



## ANALYSIS OF SAIM AKÇIL'S VARIATIONS AND INSPIRATIONS ON AN OLD ISTANBUL FOLK SONG (ÜSKÜDAR)

### SAİM AKÇIL'IN ESKİ BİR İSTANBUL TÜRKÜSÜ ÜZERİNE ÇEŞİTLEMELER VE ESİNLENMELER (ÜSKÜDAR) ESERİNİN ANALİZİ

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#### Abstract

*Variations and Breezes on an Old Istanbul Folk Song (Üsküdar)* written for solo violin in line with Saim Akçıl's contributions to Turkish violin music as a conductor, violinist and composer, this study aims to examine the variation form techniques and violin performance characteristics. The research is an example of a case study from qualitative research methods. Based on the different variation examples made by Turkish composers for the folk song *Katibim (Üsküdar'a Gider iken)*, the study work was determined by criterion sampling method, one of the purposeful sampling methods. Based on the theme of a folk song, among the pieces created with the variation technique, the ones written for solo violin were determined as criteria. In this respect, the development of the variation form in the historical process and Saim Akçıl's contributions to the Turkish violin ecole were presented, and a descriptive analysis of the artist's *Variations and Inspirations on an Old Istanbul Folk Song (Üsküdar)* was made. The work was analyzed in two stages: variation form characteristics and violin techniques. As a result, it has been observed that the variations in this piece, which is written in the type of fragmentary variation, form a multi-layered texture that combines thematic exploration and technical skill through a virtuosic performance with characteristic, figural and melodic variation types.

**Keywords:** Folk Song, Saim Akçıl, Solo Violin, Theme and Variation, Üsküdar.

#### Öz

Bu çalışma, Saim Akçıl'ın şef, kemancı ve besteci olarak Türk keman müziğine katkıları doğrultusunda solo keman için yazdığı *Eski Bir İstanbul Türküsü (Üsküdar) Üzerine Çeşitlemeler ve Esintiler* adlı eserin çeşitleme form tekniklerini ve keman icra özelliklerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Araştırma nitel araştırma yöntemlerinden bir durum çalışması örneğidir. Türk bestecilerinin *Katibim (Üsküdar'a Gider iken)* türküsü için yapmış oldukları farklı çeşitleme örneklerinden yola çıkılarak, amaçlı örnekleme yöntemlerinden ölçüt örnekleme yöntemi ile çalışma alanı belirlenmiştir. Bir türkünün temasından yola çıkılarak varyasyon tekniği ile oluşturulmuş eserler arasından solo keman için yazılmış olanlar ölçüt olarak belirlenmiştir. Bu doğrultuda varyasyon formunun tarihsel süreçteki gelişimi ve Saim Akçıl'ın Türk keman ekolüne katkıları ortaya konulmuş, sanatçının *Eski Bir İstanbul Türküsü Üzerine Çeşitlemeler ve Esintiler (Üsküdar)* adlı eserinin betimsel analizi yapılmıştır. Eser, varyasyon form özellikleri ve keman teknikleri olmak üzere iki aşamada incelenmiştir. Sonuç olarak, parçalı varyasyon türünde yazılmış olan bu eserdeki varyasyonların karakteristik, figürlü ve melodik varyasyon türleri ile virtüözik bir icra aracılığıyla tematik keşif ve teknik beceriyi birleştiren çok katmanlı bir doku oluşturduğu görülmüştür.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Halk Türküsü, Saim Akçıl, Solo Keman, Tema ve Varyasyon, Üsküdar.



## INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that the insertion of folk melodies into a piece of music is a method used in the context of political tendencies due to the developments in the twentieth century and just before, composers' use of folk themes in their own works has been a method that has been practiced since much earlier times. With the Baroque period, the presence of folk dance music, which represents the locality, in polyphonic music due to its guidance in the rhythmic context, evolved into a period in which folk music was transmitted through a more formal and established structure in the classical period.

Beyond these cases, in the romantic period, it is understood that various phenomenological elements through folk melodies came to the forefront as compositional materials with the role of formal naming. In time, with their unique rhythmic characteristics, emotional power and intrinsic connection with the people, folk melodies have come to be seen as valuable compositional material by contemporary composers, providing a rich source of inspiration for composers.

