



VARIATIONS FOR
FOUR DRUMS AND VIOLA
(REVISIONS)

Michael Colgrass
(b. 1932)



AVS Publications 016

Preface

Composed in 1957, Michael Colgrass's *Variations for Four Drums and Viola* was one of the earliest works written for the combination of viola and percussion. The work owes its origin to violist Emanuel Vardi, who approached the composer after hearing Colgrass perform on a set of small, tunable drums with the NBC Orchestra. Vardi and Colgrass premiered the work at New York's famed Five Spot Café on June 1, 1958. In his *New York Times* review of the performance the next day, Edward Downes declared the work original and "resourceful in its use of varying timbres on the carefully pitched small drums, imaginative in the way the drums were sometimes made to sound like a second melodic voice playing against the viola melody. Best of all it was stirring music, which won bravos for composer and performers." The work has since entered the standard repertoire for violists, becoming Colgrass's most frequently performed chamber work.

After the work's publication by Music for Percussion (MFP) in 1959, the composer made revisions including optional cuts and alterations to the drum and viola parts. Those revisions are reproduced here for use in conjunction with the MFP edition (now distributed by the publisher Colla Voce), and the composer has expressed a preference for performers to incorporate these changes rather than use the original published version. For a recording that includes these revisions, see Juliet White-Smith and Michael Smith's recording on: *Fashionably Late: Juliet White-Smith Debuts!* (Centaur CRC2982, 2009).

Also reproduced here is a program note that the composer wrote in the 1990s as well as his notes to the percussionist regarding performance matters. This AVS edition also includes a list of errata for the MFP edition; the errata listed for Variations III and IV have been incorporated into the published AVS revisions.

David M. Bynog, editor

Program Note for *Variations for Four Drums and Viola*

by Michael Colgrass

When I was freelancing in New York City with the NBC Orchestra in 1957, violist Emanuel Vardi, principal violist with the orchestra, asked me to write him a piece mixing these unusual little tuned drums and viola.

He invited me to his house and played for me the Bach Chaconne and some Paganini variations, which immediately fired me with the idea of writing for Manny. I simply assumed all violists played Paganini, and I wrote for him as if he were a violinist. This early experience with Manny cultivated in me a love for the viola, which has led to many other pieces featuring this deeply expressive instrument. We recorded the piece together for MGM Records and gave the first live performance at the Five Spot Café in New York's east village in the spring of 1958, the famed jazz spot that had modern music concerts on Sunday afternoons in those days. In fact, the astute listener will hear the influence of jazz in this piece, which reflects my early background as a jazz musician. On the evening of the premiere date, Coltrane and Thelonious Monk played on the same bandstand at the Five Spot!

I never would have guessed the work would one day become repertoire for violists, especially considering its difficulty for most violists so many years ago. But the viola has since come into its own as a virtuoso solo instrument, as has the idea of the artist-percussionist.

The word variations in this piece applies to the opening motive, not to a theme. I make various themes from this motive in varying moods designed to best show off the viola and tuned drums. The percussionist has fast tuning changes to make between movements, and the violist has every virtuoso device from triple stops to trilled octaves. The drums used when I wrote the piece were called timpani tom-toms, with shells of cardboard and heads of calf skin. Today percussionists use a drum called the Roto-tom, which was originally invented at my request by Albert Payson, Chicago Symphony percussionist, to play this and numerous other pieces of mine calling for drums tunable with specific pitches.

This work is respectfully dedicated to the timeless musicianship of Emanuel Vardi.

NOTES FOR THE PERCUSSIONIST

The early performances of the *Variations for Four Drums and Viola* used the original drums for which the piece was written: timpani tom-toms, with cardboard shells and calfskin heads. The 1959 MGM recording, long out of circulation but re-released in 2011 on the CD *Emanuel Vardi, Viola/Violin* (Cembal d'amour, CD 159), will show how these drums sounded. These drums are no longer available. The best substitutes, until a better drum can be produced, are the Roto-toms, manufactured by Remo in California. The largest size Roto-toms work best to achieve the greatest possibility for resonance (tuning the large drums up sounds better than tuning the smaller ones down). Percussionists are warned to avoid the eight-inch size drum, which will ring very little and tends to make a “splat” sound when struck *forte*.

One of the performance problems with the *Variations* is that the percussionist must change pitches in four places between movements, which can create long pauses and break the continuity of the piece. Therefore it is crucial that the percussionist memorize the pitch changes and practice them separately as a performance challenge in themselves (fifteen minutes a day on the pitch-change routine for a suitable period of time). With diligent practice, the time required to change pitches between each movement can be reduced to a few seconds each so that the listener will feel almost no break in performance continuity.

