

The Passacaglia in Three Twentieth-Century Musical Works

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The passacaglia is a musical ostinato form in which a continuously reiterated bass ostinato underpins continuously varied musical accompaniments. Typically the ostinato appears in the bass voice at the outset with little or no accompaniment. This allows the composer to build musically using changing accompanying parts throughout the piece. Historically, passacaglias originated in the seventeenth century, championed primarily by Giorlamo Frescobaldi as he wrote sets of variations on a continuous ground bass.

As a principle of musical form, the passacaglia has been the medium chosen by many twentieth century composers to organize and express their musical ideas. Three particular pieces by three different twentieth century composers will be briefly examined here. They are:

- *Passacaglia*, op. 1, by Anton Webern
- *Symphony No. 5*, Mvt. IV, *Passacaglia*, by Ralph Vaughan Williams
- Interlude IV from *Peter Grimes*, by Benjamin Britten

From these three examples, it becomes evident that the passacaglia is utilized as a principle of form in twentieth century music, and the ostinato may not be utilized as a literal repetition throughout. Also, the extent at which each composer departs from traditional passacaglia practices is noteworthy. The passacaglia as a principle of form is an effective musical framework for twentieth century composers to use when presenting their individual choices of tonality, harmony, and melodic development.

Passacaglia, op. 1, by Anton Webern

Anton Webern's opus number one was written while he was still a pupil of Arnold Schoenberg. It is known as one of Webern's tonal works, though he stretches tonal boundaries and explores linear chord relationships which are quite unconventional for his time. This piece is also known as one of Webern's longest and largest-scale works, written for full orchestra and lasting between eleven and twelve minutes. Webern titled it *Passacaglia*, which is fitting in that the piece is a series of melodic variations on an ostinato theme, stated without accompaniment in the beginning (see example 1.1). A tonal center of D is immediately established.

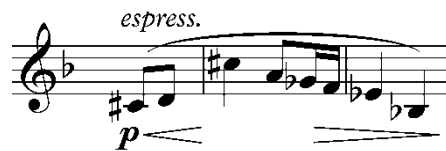


Example 1.1: theme from Anton Webern's *Passacaglia*, op. 1, mm 1-8, cello

Webern bucks tradition by placing this passacaglia in duple meter rather than the traditional triple meter. He also decides to use tonic as both the beginning and ending point for his theme, which is also untraditional. The eight measure ostinato is repeated several times with the addition of flute, trombone, and harp at first, then thickening with additional strings, clarinet, and cornet. The theme is passed almost immediately from low voices into the viola for variation II, and is then passed to the harp for variation III, in which Webern also displaces the theme by 1 beat, landing on count two, rather than on count one of each measure as originally stated. By using harmonically supportive motion in accompanying string parts, Webern begins to establish a pattern of harmony associated with the ostinato theme, not simply the theme itself.

As Webern does this, countermelodies are employed whose content can be traced to the original theme itself. These countermelodies have prominence throughout the piece. See

example 1.2, 1.3, and 1.4 which show these important countermelodies in their first presentation. Compare with the theme in example 1.1.



Example 1.2: transposed clarinet counter-melody, variation VI, mm. 49-51
(counter-melody reappears in



Example 1.3: oboe counter-melody, variation VII, mm. 56-57



Example 1.4: violin solo counter-melody, variation XIV, mm. 113-116

These countermelodies which accentuate the harmonic properties of each note of the theme and not necessarily the actual pitch class of the theme demonstrate that Webern is building a harmonic ostinato which can then be elaborated upon without the presence of the actual ostinato theme itself. In variations XVIII through XII, the theme is omitted, but the harmonic progression implied and reinforced by accompanimental materials and counter-melodies up to this point is present, and thus continuity of the passacaglia is maintained.

As stated before, the tonal centre of the piece is D. This is D minor until we reach variation XII, in which the tonality transitions to D major with the addition of F# or enharmonic Gb. D major gives way to D minor again after variation XV, and these changes in mode are clearly evidenced by the key signature as well as harmonic composition of chords. The passacaglia reaches its height of complexity in variation XV as dissonant harmonies and

unconventional linear progression accompany the ostinato theme. Webern spends several variations exploring these complex progressions, including chords such as major neopolitan seventh chords, submediant chords, and tonic 6/4 chords which resolve directly to tonic without progressing through dominant.

Beginning with variation XXV, the texture gradually thins. The final variation of the piece employs rhythmic diminution as the rhythmic values of the theme are compressed from quarter notes to quarter-note triplets. This quarter-note triplet rhythm continues into a coda which begins at m. 261 with the D long-tone in the cello part. The passacaglia ends on a simple D minor tonic chord. All told, there is an original statement of the eight bar ostinato theme, followed by twenty three eight-measure variations of the theme, a single thirty-five measure variation of the theme, a single ten-measure variation of the theme, and a coda.