These trends have also influenced composers in Turkish composers and they have incorporated folk melodies into their works in this regard. From the Turkish Five onwards, many composers have used folk melodies in their pieces and benefited from Anatolia's rich musical heritage. Saim Akçıl, who came to the forefront as one of the most important violinists raised in Turkey and who gave up playing the violin as a result of the illness he suffered and turned to conducting the orchestra, is seen to have composed his work *Variations and Inspirations on an Old Istanbul Folk Song (Üsküdar)* in line with the mentioned tendencies, using the theme of the Istanbul folk song *Üsküdar'a Gider iken*. The structure in the form of themes and variations, as well as the violin techniques employed, indicate that the piece refers to Paganini's *Caprice 24* as a reference point.

This study essentially analyzes Akçıl's virtuosity in terms of both composition and violin technique through the piece under examination. To this end, the variant structures used by Akçıl in the piece and the technical difficulties it presents are analyzed, reflecting the problem statement of the study, in an effort to understand how compositional authenticity and instrumental technique intersect in his musical language. Akçıl has represented Turkey in numerous national and international concerts, trained many students, and made significant contributions to Turkey's musical life, particularly through the orchestras he founded and conducted. The limited number of studies on Akçıl makes this study particularly important.

## Aim of the Study

This study aims to analyze the variation techniques and violin performance characteristics employed in Saim Akçıl's *Variations and Inspirations on an Old Istanbul Folk Song (Üsküdar)*, a solo violin composition. This analysis conducted within the broader context of Akçıl's significant contributions to Turkish violin music as a conductor, violinist, and composer.

## METHOD

This research is an example of a case study from qualitative research methods. "A hallmark of a good qualitative case study is that it presents an in-depth understanding of the case. In order to accomplish this, the researcher collects many forms of qualitative data, ranging from interviews, to observations, to documents, to audiovisual materials" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 96).

In the research, based on the different variation examples made by Turkish composers for the Turkish folk song *Katibim (Üsküdar'a Gider iken)*, the study work was determined by criteria sampling method, one of the purposeful sampling methods. "The main concept in this sampling method is to study all cases that fulfill a set of predetermined criteria" (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021, p. 120). The works written for solo violin among the works created with variation technique based on the folk song theme were determined as the criteria. In this respect, the development of the variation form in the historical process and Saim Akçıl's contributions to the Turkish violin ecocle were presented, and the artist's *Variations and Inspirations on an Old Istanbul Folk Song (Üsküdar)* was analyzed.

Document analysis method was used to reach the relevant findings. Descriptive analysis techniques were used to analyze the piece within the scope of the research. The analysis of the piece was handled in two stages: variation form features and violin techniques. The notation examples for the piece were written in the note writing program with reference to Akçıl's (Akçıl S. , 2013) publication published by Pan Publishing. Musical evaluations of the piece were based on the artist's own interpretation (Akçıl S. , 2018).

## FINDINGS

The findings section first provides information about Saim Akçıl, followed by explanation of the theme and variation form, and analysis of the work within the scope of the research.

### Saim AKÇIL

Saim Akçıl stands out as one of the distinguished artists that Turkey has raised in the field of music. At an early age, Akçıl's interest in music was supported by his family and he was sent to the conservatory as a boarding student, where he was well educated and thus became a highly qualified violinist. After continuing his education with leading violin teachers in Europe, the artist started his soloist career and also continued his career by working as a concertmaster in various orchestras in Europe.

Say (2006, p. 31) states that after graduating from the Istanbul City Conservatory as a student of Ekrem Zeki Ün, Akçıl began his career in Italy in 1961 as a member of the International Youth Orchestra conducted by Franco Ferrara. In the same year, he went to Germany, where he worked as a concertmaster in ensembles such as the Hagen City Orchestra, the Cologne Chamber Orchestra, the Rhine Chamber Orchestra and the I Pommeriggi Musicali di Milano Orchestra in Italy.

Akçıl has performed with leading orchestras in Turkey, including the Presidential Symphony Orchestra, and has given successful concerts with many orchestras in Europe and Asia. In Demirbağ's interview, Akçıl mentioned the situation as follows:

I have played as a soloist with the Presidential Symphony Orchestra, Istanbul and Izmir State Symphony Orchestras in Turkey and with symphony orchestras in Germany, the Netherlands, Romania, Greece, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and abroad. I have given recitals in the USA, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Bulgaria, Bulgaria, England, France, Iran, Switzerland and many other countries outside Turkey. I have served as president and member of the jury in many international violin competitions abroad. I have also given violin perfection courses in many countries. (Demirbağ, 2023).