One point to remember: the drums will never *not* be heard, but the viola might at times be obscured by the drums. I would recommend having a colleague come to a rehearsal to help achieve balance.

ROTO-TOMS PREPARATION FOR *VARIATIONS*

This method from Partrick Roulet is what I recommend to get the best sound out of the Roto-toms:

Use Aquarian Modern Vintage Series Medium-Weight Batter Heads

Here is the website: <http://www.aquariandrumheads.com/products/vintage-series>.

From a roll of moleskin, cut a narrow strip about a quarter-inch wide. The strip should be long enough to cover the entire circumference of the counter hoop. Apply the moleskin to the underside of the counter hoop to the edge that directly contacts the drum head.

After the heads are mounted, use a “drum dial” to fine-tune the tension at each tension rod. Here is the website for the drum dial: <http://drumdial.com/>.

Clearing the Heads (i.e., adjusting the tension at each tension rod to give the clearest tone without any “beats” or dissonances in the fundamental pitch or overtones):

The Roto-tom heads need to be cleared much more often than timpani. In fact, considerable time may be needed to clear the heads every time you play them. Be careful when moving the drums so as not to bang them around too much.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS:

Stick choices?

General use: snare sticks with light wool wrapped around the tip and taped at the neck of the stick (to remove the ictus of wood on skin). For Variation III, use medium-soft timp sticks for smoothness and warmth, but sticks with small heads for some clarity. For Variation V, use wood snare sticks (without wool covering) to achieve clarity and lightness and to match the sound of the bouncing bow and marcato bowing of the viola.

Balance?

I recommend bringing in an objective listener to comment on the delicate balances required between the viola and drums when the piece is ready for performance (this listener need not be a violist or percussionist). Balances are not the same for every movement. The drums tend to over-balance the viola at times, especially in the perpetual-motion sixteenth notes leading to the ending of the piece. The percussionist should start softly so he or she can crescendo as needed.

Tempo: Can players take liberties with tempi?

Go with your temperament on tempi. Use your instincts as to when to push forward or hold back. The piece has lots of room for interpretation. The main thing is to do what the music seems to call for most naturally.

Stickings: Are they to be strictly observed as written?

The bouncing sticks in Variation V are necessary to achieve the proper character. The stickings in the perpetual motion of the Finale are optional, suggested only because those stickings seemed most convenient for my way of negotiating rapidly between the drums. Note, however, that the bouncing sticks I suggest here and there help the percussionist keep the volume down, since alternate sticking is usually more intense in character.

Colgrass *Variations* Revisions

Variation No. I

Page 4: Play the first two measures of Letter G and cut to Letter H (total of four measures cut).

Viola

Drums

Ⓜ

pizz. arco strum

Ⓜ arco

p < *mf*

cresc.

f

f

Variation No. III (See Sheet Music for Complete Revision)

Page 8: Optional cut: Play the first four measures of Letter A and cut to the second measure of Letter C (total of fifteen measures cut).

Page 9–10: Beginning two measures after Letter E, the composer has made extensive changes (primarily to the drum part); see the revised version.

Variation No. IV (See Sheet Music for Complete Revision)

Page 11: Play the first three measures of Letter A and cut to the third beat of Letter C, which is now a 4/4 bar and *col legno* (total of ten and one-third measures cut).

Page 12: Play the first five measures of Letter G and cut to one measure before Letter H (total of two measures cut).

Page 13: Play the first half of the measure of Letter I (two beats) and cut to the second half of the third measure of Letter I (total of two measures cut).

Page 13: Play the first two measures of Letter K and cut to two measures before the end (total of six measures cut). A new drum part has also been written for the second measure of Letter K; see the revised version.

Finale

Page 16–17: Play the first three and a half measures of Letter B and cut to one measure before Letter C (total of half a measure cut).

Page 17: Play the first two measures of Letter C and cut to the second measure of Letter D (total of six measures cut).

(B)

Viola

Drums

senza rit.

p

p

(C)

f

p

f

Page 18: Play the first measure of Letter F and cut to Letter G (total of seven measures cut).

(F)

(G) ♩ = ♩ (♩ = 260)

Viola

Drums

Colgrass *Variations* Errata

Introduction

Page 1: One measure before Letter A, the drum part should have a time signature change to 4/4.

Page 1: In the third measure of Letter A, the drum part should have a b-flat.

Page 1: In the fourth measure of Letter A, the rhythm of the third and fourth beats in the viola part should be an eighth rest followed by two thirty-second notes and a sixteenth note (not an eighth rest followed by two thirty-second notes and an eighth note).