Symphony No. 5, IV. Passacaglia, by Ralph Vaughan Williams

Ralph Vaughan Williams completed his fifth symphony in 1943 after nearly five years of writing. The symphony contains four movements, *Preludio*, *Scherzo*, *Romanza*, and finally the *Passacaglia*. Vaughan Williams uses a primary theme from the opening movement in the latter half of the *Passacaglia*, as a way of binding the entire work together at the close. The *Passacaglia* begins and ends in D major, but other tonal regions are explored within the movement. One of the most important features of this movement, is that it does not remain a true passacaglia throughout. The ostinato is not consistent throughout the piece, and is completely abandoned as a whole, although portions of the main theme remain intact.

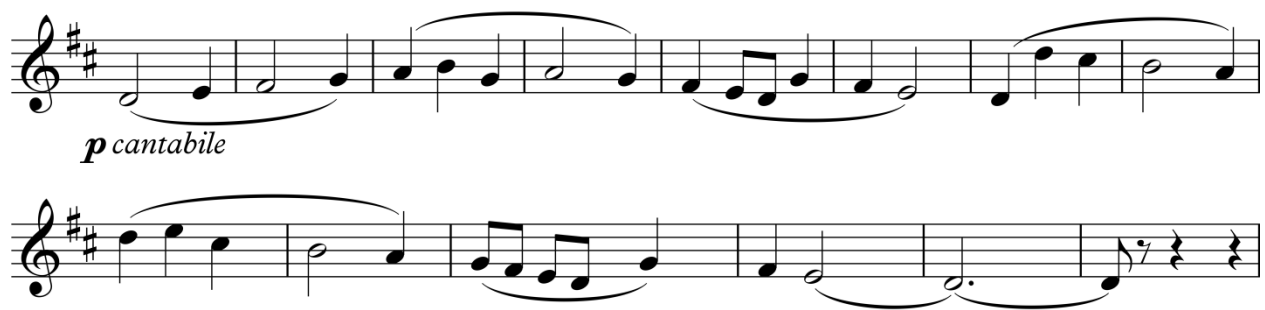
As one would expect with a movement entitled *Passacaglia*, an unaccompanied low voice (in this case, the cello section) begins and presents a simple theme which establishes the

tonality as D major. The main ostinato theme utilizes all seven pitch classes of the D major scale, begins on tonic, and ends moving up the scale from A to D, where the theme begins again. Vaughan Williams begins the movement in triple meter, which is the most common meter for a passacaglia or chaconne historically. Although it may be more common to have a nice round 8 bars for a theme, Vaughan William's theme is seven bars in length, with the downbeat of the eighth belonging already to the next statement of the theme. Below is the theme in example 2.1:



Example 2.1: main theme from Vaughan Williams, IV. *Passacaglia*, Symphony No. 5, cello, mm. 1-7

At the outset of the first variation, a rising counter-melody enters in the upper voices which becomes an important phrase for the movement as a whole. It is found in example 2.2 below:



Example 2.2: rising counter-melody, violin, mm. 8-21

This counter-melody fills two entire repetitions of the main theme, with the second half of the counter-melody emphasized by the entrance of solo viola in unison with the existing violin and flute parts. After several more repetitions of the main theme, a small climax occurs, which coincides with the entrance of a mild fanfare theme in the trumpets and winds at m. 62. This fanfare, coupled with increasingly thick orchestration builds toward an Allegro section at m. 68.

Here we have a variation on the main theme itself, and this variation is presented with imitative entrances in the brass section as shown in example 2.3:

Example 2.3: imitative variation on main theme, brass section, mm. 68-75

This is one example of how Vaughan Williams uses the main theme, and even variations of the main theme in imitative polyphony. As shown above, the trombone ascending line and following material are imitated in the horns two bars later, and then the horn part is imitated in the first trumpet two bar after the horn entrance. From this point on, there is no longer a complete statement of the theme as presented in the opening bars of this movement. This is odd, in that we have well over three quarters of a movement entitled *Passacaglia* left, yet the composer has abandoned the main passacaglia theme in its entirety. Despite this abandonment of the main theme, sections of the main theme are still prominent throughout. We also do not hear the original counter melody in its entirety from this point on, yet, just as with the main theme, fragments of the counter-melody remain prominent until the end of the symphony.

The movement shifts from D major to the subdominant, G major, briefly at m. 82, and then back to D major at m. 114. This shift back to D major is accompanied by a *Tempo primo* marking containing the same imitative brass writing as before, this time accompanied by string tremolos. At m. 153, the mode shifts from D major to D minor via a direct modulation in the trombones. D minor's chromatic mediant relationship with F minor is exploited nine bars later,

the tonality moves to F minor briefly, then to C minor, then G major, then C major, and finally to D major where the piece remains firmly planted until the end. This arrival of the D major tonality occurs at m. 238, and signals the beginning of the coda, where we find gently ascending and descending lines with intervallic relationships which are reminiscent of the main theme and the first countermelody as shown below in example 2.4 below. To further vary this counter-melody theme, Vaughan Williams has placed this in 4/4 meter as opposed to its original 3/4 setting.