An unfortunate hand injury prevented Akçıl from playing the violin and forced him to give it up, but this situation led him towards a new career as a conductor. On this new page of Akçıl's career, it is seen that he takes the conductor's chair with great enthusiasm and commitment, just as he did as a violinist, and conducts orchestras masterfully. In the same interview, Akçıl explained this situation as follows:

After Lalo's *Spanish Symphony*, which I played with the Istanbul State Symphony Orchestra in 1986, I had to quit as a solo violinist due to a problem with the fingers of my left hand. Besides the doctors in Turkey, I went to Paris and Moscow for treatment. I had surgery in Ankara, but there was no improvement in my arm. I could play the violin with only two fingers. I had to quit violin playing with a great sadness. Some people were becoming conductors because they could not succeed in an instrument. But I had given countless concerts and recitals as a violinist. That's why I decided to become a conductor. (Demirbağ, 2023).

Akçıl's initiative and advocacy for the cultural enrichment of Turkey led to the widespread establishment of orchestras by private companies across the country. His belief in the potential of the private sector to develop the arts played an important role in the establishment of renowned orchestras, notably the Borusan and Tekfen Philharmonic Orchestras. Akçıl also explained the situation mentioned in the interview as follows:

While I was studying in Germany, I also played in some chamber orchestras. When I returned to Turkey, I wished to have such special ensembles in my country. I founded the 19 May Youth Orchestra, the Mülkiyeliler Union Ensemble, the Saim Akçıl Chamber Orchestra, Nişantaşı University Orchestra, and Haliç University Chamber Orchestra, which I formed from my students. In addition to these, I founded and conducted the Borusan Chamber and Tekfen Philharmonic Orchestras, two big orchestras in Istanbul, for many years. (Demirbağ, 2023).

Not only were Akçıl's efforts limited to the establishment of these orchestras, but he also pioneered the development of these institutions to an artistically distinguished position. In this regard, it is seen that Akçıl had an impact on the cultural landscape of Turkey not only as a versatile and competent artist, but also as an educator and through the orchestras he founded.

The traces of Akçıl's violin artistry can be seen in his works *Variations and Inspirations on an Old Istanbul Folk Song (Üsküdar)* and *Variations on a Theme of Paganini*, which he composed for solo violin in the form of themes and variations, and which seem to be highly inspired by Paganini's compositional style. Since these works include many techniques and require a virtuosic performance, they come to the forefront as spectacular pieces at the soloist level.

### Theme and Variation

Variation, which refers to the repetition of a melody with slight changes, is one of the most basic musical practices used to avoid identical repetitions in music, even in primitive music, and is a basic form of composition used by composers. Variation is "the repetition of an initial main idea (theme) many times with changes in terms of melody, meter and harmony (or counterpoint), and giving it new appearances" (Cangal, 2008, p. 101). As well as being used as a compositional style within different musical forms (variation of melody, repetitions), variation has also gained an important place in the music literature as a section of a large work or as a main form under the name of *theme and variation*.

The first applications of variation are referred to by the concept of heterophony, which has its origins in ancient music and is also used in traditional music. "The first description of the phenomenon, albeit without mentioning the term, dates back to Antiquity (Plato, The Laws 812D), whereas the proper theories on the phenomenon date back to the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century (C. Stumpf–1897, G. Adler–1908, etc.)" (Koter, 2021, p. 112). "A device termed heterophony, found in the Orient and assumed to have been practiced in ancient times, involves the accompaniment of a melody by an embellished version of itself" (Stein, 1979, p. 92).

Considering the use of variation as a compositional style, it is possible to say that the most appropriate example as a form is in the works of Spanish composers named *diferencias* in parallel with the development of instrumental music.

In the Baroque period, it is seen that the ostinato, which manifested itself as an anticipation in the 13th century motets of the variation, was used for the bass, which was used as the backbone of the music, leaving its melodic line with the 16th century. "This device, known as basso ostinato, consists of a reiterated bass melody over which a diversity of textures are written" (Miller, 1948, s. 340). The reflection of variation in vocal music is known as strophic variation. "Less of a formal structure than simply a method of creating musical interest, the strophic variation applies verses of text to varied forms of a melody" (Bukofzer as cited in Crannell, 1995, p. 14).