Page 2: The final measure of this movement should have a time signature of 5/4, not 3/4.

Variation No. I

Page 4: The drum part has b-flats throughout this movement: two measures before Letter D; the second and third measures of Letter D; the third, fourth, and fifth measures of Letter E; at Letter G; (and the fourth, fifth, and sixth measures of Letter G—these three measures are eliminated if taking the cut).

Page 4: In the fourth measure of Letter D, the first note in the viola part should be a dotted half note, not a half note.

Page 4: In the fifth measure of Letter D, the drum part is missing an eighth-note rest on the second half of beat three.

Page 4: In the third measure of Letter E, the viola part should have b-flats throughout the measure.

Page 4: In the fourth and fifth measures of Letter E, the drum part's pitches should be a step lower than printed:



Page 4: Beginning at Letter G, the viola part should remain in alto clef until the end of the movement.

Page 4: At Letter G, the drum part should have an eighth-note rest, not a sixteenth, on the second half of beat three.

Page 4: At Letter G, the viola part is double voiced for the first four measures. At Letter G, the viola part should have a rest on the first beat of the lower voice. In the third measure of Letter G, the viola part should have a rest on beats one and three of the lower voice, and in the fourth measure of Letter G a rest on beat one (the third and fourth measures are eliminated if taking the cut).

Page 4: In the second measure of Letter G, the viola does have an e-natural as the lowest note of the pizzicato chord on beat three (as printed, against an e-flat as the highest note).

Page 4: In the fourth, fifth, and sixth measures of Letter G, the drum part's pitches should be a half-step lower than printed (excepting the e-natural in the fourth measure). In the fifth measure of Letter G, the drum part should have an eighth-note rest, not a sixteenth, on the second half of beat three (these measures are eliminated if taking the cut).



Page 4: The second measure of Letter H should have a time signature change to 4/4 (the notes in the viola part are a-natural and d-natural).

Variation No. II

Page 5: Beginning in measure three, the viola part switches to treble clef (lasting until the third measure of Letter A).

Page 5: In the second measure of Letter B, the viola part should have b-flats throughout the measure.

Page 6: Two measures before Letter D, the viola part should have b-flats throughout the measure.

Page 6: In the third measure of Letter E, the second note in the viola part should be a b-flat, not an a-flat (and the viola retains the b-flat on the first and third sixteenth notes of the second beat).

Variation No. III

Page 8: The metronome marking for this movement should be a dotted quarter note = 50, not a quote note = 50 (the composer has slightly altered this marking in the revised version).

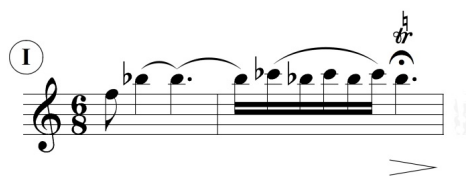
Page 8: In the first measure, the drum part should have a staccato mark on the final note of the measure.

Page 8: In the sixth measure of Letter A, the third eighth note in the viola part should be an e-flat (this measure is eliminated if taking the cut).

Page 9: Two measures before Letter G, the drum part should have dotted quarter notes, not quarter notes, in this measure.

Page 9: In the fifth measure of Letter G, the third beat of the viola part should have a b-natural, not a b-flat as printed.

Page 10: In the second measure of Letter I, the viola part's notes should be a half-step lower than printed (as they appear in the revised version of this AVS edition)



Page 10: In the third measure of Letter I, the drum part should contain an a-flat as its second note (this note has been altered to a b-flat in the revised version).

Page 10: Beginning in the third measure of Letter K, the viola part should remain in alto clef until the fifth measure of Letter L (or until the third measure of Letter L in the revised version).

Page 10: In the third measure of Letter K, the drum part should contain an e-flat on the fourth eighth note of the measure. In the fourth measure of Letter K, the drum part should contain a-flats on the third and sixth eighth notes of this measure.

Page 10: At Letter L, the final note in the drum part should be a c-flat.

Variation No. IV

Page 11: At Letter A, the last note in the drum part should be a b-flat.

Page 11: In the second measure of Letter A, the drum part should have a staccato mark on the first note.

Page 11: In the second measure of Letter A, a *piu mosso* begins in the second half of the measure, with a metronome marking of quarter note = 120. The viola part also should have a dynamic marking of *forte* beginning at the *piu mosso*.

Page 11: In the third measure of Letter A, the drum part should have a dynamic marking of *forte*.

Page 11: At Letter D, the viola part should switch to alto clef.

Page 12: Two measures before Letter E, the third note in the viola part should be an a-flat.