Example 2.4: coda variation incorporating elements of the first counter-melody, violin, mm. 237-245

In summary of this piece, Vaughan Williams begins this movement with a typical passacaglia theme, and he adds counter-melody and accompaniment to it via largely traditional methods. But instead of carrying on with the same theme repeated over and over, Vaughan Williams discards portions of it and uses fragments to form imitative polyphony. The main passacaglia theme and the first counter-melody are his source for these fragments. It is interesting to note that he focuses on the opening fragments of these two themes rather than the latter fragments, just as he begins the movement with what appears to be a strict passacaglia, and then discards the strict passacaglia theme less than a quarter of the way through the movement. Despite the lack of a passacaglia theme being present throughout, the principal of an ostinato

theme being varied is constant, and so it is my contention that passacaglia principal applies to this movement.

Interlude IV from *Peter Grimes*, by Benjamin Britten

Benjamin Britten's highly acclaimed 1945 Opera *Peter Grimes* tells the story of a mentally troubled fisherman who is accused of being responsible for his young apprentice's death. The opera contains a prologue and three acts, with instrumental interludes dispersed within the acts and scenes. The fourth instrumental interlude is labeled as a passacaglia by Britten, and sets the stage for some of the most dramatic moments in the opera. Curious that of all the passacaglias studied in the paper, this offering from Britten is perhaps the strictest passacaglia of them all, yet it is the latest historically.

The main theme is eleven beats in length, laid out in 4/4 time. Because of the odd length of the theme it only falls in the same position metrically every four repetitions, or every eleven measures. Of course, the symmetry of having an eleven beat theme which repeats itself with the same metrical position every eleven measures is a sign of careful planning. This main theme establishes a tonal center of F, and includes important content which informs melodic intervals throughout the interlude. Especially important is the descending minor third and ascending minor second contained in the main theme. These intervals are used extensively in melodic passages throughout. View the main theme below with these intervals boxed in example 3.1:



Example 3.1: main theme of Interlude IV from Britten's *Peter Grimes*, string bass, mm. 1-3

Of crucial importance is the descending minor third created from the D to B in m. 1, and the following ascending minor second formed from B to C leading into m. 2. In this case, the next repetition of the main theme begins on count 4 of m. 3, not on the downbeat of a measure. Immediate use of intervallic content derived from the main theme is found in variation I as illustrated below in example 3.2:



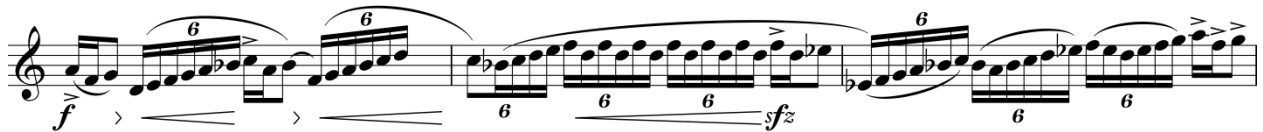
Example 3.2: first variation melody with descending m3 and ascending m2 boxed, cello, mm. 12-14

At times, these intervals are played simultaneously, forming a pitch class set of (0,1,3).

While the passacaglia's theme length is irregular, so are the variation lengths - sometimes corresponding to single or multiple thematic statements. This means that the variations usually overlap instead of coincide with the theme. Changes in character, orchestration, and melodic content delineate between variations, not necessarily how they interact with the theme. All told, there are eleven different variations, keeping with this symbolic obsession with the number eleven.

The tonality of the interlude begins in F and this is reinforced in variation I. As subsequent variations occur, the theme remains unaltered, yet the variation material serves to obscure any tonality. The result is a constant focus on F, over which unconventional and unpredictable tonal shifts occur without correspondence to the ground base. This use of the passacaglia by Britten serves to musically illustrate the irrational behavior of the title character of the opera, Peter Grimes. While the listener perceives more and more complex tonal shifts, there are simultaneously and continuously informed of the F tonal center of the main theme.

Gradually building until the final variation's climax before the entrance of the vocalists in Scene II, the final variation contains running sextuplet figures emphasizing tonal centers of D and briefly E \flat , and includes the (0,1,3) interval so widely used throughout the interlude as seen below in example 3.3:



Example 3.3: sextuplet figures emphasizing shifting tonality and use of (0,1,3) pitch class intervals as derived from the original main theme, violin I, mm. 102-104

The interlude then ends on a tonal center of F after being approached by these rapid runs in D and in E \flat .

In summary, Interlude IV contains thirty-nine statements of the main theme which remains unchanged, except in voicing, from the beginning to the end of the interlude. There are eleven variations presented of differing length and tonal content, but the interlude begins and ends with a tonal center of F. Despite slight register changes, the main theme stays in low voices throughout as expected from a traditional passacaglia. In its dealing with the ostinato theme, Britten's passacaglia is the most traditional in repetition of the theme and in voicing. However, the metric oddities presented by an eleven beat theme give way to unique and innovative correspondence between the theme and the variations which accompany it. This interlude is rightly labeled as a passacaglia by the composer due to extent at which passacaglia principle is followed throughout the piece.