In the Baroque period, the theme, which was previously enriched and varied with ornaments, was preserved structurally and melodically, and gained a new form with rhythmic and harmonic variations. The form of variations on a theme became a very rich form with variations on tempo, tonality and rhythmic structure following the changes in theme and melody in the classical period. Bach, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven played an important role in the development of this form. J.S. Bach's *Goldberg Variation (BWV 988)* is considered one of the most important works of this structure. Bach's variations don't just showcase individual interpretations of a theme; they combine under a unifying structure, built on both the recurring theme and numerical symmetry (Petermann, 2010, p. 63). *The Goldberg Variations*

express the dependent-independent relationship between theme and variation in a dialectical way in canonical variations (Ivanovitch, 2010, p. 13). Another use of the variation form is the double variation (alternating variation). This structure, examples of which can be seen in the works of Beethoven and Haydn, is composed as variations alternating two themes. Although the use of double variation is frequently encountered in the literature, Sisman (1990, p. 158), stated that the term alternating variation is more appropriate for this two reasons: “the idea of a double theme is frequently given the lie by the many such pieces which end with a variation of the first theme; because of the frequent and continuing use of double variation to mean written-out varied repeats within variations”.

In the Romantic period, F. Chopin has reflected the emotionality of the period to the variation technique with the variations he realized on the melodic and rhythmic structure of the theme. E. Elgar’s *Enigma Variations* and J. Brahms’ *Variations on the Paganini Theme (Op.35)* are considered as important works written in this form.

In the 20th century, the innovations in music have also spread to the variation form and it has been handled in different ways based on the techniques and movements used in a more radical and innovative way. Schoenberg, one of the most striking examples of this case, although he defined the variation form as a rigid form in his seminars and lectures, he applied the techniques of serial music to the variation form and reflected his libertarian approach to the form. Looking back to 19th-century clarity while forging serial variation’s distinct path, Schoenberg crafted impactful models rich in both structure and expression (Nelson, 1964, p. 163). “Starting with an extremely limited thematic material - in principle, a simple series of twelve sounds - they strive, through variation, to nourish the entire work” (Hodeir, 1956, p. 124). Regarding this, Schoenberg used the term developing variation and explained it as follows:

Music of the homophonic melodic style of composition, that is, music with a main theme, accompanied by and based on harmony, produces its material by, as I call it, developing variation. This means that variation of the features of a basic unit produces all the thematic formulations which provide for fluency, contrasts, variety, logic and unity on the one hand, and character, mood, expression, and every needed differentiation, on the other hand-thus elaborating the idea of the piece. (Schoenberg, 1975 as cited in Frisch, 1982, p. 215).

Improvisations in jazz music are interpretations of a theme. These interpretations include rhythmic, harmonic, tempo, tonality changes and melodic ornaments applied to the theme in order to give it a new meaning and expression, and in this respect they are considered as a form of variation.

Generally evaluated, it can be said that variations have a very important role in music history and writing both as a compositional tool and as a form. When the works of Turkish composers are analyzed, it can be stated that works related to the variation form have been produced. These works vary in tonal and atonal structures. However, the folk song *Katibim (Üsküdar’a Gider iken)* is important in terms of being preferred by composers for variation form. A review of the relevant literature reveals that several composers have created variations on the *Katibim* folk song, including Cemal Reşit Rey (for orchestra and piano), Bülent Tarcan (for orchestra), Ahmed Adnan Saygun (for choir), and Saim Akçıl (for solo violin). This study, seeking to illuminate Saim Akçıl’s significant contributions to Turkish violin music, delves into his composition, *Variations and Inspirations on an Old Istanbul Folk Song (Üsküdar)*.

### **Variations and Inspirations on an Old Istanbul Folk Song (Üsküdar) Piece Analysis**

*Variations and Inspirations on an Old Istanbul Folk Song (Üsküdar)* consists of a theme and 9 variations. Two motifs of the *Katibim* folk song are used in the theme, and as can be seen in Figure 1, a 3-measure introduction is made. This situation reflects the expression *Inspirations* in the title of the piece.