Page 12: One measure before Letter E, the second beat in the viola part should be a dotted half note (not a half note).

Page 12: In the second measure of Letter E, the viola part's second-to-last note should be a g-natural and a d-natural (not a g-flat and a d-natural).

Page 12: In the third measure of Letter E, the viola part should have a staccato mark on the third beat.

Page 12: In the fifth measure of Letter E, the drum part should have a staccato mark on the final note of the measure.

Page 12: From three measures before Letter F until Letter H, the viola part remains in alto clef.

Page 12: At Letter F, the viola part's final note should be a triple stop: a-natural; f-sharp; c-sharp (the measure is identical to the notes three measures before Letter F).

Page 12: In the sixth measure of Letter F, the viola part should have a b-natural (not a c-natural) as its lowest note on the last eighth note of the measure.

Page 12: In the third measure of Letter G, the first note in the drum part should be an f-sharp.

Page 13: At Letter H, the drum part has b-flats throughout the first four measures.

Page 13: In the second measure of Letter H, the viola part should have a dotted half note as its first note.

Page 13: In the third measure of Letter I, the first note in the drum part should be half note, not a dotted half note (this measure is truncated if taking the cut).

Page 13: In the third measure of the *Adagio molto*, the viola part should have a g-natural (not an f-natural) as the lower note on the first beat and the final beat of the measure.

Page 13: In the fifth measure of the *Adagio molto*, the drum part should have an f-sharp as its third grace note, not an e-sharp.

Page 13: Three measures before Letter K, the viola part should have a dotted half note, not a half note, as its first note.

Page 13: One measure before Letter K, the drum part's rhythm on beats two, three, and four should be a dotted eighth note followed by a sixteenth note followed by two eighth notes.

Variation No. V

Page 15: In the third measure of Letter I, the viola part should begin a crescendo lasting until the *forte* designation in the fifth measure of Letter I.

Finale

Page 16: At Letter B, the tempo indication should be *senza rit.*, not *molto rit.*

Page 16: In the second measure of Letter B, in both the viola and drum parts, the final note of the quintuplet on beat one should have a dash over it, not a staccato mark.

Page 16: In the second measure of Letter B, the drum part should have a change of dynamic to *piano* on the final beat of the measure.

Page 16: In the fourth measure of Letter B, the first note of the second and fourth beats in the viola part should be an eighth note, not a dotted eighth note.

Page 17: Letter C should have a time signature change to 4/4.

Page 18: One measure before Letter F should have a time signature change to 4/4.

Page 19: In the fourth bar of Letter K, each beat of the viola part should be identical to beat one, with the pitches as f-natural–e-natural–f-natural–f-sharp):



Page 20: One measure before Letter M, the first note of beat three in the viola part (the first note of the septuplet), should be a d-natural, not a d-flat.

Variation No. III (Revised Version)

Variations for Four Drums and Viola

Michael Colgrass

Lyrical ♩. = 52 (approx.)

Ⓐ

Viola

mute on

laminated wool sticks

p

p

⊕ optional cut to m. 25

7

Ⓑ

12

18

Ⓒ

23

cresc.

28

(D)

34

dim.

40

(E)

poco meno

46

(F)

p \triangleleft *mf* *p* \triangleleft *mf*

52

p \triangleleft *f*

(G)

piu mosso

63 *poco allarg.* *a tempo* (H)

68 (I) *a tempo primo*
p *poco rit.* *mf* *tenuto* *p*

73 *poco rubato*

78 (K) *pizz.* *piu mosso*

83

(L) *arco* *mute off*
p *pp*

Variation No. IV (Revised Version)

Variations for Four Drums and Viola

Michael Colgrass

Andante agitato ♩ = 70

Viola

sfp (wool covered wood) *sim.* *sim.*

Drums

p

4

(A) *piu mosso* (♩ = 120) *ponticello* *f*

8

col legno (not ponticello) *p* *tre* *tre* *tre* *tre* *f*

12

(D) *arco* III chord *mf* *mf*

16

tre *tre* *cresc.*

Variation No. IV (Revised Version)

12

18

(E)

21

Tempo di marziale

poco rit.

f

sempre staccato

26

(F)

31

(G)

pizz. arco

pizz. arco

sim.

ff

f

40

(H)

p

44

senza vibrato

(I)

mf *f*

48

Adagio molto

ad lib. *rit.* *ff* *tr* *tr* *tr* *tr* *tr* *tr* *tr* *tr* *tr* *tr*

53

piu mosso (march-like)

die away

poco rit. *sfz* *piu mosso* *agitato*

(K)

Adagio

sfz *rit.*



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