

THE NEW YORKER

APRIL 6, 2009



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

THE BOARDS PRIMARY SOURCES



In 1819, the music publisher Anton Diabelli wrote a waltz and sent it to fifty composers, asking each to contribute a variation. They all agreed, except one—Ludwig van Beethoven, who dismissed the waltz as a *Schusterfleck*, or cobbler's patch." But then something happened: Beethoven became obsessed with Diabelli's waltz, and ended up writing thirty-three variations that constitute one of his most beloved pieces for piano—Opus 120. (Imagine Harold Bloom writing a six-hundred-page treatise on "The Biggest Loser.") So why did Beethoven do it? That is the question that haunts Dr. Katherine Brandt, the character played by Jane Fonda in the new play "33 Variations," who is loosely based on Dr. William Kinderman, a musicologist at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the leading authority on the "Diabelli Variations."

"There is no doubt that Beethoven had an ironic attitude toward the waltz," Kinderman was saying, in the lounge of the Crowne Plaza, before the opening-night performance. As a graduate student in 1979, he spent

a month poring over manuscripts at the Beethoven archive, in Bonn. His biggest breakthrough had to do with the time line of the piece: the variations that were written last—including Nos. 1, 15, and 25—tend to relate more closely to the original theme, hinting that Beethoven's intentions evolved. "It's a paradox," Kinderman said. "If he's taking over this waltz by Diabelli, which has banal and repetitious features, and he's writing a gigantic work, then how does he reconcile those two tendencies? He did it by adding more variations that go back pointedly to the theme, in ways that exaggerate the banal features—that take it into the area of caricature." In the final variations, Beethoven lifts the piece beyond parody. "There's an ennobling process, a spiritualization, that goes on," Kinderman continued. "But there's a wink at the original theme in the last moments. It's as if Beethoven is looking back and saying, 'Well, I could have written even more.'"

About five years ago, Kinderman got an e-mail from the playwright Moisés Kaufman, who had taken an interest in the "Diabelli Variations" after chatting with a salesman at Tower Records. Kaufman visited Kinderman in Illinois, where they engaged in "intense brainstorming sessions" around the piano. Kinderman never expected

to be played by Jane Fonda. "I enjoy surprising twists," he said.

At the hotel, he was joined by his wife, Katherine Syer, and their six-year-old daughter, Anna. Syer is also a musicologist ("Opera is my shtick"). She had spent the day at the Columbia rare-books library, studying the letters of the Hungarian conductor Anton Seidl, while Kinderman took Anna to Toys R Us.

A few minutes before curtain, the musicologists brushed past a crowd that included Dolly Parton, David Hyde Pierce, and Rosie O'Donnell, and took their seats. At intermission, they were greeted by Dominick Balletta, the general manager of Kaufman's theatre company. Kinderman gave him a technical note: "At one point, Variation 26 is played, but on the screen it says 'Variation 21.'"

Balletta threw up his hands: "You have that conversation with Moisés!"

Afterward, the family took a cab to the opening-night party. (The driver, a Vietnam vet, had a few things to say about Jane Fonda.) On the buffet line—not realizing that he was standing behind Geoffrey Rush—Kinderman reflected on Beethoven. "He's often depicted as a scowling, overserious figure, whereas actually he was a great punster," he said. Then he spotted Susan Kellermann, the actress who plays the archi-