Figure 1. Theme

Considering the work in general, it is seen that each variation has a different character and has a stop at the end. The theme is announced briefly at the beginning of the piece like a inspiration, but since it is a folk piece, the original of the folk song is known and it is in three-part song form (Simple Ternary Form). In this respect, it can be said that the piece was written in the genre of fragmentary variation from the theme and variation genres. “Fragmentary variations are variations based on a theme composed of one or several periods, usually with a stop or an open interlude at the end of the theme and each variation” (Savaş, 2018, p. 124).

### Variation I

The first motifs of the *Katibim* folk song, given as a inspiration in the Theme, are implicitly completed in *Variation I*. Following the Theme, which has a slow introduction similar to Paganini’s *Caprice No. 11*, the melody of the ballad is varied both melodically and rhythmically, and partly polyphonically in *Variation I*. Along with the double stops used throughout the piece, in this first variation two different melodies progress within each other, abstracting the main theme and announcing a different melody in parallel that supports the main theme. This variation consists of 12 measures and rhythmically uses 16th, 8th, dotted 8th and 4th notes. The part where the melody of *Katibim* folk song is abstracted (soprano) is shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Variation I

### Variation II

In *Variation II*, melodic and rhythmic variation techniques are employed. Three-measure structures starting with trioles are completed with arpeggios of 32nd to form phrases. It can be said that figural variation method is used as the rhythmic structure reflects a certain order in this way. In this 12-measure variation, there are 4 phrases, the first of which is repeated. Melodic abstraction is used in this section and it is treated as a support of *Variation I*. In this section, in which the flageolet technique is used along with double stops, the abstracted melody is again used in the soprano voice as in the first variation. An example of this section can be seen in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Variation II

### Variation III

In *Variation III*, Akçıl applied the technique of changing the theme, refined the theme by making a cellular work related to the melody of the *Katibim* folk song and the introduction presented in the theme, and created a structure suitable only for the harmonic pattern. *Variation III*, with a structure similar to *Caprice No. 19*, utilizes trill and tied staccato techniques. Ornaments, one of the techniques of melodic variation, are included and trills are used at the beginning of each measure. This variation, written in 3/4 time, consists of a total of 32 measures with volta repetitions.

### Variation IV

In *Variation IV*, it is seen that the melody of the *Katibim* folk song is announced to a great extent. In this variation, which is composed in two voices, the soprano voice has the main melody and the alto voice has figurative variation with 32 notes as accompaniment. *Variation IV*, which draws attention with its similarity to *Caprice No. 6*, is written in two-part song form as in the original. The melody part of the first section is mostly written as it is with very minor changes (Figure 4). However, in the second part, the melody is presented abstractly even though it is structurally faithful to the original.

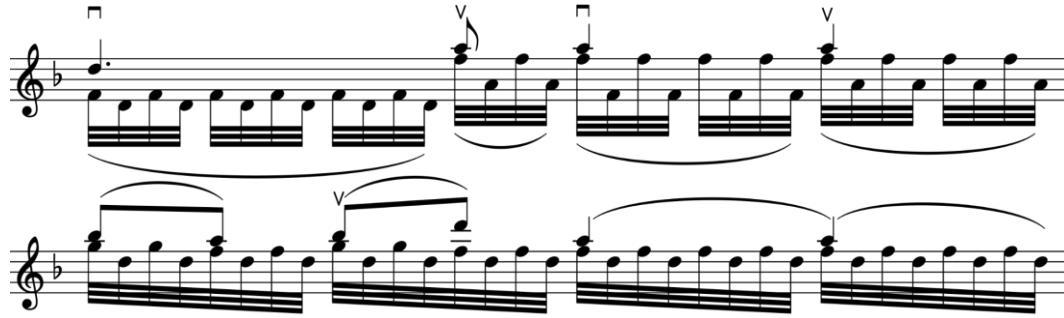


Figure 4. Variation IV

### Variation V

The technique of changing the theme was used in this variation in which only the tonality is a suggestive clue to the theme. In this variation, which is constructed in accordance with the harmonic structure of the folk song, the musical characteristics of the tonality are kept faithful, but a different rhythmic path is followed. In the whole *Variation V*, which is written in 4/4 time, figural variation is made with sextuplets indicated by legato technique.

