be compiled into his bombastic 50 member "Vaterländischen Künstlerverein", or "The Fatherland's Artists Club." Eventually writing 33 of these variations, Beethoven approached Diabelli for payment in the autumn of the 1822: "The fee for the Variat. should be 40 ducats at the most if they are worked out on as large a scale as planned, but if this should not take place, it would be set for less." A ducat is a gold coin, thought to have been introduced under Roger II of Sicily (now part of Italy), who, in 1140, coined ducats bearing the figure

of Christ, and the inscription, *Sit tibi, Christe, datus, quem tu regis iste ducatus* (or roughly, "O Christ, let this duchy which you rule be dedicated to you."). It is unclear if Beethoven originally planned to have 40 variations, but it seems likely given the simple arithmetic of 1 ducat per variation. According to legend, probably first circulated by one Anton Schindler, (the biographer known to have forged and altered Beethoven's manuscripts) the composer thought the theme of these variations to be a "Schusterfleck". Literally translated this means "cobblers' patch". Why anyone would compare a piece of music to a square piece of porous material is probably forever clouded in historical mystery, but it references the tool of a man who, by profession, wears an apron. Many believe, but no one has proven, that Beethoven wore one as well. It is by allusion then that the "Diabelli Variations" seem to mean more than their original theme, much like a Stockhausen formula. The former, written in key of C (the white notes on the piano keyboard), represents indeed an iconic aggregate of notes, getting away with something only a child would get away with. Not surprisingly, a child did get away with writing a variation of his own. In 1822, Diabelli asked the then 11-year old Franz Liszt for a contribution and this became Liszt's first

published composition. But children pretend and play whereas adults represent and work, so Liszt's variation on Diabelli's theme was devalued by history. Beethoven's set of 33 Veränderungen, however, became both well known and well regarded, even though they are an oddity among his late works, with no classical structure and an abundance of quotes and allusions.

This is but the starting point for "Opus Spongebobicum", 40 variations on the secret formula from Spongebob Squarepants, our beloved yellow friend. These are not new Diabelli variations; they are instead the phonographic record of changes, or "Veraenderungen", of an absorbent sponge, an homage to the square "für Kenner und Liebhaber" which is C.P.E. Bach's idealized (and later Glenn Gould's utopian) audience of "knowers and lovers." Opus Spongobobicum continues the noble tradition of piano music as a form of sitting contemplation, or **Zazen**, full of emotional ritardando, aimless wanderings, unpredictable dynamics, and is squarely aimed against the praxis of pianism as a form of technical spectator sport, as well as the history of piano composition as a formal, faceless activity of synthetic unification. *Domine, Quo Vadis?* One answer is hidden in Tamás Vásáry's vintage recording of Liszt's "Concert

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Paraphrase on Rigoletto, S.434 after Verdi's opera". At second 258 we find the perfect example of a warning stick, or **Keisaku**: Vásáry, perhaps overcome by emotion, loses the tempo of the evenly notated arpeggio. Lost like Schrödinger's cat, the velocities become uncertain until we hear a banging bass note, which the recording engineers at Deutsche Grammophon could have not foreseen, but still captured wonderfully, due in part to tape saturation. This is the demonstration of complexity beyond "notation-ability", the dialectic movement revealed. The Beethovenian compositional praxis of showing the development of an idea is here retrograded to show its own devolution into fragmentation. There are many warning sticks in our journey with the yellow sponge, through the "special theory of relativity", bending time and space, tempi and harmony, until you finally grasp the moment of historical totalization through your own life. Through it all there is but one quote: Scriabin's "Mystic Chord" in Veraenderung 8 at second 21.

"Opus Spongebobicum" was composed and produced by Frank Rothkamm in New York and Los Angeles from 2005-2008. Co-Producer: Nina Schneider. Sponge provided by: 99¢ Only Store. This Opus is published by: Rothkammusic (ASCAP). Spongebob Squarepants was created by Stephen Hillenburg and is a registered trademark of Nickelodeon.

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