### Variation VI

*Variation VI* is written at 40 metronome per unit beat and is like an *elegy* with its rather slow tempo, and in this respect it is a characteristic variation pattern. In this variation, which is similar to *Caprice No. 4* with this structure, Akçıl has created a variation in two-part song form, reflecting the formal structure of the folk song with the abstraction he made on the melody. The tonal structure is maintained and the melody is enriched with double stops.

### Variation VII

In this variation, in which only the harmonic structure of the folk song is based on the technique of changing the theme, a variation consisting of rhythmic variation and 16th arpeggio groups is made. In this variation, which has Baroque connotations with its structure, which is an example of a characteristic variation in terms of compositional style, there are traces of the refined melody of the folk song at the beginning of the 16th group (Figure 5). Although it has a two-part formal structure, in the second part the melody is completely abstracted and the theme is completely changed.



Figure 5. Variation VII

### Variation VIII

In *Variation VIII*, Akçıl changes the theme and again abstracts it in accordance with the tonal structure of the melody. Both parts (a+b) of this variation, written in two-part song form, have very lyrical melodies. The melodies are enriched with chords and double stops constructed in different intervals. There is also rhythmic variation in the variation, and the melodic structure is formed in groups of one 8th and two 16ths.

## Variation IX

The final section of the piece *Variation IX*, consists of two periods. The first movement is in two sections, 3/4 and 2/4, with 100 metronomes per beat. Similar to *Caprice No. 16* with its fast tempo, the theme is completely changed and the characteristic variation is made in this period consisting of groups of 16 fourth notes.

In the second period, the beat is specified as 60 metronomes and the theme is given in the same manner. The theme, which was announced 2 times with a volta, continued with the b section of the *Katibim* folk song. Unlike the theme, the melody of the b section of the folk song was supported by chords as in “Variation VIII” in the *Caprice No. 24*, and the melody was partially diversified. After the melody of the folk song is fully announced, the piece is concluded with septuplets in the finale.

## CONCLUSION

As a result of the evaluations made regarding the use of folk melodies as a compositional material, it was found that this use has a rich history dating back to ancient times. This tendency has been observed in the works of many Turkish composers who have included folk melodies, which are the rich musical heritage of Anatolia, in their compositions.

The use of theme and variation has been recognized as a fundamental compositional technique throughout the history of music. This technique, whose origins date back to antiquity, has been used by composers to create musical interest and a holistic expression in the process of evolving into sophisticated forms. Saim Akçıl’s *Variations and Inspirations on an Old Istanbul Folk Song* by Saim Akçıl, whose remarkable career as a musician and conductor has left an important mark on Turkey’s cultural geography, can be shown as one of the best examples of the use of Akçıl’s traditional Istanbul folk song *Üsküdar’a Gider iken* (*While going to Üsküdar*), both in terms of incorporating a folk song into the work as a compositional element and creating a virtuosic violin work with the use of theme and variation. Variations of the *Katibim* folk song exhibit a variety of melodic and rhythmic transformations, each of which gives the theme a unique character. Variation I masterfully complements the initial motifs with a complex interaction of double stops and rhythmic subtleties reminiscent of Paganini’s *Caprice No. 11*. Variation II continues the melodic abstraction with ternary structures and arpeggios supported by the flageolet technique. Similar to *Caprice No. 19*, Akçıl’s *Variation III* uses cellular work and trills to create a refined thematic interpretation. The melody of the folk tune appears distinctly in *Variation IV*, which includes rhythmic variations in 32nd notes and a two-part song form. In *Variation V*, the theme is transformed through rhythmic sextets over harmonic harmony, while *Variation VI*, with its elegiac tempo and double stops, functions as an echo of *Caprice No. 4*. The Baroque influences of *Variation VII*, with its group of the 16th arpeggio and thematic abstraction, are contrasted with the lyrical and chordally enriched melodies of *Variation VIII*. Finally, *Variation IX* concludes the work with different rhythmic variations and a fast tempo, culminating in a finale marked by sevenths.

Overall, when considered in a comprehensive evaluation, it is seen that the variations in his work titled *Variations and Inspirations on an Old Istanbul Folk Song* (*Üsküdar*) collectively form a multi-layered texture that combines thematic exploration and technical skill through virtuosic performance.

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